Favourite Game

Leonard Cohen

Published by Blue Door

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LEONARD COHEN

THE FAVOURITE GAME



blue door

Blue Door
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB
www.harpercollins.co.uk

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First published in Great Britain by Martin Secker & Warburg Ltd., 1963
This edition published by Blue Door in 2009

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN 978-0-00-731839-1

Typeset in Jansen Text
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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As the mist leaves no scar
On the dark green hill,
So my body leaves no scar
On you, nor ever will.

When wind and hawl encounter,
What remains to keep?
So you and I encounter
Then turn, then fall to sleep.

As many nights endure
Without a moon or star.
So will we endure
When one is gone and far.

BOOK I

1

Breavman knows a girl named Shell whose ears were pierced so she could wear the long filigree earrings. The punctures festered and now she has a tiny scar in each earlobe. He discovered them behind her hair.

A bullet broke into the flesh of his father's arm as he rose out of a trench. It comforts a man with coronary thrombosis to bear a wound taken in combat.

On the right temple Breavman has a scar which Krantz bestowed with a shovel. Trouble over a snowman. Krantz wanted to use clinkers as eyes. Breavman was and still is against the use of foreign materials in the decoration of snowmen. No woollen mufflers, hats, spectacles. In the same vein he does not approve of inserting carrots in the mouths of carved pumpkins or pinning on cucumber ears.

His mother regarded her whole body as a scar grown over some earlier perfection which she sought in mirrors and windows and hub-caps.

Children show scars like medals. Lovers use them as secrets to reveal. A scar is what happens when the word is made flesh.

It is easy to display a wound, the proud scars of combat. It is hard to show a pimple.

2

Breavman's young mother hunted wrinkles with two hands and a magnifying mirror.

When she found one she consulted a fortress of oils and creams arrayed on a glass tray and she sighed. Without faith the wrinkle was anointed.

'This isn't my face, not my real face.'

'Where is your real face, Mother?'

'Look at me. Is this what I look like?'

'Where is it, where's your real face?'

'I don't know, in Russia, when I was a girl.'

He pulled the huge atlas out of the shelf and fell with it. He sifted pages like a goldminer until he found it, the whole of Russia, pale and vast. He kneeled over the distances until his eyes blurred and he made the lakes and rivers and names become an incredible face, dim and beautiful and easily lost.

The maid had to drag him to supper. A lady's face floated over the silver and the food.

3

His father lived mostly in bed or a tent in the hospital. When he was up and walking he lied.

He took his cane without the silver band and led his son over Mount Royal. Here was the ancient crater.

Two iron and stone cannon rested in the gentle grassy scoop which was once a pit of boiling lava. Breavman wanted to dwell on the violence.

'We'll come back here when I'm better.'

One lie.

Breavman learned to pat the noses of horses tethered beside the Chalet, how to offer them sugar cubes from a flat palm.

'One day we'll go riding.'

'But you can hardly breathe.'

His father collapsed that evening over his map of flags on which he plotted the war, fumbling for the capsules to break and inhale.

4

Here is a movie filled with the bodies of his family.

His father aims the camera at his uncles, tall and serious, boutonnières in their dark lapels, who walk too close and enter into blurdom.

Their wives look formal and sad. His mother steps back, urging aunts to get into the picture. At the back of the screen her smile and shoulders go limp. She thinks she is out of focus.

Breavman stops the film to study her and her face is eaten by a spreading orange-rimmed stain as the film melts.

His grandmother sits in the shadows of the stone balcony and aunts present her with babies. A silver

tea-set glows richly in early Technicolor.

His grandfather reviews a line of children but is stopped in the midst of an approving nod and ravaged by a technical orange flame.

Breavman is mutilating the film in his efforts at history.

Breavman and his cousins fight small gentlemanly battles. The girls curtsy. All the children are invited to leap one at a time across the flagstone path.

A gardener is led shy and grateful into the sunlight to be preserved with his betters.

A battalion of wives is squeezed abreast, is decimated by the edge of the screen. His mother is one of the first to go.

Suddenly the picture is shoes and blurred grass as his father staggers under another attack.

'Help!'

Coils of celluloid are burning around his feet. He dances until he is saved by Nursie and the maid and punished by his mother.

The movie runs night and day. Be careful, blood, be careful.

5

The Breavmans founded and presided over most of the institutions which make the Montreal Jewish community one of the most powerful in the world today.

The joke around the city is: The Jews are the con-

science of the world and the Breavmans are the conscience of the Jews. 'And I am the conscience of the Breavmans,' adds Lawrence Breavman. 'Actually we are the only Jews left; that is, super-Christians, first citizens with cut prongs.'

The feeling today, if anyone troubles himself to articulate it, is that the Breavmans are in a decline. 'Be careful,' Lawrence Breavman warns his executive cousins, 'or your children will speak with accents.'

Ten years ago Breavman compiled the Code of Breavman:

We are Victorian gentlemen of Hebraic persuasion.

We cannot be positive, but we are fairly certain that any other Jews with money got it on the black market.

We do not wish to join Christian clubs or weaken our blood through inter-marriage. We wish to be regarded as peers, united by class, education, power, differentiated by home rituals.

We refuse to pass the circumcision line.

We were civilized first and drink less, you lousy bunch of bloodthirsty drunks.

6

A rat is more alive than a turtle.

A turtle is slow, cold, mechanical, nearly a toy, a shell with legs. Their deaths didn't count. But a white rat is quick and warm in its envelope of skin.

Krantz kept his in an empty radio. Breavman kept

his in a deep honey tin. Krantz went away for the holidays and asked Breavman to take care of his. Breavman dropped it in with his.

Feeding rats is work. You have to go down to the basement. He forgot for a while. Soon he didn't want to think about the honey tin and avoided the basement stairs.

He went down at last and there was an awful smell coming from the tin. He wished it were still full of honey. He looked inside and one rat had eaten most of the stomach of the other rat. He didn't care which was his. The alive rat jumped at him and then he knew it was crazy.

He held the tin way in front because of the stink and filled it with water. The dead one floated on top with the hole between its ribs and hind legs showing. The alive one scratched the side.

He was called for lunch which began with marrow. His father tapped it out of a bone. It came from inside an animal.

When he went down again both were floating. He emptied the can in the driveway and covered it with snow. He vomited and covered that with snow.

Krantz was mad. He wanted to have a funeral at least, but they couldn't find the bodies because of some heavy snowfalls.

When Spring began they attacked islands of dirty snow in the driveway. Nothing. Krantz said that seeing things were as they were Breavman owed him money for a white rat. He'd lent his and got nothing back, not even a skeleton. Breavman said that a hospital doesn't pay anything when someone dies there. Krantz said that

when you lend somebody something and that person loses it he has to pay for it. Breavman said that when it's alive it isn't a thing and besides he was doing him a favour when he took care of his. Krantz said that killing a rat was some favour and they fought it out on the wet gravel. Then they went downtown and bought new ones.

Breavman's escaped and lived in a closet under the stairs. He saw its eyes with a flashlight. For a few mornings he put out Puffed Wheat in front of the door and it was nibbled, but soon he didn't bother.

When summer came and the shutters and screens were being taken out one of the men discovered a little skeleton. It had patches of hair stuck to it. He dropped it in a garbage can.

Breavman fished it out when the man was gone and ran to Krantz's. He said it was the skeleton of the first rat and Krantz could have a funeral if he wanted. Krantz said he didn't need a stinky old skeleton, he had a live one. Breavman said that was fine but he had to admit they were quits. Krantz admitted.

Breavman buried it under the pansies, one of which his father took each morning for his buttonhole. Breavman took new interest in smelling them.

7

Come back, stern Bertha, come back and lure me up the torture tree. Remove me from the bedrooms of easy women. Extract the full due. The girl I had last

night betrays the man who pays her rent.

That is how Breavman invoked the spirit of Bertha many mornings of his twenties.

Then his bones return to chicken-width. His nose retreats from impressive Semitic prominence to a childhood Gentile obscurity. Body hair blows away with the years like an ill-fated oasis. He is light enough for handbars and apple branches. The Japs and Germans are wrong.

'Play it now, Bertha?'

He has followed her to precarious parts of the tree.

'Higher!' she demands.

Even the apples are trembling. The sun catches her flute, turns the polished wood to a moment of chrome.

'Now?'

'First you have to say something about God.'

'God is a jerk.'

'Oh, that's nothing. I won't play for that.'

The sky is blue and the clouds are moving. There is rotting fruit on the ground some miles below.

'Fug God.'

'Something terribly, horribly dirty, scaredy-cat. The real word.'

'Fuck God!'

He waits for the fiery wind to lift him out of his perch and leave him dismembered on the grass.

'Fuck GOD!'

Breavman sights Krantz who is lying beside a coiled hose and unravelling a baseball.

'Hey, Krantz, listen to this. *FUCK GOD!*'

Breavman never heard his own voice so pure. The air is a microphone.

Bertha alters her fragile position to strike his cheek with her flute.

'Dirty tongue!'

'It was your idea.'

She strikes again for piety and tears off apples as she crashes past the limbs. Nothing of her voice as she falls.

Krantz and Breavman survey her for one second twisted into a position she could never achieve in gym. Her bland Saxon face is further anesthetized by uncracked steel-rimmed glasses. A sharp bone of the arm has escaped the skin.

After the ambulance Breavman whispered.

'Krantz, there's something special about my voice.'

'No, there isn't.'

'There is so. I can make things happen.'

'You're a nut.'

'Want to hear my resolutions?'

'No.'

'I promise not to speak for a week. I promise to learn how to play it myself. In that way the number of people who know how to play remains the same.'

'What good's that?'

'It's obvious, Krantz.'

8

His father decided to rise from his chair.

'I'm speaking to you, Lawrence!'

'Your father's speaking to you, Lawrence,' his mother interpreted.

Breavman attempted one last desperate pantomime.

'Listen to your father breathing.'

The elder Breavman calculated the expense of energy, accepted the risk, drove the back of his hand across his son's face.

His lips were not too swollen to practise 'Old Black Joe.'

They said she'd live. But he didn't give it up. He'd be one extra.

9

The Japs and Germans were beautiful enemies. They had buck teeth or cruel monocles and commanded in crude English with much saliva. They started the war because of their nature.

Red Cross ships must be bombed, all parachutists machine-gunned. Their uniforms were stiff and decorated with skulls. They kept right on eating and laughed at appeals for mercy.

They did nothing warlike without a close-up of perverted glee.

Best of all, they tortured. To get secrets, to make soap, to set examples to towns of heroes. But mostly they tortured for fun, because of their nature.

Comic books, movies, radio programmes centred their entertainment around the fact of torture. Nothing

fascinates a child like a tale of torture. With the clearest of consciences, with a patriotic intensity, children dreamed, talked, acted orgies of physical abuse. Imaginations were released to wander on a reconnaissance mission from Calvary to Dachau.

European children starved and watched their parents scheme and die. Here we grew up with toy whips. Early warning against our future leaders, the war babies.

10

They had Lisa, they had the garage, they needed string, red string for the sake of blood.

They couldn't enter the deep garage without red string.

Breavman remembered a coil.

The kitchen drawer is a step removed from the garbage can, which is a step removed from the outside garbage can, which is a step removed from the armadillo-hulked automatic garbage trucks, which are a step removed from the mysterious stinking garbage heaps by the edge of the St. Lawrence.

'A nice glass of chocolate milk?'

He wished his mother had some respect for importance.

Oh, it is a most perfect kitchen drawer, even when you are in a desperate hurry.

Besides the tangled string box there are candlebutts from years of Sabbath evenings kept in thrifty

anticipation of hurricanes, brass keys to locks which have been changed (it is difficult to throw out anything so precise and crafted as a metal key), straight pens with ink-caked nibs which could be cleaned if anyone took the trouble (his mother instructed the maid), toothpicks they never used (especially for picking teeth), the broken pair of scissors (the new pair was kept in another drawer: ten years later it was still referred to as 'the new pair'), exhausted rubber rings from home preserving bottles (pickled tomatoes, green, evil, tight-skinned), knobs, nuts, all the homey debris which avarice protects.

He fingered blindly in the string box because the drawer can never be opened all the way.

'A little cookie, a nice piece of honey cake, there's a whole box of macaroons?'

Ah! bright red.

The welts dance all over Lisa's imaginary body.

'Strawberries,' his mother called like a good-bye.

There is a way children enter garages, barns, attics, the same way they enter great halls and family chapels. Garages, barns and attics are always older than the buildings to which they are attached. They have the dark reverent air of immense kitchen drawers. They are friendly museums.

It was dark inside, smelled of oil and last year's leaves which splintered as they moved. Bits of metal, the edges of shovels and cans glimmered damply.

'You're the American,' said Krantz.

'No, I'm not,' said Lisa.

'You're the American,' said Breavman. 'Two against one.'

The ack-ack of Breavman and Krantz was very heavy. Lisa came on a daring manoeuvre across the darkness, arms outstretched.

'Ehehehehehehehh,' stuttered her machine guns.

She's hit.

She went into a spectacular nose dive, bailed out at the last moment. Swaying from one foot to another she floated down the sky, looking below, knowing her number was up.

She's a perfect dancer, Breavman thought.

Lisa watched the Krauts coming.

'*Achtung. Heil Hitler!* You are a prisoner of the Third Reich.'

'I swallowed the plans.'

'Vee haf methods.'

She is led to lie face down on the cot.

'Just on the bum.'

Geez, they're white, they're solid white.

Her buttocks were whipped painlessly with red string.

'Turn over,' Breavman commanded.

'The rule was: only on the bum,' Lisa protested.

'That was last time,' argued Krantz the legalist.

She had to take off her top, too, and the cot disappeared from under her and she floated in the autumnal gloom of the garage, two feet above the stone floor.

Oh my, my, my.

Breavman didn't take his turn whipping. There were white flowers growing out of all her pores.

'What's the matter with him? I'm getting dressed.'

'The Third Reich will not tolerate insubordination,' said Krantz.

'Should we hold her?' said Breavman.

'She'll make a lot of noise,' said Krantz.

Now outside of the game, she made them turn while she put on her dress. The sunlight she let in while leaving turned the garage into a garage. They sat in silence, the red whip lost.

'Let's go, Breavman.'

'She's perfect, isn't she, Krantz?'

'What's so perfect about her?'

'You saw her. She's perfect.'

'So long, Breavman.'

Breavman followed him out of the yard.

'She's perfect, Krantz, didn't you see?'

Krantz plugged his ears with his forefingers. They passed Bertha's Tree. Krantz began to run.

'She was really perfect, you have to admit it, Krantz.'

Krantz was faster.

11

One of Breavman's early sins was to sneak a look at the gun. His father kept it in a night-table between his and his wife's bed.

It was a huge .38 in a thick leather case. Name, rank and regiment engraved on the barrel. Lethal, angular, precise, it smouldered in the dark drawer with dangerous potential. The metal was always cold.

The sound of the machinery when Breavman pulled the hammer back was the marvellous sound of all

murderous scientific achievement. Click! like the smacking of cogwheel lips.

The little blunt bullets took the scratch of a thumbnail.

If there were Germans coming down the street …

When his father married he swore to kill any man who ever made advances towards his wife. His mother told the story as a joke. Breavman believed the words. He had a vision of a corpse-heap of all the men who had ever smiled at her.

His father had an expensive heart doctor named Farley. He was around so much that they might have called him Uncle if they had been that sort of family. While his father was gasping under the oxygen-tent in the Royal Victoria, Doctor Farley kissed his mother in the hallway of their house. It was a gentle kiss to console an unhappy woman, between two people who had known each other through many crises.

Breavman wondered whether or not he'd better get the gun and finish him off.

Then who'd repair his father?

Not long ago Breavman watched his mother read the *Star*. She put down the paper and a Chekhovian smile of lost orchards softened her face. She had just read Farley's obituary notice.

'Such a handsome man.' She seemed to be thinking of sad Joan Crawford movies. 'He wanted me to marry him.'

'Before or after my father died?'

'Don't be so foolish.'

His father was a tidy man, upturned his wife's sewing basket when he thought it was getting messy, raged

when his family's slippers were not carefully lined under respective beds.

He was a fat man who laughed easily with everybody but his brothers.

He was so fat and his brothers were tall and thin and it wasn't fair, it wasn't fair, why should the fat one die, didn't he have enough being fat and breathless, why not one of the handsome ones?

The gun proved he was once a warrior.

His brother's pictures were in the papers in connection with the war effort. He gave his son his first book, *The Romance of the King's Army*, a thick volume praising British regiments.

K-K-K-Katy, he sang when he could.

What he really loved was machinery. He would go miles to see a machine which cut a pipe this way instead of that. His family thought him a fool. He lent money to his friends and employees without question. He was given poetry books for his bar mitzvah. Breavman has the leather books now and startles at each uncut page.

'And read these, too, Lawrence.'

How To Tell Birds
How To Tell Trees
How To Tell Insects
How To Tell Stones

He looked at his father in the crisp, white bed, always neat, still smelling of Vitalis. There was something sour inside the softening body, some enemy, some limpness of the heart.

He tore the books as his father weakened. He didn't

know why he hated the careful diagrams and coloured plates. We do. It was to scorn the world of detail, information, precision, all the false knowledge which cannot intrude on decay.

Breavman roamed his house waiting for a shot to ring out. That would teach them, the great successes, the eloquent speakers, the synagogue builders, all the grand brothers that walked ahead into public glory. He waited for the blast of a .38 which would clean the house and bring a terrible change. The gun was right beside the bed. He waited for his father to execute his heart.

'Get me the medals out of the top drawer.'

Breavman brought them to the bed. The reds and golds of the ribbons ran into each other as in a watercolour. With some effort his father pinned them on Breavman's sweater.

Breavman stood at attention ready to receive the farewell address.

'Don't you like them? You're always looking at them.'

'Oh, yes.'

'Stop stretching yourself like a damn fool. They're yours.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'Well, go out and play with them. Tell your mother I don't want to see anyone and that includes my famous brothers.'

Breavman went downstairs and unlocked the closet which held his father's fishing equipment. He spent hours in wonder, putting the great salmon rods together, winding and unwinding the copper wire,

handling the dangerous flies and hooks.

How could his father have wielded these beautiful, heavy weapons, that swollen body on the crisp, white bed?

Where was the body in rubber boots that waded up rivers?

12

Many years later, telling all this, Breavman interrupted himself:

'Shell, how many men know of those little scars in your earlobes? How many besides me, the original archaeologist of earlobes?'

'Not as many as you think.'

'I don't mean the two or three or fifty that kissed them with their everyday lips. But in your fantasies, how many did something impossible with their mouths?'

'Lawrence, please, we're lying here together. You're trying to spoil the night somehow.'

'I'd say battalions.'

She did not reply and her silence removed her body from him a little distance.

'Tell me some more about Bertha, Krantz and Lisa.'

'Anything I tell you is an alibi for something else.'

'Then let's be quiet together.'

'I saw Lisa before that time in the garage. We must have been five or six.'

Breavman stared at Shell and described Lisa's sunny

room, dense with expensive toys. Electric hobby-horse which rocked itself. Life-sized walking dolls. Nothing that didn't squeak or light up when squeezed.

They hid in the shade of under-the-bed, their hands full of secrets and new smells, on the look-out for servants, watching the sun slide along the linoleum with the fairy tales cut in it.

The gigantic shoes of a housemaid paddled close by.

'That's lovely, Lawrence.'

'But it's a lie. It happened, but it's a lie. Bertha's Tree is a lie although she really fell out of it. That night after I fooled with my father's fishing rods I sneaked into my parents' room. They were both sleeping in their separate beds. There was a moon. They were both facing the ceiling and lying in the same position. I knew that if I shouted only one of them would wake up.'

'Was that the night he died?'

'It doesn't matter how anything happens.'

He began to kiss her shoulders and face and although he was hurting her with his nails and teeth she didn't protest.

'Your body will never be familiar.'

13

After breakfast six men entered the house and set the coffin down in the living-room. It was surprisingly huge, made of dark-grained wood, brass-handled. There was snow on their clothes.