

Joy Ross

My Crush on Tony Blair (And How I Overcame It)

If I had to be really, really honest, I would say it started on C-SPAN, one weekend when the U.S. government was caught up in another scandal, and allegations and misdeeds and spin guys were all over TV. I mean, on networks, CNN, Fox News and MSNBC. So all I could find was sport fishing on the Outdoor Network and a prison movie on the sci-fi channel and it was late on a Sunday night, I remember, because I had a meeting at work the next day for which I was maybe a little bit unprepared.

I work at Estee Lauder Corporate. In lipsticks. We were deciding the colors for the year 2004. It's pretty technical, although not really, if you know what I mean. But there are a lot of meetings, and in some of them, you might have to make a presentation. So it's stressful.

Anyway, I was clicking past "Crocodile Hunter", "Jewelry Under \$40," and "Emeril Live", and there on C-SPAN, on an apparently weekly program called the "Prime Minister's Questions," was Tony Blair.

He's incredibly sexy. I mean, he just stopped my channel-surfing cold.

Okay, yes, I'd seen him before; I think I first noticed him in an Annie Leibovitz photo of European Union heads of state, outside some castle. All the old guys like Mitterrand were wearing suits and had big barrel chests, and then there was Tony, in shirt-sleeves, and wearing a pink button-down cotton shirt. With his hands on his hips, like "Let's get to work and save Europe," and a really cute smile. He wasn't as tall as Helmut Kohl, but as that actress Emma Thompson once said, comparing Arnold Schwarzenegger to her then-husband Kenneth Branagh, "We're a small, pink, island people." Anyway, he looked plenty tall enough for me. His eyes were really blue.

After that, it almost seemed as though I couldn't flip through an issue of *Vanity Fair* without having him stare back at me from the pages. I'd be relaxing at work by reading about Brad Pitt or some-

thing and there he'd be, in a multi-page spread by Annie Liebovitz again, only this time in black and white, with all his Cabinet ministers, photographed in a "working" session, running Britain. I'd have to say that, even though I knew he was a leader of the free world, I was looking at him more like a man, a very attractive man, and so loose and easygoing in the photo, not like those straight-laced Oxford guys sitting upright in their chairs. I remember that Tony was leaning forward, gesturing, making some sort of point, seeming oblivious to the camera, and you could really see he has a passion for his work. I love that in a man.

What was with Annie Liebovitz, I wondered, that she had this fantastic job where she was always getting to photograph great-looking men?

So anyway, back to me with the remote control: there I was, staring right into the man's eyes, or actually, a little down, given the angle of the camera in the House of Commons, at his attractively balding head. He has the most interesting hair, sort of wavy and brown and thinning. He had a sort of non-blow-dried insouciance, as he gripped the podium and answered questions from the extremely nasty members of the opposition Conservative party—I think it was something really hostile about postal rates—and I couldn't help noticing that his tie was just an ordinary tie. It wasn't a power tie, not like Trent Lott's giant red compensatory ties, you know what I mean?

But mostly it just struck me how *real* he seemed; sometimes you can tell that sort of thing. Okay, yes, I knew he had a wife; *Vanity Fair* had run a picture of them with the Clintons, taken when the Prime Minister was visiting Washington. But his wife, like Hillary Clinton, was said to be a lawyer, and I mean, really, how often are they home? I noticed he didn't wear a wedding ring. And anyway, it was just a crush, I thought, that would eventually subside.

At the end of the C-SPAN program, it said: if you have any questions, write the Prime Minister, and then they gave his address. Just like that, Number 10 Downing Street, the whole address. I thought about that a long time. I hadn't written down the zip code so when I watched the next week, I make sure I had a pencil and piece of paper handy, just in case—in case I thought of a

question he hadn't answered about pension increases in Sussex, for instance. I wanted our relationship to be professional, or at least, I mean, one between equals. I mean, I would have wanted him to know that I had a college degree and could discuss, you know, poll taxes and domestic policy and the situation with Iraq. It wasn't a cheap kind of thing. Our "encounters," I guess you could call them, were on a higher plane than just your average crush; they were an intellectual kind of thing. You might even say I began to feel he was my intellectual soulmate.

So I watched his show, oh, for several weeks, listening to all the ways in which we really connected. Daycare, education, and even the need to be very, very demanding in our relationship with the Russians on Chechnya. He was really expanding my mind; he got me thinking about the need for Scotland to have self-rule and about the necessary reform of the House of Lords; I've *always* thought that guys inheriting all the houses and the money and stuff, not to mention a seat in Parliament, is stupid. I mean, look what that kind of thinking did to Eleanor in *Sense & Sensibility*.

In fact, I began to tape the show, so that I could go over it again and again and make sure I was getting to know all the players. There's a really cute guy who represents Oxford, and also one from Knightsbridge, but he's a Conservative, and you can tell he's for the rich because he always wears very expensive suits. They're pretty attractive though—I guess if you have the money, you might as well spend it. I used to think about that guy's suits sometimes on the way to work, and wonder what sort of dress you'd wear if you were going out to dinner with a guy in that sort of suit.

And then I'd naturally begin to think about colors for the Year 2004 and have to take some deep breaths and come back down to earth and find my center. It's sort of stressful to get up to speed on an entirely different government, especially when all the guys have accents, *different* accents. Some of the guys are from Yorkshire and some are from Cornwall and places like that. And meanwhile, all my British friends, both of them, were *horrified*, like, Ami! are you utterly mad! They'd talk about how Blair was the Anti-Christ as far as the liberal wing of his party was concerned and that he was a sellout centrist like Bill Clinton and that

he'd even been in a band, and had been a big womanizer like Clinton was at Cambridge.

But I mean, really, what man doesn't have a past? Everyone grows.

And even though sometimes it seemed as though, on rewind, he might not be answering the whole, entire, question, I still thought he was a better choice, by far, than the Conservative opposition leader, William Hague, who was sort of attack-Chihuahua for the right-wing. Now *there's* a guy who would get you into a war—you can tell by the red tie. With polka-dots even! Who wears that?! Plus, then I read in *People* that Tony actually stood in line at a PTA meeting to meet his children's teacher, and only asked to cut in front when he was about to be late for his weekly meeting with the Queen. Incredible. I had that clipping over my desk for a couple of weeks to remind me: don't settle for less in a man! look for manners! you're worth it!

I read that the Queen was really fond of him, and so was Princess Di—before her death; I think that was in *USA Today*. So I started to go down to a little store in the Village that sold British imports, and pick up Stilton cheese and different ales to have in my fridge for when I watched tapes. Pretty soon I was spending, like, most of the soccer season hanging out in a British-theme pub next door to the import store, watching Chelsea kick Nottingham Forest's ass—that's what the guy I played darts with said—and drinking Guinness.

I have to say that the fans in a British-theme pub are pretty rowdy.

But I liked to listen to the way the guys talked; it reminded me so much of Tony, and you can only listen to any one tape so many times. My friend Hildi went to London and brought me back a Tony Blair mug, which I didn't take to work, but kept on my desk in my home office. It's sort of a corner in my apartment where I sometimes do my work if I have to bring it home.

You know, Elizabeth Hurley is our spokesperson for Estee Lauder; *she's* English and so is her boyfriend, Hugh.

Anyway, I sharpened all the pencils, and then arranged them in the mug, and then I turned the face so that it was like Tony was watching the show with me. I thought that was hilarious. I was still

thinking about something I could write and ask him about, and I had started a letter that I thought was pretty good but still needed revising. If I was going to write, I wanted it to be serious, you know; I didn't want him to think I was some sort of nut.

I guess the turning point came one morning when I was just sort of lying in bed, listening to the rain, and thinking how *English*, how really *English* rain is—when you think about it—when I heard on the “Today” show that Tony had been named the Moral and Spiritual Leader of the World. No kidding, in a worldwide poll, of people all over the world, he was the No. 1 person they said they looked up to. Which was sort of validating, on the face of it. It was kind of like when Sam Waterston was chosen to take over the lead in “Law & Order” and I had loved him ever since I'd seen the video of *The Great Gatsby* where he's *so much* better than Robert Redford.

That's something you should rent sometime, if you never have.

But this was my dilemma: I'm a woman, and I get a crush—which I never, never wanted to have happen—on this really attractive guy, and he turns out to be the Moral and Spiritual Leader of the World. You know what I mean? I mean, admired by millions of people the world over. And suddenly, it all started to seem kind of wrong; here was someone like that, with those kinds of responsibilities. And here was me. And I'm not a selfish person.

So the future was clear; I knew what I had to do. I mean, it's not like I had planned any of this—it just happened. But now I had to be responsible and do the responsible thing, and take responsibility for this. You know what I mean? Plus, when I proposed “English Roses” as a new campaign at work, everyone thought I was weird because the trend was clearly Asia. It's possible that my crush had sort of, you know, clouded my thinking and was affecting my career, not just taking up a lot of nights and weekends.

And my career is *very* important to me.

So I was talking to this woman on the bus one morning about things, about Tony, and how I needed to be over him, and she said she thought it was a good idea—I mean, totally supportive!—and she told me to read this book, *Finding Your Inner Path: How to Get Over Your Obsessions with a Person*. She said someone had given it to her daughter when her daughter was really in love with

a guy who turned out to be a big drug dealer, but who treated her really well. I thought that was a good recommendation.

The program is simple; it can work for anyone, as long as you really, really want to end it. One thing you do is repeat a set of 50 aphorisms to yourself, which start like this: 1) Be true to the true path within yourself and 2) be open to the realities of the path you are headed down. I could see right away that these were right. I mean, cheese and ale are really pretty fattening, and then even if you love the guy, the bi-continental part would be hard to make work, even if you had actually met and spent time together and everything. This way, it was even harder.

The book also said that you should repeat to yourself things like: 11) sometimes love hits a speed bump and sometimes it hits a wall. I thought that one was funny and it was also true: I only get two weeks vacation a year, and I wasn't due for one until August. Two weeks is hardly enough time to see London, let alone to work on a relationship. When Hildi was in London, she barely had time to shop.

And then there was 23) some loves make you betray who you truly, deeply are—is that the direction you want to walk? I mean, no, I never, never wanted that. I had just been channel-surfing, and maybe reading *Vanity Fair*, and watching some Merchant & Ivory videos and had fallen for a guy. I didn't want to 32) stand still on the path when 35) I could be realizing that the way was open before me because I was a whole and uniquely special person.

Like Annie Leibovitz—she seems like a whole and uniquely special person. She always has a camera in her hand, and she wears a lot of black, like she's not all that worried about colors for the Year 2004.

So that spring weekend, I decided to do it: I gave away all my videotapes, or at least the one on which I had taped Tony's state visit to the White House, where he'd stood in line for hours, greeting people, only about three feet from the camera. He seemed really genuine and he looks great in a tux. That was maybe the most painful one to watch for the last time. I gave it to Hildi and told her, Don't give it back to me! tape over it, please! Then I spent the weekend changing tapes and taping off the E! channel

so that I had the "Golden Globes Post-Show Fashion Review," the "Gossip Show," and a bunch of "Fashion Emergencies" on tape, and also a couple of movies off of Bravo! Foreign movies, I haven't watched them yet.

And then I got rid of the cheese, and the biscuits in those little cartons with the red plaid on the side, and all the British teas, like Earl Grey, which I bought as an experiment. I only kept the cinnamon, which is the one I thought I would have liked even if I'd never developed my crush. I gave the last two lagers to the guy downstairs; I was going to give him the mug, and then I was afraid he'd think that was weird, giving a mug with a guy on it to a guy.

So I just turned the mug to the wall, so that you could only see the plain white side of the cup, and I went out to see a movie. I think I saw *Message in a Bottle*, at the dollar theatre, which was terrible, because it had a stupid ending. Then I was in a funk, and had to review my aphorisms: 37) if you feel yourself faltering, recommit yourself to the path and 38) no obsession goes away by itself; you have to thank it for all its work and tell it you are strong without it—or you may be obsessed forever. Which, of course, to be really, really honest, I didn't want. And also 40) there are better things in store along the path, which, duh, I knew. I knew there were a lot of guys in New York, maybe some of them at work. Maybe some of them were even English.

Or not.

I just remember that it was raining, because I decided to sit there on the couch, drinking cinnamon tea, and sort of flipping channels, and repeating 41) the path is open before you if you will put on your shoes, 42) you are a whole and uniquely special person, 43) he is only an obsession and you can decide to make it stop.