

## Large Tony – Blogger Profile

By Alan Bennett Ilagan

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*I hold it in my hands and bring it to my face, inhaling its essence. I read the names and inscriptions written in marker across its heather expanse. I know some of the places it's been, and have met some of the fine folks who have held it in their own hands and worn it on their backs. (I'm not sure what it says about my thighs that they fit through the shirt sleeves.)*

*It already carries a heavy history, for a T-shirt at least. Having been lost and forgotten, having been worn and watched, and having graced the skin of all these men, it's been through a lot. In that respect most of us share an affinity with this shirt – we know what it's been through, because we've been there too.*

*It has a finely-weathered feel to it, not dirty or skanky just yet, but lived-in, soft and loved. Cuddling up to it, I can feel the spirit of those who came before – their laughter and joy at being part of something – a thrilling sense of inclusion that I never quite felt, not even today.*

***“If you don't fit in at the beginning, you never really fit in, ever, do you?”***

*On my best days, I feel like I've made it through that wilderness, managing (okay, demanding) to be loved for the very misfit nature that once, and always, separated me from the pack. But even so, what to do now? What happens when the loneliness and hurt aren't completely quieted or quelled by the perfect boyfriend, a glamorous life, or a Louis Vuitton bag? Stripped of these accoutrements, what do I have? What does anyone have? Sometimes it doesn't matter. Sometimes all you need is an old T-shirt, and a friend you've never met.*

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Ever since I stumbled upon Tony and his blog, I wondered if we would have been friends when we were kids. It's a mental game I play whenever someone has moved me in some way, and if you've read any of Tony's writing, you can't help but be touched by something.

There's a tinge of tragedy to him, a slight hint of sorrow; it's in the way he carefully handles the world. Most people are careless. They walk through their days oblivious to those around them. A few pretend they care with ostentatious displays of philanthropy, squawking about their many board memberships, their charity work, their selfless volunteering (provided you spell their name correctly on the acknowledgments).

There's something genuine about Tony's gentleness, partly because it's backed up with his brawn. He doesn't need to be so kind. He could get his points across with brute force, kicking the ass of any ignorant mo-fos, challenging and defeating any back-handed slaps. He's the kind of guy you want to have your back (in every way).

I'd like to think we would have been friends. My closest friendships are unlikely ones, and Tony would have been an enviable foil that I would have wrapped around me, shiny-side-out. He would be into sports and I would be into flowers, but we'd meet in the middle of the field, where football and dandelions do sometimes mingle.

He would remind me of my friend Jeff – a tall jock who excelled at basketball and football and just about anything physical – a young man who seemingly had everything – good looks, smarts, a caring family – and a secretly sad guy who went and killed himself when we were in high school. We too had been unlikely friends as children, each supplying a part lacking in the other, symbiotically surviving but never admitting the need.

In some ways, to me, Tony is the boy who lived. At least, he represents someone who has survived his tragedies and managed to avoid becoming bitter in the process. Some of us haven't come close to being touched by such terrible events, but we still manage to get bogged down in self-pity and sadness, not that anyone's sorrow is worth more or less than anyone else's.

Maybe you lost someone dear to you, maybe someone hurt you so badly you never got back to where you were before they entered your life, or maybe you loved someone who simply didn't love you back – there's no limit to our capacity for pain.

You can have the best boyfriend, a loving supportive family, a great group of friends, but sometimes there's an ache inside, and a longing that never quite goes away. It's an ache for a better humanity, a longing for a more decent world, and in such dim days as these it's hard to find much hope. Whenever I'm lucky enough to come across someone like Tony, it re-affirms my faith in this world, and I'm reminded that goodness still exists, even if it's hidden away in the gorgeous Great Smokey Mountains of Tennessee.

In some small way that's what a few bloggers have done – we may never meet in person, but we've connected on another level – sometimes deeper, sometimes more profound than a chance connection at a bar or club. There's a lot less left to random chance – you can pick and choose where you go on the internet, which sites are the most hospitable, and you can select and maintain any links you see fit. It's sort of like what would happen if you were allowed to pick your family, and the online communities some have built are extended clans. The bottom line is that it is a choice, and our online lives are as rich or poor as we make them.

There are bloggers who lay claim to a billion online friends, boasting long lists of links that scroll down forever, and a multitude of pop-up supporters and sponsors. Just as in real life, where people have endless address books on their cel-phones, half of whom they don't even remember, an expansive acquaintance pool, or a bunch of casual bar buddies who don't know their last name, the internet can be a superficial popularity contest. Personally, I've never felt the need to be that popular. My friends, like my links, may not be numerous, and I may not often engage in public discussions or comments (or even know how to enable them for that matter), but those that I do have mean a lot to me. They are not haphazard folks added on a whim or stranger's wish.

The fact is that there are not many people in this world who truly move me. A man who can write well, and one who appreciates the written word in return, a man who gives himself over to beauty and can be touched by an arresting image – that's the kind of person who impresses me – someone who is sensitive enough to truly care about how he treats other people, and someone who is welcoming to all.

It's what I love most about Tony and his blog, and it's what I will sorely miss when he moves on. He's left me richer for having read and taken part in his life, even in these small ways. True goodness is never forgotten – we pass it along in every little thing we do.