Big Al

Of all the people that have influenced me over the years, Big Al is probably the most interesting. He has the uncanny ability of being able to make you see him for what he isn't; no one really knows what Al is all about, and he likes it like that.

By his appearance, you might guess that he was either a butcher, a dockworker, or a bookie; fat, face like a bulldog, messy snarled hair, and always a big Havana cigar, or a foul smelling cigarette hanging out of his lips. I guess, having lived in Cambridge all these years, I should be used to all of the different characters I've met along the way. Al is a little different. My frequent hangout, Harvard Square is covered with all sorts of people playing chess, checker, backgammon, and at night, cards. That's when Big Al comes out.

I clearly remember the first time I met him. I had stayed out late playing chess, and a few of the guys who hang out at the chess tables, (most of them Jewish, all over the age of 60) were sitting around talking about the stock market. Al lumbered over and joined in the conversation. During the discussion I overheard Al saying, "I don't know too much about the stock market... sounds like a bunch of garbage to me." Later I found out Al had over $25,000 in the stock market, the product of a $2,500 night of poker, wisely invested by Al himself.

Another time, Al sat me down and said, "Look kid, no matter what, ya gotta get yourself an education see?" This was at a time when I was grumbling about high school, and the prospect of going on to another four years of school wasn't making my life all the much happier. (I was only a Sophomore at the time...)

"I'm just a washed up bum" said Al, "I'm workin' as a meat packer, scrapin' together just enough dough to make a livin'. You don't want that, ya gotta go to school and become a doctor of a lawyer or somethin', see?" At the time, I didn't know Al in fact owned a meat packing business, had a great deal of savings, and made enough money to put most of the guys in the Square to shame.

Al kind of took me under his wing from then on, and always gave me advice on life, and what to avoid. "Go ahead," he used to say, "do the drugs, drink the alcohol, have fun. But if you do me one favor, one small favor... stay away from the women." Apparently, Al once had a sweet little wife who left him for another guy. Al says it broke his heart, but to tell you the truth, he seems to enjoy being able to go out at any time, never having to support anyone but himself, and doing just about anything he wants.

I think the best memory of Al I have is the time he asked me if I wanted to play some penny poker with "the guys". Now I admit, I was a bit cocky at the time, and prided myself in my poker playing ability. So of course, I accepted the invitation. "What the hell" I thought. Besides, I'm just a kid, they'll be easy on me." Everyone lost a few pennies to Big Al that night.... I lost five dollars. I turned to him afterwards and said with a frown, "A few games here and there eh?" he replied with his crooked smile, and a small chuckle, "Just got lucky with the cards tonight... just got lucky with the cards." and gave me an endearing cuff on the chin. I learned from then on never to try and take advantage of my age when dealing with people, and never to act too confident when playing any type of game; that goes for everyday life as well.

Big Al is definitely a special guy. I think he made me realize how important it was not to judge someone by the way they look or how they act on the outside.
All too often I would find myself making judgments about someone that I didn't really know, and in doing so, I would lose any chance of discovering who they really were. After meeting Big Al, I took the time to really find out what a person was like. I think he provided me with a fresh outlook on my relationships with others, and gave me some important insights into how I should relate to the people around me.