

book extract

Leonard got me pregnant and made a fool out of me

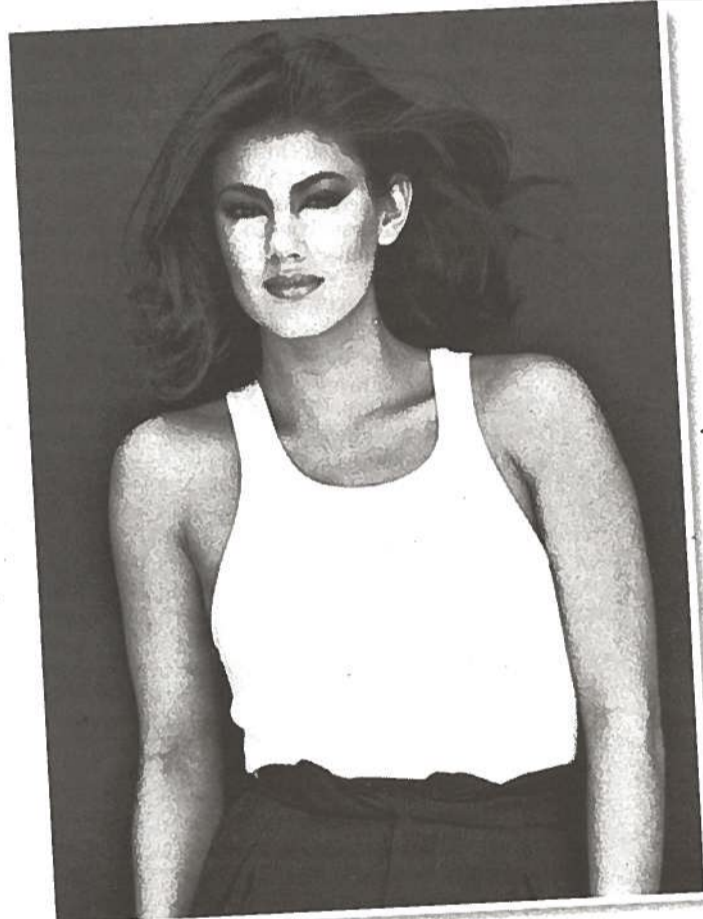
Leonard Cohen's most beloved song, *Hallelujah*, was inspired by a Costa Rican lover whom the singer abandoned. She tells her story to **Michael Posner** in an exclusive extract from his book

On October 29, 1980, before a concert in Brussels, Cohen met Gabriela Valenzuela, a 20-year-old Costa Rican student. Although her name did not appear in a single interview, she was to become one of the most important women in his life. Indeed, for the next several years, Cohen would find himself effectively juggling two intense romantic liaisons — one with Valenzuela, the other with French photographer Dominique Issermann, whom he met in 1981. On the face of it, the relationship with Valenzuela was improbable. Cohen had recently celebrated his 46th birthday, although he initially told her he was 42.

On the other hand, it's unlikely he could have found another partner as well versed in the work of his poetic hero, Federico García Lorca. The daughter of an actor/broadcaster and fine seamstress, she had immersed herself in García Lorca's work in high school. Later, studying theatre in Madrid, a lover introduced her to Cohen's music and books. "I connected immediately with his sorrow-filled, tender songs. But I never saw a photograph of Cohen." Studying journalism at the Université Libre de Brussels, Valenzuela had seen a poster announcing a Leonard Cohen concert and bought a ticket.

Valenzuela could never have guessed the importance that a single conversation was to have on her life. Had she not been invited to dinner [after a chance meeting], her Leonard Cohen experience would have ended with their pre-concert flirtation. Offered a job as fan mail coordinator, she put her education on hold and made her way to Düsseldorf. Initially, Cohen kept a certain distance from Valenzuela. The slow burn was part of his *modus operandi*. On tour, Valenzuela collected fan mail, pressed Cohen's jacket, set out Courvoisier in the green room, and ensured a heart-healthy diet of fresh nutritional food. Backstage, after the concerts, she saw the women lining up for Cohen.

Cohen gave two final concerts in Tel Aviv on November 24, 1980. En route, he wrote to Valenzuela — the first of some 40 letters to her over the next six years. "He asked a flight attendant to let him use his typewriter," says Valenzuela. "He told her it was urgent. In the letter, he said he had to write 'to the beautiful woman with almond eyes and almost transparent feet' to tell her how much I like her. He says, 'I want you,



THE END OF LOVE
Gabriela Valenzuela in 1980, the year that she met Leonard Cohen, top

'The abortion was like a murder. I wanted to scream, give me back my child'

darling. I want you, and you know that at first glance, there is no remedy."

If Cohen was reigning over a *de facto* harem on Hydra, the woman most vividly on his mind was Valenzuela: "He wrote to me from Hydra and said he'd grown a beard with which to scrape my entire body. It was very romantic. I didn't see him again until 1982, but all of 1981 was a mental turn-on, the buildup."

At the end of August 1981, Cohen sent a telegram to Valenzuela in Brussels, asking her to meet him in London at Durrants Hotel. Busy working, she did not respond. [In *Hallelujah* Cohen sings: "I didn't come here to London just to fool you."] Days later, she received a letter, mailed from London. "The stationery inside was crisp, and only contained a short note that said something like, 'You are in my skin.' I did not know what it was — why he'd send an empty page," says Valenzuela. "Twenty-five years later, I organised all his letters and opened this one and, voilà. I could now see what it was — a full display of his DNA.



I was so naive then, I did not get the full impact of this unique gesture."

In June 1982, Cohen finally consummated his relationship with Valenzuela. At her own expense, she had taken a train from Brussels to Athens. Cohen met her on the port on Hydra: "I arrived, beyond exhausted. We had coffee and cake at the port, my bag was put on to a donkey, and we began the pilgrimage to his house. Silence was the communicating mode. He treated me like this was the beginning of everything. There was a box on the bed. A gift — a tunic, made of Lebanese cloth. When [orthodox] Jewish women marry, there's a ceremony before the wedding where they are cleansed [in the mikveh]. Then they put on a dress, white and clean, like fine cheesecloth. That's what that was — a ceremony. And he bathed me — beautifully, with a little porcelain pitcher. Then he put the tunic on and took me to bed, and without saying a word, we made love, and it was fantastic — beautiful lovemaking."

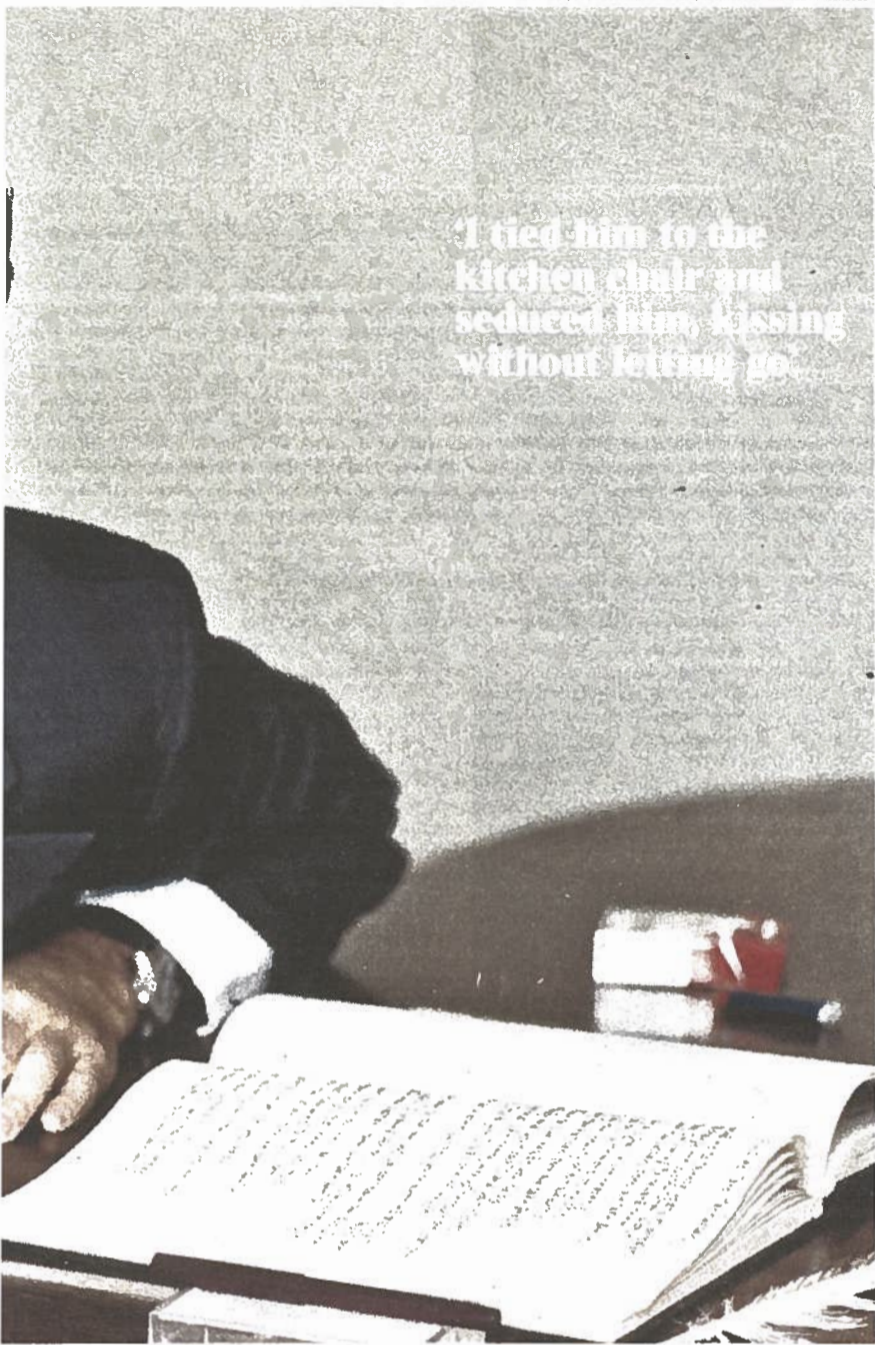
One night, Cohen told her he needed a haircut: "His hair was long and wavy and fuller at the top. I said I could cut it. I told him to take his clothes off, both of us naked, to avoid hairs all over our clothes. He thought it was funny. I got a sheet of newspaper, to avoid getting hairs on him, but he said no, he didn't want newspaper on him. I used a white cotton kitchen cloth instead. My breasts were at his eye level, and he'd try to catch my nipple with his mouth. I took off the kitchen rag and tied him to the kitchen chair and seduced him, kissing without letting go."

That night, Valenzuela slept on a cot while Cohen wrote: "He wrote and wrote and wrote. A couple of times he came to kneel and kiss my belly, my armpits, my neck. He was deeply loving, with a sense of gratitude. He cried a couple of times. He was very moved."

Another evening, Valenzuela, naked, took a pillow and a shawl, lay down on a Persian rug on Cohen's [roof] terrace, and fell asleep: "I woke up and he had penetrated me without my knowing it. Then we made love. It was a full moon. The next day, I had knees that made me look like Jesus Christ. We held tight to each other like sailors in a bad storm. I don't know if the song [*Hallelujah*] is about that, but when I hear it, my soul vibrates." Two verses of *Hallelujah* appear to derive from these experiences. ["You saw her bathing on the roof/ Her beauty and the moonlight overthrew her/ She tied you to a kitchen chair/ She broke your throne, and she cut your hair/ And from your lips she drew the Hallelujah."]

In New York on June 4, 1986, she took a home pregnancy test. "I did not want this to happen. But Leonard had been writing letters and talking to my unborn child. This is two years before I was pregnant. He told me he wanted to have my child — and he named my child." The name was to be September Cohen — the same name that Cohen, in a 1966 TV interview, had joked that he might adopt as a stage name when he began his music career. Cohen also referred to himself as September in 1970, in an inscription to a book he bought for Suzanne Elrod [Cohen's partner for much of the 1970s and the mother of his two children]. "Once, he kissed me — I was still sleeping — and left a letter on the bed for her. There are two letters, in French. He always called her September — a little girl. 'My darling, my little one, I look for you in every crevice of your mother's body... I feel the vibrations of your mother's body and I know you're there.' He talked to her. He said, 'You can only see her now from the inside, but if you were on the outside, you will see why she's so spectacular and you will love her.'"

ERIC PRÉAU/SYGMA VIA GETTY IMAGES, COURTESY OF GABRIELA VALENZUELA



'I tied him to the kitchen chair and seduced him, kissing without letting go.'

Valenzuela had always been careful about birth control. But in 1985, returning from his concert tour, Cohen surprised her, saying he had decided to have a procedure. "Not a vasectomy, but a non-scalpel vasectomy [a less painful method of ensuring infertility]. I couldn't tell if he was serious. He said he did not want to [father] more children — he had enough obligations. And he already sensed his own children would blame him for his shortcomings. It broke my heart."

Soon after, she went off the Pill: "I got pregnant just like that. I was devastated. Then my doctor told me those [procedures] don't work or take a while to work. I felt mocked." They spoke by phone on June 7, 1986, but she did not disclose her fears. Soon after, Cohen flew to Paris. In late June, a doctor's letter confirmed the pregnancy. She was expecting Cohen to return from Europe on June 27; he never arrived: "He did not call and did not answer my calls. He abandoned me completely. I knew then they [he and Dominique Issermann] were together."

The abortion itself was traumatic: "Most abortions are done by aspiration, but I saw the image and this was like a murder. I wanted to scream, 'Give me back my child.' I cried every time I showered because I couldn't process it and had to do it in silence. I tried, God knows I tried, and begged for forgiveness. It was just too painful." And then "like nothing had happened", Cohen returned to New York in September and tracked her down. She was working as a PR consultant to help launch a fashion firm in Milan.

"I told anybody that knew him I did not want to hear from him. My mother changed her number. Even Kelley [Lynch, a friend of Valenzuela] did not have my number. I disconnected my phone. But I'd been planning to move to a friend's

apartment and he had her number. Leonard must have called her ten times, nonstop. He was so insistent. He never said who it was, though she knew. Finally she said, 'Is this Leonard?' He said 'Yes,' and for fun she said, 'Leonard Bernstein or Leonard Cohen?' Then she said, 'If it's so important to talk to her, call this number.'

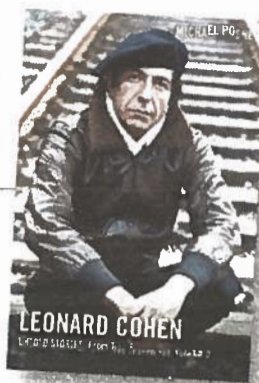
Valenzuela never spoke to Cohen, but Lynch did. "Cohen knew she was pregnant because we had a brief phone conversation about it," says Lynch. "He said very little, if anything, and ended the call quickly. That I recall vividly, because it was uncomfortable for me to raise this issue. I thought she was an important person in his life, so his response, or lack of one, was bizarre. But this was a topic never to be discussed again." In fact, Cohen was denying or avoiding paternity in the very house in which this child had been conceived.

On July 14, 1986, Sandra Anderson [a friend of Cohen's based in Montreal], says that "he brushed it off and said it was not uncommon for women to try to get money out of people like him. He said he'd once paid a woman off, but was not going to do so again."

"Work was difficult," says Valenzuela. "I didn't have a lot of money. I didn't know how to break the news to my family. I felt Leonard had made a fool out of me. It was his child, the child he'd written letters to. And now he was gone — where? This was the most painful moment of the entire relationship. The pregnancy was one thing, but he abandoned me, after years of professing love for this child. It was painful to realise I needed to not be attached to this man who had just broken my heart."

She [Valenzuela] would see Cohen only once more, briefly — backstage, after a 1988 concert. Lynch had reached out to tell her Cohen insisted she come to Carnegie Hall. He sent tickets without confirming if

she would attend — the same seats she'd had when they first met in Brussels, centre aisle, third row. He had told her many times that he was dedicating *I'm Your Man* to her. It was harrowing for her to read on the record a note that said, "D.I. [Dominique Issermann] this is for you." It took her decades to disclose the relationship to her family. Cohen's diaries from this period may ultimately reveal how he felt about the demise of the Valenzuela relationship but, characteristically, he said nothing to friends. Only in his final book, *The Flame*, posthumously published in



Adapted from Leonard Cohen, *Untold Stories: From This Broken Hill Vol 2* by Michael Posner, published by Simon & Schuster on Nov 2, £25

2018, would it be possible to read a clear expression of regret.

Meanwhile, Cohen was struggling to maintain his other relationship, with Dominique Issermann. It, too, was already in turbulent waters. And yet, as he stood on his broken hill, Cohen might have been able to discern a shaft of sunlight. Jennifer Warnes was about to release a cover album that would effectively resurrect his career. And he himself was at work on music that would take him in new creative directions and suddenly make Leonard Cohen, in his mid-fifties, the epitome of cultural cool.

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