



2004

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## Recommended Citation

Dabydeen, Cyril, Leovskis blues, *Kunapipi*, 26(1), 2004.  
Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol26/iss1/18>

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### **Abstract**

Leovski Donovan my brother called himself: a genuine Russian name as it sounded; and pleased with himself he was, as he drew a picture of Lenin with goatee and all; and the chin jutted out, reflecting the revolutionary's iron will, he said. Next he started writing poems: none of your bourgeois preoccupation with selfreflection, or of pastoral nature which our local poets were good at. Leovski wrote poems that the workers wanted to hear, as he read them out loudly to me. He also wrote essays, extolling progressive forces the world over.

CYRIL DABYDEEN

## LEOVSKI'S BLUES

*Leovski Donovan* my brother called himself: a genuine Russian name as it sounded; and pleased with himself he was, as he drew a picture of Lenin with goatee and all; and the chin jutted out, reflecting the revolutionary's iron will, he said. Next he started writing poems: none of your bourgeois preoccupation with self-reflection, or of pastoral nature which our local poets were good at. Leovski wrote poems that the workers wanted to hear, as he read them out loudly to me. He also wrote essays, extolling progressive forces the world over.

My brother also read Cuba's *Granma*: all weighty parcels that the postman brought to our door, who'd seemed suspicious as he took off. More serious Leovski began to appear; and he hoped his essays on Marxism and Third World socialism would draw attention in America, in magazines such as *The Village Voice*, *Harper's*, as he yet called himself *Leovski Donovan*.

And other people too changed their names, some taking genuine African ones in our district, if not the country as a whole, I reflected; and, indeed, strange many of these names were, all with the talk of a back-to-Africa movement and Marcus Garvey. For my brother though, being a Russian was all, despite our Indian family and background. No doubt he felt that Russia — the entire Soviet Union — was powerful. Now here, in our part of the world he was ready to bring about transformation.

I listened to him, and smiled.

My mother also listened, and maybe she sensed what was going through me. When later I saw Leovski leading a long line of workers, all 'peasants and workers', each waving a placard — and he being in the 'vanguard' — I became worried. I tried talking him out of his revolutionary zeal; but by now his name *Leovski Donovan* was being repeated everywhere, not without some awe. He also inspired jest ... as I saw the name Leovski written down on culverts, cowpens: my brother's popularity mixed with parody.

A couple more marches along the main road, and our entire family became worried. My mother asked where he got the name from, as she tried pronouncing it, unread or unlettered as she was. Then she wrung her hands and let out an audible moan.

My youngest brother smiled, and called out, 'Le-ov-ski'; it sounded like a game being played. Others picked up on this, a refrain indeed, and jeered.

Leovski merely held out his chin, Lenin-like; he seemed a genuine Russian now. I laughed. He didn't.

Solemnly, he said we must get rid of poverty once and for all; then he murmured about the difference between idealism and materialism as he struck an intellectual pose. By now he was reading constantly; he even played a tape-recorder, 'practicing' his speeches he would one day deliver to his 'comrades.' 'D'you really mean that, Leovski?' I asked, sceptical.

Hands akimbo, he listened to the tape-recorder: to his own voice, the speeches. Then he rasped to me, 'Exploitation must end soon!'

'What exploitation?'

He shrugged.

By now a few of the youngsters among us had been sent abroad by the 'Party'; and when they came back after a few months, they were full of a fancy talk about 'dialectical materialism' and 'scientific socialism,' which would solve all our problems, to end Third World exploitation and poverty once and for all!

I imagined Leovski going abroad too, and when he returned he would indeed never be the same again. In Moscow, I saw him addressing everyone as *tovarish* (comrade), as he talked about social change in highfalutin' terms. Russian hardliners listened to him with curiosity, I figured. Ah, they concluded, with Comrade Leovski Donovan Third World socialism and the Communist International were on the right track. Leovski next showed them his essays — his articles — all written long hand. And with passion he talked about the workers' plight: as if they were a special breed, not people who sometimes guffawed at the slightest joke or were sometimes roguish in our village.

Frowns from his Russian 'comrades', even as they repeated his name, *Leovski Donovan*, then studied his unmistakable Hindu features. They became more intrigued, even as my brother expatiated about the differences between pragmatism, idealism, and materialism. His voice rang with conviction.

My mother frowned. Leovski dared me to imagine more.

Then he said I must also call him 'comrade': we were a progressive family. He quoted Marx and emphasised that Marxism-Leninism wasn't a dogma, but 'a guide to action'. 'Are you sure about that, Leovski?' I challenged him.

He scoffed an answer.

'We're not in Russia, you know,' I said, still baiting him.

'We could be.'

I forced a smile.

'Progressive forces will survive. International solidarity is all,' he grated.

My mother again frowned, but was also puzzled. I figured I now had to steer my brother on the right path, if only for our mother's sake: the latter urging me on to it quietly. Then she too began calling him by that name, not his real Hindu name, Doodnauth.

'Leovski,' I heard again.

Triumphant ... it sounded.

I'd started making plans to come to Canada, mainly to attend university.

Leovski said that Canadian education was too bourgeois; it didn't prepare one to bring about world revolution and liberation. Somehow I knew he'd say this.

He sneered next; but he was my brother, I reminded myself. And maybe he was glad I had ambition, my wanting to escape our poverty as I'd said.

Then Leovski turned away, to talk to the workers who came to consult him about something or the other: maybe to plan another long march to protest their working conditions. They would now seriously discuss 'strategy and tactics'.

I eavesdropped, smiling. I watched Leovski become animated, even comical. At once I recalled the time when we were seven or eight and had gone to visit our father's relatives on the Corentyne; and how much they'd doted on him, he with his wavy hair, handsome as he looked. The relatives figured he'd become a film star one day, even end up in Bombay (Bollywood always on their minds). Then I remembered our coming home from the Corentyne in the bus named *Duke of Kent* (another bus was called *Lord Mountbatten*), with the horn regularly blowing and deafening everyone. He started trembling when the live chicken the relatives had given us as gifts, seemed ready to fly out of his hands. Pandemonium among the passengers; a look of abject terror on my brother's face, so overcome he was with anxiety.

I reminded Leovski about this, and he smiled.

'That chicken,' I prompted another time.

But now he was ready to make another speech to the 'workers and peasants', like a real firebrand politician. I watched him shaking his fist and quoting facts and figures; and where he got his information from I didn't know; it was as if he had a full research team behind him. From time to time too, I watched him make notes with a vigorous hand, the numbers he kept copying down, then repeated to himself into the tape-recorder.

The postman came again, with another parcel from Havana.

More *Granma* ... and other propaganda material, though Leovski never called it that. 'You better be careful,' I said to him, thinking he'd soon have the security police after him because of the government's fear of 'dissidents'.

He simply called me the 'Canadian' because I'd kept seriously thinking of coming to Canada.

Once more I joined a group of workers — to observe him in action, in a way admiring how forcefully he spoke and gesticulated. A nephew or niece sat next to me, as I nudged her to listen carefully. And more irrepressible Leovski seemed as he talked about the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' — the panacea for all the world's political woes.

The workers and peasants applauded.

I raised a hand to ask a question, to challenge him about some point or the other: in a way testing him, even as I sensed he would dismiss me as the

‘Canadian’. Then I found myself applauding him. Oddly, the image of my brother in the bus holding on to the chicken for dear life’s sake as *Duke of Kent* thundered down the main road never left me. The chicken fluttered noisily, then jumped from seat to seat, from one passenger to another as everyone tried grabbing it!

‘We’ll soon be home,’ I tried to soothe him, as the bus trundled on.

‘Hold the hen down. It go bite!’ he cried, already being a nervous wreck.

‘No!’

Then he clamped the chicken down between his legs, mouth set tight; and maybe his activism began from then, I thought.

I wanted to tell his audience this, and listen to them laugh. Really laugh.

Leovski glared at me: he knew what was on my mind. Then his voice became measured, but calm. The one next to me gave me a nudge — wanting me to listen carefully to Leovski.

After the meeting, everyone congratulated my brother for a speech well delivered, his message was so powerful. Another pumped his hand as if he’d never stop. Once more I imagined my brother meeting one Communist leader after another in Moscow. Then Fidel Castro himself in Havana he met. And Comrade Fidel, with cigar and reeking of a foul fume from his bushy beard, also pumped his hand, calling him *companero*. Maybe Castro then whispered something about Che Guevara, as if they were all now on equal terms.

‘The Third World must never succumb to American imperialism,’ I imagined Castro saying as my brother nodded.

‘We must never allow ourselves to become like Grenada and Panama,’ Castro brandished his hands before my brother’s face.

My brother smiled.

I too smiled, the Canadian that I was.

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‘Leovski Donovan,’ I muttered, whispering his name in the kitchen to myself, as my mother again frowned. It was dinner time, and my brother had come to join us in the kitchen of our small house, exhausted and hungry as he seemed after his last lengthy speech.

‘You want some food, Leovski?’ my mother asked.

‘Yes, hurry up,’ he commanded. My mother quickly dished out a heap of rice, as if he needed a special helping.

‘When is your next meeting, Leovski?’ I asked.

He didn’t answer.

‘When are you meeting the workers again?’

‘Soon.’ He looked away; something else was on his mind. Then he shrugged, but looked sternly at me, ready to quote some statistic or other.

Stuffing his mouth full of rice and biting into a *wiri-wiri* pepper, which can really make the tongue burn, he kept thinking. His Adam’s apple bulged. This

would be his last mouthful. Oddly, I imagined people being put in prison in Siberia under Stalin, as I continued watching him; and he didn't appear like my brother any more. But he was, my mother seemed to say to me at the table.

Auntie, Grandmother, other relatives — they were all saying the same as they watched him covertly. Some smiled. Again I thought of the bus, and the chickens fluttering, everywhere.

Leovski suddenly laughed, no longer the revolutionary he seemed: and it was just like old times, as I wanted him to be, if only for our mother's sake.

A sliver of onion stuck out of his left bicuspid. Then he muttered something about a large workers' strike looming.

My mother's eyes widened. And maybe right after the strike, Leovski would announce that he would leave—the Party would be sending him away.

Where?

He only smiled.

My mother looked at us, becoming more anxious.

Then I noticed that Leovski didn't jut out his chin. He didn't make any reference to Lenin too, when I tried to nettle him by saying that Stalin was the worst dictator the world has known. He squinted; and I imagined he was having second thoughts about the planned workers' strike. Yet I dwelled on his talk about ploughing back the large profits made from sugar cane by the multinationals into establishing a Cadbury's milk chocolate factory locally; and the sugar didn't have to be sent all the way to England too! He used terms like 'social infrastructure' as he talked about health and educational development as if this would happen overnight. More facts, statistics, he spewed out, and in a way I was proud of him.

But he also seemed glum. 'Hey, Leovski, what's the matter?' I said.

He didn't answer.

I called him by his real name, and still he didn't answer.

I tried *companero*, pretending to be Castro with a fat cigar hanging from my lips. Then, *tovarish*.

No answer.

I watched one or two of the workers calling on him, to talk about the labour strike. And they too weren't sure about him. What was Leovski really thinking? Once or twice he murmured something about me being 'the Canadian': he'd been dwelling on this.

I sat in on the next strategy session planning the strike. Balram, one worker, said: 'Now is the time to cripple the sugar industry. Let's teach them a lesson.'

'What kind of lesson?' Leovski asked testily.

The other workers seemed immediately cowed, though one sniggered.

For days after Leovski kept to himself, and all my efforts to engage him to defend socialism and communism seemed to no avail. I even tried aggression: saying socialism was merely a form of dictatorship; before, when I'd said that,

he railed at me and went into a long harangue about the American system: that it was only a democracy of the rich, the many millionaires and heads of corporations who ran the White House! Capitalism led to world-wide imperialism, didn't I know?

'Hey, Leovski, what's the matter? I'm your brother — tell me!' I nearly used the word '*comrade*'.

He shrugged.

'Come on, *Leovski* ... what is it?' He sneered. 'That name's only for foreign people,' he said.

I looked at him as his eyelids quivered.

'The workers...?' I tried.

He burst out: 'Now what are you? The head of a multinational corporation?' I waited.

Then, 'I'm going to America,' he said.

'You are?'

He lifted his head, chin jutting out. 'America ... yes.'

'What about Russia or Cuba?'

Maybe he'd had a row with the Party. Now he didn't want to lead another march and to take strike action.

'The workers — the exploited — they depend on you,' I added. 'That Balram, for instance....'

'His wife's pregnant again,' Leovski moaned.

I asked about his going abroad, to America. But he didn't want to say more. I figured the next day he'd be back to his old self, the true *revolutionary*. Another bus, *Lord Mountbatten*, passed by on the main road, not far from our house. Then the truck named *Zapata*, workers in it hailing as they saw him in our front yard, all in the spirit of true comradeship.

When I called him by his Russian name again, he said I shouldn't. 'Then what are you?' I insisted, not letting him off the hook.

'Che Guevara,' he said, with a straight face.

'So Che Guevara wants to go to America — to start a revolution?' I laughed.

The old fire in his eyes again. 'Just like you'll be doing in Canada, no?' he taunted.

'In Canada people have freedom,' I argued. 'In America ... too.'

'There the workers everywhere are exploited!'

'Some people have made it from rags to....' I still tried baiting him. And quickly I added, 'Where in America are the oppressed who will want to join you in overthrowing...?'

'The Blacks, they're really oppressed.' His eyes burned.

Ah, I figured he was genuinely wondering about me going to Canada, as much as I wondered about him going to America, soon.

'Where will you get the money to go to America?' I said next. It was what my mother had also asked.

He kept thinking.

'Will the Party give you, Leovski?'

Another truck lumbered by, more workers hailing him. 'Will *they*?' I pointed at the ones with faces smeared with the soot from the burnt sugar cane after a long day in the fields. And they kept waving to him ... *Che Guevara!*

Then he said: '*You* will give me the money'. His irony didn't escape me.

The truck now gone down the winding road, a heavy blanket of smoke in its trail. 'I will, eh?'

'You're my brother.'

I laughed. He too laughed.

'Look here, Leovski —'

'Don't call me by that name.'

'Look here, Che Guevara —'

'Don't call me that either.'

Now ... his true name, which somehow didn't sound like his name anymore: it was too mundane-sounding; I still wanted him to be *Leovski Donovan*.

He grimaced. 'The blacks in America are really the oppressed,' he said. 'In the streets of New York, Chicago, Alabama and the far south, they need to be liberated.' Once more his strident tone, as he quoted African Americans like the Reverend Jessie Jackson. I'd heard him say some of this into his tape-recorder.

My mother came by, quietly listening.

Leovski began telling me next about how many blacks lived in the ghettos, in the inner cities, and the drug addiction, crime, racism, AIDS: he knew it all. When I didn't respond, he accused: 'Don't you care about them?'

His chin jutted out; and maybe he'd talk about life in Canada next, about the Native people. No, he left that for me.

'What about the people here? The exploited...?' I countered.

He continued on about the Blacks in America, how they'd suffered long decades of slavery in the cotton plantations. His eyes seemed ablaze. I managed a reply: 'So you think *they* will listen to you?'

'Why wouldn't they? They need organising.' And he continued on about the Blacks in places like Toronto, Montreal, Halifax, which really surprised me. Yes, police were shooting blacks too in Canada, not just in Los Angeles, didn't I know?

I looked at him ... expecting him to talk about the Native people's plight next. But he vaguely muttered something about not understanding why the Eskimos wanted to live in cold weather up north. And I thought he laughed.

'They are Canada's first people,' I said.

He didn't answer; maybe he was only thinking of the cold weather.

My mother looked confused, because she'd never heard of people in America or Canada starving. She'd seen magazine pictures of everyone being well-dressed, including blacks, who rode in large fancy cars.

But my brother was impatient; he quickly dismissed her.

Then he looked at me again: he wasn't getting far with me, he knew.

Then addressing our mother only, he said: 'What are you cooking today?' He was hungry again.

He swallowed emptily. Was he really thinking about Native people ... in Canada? My mother managed a smile. Surprisingly she hummed, 'In America, maybe you will eat all you want, son.' It was her sense of irony, even implying gluttony. But maybe she said this because the situation now in our country was getting worse: everyone was talking of leaving the country. Where people got the gumption from ... and money to make travel arrangements, and to obtain visas, I didn't know. From time to time they'd ask my brother to assist them with spelling names of places correctly.

And he did, willingly.

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My mother started dishing out food for the hungry Leovski, even as she kept wondering if there were indeed poor and homeless people in America; I could tell this from her eyes.

And maybe a strange fear about America gripped her, there where Leovski would be going soon. And fear about Canada as well, because of the plight of the Native people ... where I'd be going. A soiled-looking copy of *Granma* was on the table, which none of us had read, including Leovski. My mother's eyes shifted to it.

And I kept thinking of people in America and Canada ... many doing menial work in restaurants, hotels, factories: perhaps also planning a long protest march in order to improve their working conditions.

Another truck, painted pink almost, lumbered by, one without a name.

Leovski glanced at me, and he knew what I was thinking: about that nameless truck ... as I quickly imagined it one day being called *Leovski Donovan*.

'When's he leaving for America?' Balram asked me soon after.

'You mean Comrade Leovski?' I impressed on him.

He nodded.

'Is the Party still sending him away?'

Balram was deeply involved in Party work. 'He's really one of us, you know,' he added, suspicious of me now.

Then he smiled; and I didn't like the way he smiled; it was as if he was laughing at my brother, before he left for America.

My brother in the kitchen swallowed small mouthfuls, yet looked solemn. 'I will remain here,' he said. He now studied the dhal and rice — his favourite fare — which my mother always prepared for him.

Then he ate quickly, shovelling the food into his mouth.

Strangely, I began seeing him interviewed by a TV crew as he headed a

protest march in New York; and the announcer saying: *'Mr Leovski Donovan is deeply concerned about the plight of immigrants in the United States of America. Not just the Blacks and the Hispanics and people from Puerto Rico, but the illegal, undocumented immigrants also ... in New York, California, all across America!'*

Pause.

*'So Mr Leovski Donovan,'* asked the beautiful Hispanic female reporter, *'are you yourself an illegal alien?'*

My brother's jutting-out chin, Lenin-like once again.

Something about the word *'alien'* troubled him. He looked confused ... as the picture slowly began fading from my mind.

Then I saw him again with hands punctuating the air before a large crowd. The nameless pink truck lumbered by again, the workers applauding him. *'Leovski Donovan,'* called out ... and the truck suddenly was no longer nameless.

My mother, alone — I figured — vaguely contemplated our fate; and she perhaps was unable to recognize us anymore ... as if we were already gone to America or Canada. The sounds of the truck lumbering by, seemed all.