

MY LOVE AFFAIR WITH TONY BLAIR

BY TOM GREEN

(Rough draft – August 2009)

FOREWORD

It's strange. As I write this now, no one has any idea what's to come; what I have to say.

Well, one person. But even he doesn't know that I'm going to say it.

And yet, by the time you read this, it will all be public. The truth – or versions of the truth – will be out. I know how these things work. There'll be leaks. Rumours. Juicy titbits from my publishers, character assassinations from his people.

It will be a whirlwind. A tempest. Beyond anything that I can really anticipate or prepare for.

So I'm not going to try. I'm just going to concentrate on being here. In a small attic room above a busy London street. Just writing. Just telling the truth. Just saying what took place.

CHAPTER ONE

One thing leads to another, you know how it goes. One minute I'm nearing the end of a phone call and the next, because there's a pause to fill, I ask what they'll do with the cats when they're away and she says, now she thinks of it, is there a chance - there's probably no chance - but would I be interested in taking care of the house for them while they're gone.

And it starts from there. Because I'm looking for a way to get out of the place I've been living in. To get out of Edinburgh altogether if I can. A chance, as my Californian pen-friend used to say, to start over.

Not that it's sorted out straight away. She back-tracks. Says she will have to talk to Maurice, her husband, over the weekend. Because he might already have made other arrangements: the neighbours, his sister or a friend.

'Lima, that's fine,' I say, cool as I can manage. 'Let me know. But I'd be delighted to do it, I really would. And you know I love your cats.'

So I'm left waiting. Trying not to think about how right it seems: Maurice and Lima's house in London - three weeks to get things sorted out. And I try not to think about what I'll do if it doesn't come off. Because I have to do something, I really will have to do something.

The next morning, Saturday, awake at six, I walk to the newsagent for a paper and some food. Return to make scrambled eggs for breakfast. In butter. With bacon.

The phone remains silent. All morning I sit with it, waiting, the living room's silence intensifying as the noise of the city outside gets louder: shoppers pushing along pavements or driving out of town to fill trollies full of food for a week, girls and boys buying records and clothes, couples scratching each other's heads as they contemplate home-furnishings. I read the newspaper from front to back. Politics mostly. And I daydream. Imagining that I am smoking again - I can feel the cigarette's gentle weight between my fingers - and thinking about Maurice and Lima. Maurice (named after his grandfather) and Lima (after the city in which her parents fell in love): the most beautiful people I know.

It was Lima I met first. She had been wearing a green dress, earth to the fire of her cropped orange hair, and she was almost unnaturally composed. Nothing would knock her off balance, I can remember thinking, and I can remember that we talked about the woman hosting the party, and I can still hear Lima's almost dirty laugh.

'What's the joke?' a man said, barging in.

'Oh - nothing,' Lima sparkled. 'Claire was just saying how -'

'Where are the beers?' the man interrupted, walking off before there was time for an answer.

'Who was that?' I asked.

Lima smiled. 'Oh, don't mind Maurice,' she said. 'He hates parties.'

She had been the only person at there I wanted to look at. Or speak to. That was the thing, the main thing. Not that she was *this* or *that* but that whoever I was with I watched her. I couldn't help it. Her smooth-as-milk skin. Shooting-star eyes. Her self.

But it was Maurice I ended up with. Sat out in the garden as the party was dying down we found ourselves drunk, side by side, and Maurice laid a gentle arm across my shoulders and went to sleep. The heavy weight of his head on my shoulder. His aftershave. His breath rising and falling.

I met them again the following weekend. At a dinner party. 'God, it feels like we're on some kind of circuit,' Maurice said as he walked in to see me sat in the living room.

'Ignore him,' Lima smiled, dressed in ice-blue silk trousers, a white slip.

Maurice said, sitting down and opening a can of beer: 'How come we've never met before?'

Wearing a mauve suit and yellow shirt. 'I mean, before last time.'

I shrugged. Said nothing. And over dinner got to know Maurice better, listening to his tumbling tales while trying not to stare – at him or at Lima who was sitting opposite.

A month after that second party, having not seen them since, I received an invitation. . Plain red lettering on white card inviting me to a pool party at a leafy-sounding address in Surrey. Scribbled across the back was a note and a loopy signature that I finally deciphered as *Lima*.

A pool party. On an August day bright with heat. Afternoon air rushing through the open windows as I drove to the old crumble-brick house, bonnets and windcreens of the cars scattered in front of it flashing sunlight as I approached.

A pool party. Everyone high on just being there; on the hot splashed paving, flat out on the lawn, pressed up to the shade of trees, diving and swimming and laughing in the water. Lima spotted me soon after I arrived. 'Hi!' she said. 'I'm so glad you came. Isn't it lovely? I couldn't believe the weather when I woke up this morning - I've had my fingers crossed all week.' Wearing white cotton trousers and shirt, her face shaded by a straw hat. Sun cream on her nose.

I spent most of the party in the pool (Lima flitted about everywhere, Maurice was nowhere), swimming lengths first, stretching out, and then resting with my back to the side, feeling buoyant in the warm water, sipping first vodka-sharpened banana smoothies and then Japanese beer. Watching. The fractured light on the water's surface, made brilliant on glistening hair and skin. Faces open and alive, nostrils flared. And as the sun eased lower the water looked softer and the people were softer too, thanks to drink and well-being, and couples in the pool and on the side curled together, kissing.

A pool party. A day deep in the countryside, deep in the summer, that marked the real start of my friendship with Maurice and Lima. Two weeks later, in a letter accompanying a photograph of Lima that went straight into my sketchbook, was the language of friends (*How much we. . . Wasn't it. . . When can you. . .*) and included, tucked away at the end, a confidence. News. *By the way*, it said, coyly, *Maurice and I have decided to get married. Thought you'd like to know!*

Sitting in my bedroom in Edinburgh on a Saturday in March, waiting for the phone to ring, trying to suck a sound from it, almost hearing Lima's voice inviting me to London, I realise that everything about where I am living makes me feel tired. The sash windows, cloudy with not having been cleaned; the wallpaper that has never (ever?) been replaced. The voice of the woman upstairs talking to her dog seems louder than ever, the smell of cooking from the pub at the end of the road more stomach-turning.

Just after midday I go into the kitchen for a bowl of cornflakes, returning to the living room to flick the TV through all the channels and then off. I should do some washing. That is, I should put dirty clothes in a bag and go to the laundrette – there's no washing machine; a fitted kitchen with a place where one could go, but I've never got round to buying one. A grey plastic fitted kitchen, narrow so that two people can only just squeeze past and it's impossible for one to wash up while the other opens the fridge. Everything spotless and in its place: the bread bin, cafetière, kitchen roll, chopping board leaning up against the empty plate rack on the gleaming chrome draining board. A tight, narrow, grey plastic kitchen; I keep it clean to make it bearable.

I should have cleaned the windows.

If I'd cleaned the flat's windows, wiped away the God knows how many years worth of grime and dirty rain and pigeon shit, more light would have got in. I should have cleaned them, or got them cleaned. I should have looked in the phone book when I first moved in and got a window cleaner. When I was small, my Mum used to do it herself, coating the glass in a thick pink liquid and then wiping it so clean that you could almost believe the glass had been removed.

I should have stripped the wallpaper and painted the walls. If I'd got the windows cleaned, painted the walls white, got a washing machine, a bookcase or two and maybe put a picture up it would have changed the whole feel of the place. But then that, any of that, would have implied an intention to stay.

I squeeze the TV alive again with my thumb on the remote control and then, straight-away, turn it off. I stare at the phone on the table. Longing for it to ring.

Eighteen months ago when I first arrived in Edinburgh I would have gone for a walk around the centre of town or to the castle or up to Arthur's Seat. The city had been striking, after London, the space and the sense that you could always see out - glimpses of green from almost anywhere you stood. In one of my sketchbooks, next to my train ticket from London, I'd written *Gregory says that Edinburgh is the most civilised city in the world*, and it could certainly seem like that, in the centre, or on the more picturesque fringes looking out and away.

Gregory says. . .

Gregory says that it's unhealthy for artists to live in London. He always said he would leave once he'd finished college, even though he grew up in Whitechapel. Gregory says that real artists get their hands dirty. Real artists wear overalls. He says that when he comes to my flat and sees the neat pad and pencils and rubber set out beneath the Luxo lamp on the desk in my bedroom. Gregory says all of these things quietly, as if to himself.

Gregory, who somehow had been the only person from college I had stayed in touch with. Broad beneath his grey overalls, bent over some stick of metal in a vice, or showering sparks with an angle-grinder, or soldering with the small white bulb of metal-melting heat from his oxy-acetylene torch. His workshop had been our first stop on that first day, the day that I'd arrived in Edinburgh. Gregory said that I could stay with him as long as I wanted. It wasn't a problem, he was in the workshop every day and only used the house to sleep in. But the people he lived with didn't seem so sure and after an uncomfortable week tip-toeing and trying to please I moved into a flat (this flat) that I saw advertised in the window of a newsagent.

Now I'm waiting to leave. Waiting for the phone to ring and for Lima to say that Maurice has agreed to me coming to look after the house while they are away. I stand up. Stretch. Drag my stiff body into the bedroom where I sit down at the drawing board, rub my face, pick up my pencil and start to draw.

Sunday morning could be a time when they ring. It would make sense - probably the first chance they've had to discuss it, sitting in bed talking, with breakfast and the Sunday papers.

I wake with a jolt, a picture of them in my mind. Seven o'clock. They will still be asleep. Unlike me. In bed at two but now wide awake.

I kill time in bed and then spend Sunday hours leafing through the paper, sitting in front of the political programmes on TV, interviewers doing their Sunday best to lay traps, spring surprises and put words into the mouths of brickwalling politicians. I work through the afternoon, then its back to the TV. Flicking between channels. Remotely controlling. I should call Lima. I should call her. Of course I should.

There is a time when I would have done. When to call Lima would have been perfectly natural. A time when we were speaking on the phone pretty much every week. After the pool party and the wedding news I had met Lima for lunch in town, squeezing into the corner of a small Italian cafe to eat veal in ciabatta and drink double espresso.

'So you enjoyed the party?' Lima asked before biting into her sandwich.

I nodded. 'It's wonderful what money can buy.'

'Sarah's nice though. Her parties are always good.'

I looked at Lima in her smart brown lawyer's suit. 'Did Maurice propose to you then?' I asked. 'Did he go down on one knee?'

Lima smiled. Tapped her lips with the paper serviette. 'Not exactly. We'd spoken about it before, and then, as we were driving home on Saturday he said something like *Do you suppose we ought to get married then?* Kind of grunted it, eyes on the road. *What do you think?* I replied, and he glanced out of the side window and said *Well, yes, I think we probably should. We've been together quite a while. We've lived together for almost two years. And there don't seem to be any problems.* And he looked at me, suddenly worried. *Do there?* Bless him.'

‘And did you make him sweat?’

Lima smiled. ‘Maurice isn’t very good with things like that. If I had then I think he would have grilled me about my doubts until I agreed. He wouldn’t have left me alone. But I didn’t have any doubts. Not that I’ve been thinking about it but I guess at the back of my mind I’ve taken it for granted that we would get married sooner or later.’

‘And does it feel any different?’ I asked, sipping my coffee.

‘It feels right. *So* right. And everything is slightly richer, somehow.’ Her fingers on the rim of her coffee cup as she looked for the words. ‘It’s hard to explain. But everything seems more substantial, more permanent.’

‘How’s Maurice?’

Lima laughed. ‘Like a kid with a new toy. Or like he gets when he’s got a new film to work on. Full of ideas and plans. At the last count I think we were going to have five hundred guests and the biggest marquee in the western world.’

Maurice did seem different. More at ease. We started going out together, the three of us, to the cinema or bowling at weekends, to restaurants in the week, and between Christmas and New Year I went away to Bournemouth to stay in the house where Maurice had grown up. No one had lived there for almost five years, since his mother’s return to Jamaica, and it was maintained by a neighbour who mowed the lawn and watered the plants, with Maurice and Lima visiting infrequently, most often for business weekends with people Maurice was working with. A simple, seaside-town house, combining a sense of resonant past (full bookshelves, children’s drawings on the kitchen wall, framed photos on the mantelpiece) and recent neglect (nothing new and a stillness everywhere). Maurice did not fill the house as I had expected him to (the three days would be a celebration of everything Maurice, I had thought), he was quieter, calmer than I’d ever known him to be.

‘He likes to come here with other people,’ Lima said as they walked along the sea front, staring out at the sun-frosted sea, Maurice up ahead of us. ‘He gets quite melancholy if we ever come here alone.’

Each evening, each of the three Bournemouth evenings, we sat round the big dark table in the dining room and got drunk. Maurice told stories about the house and his family, about Christmas and funerals and fights with his brothers and walking in on his parents having sex. ‘My mother laughed,’ he said. ‘She looked up from under my Dad and just burst out laughing. I could hear her as I went downstairs, laughing and laughing.’

Then, in the build-up to the wedding, the six long months of preparations and arrangements, I felt that I was sharing the excitement, caught up in a celebration. And we all still met up, at parties or the three of us for dinner, and I had lunch with Lima from time to time. But somehow our friendship did not progress. Nothing *happened*. I was always waiting for something to happen, something like Bournemouth or the pool party or just something. Anything.

It rained on the day of the wedding. Lots of tall people in daring hats, women in heels on the wet ground as tentative as thoroughbred race horses, men sleek in tails. And the families: Maurice’s mother in a wheelchair, her two other sons obediently by her side; Lima’s parents buried in a cluster of older relatives with emissaries shooting off from time to time under umbrellas to go into the church or talk to the photographer. I sketched the vicar during his sermon and got a disapproving look from the cross-looking man next to me. Later, sitting at one of the big tables during the speeches, I drew him while he listened, deep creases in his forehead and below his eyes.

Sunday evening. I'm watching TV, waiting for the phone to ring. Mixing the news with *Breathless*. John Major's dying days, Richard Gere's glory days. Not a great film but Gere is compelling; his self-possession, always watching, holding back. And there's something reckless about him, the sense that he doesn't really care. Major is compelling too. Strangely. Slow and heavy, those great big hands that he doesn't know what to do with, and his lizard-like cronies seeming to actually enjoy the doublespeak of *We're on track to win*. Cut to Blair: crusading, striding. Bringing city centres to a standstill while the Prime Minister can hardly muster a crowd around his soapbox. Both criss-crossing the country, through the battleground of new towns and market towns that are remembered every five years when the politicians and the journalists leave London. Almost unthinkable that these people living their private lives have to be persuaded - the reporters seem hardly able to believe it, that the electorate, ordinary people, will have the final say. I turn the sound turned down, looking at the sequence of earnest faces and imploring smiles and the attempts by all sides to personify confidence, to express self-belief. That, more than anything, seems to be what they are selling (like all salesman they assume that the customer will not actually understand the product). They are selling confidence. Self-assurance. And in the glare of the television lights, in the face of ordinary people, these seem to be surprisingly difficult things to fake.

On Monday morning the call still hasn't come. The world still hasn't changed. Nothing has changed. I drift, time-passing, and in the afternoon walk twice around the block and then, back home, watch from the window as shops are closed and people return from work before I slip into an evening mixing *EastEnders* with *The Bill*, the *Nine O'Clock News* with a documentary about a couple moving to France. And still no word from Lima.

Newsnight, looking at the election in Scotland. Not so different from England. But still I feel that I'm in a foreign country and it suits me in a way - all my life I've lived in other people's homes. Even as a child. My room was just the place where I slept. It was my parent's house, fresh and clean as the 1950s, set on the edge of a small town soaking up its first wave of commuters. My room overlooked the garden, elm trees at the bottom in front of an overgrown path that led to a park of rough fields and horse-chestnut trees that the developers had not yet got round to buying.

My parent's house. Lined with the possessions of their lives, the pictures and books and furniture and photographs and bed-linen and crockery and cutlery and lamp-shades. Nothing quite matching. A comfortable assortment, unplanned and unfinished, always being added to.

Monday night, watching Newsnight in a flat I've come to loathe. As the credits are rolling, the phone rings. Over the trumpeting music accompanying images of Major and Blair shaking hands with the public, pushing through crowd, my phone rings. And it's Lima. Saying that she's sorry for not getting back to him but is he still free to look after the house and the cats while they are away?

And this place seems to slip away, almost as if it has never existed. Because I know that I can start looking forward. I can breathe deeply again. I know that I'm leaving and not coming back.

Notes

I hope it's okay that I started here. I know what you said about the opening chapter needing to jump straight to the action, to the place people most want to read about but this is what

came out. This really is where it started and I don't think I can do it any other way. The good news is that it didn't take too long. I wrote this pretty much in a day – the delay was from me wondering whether to send it or start again, differently.

Claire.

Paula, assuming you've got this far – hello. Cute isn't she?

Trust me on this. Keep reading.

Howard