

Albert and the Secondhand Man

A Story about Fair Play

Home _____ **<http://nofrillstech.net/>**

To begin this story, one must really begin with Stan, The Second-Hand Man, who actually had higher business pretensions that ranged in price and (only) occasionally in presentation, towards the “pre-loved” or even the actual antique.

Independent small businessman, (petty) capitalist, monarchist, political right-winger, sporting gentleman and Jockey-Club Member (minor), race-horse share-holder, old-style bigot, family man, taxpayer, and entrepreneur. (The latter vicariously so, in fact, much of his lifestyle and place in the community was vicarious, given his means, compared to the sort of business circles he aspired to move in.) Not the best of his type, nor even the worst, in truth.

Stan did not drink, unusual for a sportin' man, and, never discussed the subject, so one could only guess at what revelations lay within that particular closed book. Perhaps something to do with the grim calm exhibited by his now-upwardly-mobile wife at the odd times she visited the shop, who knows. But, Stan was a Salesman, self assured and self selling, a bit frayed to be truly dapper, well doused with after shave, and with mouth-freshener gum always in motion, he was truly the oil, or grease, in the wheels of Sydney commerce.

In fact, Stan was a caricature of himself and all he stood for, even to the point of travesty. He saw only what he stood for; if at all he did recognise his real situation in any possible moments of self-doubt, it would only be regarded as a temporary situation, a glitch. He was On The Way Up.

Of course the Asian hordes coming of Australia under socialist immigration policy penalised valiant businessmen like himself; besides, after a year or so, they were all driving around in new cars and where did they get the money?. (Business migrants not being a category that he recognised the existence of.)

The silly irony of it all was that Stan's shop was situated in a transit zone in the Sydney area, and most of his customers were people he despised, anyway. This did include the White Australian Bludgers who let the side down, except, of course, those who could convincingly claim that their jobs had been taken by preferential treatment given all the unwanted migrants, Asian or otherwise...

Part of the maintenance of Stan's self-deception, as an Anglo-Irish pillar of the community, was to be able to point at random to this ready-made pool of scapegoats, even if they did buy from him. Mind you, some of the cultural or personal clashes were not all Stan's fault; some of his customers were a bit rough, to say the least, and even unwashed at times, given the overall class of Stan's establishment. But their actions simply strengthened his rabid generalisations about all foreigners and undesirables in general, a firm principle of his was never ever to need a passport, Home Was Best, and a familiar pond was safest for such a small fish as he.

As a second-hand dealer, he was a study, and a classic one. His emporium was part of a small, aged, and weathered red-brick group of shops just off a main drag, all of which had a rather rickety, tatty look with just enough paint in the right places to avoid downright dowdiness. The hotch-potch of junk that spilled out onto the pavement was Stan's concession at his shop to eye-catching display, complementing his hand-painted sign hanging from the filigreed bullnose above the door.

As I said, he was neither the best nor the worst of his kind in his dealings. He had that sort of charm and almost obsessive patience, driven by the ultimate aim of making a sale, that worked to emotionally ensnare the hapless customer with reasons, visions, discounts, waving away of doubts, value for money, eye to posterity, etc., etc.

There were certain rules of engagement to follow, whether the article for sale was a rickety wardrobe, or a dark and dusty amateur oil painting in-the-style-of-if-not-actually-by. The Spell would be woven in such a way that the more timid customer, (or easier mark) would feel so much a part of the wonderful world of the pre-loved or almost antique, and, they would almost feel obligated to buy because of the effort and the privilege of Stan's time devoted to them for this most personal cultural initiation...

But for Stan, nothing in life was really so necessary or worthwhile except the closing of a deal, and the maneuverings preparatory to the next; his self-image, his reason for being was as A Deal-Maker. His stock was only the medium, secondhand meant minimum capital outlay, a foot in the capitalist door, he could sum a person's wealth and potential gullibility at a single incisive glance, and just as quickly drop his interest in one customer if a more likely looking mark came near his door. Stan favoured the immediate customer's left shoulder for glancing over, and beyond, as his commercial radar kept ceaselessly scanning the ambient pavement beyond his shop window.

Of the basic rules, the most important was never to give cash back once you have it in hand. Give promises, trades, or even transfer deposits, preferably to more expensive goods, but **never** money back. Another rule was to tell the customer what they want to hear, to allay fears and doubts, and to flatter their taste and business sense, both of which came under the spell-weaving aspect of “Sales”.

Yet another rule was never to do more value-adding in the form of repairs or refurbishment than was absolutely necessary; sprucing up usually meant a quick dusting, and application of furniture polish on whatever visible surfaces there were. Of course, the customers could inspect, question and even bargain, but if they were so smart, then caveat emptor rules, OK, and we are all adults, and whingers not wanted, with accompanying hackle-raising as the situation demanded.

After all, a real businessman had to draw the line somewhere; or to put it another, more expedient way, if whatever was involved could be termed business, then it was legit. Sounds familiar? The mark of the true entrepreneur doing his bit and risking his all for the economy and the nation, putting self (and dependents) last, and not being appreciated for it by the taxman, or the ungrateful part of the nation that did not vote Conservative. (To Stan and his ilk, Government By Scapegoat(ing) was the soundest government of all, the worst would be a House of Independents, with no Safety in Numbers there, **or** guarantee of being ethnicity-free..!)

Meanwhile, the discount margin rule was ultimately, and always, there to please and/or placate the customer, although never preset, but rather quickly calculated ad hoc in those precious moments of pre-sale spellbinding. How much could the market stand, was the underlying principle after all. Discounts were the last resort, but always pre-factored into pricing, of course. Any uncharacteristic lapses into soft-heartedness would cause Stan to fret for days over possible loss of profits caused by such a foolhardy display of goodwill, however minor the sums involved. Mostly these lapses were to cement an existing deal anyway, but it was not best the principle to do business by, no way!

Stan hated, or at least was indifferent to, his own merchandising, subconsciously or otherwise; perhaps the self-deception wore thin at times, or as I said before, these goods were just the medium for the deals, but never good enough to put real money in the pocket. "Spend some to make some" was hard for him to actually do. For example, that symbol of modern business, the mobile phone, was to Stan a proud possession, **but** mainly for outgoing calls, being expensive to run, and hard on batteries, of course. Mention of conventional advertising caused dark mutterings about word of mouth, and hired helps doing their bit.

Stock-handling was also a real chore. As a carrier, he was a disaster, never properly tying or padding when transporting. At such times, one could see that the actual mechanics of business, for all his trumpeting, were to Stan more of an inconvenience than anything else, with his mind on other things like his racehorse share, the next deal, or whether the Chinese up the road had a new car.

Certainly, it was excruciating to see Stan swapping frames on paintings that just could be valuable, or at least possibly were from Minor Painters. There would be quick consultations of some out-of-date dealer's "bible", or phone calls to the long-suffering State Art Gallery, then a possible rub over with the ubiquitous polish, or even fitted into a "better" frame. Then, bearing the burden of more damage at Stan's hands than for the previous 50 years, the "Old Master" would be presented for inspection to Someone In The Know. The returns were never up to expectations...

Non-punctuality, or what Stan would have thought of more as rescheduling or prioritisation, also cost him customers and good will; in fact this was the aspect of Stan that most showed his true degree of self-centredness. His attitude that business should as much as possible be on his own terms meant that his commercial horizons would always be limited.

His marriage was certainly a difficult one, judging by the odd intense exchange I heard at times when his wife called by the shop, finances being the usual reason. His wife also worked, presumably for her "own" money. There were also two small timid blue-eyed, dark-haired children who seldom came to the shop. One had the feeling that the wife did approve of money, but **not** associations with a second-hand shop. My impressions were of a well-meaning person, but imbued with the more hypocritical aspects of middle-class aspirations. But when she took up with Stan, she had a man to whom trade, training, or profession, were superfluous for the livelihood of Deal-Maker, and that was that. Indeed, who knows whatever tied their particular long suffering knot in the first place-- the consequences of another form of faulty accounting, perhaps?

How Stan ever actually survived financially, I do not know. Perhaps he had a racket elsewhere, although he never took risks in the shop with truly dodgy sales. Records were always carefully kept as required by police regulations. I do know that he managed to convince his Greek landlord to reduce rent; obviously, the landlord did not know about the race horse share, or why on certain days Stan would always be "on business" elsewhere.

How did I know all these things? Well, I worked for Stan part-time for a few months out of interest, and for the experience, both for the business and that of his type of merchant and merchandise. The next step on from my own early experiences of garage sales, so to speak. I also had a couple of reasonable deals from Stan when I first came to the neighborhood, to give him credit, and we had the odd conversation now and again as Fellow Australians which led to the job offer. (My own ancestry somehow never got a mention, Stan as always judging on appearances, I suppose?)

Until I found out what really was going on with his business and lifestyle, I had been sympathetic to the fact that he had a need for an assistant or occasional shop-minder, who would at least take an interest, and not run off with stock or strike bad deals. My sympathies even extended to believing the struggling small businessman bit, leaving aside his worst political sentiments.

But in the end, as his employee, I would grow tired of castigations about sales and profits that would follow bad days at the races, or finding the hot-water jug sold. Even cheap card tables used for display would flogged off for a few bucks, and my best "merchandise" arrangement efforts left on the floor. One day, this was to happen once too often,

and I would think what the hell, I had seen enough, and Stan would never change. Slave and/or scapegoat were not for me...

There were other aspects of the "job" that were off-putting also, like picking over the pathetic remnants of some deceased estate jobbed off by uncaring relatives, or by landlords clearing out premises for re-letting. They would inevitably be the personal effects of those of poorer classes, memories of their lives and times dying with them. This sort of stock would come in job lots for a few dollars from auctions, and be gone through eagerly, and with obscene haste, by Stan, looking for marketable memorabilia or "Old Masters".

Sometimes, I could feel "emanations" or whatever you would like to call them, like a cloud over these goods, and feel oppressed and depressed while sorting out the stuff. At other times, though, there would be interesting objects, finds, or even actual customers. I read books on collecting that I picked up, and auctions I attended with Stan had their moments also, so the job was not all bad, by any means.

I did realise, of course, that Stan's end of the market was one step up from the local versions of parish charity, and as such did perform some sort of social service in the form of minor cash relief, however meagre, and actual goods disposal which would have been difficult to achieve for some by other means. Generally, Stan was not exactly generous to a fault in his dealings. Certainly, as far as the buying market was concerned, some of what Stan turned over did actually come from the local "Parish Services", who in turn were selling what they had donated to them.

At least twice a week, we would close the shop for a couple of hours, and do the rounds of these social aid outlets as a matter of routine, to stock Stan's shop for appearance's sake, if not for big returns. This was another rule, fair enough for any retail business to observe, that of never allowing the shop to look empty; certainly, the old van would carry some strange cargoes after these stock-up trips. Auction trips were not much better in result, as Businessman Stan was at the bottom end of that market as well, in piscatorial terms, a minor Bottom Feeder....

Stan was as hooked on his lifestyle as any gambler, in fact **that** was also his main problem, as I found out when I began to work for him. He devoted much of his income to equine welfare, and not just the racehorse maintenance part, either. Stan had pestered me to "invest" in the shared nag until one day I finally gave him \$5 for the sake of peace and quiet. The nag, of course, did not win, and I never did see the betting slip bought in my name either, "lost", apparently..?

Personally, I would hate to have a life-style as sterile and anti-intellectual as his, more due to attitude than actual circumstance, and never to change, no matter how much money he could have made. Probably, Stan had never visited any library since reluctant attendance of the representative institution at his old school. For his children, I felt only sorrow if this sterility was to blight their lives and self-awareness. Certainly, Stan was not in favour of impinging foreign influences pervading The Mother Country, either, including travel, language study, or any other form of cultural contact, including cuisine!

But, the story of Albert, and how he got the better of Stan, was one little incident I was pleased to be a party to. It all started with a TV that had already been in and out of the shop more than once, and was finally sold to Albert. Albert was himself an interesting study as well, and in great contrast to Stan, though they could both be regarded as archetypal in their respective ways, regardless of nation or culture.

Albert was almost a caricature of himself in his own way, too, as a tall, thin, toothy, baggily-dressed and bespectacled Indian migrant. He spoke old colonial-style English, verbose, formal and old-fashioned as it was, and reminiscent of the style of The Times of India at the State Library. His accent, though, was pure goodness-gracious-me, complete with traditional and quite unselfconscious head movements. These were traits not always to advantage for job-seeking, or other formal situations, perhaps, when manifest out of the original cultural milieu.

Albert had a small sari-clad wife, one solemn child on whom they both doted, and there was one on the way. In truth, they were the epitome of decent middle class values without the more pernicious aspirations; humble, somewhat naive in their honesty and law-abiding, greatly respecting the institutions of their new home, and looking forward to Proper Citizenship in due course. Indeed, they were better as potential citizenship material than many others who might presume to express their rights and opinions in the society at large, or who appear in the annals of reportage of anti-social behavior in pursuit of their "rights" and political ends.

They had left Kerala in India because, as the christian name indicates, Albert and his wife were Protestant Indians, possibly even Anglo-Indian. They were in fear of their well-being in their old home, yet another country turning inwards ideologically towards increasing fundamentalism and religious fascism.

Albert was a degreed civil engineer, and thus had high hopes that the Australian immigration blurb would deliver what it promised, namely, a new start, and a secure job and future for he and his little family. But, this was not so far to be, at least after one year anyway. Albert was still on the dole, in spite of patient efforts to find work. His wife did not speak much English, as well as being painfully shy and a traditional housewife by vocation. They lived in a one-bedroom flat in a featureless modern apartment block, built, it would seem, to house so many hopefuls like them in big "first-world" cities everywhere.

Albert, of course, however earnest and honest his intentions and self-presentation at job interviews, professional or otherwise, was doubtless his own worst enemy. Appearance, accent, third-world degree, and a fussy manner, all contributed to this.

Even his Eastern patience was wearing thin after a year, and he would comment with a sigh on the difference between the earlier dream and subsequent reality of their time in Australia. But a job market that was employing qualified engineers as installation technicians on NSW Rail upgrades did not offer much to someone like Albert. Factories were filled by those less educated, but considered more trainable despite minimal English. Sorry, Albert...

So, he stoically endured the dole, the knock-backs, and the occasional bit of "attitude" guardedly expressed toward him by other members of the population, native-born citizens or otherwise. One should say, though, that it is remarkable, colonial era aside, that multi-cultural matters are now quite reasonably handled in Australia, considering the home-grown attitudes, as well as the importation of so many of those who come from certain cultures traditionally representing some of the world's best haters, including mutual haters! All this, and international approbation for a job well done! In truth, better than some, and, not as good as others?

Perhaps Australian social and geographical flexibilities meant that mutually uncomfortable meetings need not occur? Perhaps those least tolerant that remain of "white" Australia had also shrugged shoulders at what could be termed a multi-cultural fait accompli, realising that actual undesirable contact with could be avoided by exercising those same flexibilities?

The whole world, after all, with the possible exception of the Rift Valley, could be said to be populated by migrant stock, with DNA research and comparisons with chimps, dogs and flatworms doing their part in rendering minor physical differences, between all us migrants, increasingly irrelevant, with cultural and religious differences being the remaining hiccups before the advent of True World Peace... Certainly, Australia as a migrant haven was socially better and safer for Albert, et al, than Kerala, by his own account, being, in reality, forgiving and all as he was of their present socioeconomic circumstances.

Anyway, in respect to the basic necessities of life at least, Albert and family could have been a lot worse off. But oversold New Starts do no-one's morale any good; certainly, Protestant Indians from Kerala do not have a high profile compared to other victims of humanity's determination to perpetuate a feud mentality. Albert was, no doubt, expected to be grateful for any share of the current political, economic, and policy, noblesse oblige, regardless of which social or economic crack he and his family might slip through. For his part, **he** would do The Right Things, and live The Right Way, and things would turn out Right; Salvation, (or perhaps Karma?), would take care of the rest.

I enjoyed Albert's hospitality on occasion, as the TV incident continued. I visited his house for various reasons, and in so doing, got to know his story. As a result, I was happy to take his side against Stan over the matter, although it was Albert who provided his own solution in the end.

In brief, the television incident took place as follows:

Albert first came to the shop one day when I was there alone, and Stan was "on business"/at the races. He bought at that time an old wardrobe, which I later helped to wheel a mile or so round to his flat on a hand-trolley to save the delivery fee. We got to talking about travel, immigration, etc, partly because I had been to India many years before, and partly because in Albert's newness and shyness, he was more than happy to have an all-to-rare and long conversation with a Local.

The wardrobe's arrival at Albert's flat called for hospitality, so after treating me to tea, Indian cakes, and sweets baked by his wife, Albert announced that he would call at the shop again, now that he had found it; there also was an Indian general store nearby which had drawn him to this particular part of Paramatta. He would drop in at least once a week, after visiting the other store, to check the stock at Stan's emporium, and have a chat. Such are the little strands of fate that weave our daily lives and encounters.

However, the next time Albert called at the shop, Stan happened to have a rare day off from all the races, auctions, and charity "rounds". With predictable consequences, the chicken was spell-bound by the cobra, in Albert's own cultural terms. With the cobra's undivided attention in an otherwise empty shop, and naïve trust and natural good manners making things even easier to caste the spell, Albert Bought The TV Lemon.

To bring some perspective to the incident, I should explain Albert's modest financial plan each fortnight was to use surplus dole money, (yes, Albert and Co. could operate on a small surplus, so frugal was their lifestyle), to accumulate useful property as the need arose.

On this particular occasion he did not have furniture on the list, as he later told me, but a TV. This was an ambitious purchase, but a worthy one as well as strategic one. The TV was both to be "company" for wife and child, to compensate for the fact that they could not "go out" much, except locally for walks, and never at night, and, to encourage them both with learning English at home, so the children, present and future, would not be disadvantaged when later attending school.

Albert was independent, with old-fashioned ideas about Property, which now worked against him in this case, as he wanted to own his TV set, rather than to rent one. Through Ownership, the best of intentions for his family would be met, any worries of meeting rental demands would be avoided, and English-learning would proceed as planned. Perhaps a little fatalism regarding the efficacy of good intentions was thrown in, also, and thus the quality of the prospective TV purchased would be taken more for granted than was perhaps wise under the circumstances.

Certainly a modest market plan for Albert to have, but a perilous one to implement in the second-hand TV market, especially with someone like Stan to charm the carefully-saved money out of his pocket. The TV in question was an older, very heavy colour set with channel switch, no UHF or remote, and well-used enough to be getting to the point where the picture controls were struggling to do their job. Certainly, it had returned to pass through Stan's hands more than once, like some lucky pawnbroker's lodestone. One could say that the "emanations" from this pre-loved consumer item were of a very weary nature....

But with Stan's toothy charm, displayed so convincingly at the same place where Albert had bought the **very** satisfactory wardrobe, and with the TV selling at about 20% of the price of the newer model, including the rabbit ears, it seemed a Bargain. Stan could usually rise above cultural divides in pursuit of a deal, no doubt of that, and quickly became Albert's best friend of that fleeting and fateful moment.

To someone as trusting of the forces of Destiny as Albert, who did not know much about TVs anyway, (he was a civil engineer, after all, not an electronics expert), this TV seemed to be just what he wanted. Of course, Stan himself knew there was always a risk with selling any used appliances, especially the more technical types, but this TV seemed to be surviving turnover OK, and after all, sales was a numbers game...

So, a deal was struck, plus \$5.0 for delivery, a "special" price for when Stan "happened" to be going that way, which of course, was to be the next morning, in not quite indecent haste, given his usual cash flow problems. Albert was fair game, too, especially as one of "Them". A warranty was implied, but, if ever invoked, would be subject to Stan's code of business ethics, as outlined before.

The TV was duly dropped off the next day. Albert, of course, did not happen to be home just then, and Stan did not hang around, Albert's wife just handed over the money as arranged, and left the set on the floor until her husband came home to set it up and try it, her ignorance of TVs being even more profound than his. So, when Albert came home, he and his wife struggled together to put the "new" TV in pride of place, hooked up the old rabbit ears, and switched on.

Well, the result was rather less than satisfactory, which of course was to be the obvious and inevitable outcome, as you could imagine. Whether because of Stan's usual care as a carrier, or because the building was unsuitable for a TV of such advanced age, (Albert had a ground-floor flat in a block of concrete cubes with the usual reinforcing), or, just that the TV had been risked once too often as a consumer item, was not to be known, but the set sulked, and would only produce indistinct sound, and a dark and very vague picture. So much for the eagerly awaited occasion; one can only wonder at the disappointment of the moment...

Needless to say, Albert was soon back at the shop to voice his concerns, but at that time, I was the one he spoke to, not Stan. All I could say to Albert was that I would tell Stan what had happened, and then gave a lecture on renting these sorts of goods, rather than risk the secondhand market, and that, yes, renting was part of the Australian way of life. There was no discredit or stigma attached to those who rented, after all, to stretch a point, it was the means by which so many businesses were up and running promptly in Australia, especially those where first impressions counted for much...

But, post hoc advice like that did not do much to solve the immediate matter of the TV, so Albert went home again via the Indian grocer's, and later on I told Stan what had happened. He was not pleased, but was confident that his idea of warranty would carry the day. The tactics began to be planned. I was apprehensive for both parties, but more sympathetic to Albert, and aware that I, too, was an accessory after the dicey fact, even if an unwitting one.

First of all, Stan insisted that I was to visit Albert, as I lived nearby and seemed to like those sorts of people, to see if the set had been set up properly. Perhaps they did not know that electricity was required, etc...

This I duly did, and found after applying all of my own hard-won informal knowledge of TVs and their aerials, I could make no difference to the performance. That particular TV was very close to ceasing to be, and like the parrot of legend, no amount of talking was going to restore it to full health. In my considered opinion, Stan would just have to face the fact, and show some spirit of fair play in the matter. These facts I then reported back to him.

Then came Stan's next series of moves, which consisted of accusing Albert of blatant TV abuse, followed by a series of broken appointments to avoid personal dealings as long as possible. Thus, Albert was duly prioritised in such a way that would cause attrition of his resolve, without being classed as outright refusal to speak with him. Albert did have a phone, mainly for the purpose of obtaining work, but Stan, of course, always "forgot" his number, not bothering with phoning to break appointments.

The result was that Albert, always on foot, made several fruitless visits to Stan's shop, much exceeding his usual needs to concurrently visit the Indian grocer nearby. During this time, it was me who was left to deal with Albert as

best I could, and I tried to help as much as possible with advice about what to do, like suggesting to make sure that Stan did make a good swap, **not** a down-market one, and gave Albert the address of the Dept. of Fair Trade, while apologising on behalf of Australia in general.

Privately, I told Stan, without even bothering to appeal to his possible better nature, that Albert did have certain advantages in the matter, like his immigrant status, or that goods not meeting the standards and need, etc., could be exchanged for cash as well as other goods, if the point was pushed, (Or, in this case, If The Bluff Was Called).

But Stan's low opinion of Albert The Migrant, as well as past successes in these sorts of matters, gave him optimism, and, confidence to continue to run through his trusted inventory of stalling tactics. So the little drama was to be played out to the very end. Offers of other stock were made, via me, and politely refused by Albert. One party wanted cash back, and the other wanted to keep the cash.

But Albert was adamant that he would have his hard-saved money back to put towards another workable TV, and from a more reputable source than Stan's Emporium of the-not-always-truly-pre-loved. With his usual quiet determination, when he did make up his mind, Albert now decided to "do in West Sydney" etc, and take the advice of, and opportunity to, rent a TV. Those disputed monies, still at that time to Stan's credit, were earmarked for that very rental purpose on being returned to Albert's pocket.

Finally, with some collusion from me (denied, of course, to Stan), Albert finally ambushed Stan at the shop, and again confronted him with the dual problem of dodgy TV and outstanding credit. Of course, Stan blustered, and on this occasion got as far as accusing Albert, once again, of damaging the TV, as it was OK when it left the shop etc. Albert, ever reasonable and polite as was his wont, denied this was the case. Another trade-off was offered, and refused. Then Stan had to dash off on an "urgent" appointment, and once more Albert trudged home empty-handed.

But, he was not to be deterred, and, with the age-old patience and endurance of his kind, which someone like Stan would never understand, Albert intended to persist in regaining what he saw, which even the world would surely acknowledge, as that which was rightfully his. Also, the fact was, ironically, his scorned status as Unemployed Migrant was an advantage, and gave him extra time and opportunity to yet again ambush Stan at the shop as the opportunity arose.

He also arranged with a sympathetic Asian neighbour to bring the TV over by car while on the way to another nearby ethnic grocer. Albert had the receipt for the original purchase which he kept safe, and never brought this to the shop, so this action of simply returning the TV, as he announced, was "merely to emphasise the principal fact that in no way did he wish to keep the TV as a means of bargaining, and would place no such obstacle in the way of having his original purchase-money returned". (As opposed to merely being refunded....!)

Another ambush ensued. As usual, another swap of goods was offered and refused, by Stan's account, a swap opportunity that Albert should really have been grateful for. And so this pattern of ambushes and confrontations proceeded. Albert, with his age-old patience, plus Stan, by now unwilling to be beaten by one of "them", and, with Personal Honour at stake for both. The full schedule of Stan's tactics was duly run through, until finally, Stan offered to "buy" back the TV back, but at a price well below the original.

This of course, Albert also politely refused, wanting to get back, in full, that hard-saved family money. (For such it was; though traditional, there was much that was very democratic about that little family unit, bravely facing the odds together). He felt so very responsible for the now-obvious bad bargain as Provider and Head of the Family, and as the one who made the original decision to buy the TV. Albert's social conscience was as great as his patience and sense of justice.

This latest refusal was the final insult for Stan, defying as it did his last tactic. He then told Albert in no uncertain terms (expletives non-deleted), to get lost, confidently done of course, as Albert posed no physical threat. Besides, as he put it later, that Unspeakable was also ungrateful for what, by Stan's standards, was a very real concession. The fact that Albert had refused this offer was grounds enough for Stan to put Albert out of the shop, and the affair from his mind, all considerations of the Fair Trading and Race Relations aside.

What happened then, according to Albert, was that he left the shop as he had been so uncivilly bidden, and then sat down outside on the pavement. As he so simply and poignantly put it, "I sat down to wait for the money, for however long it took. The TV was no good, that was our money, and I wanted him to give it back." So, Albert had put himself in patience mode, and sat out on the footpath, where he, with Civil Right on his side, had every right to be. Albert "Did A Gandhi" where this had never been done before! That public sit-in was, plainly and simply, Albert's ultimate weapon, call it passive resistance or whatever, and plainly and simply, after a surprisingly short while, the tactic worked.....

Stan, of course, with no sense or knowledge of history or other cultures, was quite unprepared for this, as he saw it, most un-Australian of activities. Albert thought he would triumph by proving his rights, expressed by the strength of his determination, and bringing shame on Stan by his very public, but passive act. Beneath the veneer of Protestantism, Albert still had his more ancient Hindoo cultural heart to sustain him.

However, Stan having a rather less than completely developed sense of ordinary morality, probably saw, instead, the plain embarrassment of one of “them” sitting idly on his doorstep, in plain view of some sporting or “business” acquaintance who may pass by, necessitating an explanation about how he, Stan, had allowed himself to get into this predicament. **Very** bad for the Businessman Image, in Stan’s case!

As Albert later told me, Stan pretended to ignore him for a half hour or so, then came out of the shop, gestured him inside, gave him the money away from public view with no further comment, then pointed to the door. Albert had triumphed in the end, not so much on the grounds of his recourse to higher principles, but rather because of his cultural wisdom, and the strength of Stan’s own prejudices evoked against himself. At stake, along with all the “principles” on both sides, had been the original purchase price of A\$100, excluding delivery fee.

Stan said to me later, offhandedly, of course, “I couldn’t have that scrawny bastard hanging around the front of the shop for too long...” I made sure I kept a straight face, but was pleased that the matter was resolved before any other course of action, legal or otherwise, was pursued. The other fortuitous contributing factor to the speedy resolution was that, at the time, Stan actually had enough ready money in his pocket to affect the refund, probably due to a good gee-gee tip that was not yet “reinvested”.

Somehow, though, I think the outcome would have been the same, no matter how long Albert sat there, and for basically the same reasons on Stan’s part. But no more was said about the incident, and while I remained employed, the extent of my discussions with Albert was never to be an issue. Stan was practical enough not to seriously alienate an assistant who, in other respects, performed satisfactorily, and could be trusted alone in the shop. The odd little lecture about sticking to one’s own kind still continued for my benefit, Stan seeming to think that my interest in travel and other cultures, as a New White Australian, (I had a Citizenship Certificate to prove this, too..), was some sort of temporary aberration that could be “cured” with “proper” counseling from A Real Australian, which sporadically continued during the remainder of my time at the shop.

Anyway, after all the excitement, Albert and his family had finally accepted the wisdom of The Australian Way, at least in the interim, and rented a TV, as a minor and temporary corruption of their immortal souls, though sagely refusing a video as too expensive, as well as really too much of a good thing. Whether Albert’s tactics thus used to recover the money would have worked in other Australian situations, is, of course, a moot point; I certainly cautioned him, with “local” knowledge, that even with Right on one’s side, a certain proportion of Luck was also needed for ever resolving similar consumer disputes. It was better to avoid these sorts of problems altogether, and quit while ahead on matters of tactics.

Stan probably learned nothing, really, but did adopt the practice of discouraging yet another category of easily identifiable customer from “wasting his time”, to the further detriment of his “turnover”.

Albert and I met from time to time after that, though not at Stan’s shop. Albert asked for help on job interviews, we did some more money-saving furniture shifts as the need arose, and I enjoyed hospitality with his family. Life went on for them, and I saw them together at other times, too, making their local excursions, later on with the newcomer in a pram. They generally seemed to subsist as best they could as a family in their financially and socially circumscribed world.

Finally, I moved on from Stan’s shop when the novelty of being his employee wore off, and later from the city as well, tired as I was of that sort of urban life. At least I could move on with ease, all things were a bit more equal for me than for Albert and Co. Wherever he is now, I wish him and his family well. With luck, time, and an improving economy, would see him in some sort of useful and worthwhile job, his self-respect and his family’s future secured, and his children enabled to achieve somewhat more than their parents in the New Land, when the social and financial exigencies of an oversold “new start” were relegated to a fading memory.

Certainly, Albert had a certain respectability and nobility, however humbly, eccentrically, or politely expressed, that represented some of the best qualities desirable in a citizen anywhere. Stan, too, had his particular social niche and corresponding function that would always manifest in any society. Indeed, as archetypes of **any** human society, the story of their confrontation was something of a timeless parable of human affairs, although the resolution of the conflict had a particularly cultural flavour in this instance....