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## Uncle Tony

Whenever I go through photographs with my grandma, Tony is scattered throughout. He randomly pops up at birthday parties, holidays and even family reunions. We never said it out loud as a family, but we all knew to some extent he was involved in illegal activity. Whenever we talk about we laugh and say “We don’t talk about it..” But it really was something we never talked about. I guess most of my life I have just sort of knew or has suspicion that Tony was in the mafia.

The name Tony really? Almost every Mob or even Italian man in the media has the name Tony. The fact that we called him Uncle Tony even pushed that line father. Was my family just playing into these stereotypes?

The last time I saw Tony was in London in 2012. He was in Scotland for business, and he contacted me and my brother saying he wanted to watch a soccer friendly between England in Brazil in Middlesbrough with us.

At the time it had been a while since I had seen Tony, and me and my brother were eager to get a chance to catch up with the very exciting and mysterious man.

He got us tickets and we met for dinner before. He knew how much European football meant to us and it meant a lot that he would travel to watch a game with us.

During the game Brazil was dominating England (as expected) and Neymar was laying on the ground trying to get the ref to call a foul.

A couple rows behind us a British man started to yell some terrible things. He was calling our specific Brazilian players and calling them very upsetting derogatory names. My world of the perfect sport was crumbling around me. I put my hands in my hands and closed my eyes.

The halftime whistle blew and I looked up. Tony was gone. I turn back and he was walking towards the racist heckler farther in the stands. I turned back around fast and nudged my brother who was so absorbed in the players walking off the pitch. When I turned back around, Tony and the terrible man were gone. Half time goes on and Tony is nowhere to be seen. Right as the players are coming back out through the tunnel for the 2nd half Tony appears smiling and hands us new drinks. I want to ask him what happened but I just smile and grab the drink.

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The second that I got out of the car, the Galveston air hit my face. It was disgusting. I could taste the salt in the air. The seagulls were loud and starting to drown out my thoughts. I immediately wished that I had worn sunscreen. The driver closed the door behind me, and we walked around the corner of the giant metal shipping container.

As we turned the corner I saw the back of Uncle Tony. He is not actually my uncle. In fact, I have no clue why I have called him that my whole life. He was wearing a casual suit and the same gold chain that he has worn since I can remember. The wind was strong, yet his hair did not move an inch.

The two men on either side of him saw me and the driver and nodded to him, Tony turned around.

When Tony turned around his smile looked as if it was from ear to ear. He opened his arms and I walked into them.

"Little Z! Little Z!" He put his hands on my shoulders and I immediately felt small. I thought he was going to introduce me to the two men standing on either side of him but he just wrapped his arm around my shoulder and we started to walk. He started to point at things as we make our way to the water. He pointed at boats and passages talked about pirates and the history of Galveston. I tried to pay attention but I have only been standing up for less than 5 minutes so I felt flustered. We stood there and as I started to gain my bearings, I realize that the two men are nowhere to be seen. Tony went on and on. As he moved around, I could see the gun that he has strapped to his abdomen.

The only Christmas Tony ever came to was the Christmas of my first year of highschool. My huge somewhat obnoxious Italian family gathers at my grandmother's house every year and it is always an ordeal. Something always happens, from my grandmother bringing strangers from the grocery store, to my real uncle bringing easter eggs because he got the holidays mixed up.

That year, in 2008, I remember when Tony walked in, everyone made a unanimous happy shout. But before he could walk in past the doormat my grandmother was pushing him out the door. My family of thirty crowded around the massive windows spying out at what my tiny Italian grandmother could be saying to the massive man that was Tony. She was pointing her finger in his face and shaking it up at him. His head hung low and he nodded his head.

We see him walk back to his car and open the door reach in his jacket take something out and then close the door and head back towards my grandmother. She hugs him and they walk linked arms back into the house. At the time I had not clue what had happened. My whole family was cracking up. I only found out a year later that she was yelling at him for trying to bring a gun into her house on Christmas.

I had no idea how long we had been standing next to the water but his phone made a buzz. He checked his phone and he put his arm back around my shoulder and guided me in a different direction. There was a big dark blue car waiting and we both got in.

It was time for lunch. Tony tells me it is his least favorite meal of the day. "You can't really drink at lunch. You also can't really eat a steak. I mean, like, I do, but.. I get looks." I immediately try and imagine Tony feeling social pressure. I smile.

We got to where we are going to eat lunch, it was a place called Mosquito Cafe. He looked at my face. "See, I know what you are thinkin, but you would be surprised! Don't knock it till you try it!"

We walk in and immediately walked towards the patio.

"I asked around about a good place to take you and multiple people said a young girl from Austin would like it here."

The waitress comes around and before I have even time to look at the menu he is ordering appetizers and drinks for us. I love Tony but you can tell that he is so used to being the boss, that it seeps into all aspects of his life.

Watching him interact with our waitress was interesting. He did not give that big smile he gave me when I first saw him at the docks to everyone. He immediately becomes more intimidating to me.

He asked me questions for what felt like an hour. Wanting to know everything about my plans post graduation. We talked about soccer, and my family and more soccer. I realize that past these three things, my life, soccer and my family me and Tony have never talked about anything else. I realize that I know nothing about him. I know he is older than my dad, and he is a family friend, but other than that nothing. I did not even know where in Italy he was from.

So I started with the basics.

He was born and raised till he was 14 in the city of Palermo. Palermo is located in the northwest of the island of Sicily. He does not call himself Italian. He calls himself Sicilian. This is something he states multiple times as we talk about his upbringing.

He is the youngest boy in his family. He had six siblings growing up. Now he only had 4. I know not to ask more questions about that, just with one look that he gives me.

His sleeves were rolled up, and I could see the tattoos that looked now so old on his tan skin. He pulls one sleeve past his elbow and shows me his family crest. He jokes; "If I could reach it, I would kiss it."

He talked about how lucky he was to grow up in a place so beautiful. He has not been back for years. He says it is because he is so busy but I don't really believe it. He tells me so many details, but nothing personal.

As he is telling me things, like the coast line in Palermo, and this one spot where you can see the west side of main land he stops and says, "I have not thought about that in years." Within seconds he starts to ask me questions trying to change the subject to me. I can feel he is uncomfortable and I don't want to poke the bear, so I play along.

I was racking my brain for anything to make him talk about himself. I asked him if he was on Facebook. He looked at me and took a drink. I took that as a no. I asked him what TV he liked to watch. He responses:

"You know what, I don't really have much time for TV. What is your favorite show?"

Then all of a sudden it feels, I am explaining why I can like Game of Thrones and The Bachelorette at the same time. I stop myself. How long have I been talking about myself. How does he keep doing that?

Tony was this charismatic, caring guy. I wanted to believe that he just cared about me and that he wanted to know about my life. To some extent I really do think is true, yet I know he also was trying to hid things from me.

Lunch is over and he has a schedule for us. He tells me he has to meet "his boys" back at where I first met with Tony at five sharp so we better get a move on. We stand up and he puts a wad of cash on the table. He places his hand on my shoulder and we walk out. People are looking at us. Holy crap. Seeing him in comparison to the other dinners at the Mosquito Cafe, it hits me.

Tony was a walking, talking, stereotype of an Italian man.

I made a comment about his gold chain. He laughs. I then asked him if he has ever worn a track suit. He looks at me so puzzled, he does not answer. I might have pushed it. We got into the car.

For the next three hours and forty five minutes we go to landmarks. We go to an old ship. We drive around and around and he tells me things about Galveston. I would not say I was bored. I am just feeling like it was hard for me to ask him questions since he was constantly talking. I could tell he was enjoying himself. I knew he loved history. It was something my grandmother told me about him. I do not think he talks to a lot of people like this outside my family.

He never asked me what where we should go next, or if I want to do this or that. He has everything planned and we spend the exact amount of minutes at each place that he has allotted.

He answered one call during the time in the car. He turned his face away from me as if that would stop me from hearing. He is speaking in Italian. It sounded so normal, I forgot it was his first language.

He hangs up and in that moment of silence I asked how hard it was to learn english.

“Well we were moving around so much and I was coming in and out of America all the time. I honestly do not remember learning. It just kind of happened” In my time with Tony every once and awhile he will say an Italian phrase as if he just forgot the english word. It sounds so right coming from him that I never ask what he said.

He told me he better get back to where we started. I ask him:

“Why Galveston?”

He laughed. “Right? It is kind of a terrible place.”

I looked at him puzzled. “You know so much about it.”

“Well it does not take a lot to learn. I am probably here 2-3 times a year.”

They way he talked about the port city was as if he lived here.

We got back to the water's edge and the car stops. The two men that I were here earlier are still here and one opens the door for him. I start to get out of the car and Tony puts his hands up.

“No. You wait here.”

He closed the door. I felt so small. Not physically small, but like a young kid being told to wait in the car while their parents went into the store. I was pissed. I drove all the way down here with a weird dude so that I could see what Tony was doing and now I was being forced to wait in the car while something probably exciting was going to happen.

In the car I made some calls I had been avoiding. Caught up on social media, I realized I have not been on my phone all day. I was probably in the car for an hour before they returned. I felt so annoyed. One of the men that Tony was with peeked into the car and spoke, up to this point I never heard him say a word,

“Ready to go to dinner, Miss?” I look at him and without saying anything someone gets in the driver's side and starts to drive. I felt out of any control. We drove for less than five minutes before we stop at a restaurant. I hurried to open the door before the weird tall skinny man could do it for me.

We walked up to the restaurant and I am walked to the back patio again and I see Tony already. How did he beat us?

Food was already on the table and drinks were already poured. It felt weird. My chair was pulled out by the man that sat us. There were two bottles of wines already on the table and two Shiners. I looked puzzled at the two bottles of beer. He sees my puzzled face and asked me what was wrong. I had never seen Tony drink anything besides wine (Except at that soccer game). He tells me he had called ahead after he saw that I had a Shiner sticker on my water bottle. It was a sweet gesture but wine

sounded better. It was like he could read my mind. He turned around and within seconds nodded to someone and the beer was gone from the table.

Up to this point in my time with Tony there has been obvious to the point of ridiculous signs that he was involved with the Mafia. From the shipping containers, to the money, and the drivers, the gun. Yet something about the wine on that table and the beer that left without him saying a word made me swallow my tongue and sit up straight.

I have was having dinner with a mobster.

I did not even really look at what was on the plate till he picked up his fork and put his napkin in his lap. In front of me was a plate of green pasta with tomatoes and parmesan cheese. I look at his plate it is a steak with asparagus. He sees me looking at his plate and he asks if anything is okay. He remembered that I was a vegetarian. "You are still a vegetarian right?" I nodded my head and picked up my napkin.

I think he can tell I am a little annoyed.

"Well yah want to ask me some more of them questions?"

I asked the question I had been waiting to ask. "What was in the shipping containers"

He laughed. "What do you think was in the shipping containers"

I nervously laughed. I thought should I just give him my best guess? "Important cheese?"

He smiled. "Yup, you got in on the first guess" The look on his face made me question if he was telling the truth, but his face also told me to not push any farther. That was the first time that day I felt nervous.

"What is the maddest you have ever been?"

He answered so fast, "I was ten and we were driving in Germany on the highway. I was with my father. I screamed at him to stop the car because there was this you know, this turtle crossing the road. I get out and moved it off the road and faced it to the water. I got back in the car and my dad, you know, he was already driving before the door was closed. He was probably thinking I was wasting my time, you know?" He takes a sip of his wine. His glass was absurdly full. I mimic his actions. "So we are driving away and I look back in the side mirror you know, to look at the turtle, and the car behind us swerves to purposefully hit it, to run the damn animal over."

This is not where I thought this story was going.

"Damn, that has stuck with me you know? You can not trust people. Even if you try the hardest to do the right thing, the person behind you is gonna come in and fuck it up."

I sat in silence. This was the first time Tony had said anything to me that went beyond the basics. Maybe it was the alcohol.

We sit and eat and drink and I feel better. I did not eat a lot at lunch and I think I was just really hungry.

I thought about my realization of having dinner with a mobster. And to some extent started to feel guilty, I felt this way because he fit into this stereotype that I had in my head based on images that I had seen in the media.

These stereotypes that we have are these “pictures in our head” of something which can simplify and distort and even do injury to a meaning.

We talk about how he came to know my family, and how much we mean to him. He talks about how much he hates planes but he is on them every week. At one point he says “My ex wife and I” I never knew he was married. Before I knew it, the first bottle was gone and the sun was going down.

I wanted to ask him something all day but never did. But I was going to do it now. Maybe it was the alcohol.

“Tony, do you ever think of yourself as a stereotype?”

“What is that? A stereotype?”

“You know like, the Italian man stereotype is like big, wears a tracksuit with gold chains, always has a cigar on him, only eats spaghetti..”

“Hold up. What is wrong with spaghetti?”

He says it with a mocking tone and I roll my eyes. He laughs.

“I know, I know.”

“Well?”

“Well yes, yeah, I mean sure I know I fit some things that are I guess stereo...typical.” People see me and I know some people are scared. Yeah, you know people have this idea, because I talk like this, and dress like this and do what I do that means that I am in the Mob.”

He finally said it. The word I have been purposefully holding my tongue making sure it did not slip. Not even wanting to think it in case he could read my mind.

We all have this idea in our heads of what a mobster looks and acts like. As a population I feel like you could say that we are confident in our knowledge about Italian culture. Even if most of us could not name more than 2 cities, or know anything besides what we have learned from the media.

I open my eyes wide and take a sip. He laughs. “We don't talk about it remember?” I look at him and he is laughing harder now. We are alone on the patio and it was the first time I realized that. The only other people were his two buddies who were sitting at the end of the patio not talking just drinking and looking at the water.

Before I could ask anything, he says, "You know why there is a mob? Because of political corruption, there needed to be a justice system outside the justice system. It started as something that was trying to fix what was wrong but now to some extent it is what is wrong in a lot of places."

I can't tell if he is telling me what I want to hear. He laughs again.

"After all these movies and shows about the mob, it has been you know like glorified to something that it just aint. It is scary and harsh and not something anyone should want to be a part of or try and figure out."

I can't tell is he is trying to tell me something.

"I have been stopped at airports because of the way I look, you know? People are scared of me because they have this idea of who I am. You know what I am a stereotype. I have two cigars in my pocket at all time, I own multiple track suits" He laughs a little "I love pasta, I have nothing besides black and purple and blue shirts. Does that make me a member of the Mob tho?"

He went on and on. Laughing along the way.

Later I asked him if he had ever watched the Sopranos, even if he did not really watch TV. He told me he had seen a couple episodes, he told me he knew it was a good show but he never felt like he had to need to watch it.

Media shows us the same images over and over of specific type of person. The way that Italian and specif mobsters are shown in the same fashion makes these ideas stick with the audience.

It is not just Italian stereotypes that are plaguing our televisions and movie theaters, everyone and thing has a stigma that the media has created. Tony told me that his biggest "beef" with how media portrays Italian people is that, "It is like if you are Italian than that also means you are in the mob, there is no middle ground. Italian means mob."

It is hard to ignore this. Mass media is populated with stereotypes. When people see Tony in public they are going to revert to the images that we have seen time and time again on our televisions and movie screens.

I do not know if Tony is in the Mob. I don't know if I want to know. I do know that your typical mobster would not sit down for an interview. Or write me a letter every year on my birthday.

A typical mobster would not spend a day with his fake niece trying to teach her about history of town he does not even care about. Or would he? I guess I have no idea what a mobster would do. I only have these ideas of what a mobster would do.

I had spent a whole day with Tony and I only had more questions. Yet I think they are questions that I will have for the rest of my life.

### **Authors Note**

Writing this article in comparison to writing the other article for this class was different. Writing about myself is really easy, I know myself and I won't hold anything back. The second article in the class where we had to interview a classmate was similar in the fact that, my peer also had nothing to hold back. There was this common exchange that made it easy. Yet with Tony and this article that common exchange was gone. He was writing a paper, he was living his life and I was trying to weasel my way into it. A life that has a lot of closed doors that I can not get into. This interview process for this article was the most genuine, in terms of journalism I feel. I was really putting myself out there trying to get a good story.

This time with Tony did not feel real. I called my grandmother after I left his presence and she was no help in filling in the blanks. She told me that his siblings died when he was still pretty young and that he had to raise his younger sisters since his mom checked out. "Tony acts tough but he is a big softy" He would do anything for you kids, he has always taken you and your cousins on as his own. I ask about his ex, she knows nothing. There is so much more I could go into about Tony. He is a kind loving man who told me not to include his last name in this interview. Even though I still have so many unanswered questions, I know Tony on a whole different level. Things he talked to me about are going to stick with me for years to come.