



**The Big Apple,
One Bite at a Time**

Anthony Morrocco

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Published by Morrocco Method Int'l
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The Big Apple, One Bite at a Time

Chapter 1: New York in the '60s

The Big Apple has always had a unique kind of energy. You can feel it the moment you arrive, no matter who you are, or where you've come from. Fred Astaire got that part right.

1964 Has endured a rocky start for all of us. Our President had been assassinated, our new Camelot already in ruins... but life went on and so did we. When I arrived in New York, there was a certain feeling in the air, and you could sense it from the soles of your feet up to the almost tingling tips of your hair. Perhaps it was a different kind of energy from the one I sensed on that childhood hilltop, age four, and the one in Grandma Lena's garden, but it was energy nonetheless. It was everywhere, in all the people, on every street, and in every brick.



The famous World's Fair was opening its doors for the first time in history, and already the streets were crowded with visitors, hoping to see a vision and a show of the bright future they imagined. It was a new world of skyscrapers, smog, cabs and hotdog stands, Madison Avenue and Times Square, and masses of people moving in throngs down every street. It was going to be the next big life adventure, Antonio style – and I would be damned if it wasn't going to be done *my way*.

On February 7th of the same year, a Pan Am Yankee Clipper flight 101 from London Heathrow landed at New York's Kennedy Airport, and four young British men stepped onto the tarmac. "Beatlemania"

had officially arrived in town with their falsetto whoops, jangly guitars and floppy pudding bowl haircuts creeping around every corner, leaking out of every passing radio. Sinatra was long gone, Elvis was looking like a dinosaur lumbering up over the horizon of the past. This was the strange world I was stepping into, but nothing could have prepared me for what was to come.

Thanks once again to the US Navy, Uncle Sam generously paid the dime for my education, no matter what school I chose. I had no idea where to start, so I enrolled in the Brooklyn Campus of the Pratt Institute, and signed up for a few basic classes that interested me: Architecture, illustration, graphic design, painting and drawing. What was I thinking?

As soon as I started, I realized that I had made a terrible mistake. It felt like senior year in high school all over again. After my white-knuckle adventures in Morocco and my life-affirming travels in Europe, this business of study was claustrophobic, and soul-destroying. I felt like a true artist, a dynamo of creativity, and hell, I didn't need stuffy old lecturers telling me what I could or could not do.

In my view, I had already graduated – albeit from the Navy – and life itself, and the whole universe was going to be my university. There was just no way that these lecturers were going to box me into a life that wasn't worth living. I spent sleepless nights mulling over my destiny. I knew that the choice I settled on would determine my life's path, but it wasn't clear to me yet – it was still unfolding.

Thanks to my grandmother's influence I trusted the process of life, but still – there were practical considerations to take into account. A few hundred dollars a month from the Navy paid for my classes and books. I was covering my rent and subway rides, but even so, I was working three jobs, plus attending the occasional class.



The pressure increased until the critical point arrived – and then, right on cue, the phone rang.

When you learn to flow with the process of your own life, these kinds of things happen all the time. Call it the Law of Attraction, synchronicity, or just the Mystery and Magic of Time – but it's real. When the time is right, the waves of the sea part, and the pathway opens up.

I picked up the phone. On the other end of the line was Larry Decrasanti, who was then my boss at Luxury Catering NYC, where I worked as part time bartender, waiter, cook and bottle washer.

"Antonio!" He said over the crackling line, "A good friend of mine just broke up with his girlfriend and they have a rent-controlled apartment at 77th street on 2nd Avenue and they just deserted the place..."

I could not believe what I was hearing. Here was the answer I had been looking for! Larry kept talking fast:

"...So go to the west side real estate office and claim this address: 1442 2nd Avenue Apartment 21, and tell them it is Dominick Scarpenatti's Apartment." He said.

I dropped the phone and began a mad scramble across New York. I had to repeat the address name over and over in my head to make sure I didn't forget it! I must have looked like a mad man standing in the subway car or running down the street repeating it. I nearly tripped over a woman and almost bumped into a cop, but I made it panting and happy!

After arriving to the west side real estate office, the woman who worked behind the desk took one long look at me, and then disappeared behind closed doors for a few moments, that seemed to me like an eternity. Then she reappeared with papers in her hand.

"It's \$68.00 a month, rent-controlled. That means the rent stays at \$68.00 for as long as you live there, provided you don't sub-lease or abandon the apartment..." She continued talking, but I couldn't hear everything she was saying since I was so lost in my thoughts ... *It's impossible, but it's happening! Pure gold!* I thought to myself.

A rent control apartment in the Upper East Side of Manhattan was rare. But for \$68 a month, including 4 rooms, and with a view of the east river – it was a gift from the universe. My days of sharing a Navy barracks dorm were over. Hello Freedom!

Life's University Continues: Kenneth's Salon



Funny enough, Larry's role in my life wasn't over. He was also the one who by some miracle or another got me the job as an apprentice at Kenneth's Salon, which was also going to be the first stepping stone to the next leg of my journey. I had already enrolled in hair-dressing school, but I still had no idea that this was going to be the direction my life's path would take. But, as I was to learn, some kind of unstoppable force was at work.

The fact that my ancestral roots stretched back to Venice counted in my favor that day. Rosemary Sorentino, the woman who interviewed me, and for whom I would be working as an apprentice, was from Sicily. We bonded instantly, in the true Italian way, and she hired me on the spot.

Little did I know what that would mean for my career. This wasn't just a regular hair salon for the rich – it was *the place to go* for the super-rich and famous. The Salon belonged to Kenneth Battelle, who most people called "Mr. Kenneth." He has been described as the world's first celebrity hairdresser.

For people like me he was the Michelangelo of hair.

Kenneth became wildly famous for creating Jacqueline Kennedy's bouffant in 1961. Among his customers were the famous Marilyn Monroe, Audrey Hepburn, and many of America's most highprofile socialites such as Brooke Astor and Happy Rockefeller, all the Kennedy ladies, and the Fords. Mr. Kenneth was also the first and only hairdresser to win a Coty Award.

If Mr. Kenneth was Michelangelo, then Rosemary Sorentino was the Leonardo da Vinci of hair coloring. What a place to work at! All these famous personalities had to pass through my hands on their way to the maestros – and I was learning fast from the University of Life. It felt like I had been given an all-access backstage pass to the lives of some of the most famous people in the world. Even if I was just a lowly apprentice and an outsider to many places I visited while working at Kenneth's, I had somehow been admitted into the inner circle of fame.

I remember that one famous client, Faye Dunaway, was shooting the *Thomas Crown Affair* with Steve McQueen, Rosemary and I were in the contract, and we got to fly back and forth between LA and NYC. We also got to attend a cocktail party in Fay's fabulous West Side apartment. When we got there, we couldn't help but notice the entrance bedecked with silver foil, which Faye had set a trend for. I will never forget what I felt when I walked through the door and saw that inside she had an incredible Spanish kitchen, with a balcony so we could step outside –something which was quite rare for NYC.

Another regular customer at Kenneth's was Jackie Kennedy. Rosemary colored her hair every six to eight weeks. During this time she was regularly featured in all the newspapers. Her affair with Aristotle Onassis the wealthy Greek shipping magnate –or "Ari" like she affectionately called him– was hot news. She used to affectionately call him "Ari," and told us that "they still want to kill us." She was with him because he offered her and her kids protection from whoever killed Kennedy and from the press and public. I remember I had lunch with Kenneth and Rosemary several times at Jackie's Central Park condo. I will never forget that going through all those security checkpoints was one of the most glamorous and exciting times in my life.

Chapter 2: Fire Island: The Bohemians and the Meatballs



Throughout the 1960's and 1970's Fire Island was a place unlike any other place in the world. There was a special kind of magic and mystery there. It was created by the mixture of white beach sand, bottles of champagne, cocktails, art, people, and wild imagination. These were some of my craziest, most cherished, and most memorable adventures of my life.

The Times were–a–Changing Beatnik – Another Renaissance

The conservative ideas of the 1950's were being thrown to the wind all over America, and the blossoming youth culture was like a revolution – nowhere more so than in Cherry Grove, and the Pines on Fire Island, which is now Long Island, NY.

During the 1950's, the mindset of most Americans – the way they thought about all kinds of things – was still influenced by the post-war recession years. Most people still believed in good, honest hard work with straight and conservative values, and they believed in nothing more strongly than prosperity of America. In other words, most of them were stuffy and boring.

But the 1960's saw the young girls trading their wide, pleated skirts and pencil skirts for miniskirts. Tight sweaters and cardigans were thrown out, or burned, and young people now wore the psychedelic colors of the 'Summer of Love.' There I was, in the strangest place in the country – maybe the whole world– during the grandest Cultural Revolution in modern times.

America was changing, and the changes were spreading in colorful waves across the entire world. I remember that Martin Luther King Bobby Kennedy were on the news all the time – until they were both killed– and so were all the riots that came with the race clashes. The times were a-changing, and the young people had new ideas about freedom, music, psychedelic drugs, relationships, gender, and about what was best in life. The old rules were nonsense to us. It was time for an allnight party, for beat poetry, and acoustic guitars under the moonlight on the beach. That suited me much better than an old-fashioned, dreary life of conformity to someone else's ideas. The old-school fought against the changes, but there was no stopping the tide – especially on Fire Island.

Ever since the 1920's the little island has been an eclectic sort of place – a small getaway from Long Island, only 36 miles long and less than half a mile wide. It attracted a lot of artists from the Broadway scene over the years. Up until 1962 there was no electricity, and no cars allowed on the island except for emergency vehicles. It was primitive living – but some people seemed to find that kind of lifestyle attractive. It didn't matter to them that it was a hassle to light the house at night, or that you risked burning the place down with gas lamps on rickety old fittings.

Luckily, not too long after I was there things started to change. There was a secret community of bohemians and artists that slowly grew into something much bigger as the parties became wilder, the music got louder, and the way people dressed became more 'outrageous.' Fire Island became a kind of mecca for those souls who didn't fit into mainstream America. For me it was a haven, and a playground, full of all the best things, and some of the best people I've ever met.

All-Night Parties and Crazy Times

Cherry Grove was the wildest spot on the island. Every summer, from Memorial Day to Labor Day, the rich and famous bohemians rubbed shoulders with dancers, the wildlings and the party-goers from dawn till dusk. Nudity wasn't a problem in the Grove. It didn't matter if you were into boys or girls either –except, of course, for the police force on the island –not to mention the Italian mafia

who wanted all the cash that flowed into the restaurants, hotels and dance halls! – but there was no stopping it. Today, of course, nobody bats and eyelid about that kind of thing, but back then it was 1965 after all!

The champagne corks started popping early in the morning, and by the afternoon it was time for cocktails. When evening arrived, the fires were lit for barbecues, and then even later the party really got into full swing – and it kept on going and going until... Very late!

There were always all kinds of theme parties and costume parties going on, mostly in people's private homes. I also remember that there was a favorite tradition on the Island called the "Sixish." Groups of people of all types went wandering around looking for liquor, love and loud music. Every day the party moved to a different house, and party-goers would move around from one place to the next – wherever the breeze blew them.



They used to set up huge, elaborate tents on the beach, like something out of the time of the gladiators. Weekends on the island were madness – but the best kind of fun you can imagine.

An invitation to Fire Island was an invitation I could never refuse. I would simply grab my sandals, my bathing suit and my pullover, and one way or another I would make my way there. As many as 45,000 people flocked to the tiny island over a weekend. Most caught the train out of Penn station, and hopped on the Ferry boat. For the fortunate few –like us– there was another way: A private seaplane.

The plane would land on the island, and then a four-wheel-drive jeep would take us to Kenneth's 5bedroom beach home. It was a thrill to travel that way, and it was an incredible place to stay. The house was tucked away, far from the maddening crowds, right on the dunes in the Pines. Spectacular! Fire Island was a paradise for forward-thinking people, for bohemians, artists and hippies, and it was a non-stop party every weekend.



People like Tennessee Williams and Rock Hudson were there, as well as Elizabeth Taylor, Bette Midler and Andy Warhol – to name just a few. There were fashion designers like Giorgio St. Angelo and Calvin

Klein. All kinds of people – the oddballs and the creatives, the musicians and the dancers – what a collection!

Everywhere there would be posters advertising music and theatre, like this one:

HAPPENING TONIGHT–

Tom Potocki and Gary Winters, artists about Fire Island, blow their artistic minds and invite other islanders to do the same when they stage their Fire Island happening, 'Plastic Grass,' at the Seaview recreation area on the bay tonight, starting at 6 p.m. Potocki and Winters have gone through their entire life savings to stage tonight's thing and urge everyone to show their sympathy by arriving at least ten minutes late. Lighting, courtesy The Moon. Howls, courtesy Sunken Forest."

The Difference between Italian and Jewish Balls

It was during one memorable weekend in this magical place that I met two of the most enchanting people I've ever met: Bernie and Evelyn. Bernie was an eminent and successful attorney in Washington, and Evelyn was a true artist and a bohemian at heart; she was a trend-setting designer, and much of her work was on display in the Decoration and Design Building in New York –which is like the Louvre or the Tate Gallery for interior designers. They both lived in a penthouse in New York City on East 64th and Park avenue. They also owned a villa in Italy, and they summered in Europe – either in their villa, or on their island in Switzerland. They were refined human beings saturated in culture, socialites of the highest caliber, jet-setters, and lovers of life. What a privilege to have met them on that crazy island!



From the moment we met, we hit it off. I used to call them 'Bernardo and Evelina,' my Italian names for my Jewish-adopted family. Yes, I adopted them, and this is how it happened: one night we were on the island, drinking heavily, and I was telling them all about my parents, and how I felt that they had failed to educate me on the finer things in life, even on Italian culture; how they never understood the kind of person I was, and how narrow their horizons had always been. After I finished sharing my family's story, I told them in a jokingly way, "I wish I could adopt

you as my parents!". After saying this, I couldn't believe how lightheartedly they took it; they immediately agreed that it was a wonderful idea and, as soon as we got back to the city, they invited me to their penthouse. That marked the beginning of endless parties and luxury extravaganza.

Bernie and Evelyn had two sons, Jed and Mathew, who had left the nest to go to college. So, they had left behind two empty bedrooms in the penthouse that Bernie and Evelyn didn't know what to do with. Luckily, we had already bonded deeply, just like family, so I became the perfect candidate to fill the empty space in their life. Deep inside I felt like these were *my people*, and they felt the same way about me.

The socialite couple used to throw lavish soirees every Sunday. It was a regular event that took up the entire day, and it was always so dazzling, and so mind-expanding that it made my head spin. The entire day would be filled with entertaining conversations with personalities from the bustling New York art scene. Those Sundays changed my life in so many ways: they opened my eyes to things I had never heard about; things that expanded my knowledge of culture, art, literature, and my view of the world and all its secrets.

Each Sunday at the penthouse Bernie would have their staff ready to cook, clean, cater and welcome Broadway stars, the theatre people, the journalists, the authors, the gorgeous models, and even the attorneys and businessmen would arrive. From eleven in the morning until two in the afternoon was the brunch party. After the brunch group left, then from three-o'clock to 6 pm another group would arrive for cocktails and hors-d'oeuvres. Around seven-thirty the next group would come in – always 12 people for a formal dinner –and since I was part of the family, I was always invited and welcomed at Bernie and Evelyn's home. After the party was over I'd head back home and try to sleep for a bit, so I could go back to work at Kenneth's on Monday.

During these parties, Bernie and Evelyn introduced to many incredible people. Their circle of friends and acquaintances included everyone who was part of the most intimate underground culture in NYC. The guests always knew which books one should read, which Broadway or off-Broadway productions were worthwhile, and which weren't. They knew everything about the arts, music and movies, literature and poetry – and I soaked it all up, learning everything I could.

How did an Italian boy from Connecticut end up there? you may ask. Well, I still don't know, but I'm forever grateful to those two graceful and generous people – my Jewish mommy and daddy, who took me into their lives, showered me with blessings and cared for me as one of their own sons. I remember that every now and then, whenever I looked confused or just spaced out, Evelyn would say, “Bernie, you want to talk to Antonio about this or that” and Bernie would take me into his study, sit down with me to a cognac and cigar, and we would have a father/son talk. He would give me the kind of guidance and support that my Italian father, Carmino, never gave me. This truly is the blessing that every young man desires from his father, and few ever receive. It would not be until decades later, after meeting Robert Bly and the Men's Movement, that I would be involved with thousands of healthy men who would mentor young and elders ... But that's another chapter yet to be written.

Oh, I almost forgot! So, what is the difference between Italian and Jewish balls?... The soup! It's all in the chicken soup! Italians have meatballs, and Jewish people have matzah balls, but the chicken

soup is identical. Well, perhaps that's not the most philosophical of questions, but it's the one I remember most clearly from all those thousands of conversations around that dinner table.

My life was filled with beauty and adventure in the years between 1965 and 1974, when I sailed to Europe. Between Fire Island, my adopted Jewish family Sundays, and the workshop with those amazing European Craftsmen – every single day was filled to the brim with experiences I would not trade for gold, or anything else in life.

After I returned from Europe, I first moved to Boston, and then later to California, and even if I didn't spend as much time with 'Bernardo and Evelina' as I would have liked, we never lost touch. Those two were and still are a part of my life ever since that fateful day on Fire Island.



Chapter 3: European Craftsmen in New York City

The 1960's in New York City were a whole different dimension in my life. Those years were not only about Kenneth's Salon and its super rich clients, but some kind of energy in me that had always

drawn me to the vibrant art, artists and creativity – in any shape or form – gave way to another part of my life that was full of exquisite craftsmanship. *Life itself is creative* – and for me, human beings are at their best when they're imagining something new, and making it come to life with their own two hands.

Sometime around 1966, I started developing an interest in wood carving. There's something about working with wood that uplifts me and brings out my inner artist. I don't know if it's the fragrance of the wood itself, the feel of the wood-grain under my fingers or figuring out how to make the perfect dovetail or mortice and tennon joint. Every project is a journey of discovery.

Being able to look at a raw piece of wood and see what it could become – and then set to work turning it into a reality – was the best feeling in the world. To me, it was more than just an interest; I think I was falling in love with woodworking.

I found a master woodcarver from Sicily named Frank Lassitra, who could be found at a workshop in a loft on the Upper East Side around 66th and 1st Avenue. Whenever I got the chance, I would go there, and Frank would teach me a few tricks of the trade. He taught me about the incredible craftsmanship of 17th and 18th century, pure baroque woodworking. The chairs, tables, bureaus, cabinets and shelves from that period were so intricate, and superbly designed. I can't find enough words to describe what a magical time that was!



The masterpieces from that age radiate a luxurious sort of feeling – every piece is richly decorated with inlays, curls, carvings and goldleaf. You simply don't find that kind of craftsmanship and attention to detail anymore – only in antique shops, and only if you're lucky.

As I worked at my bench, I was learning patience and dedication. I learned to go with the grain of the wood, feeling what the living material wanted to become. I learned that if you go against the grain, you ruin the carving, and hurt yourself in the process.

Frank would come over and show me where I was going wrong, and give me a few tips, and then go back to his carving again. It was a wonderful feeling to just get lost in the craft and feel my hands warm and tingling afterwards; I would end up covered in sawdust and shavings, and somehow that felt so rewarding.

Learning the Craft, Living the Life

During that time, I had the privilege to meet a number of amazing craftsmen. There was a man from Brazil who could do the most amazing gold-leafing on glass. I also got to know James Capovan, who became the mentor and great-grandfather I never had. Even if I was only in my twenties at the time, and he was already in his eighties, we hit it off famously.

James was a man of many talents; he taught me so many things about work and life. He loved what he did, his craft was his life, and those hands of his could do anything. He never missed a day of work, and he was never out of things to do. To this day, I still remember him proudly saying, "I've never been out of work for a single day in my entire life!". His skill, his craftsmanship, and his strong work ethic sustained him through the Great Depression, recessions, and both World Wars. No matter what was happening, his willing hands would always put food on his table.

James was a master goldsmith, silversmith and metalsmith who had come from Venice. He knew many things about art and culture, and he had the street-smarts to match. A craftsman, a street urchin, and a rare character! When I was around him it was as if I was basking in the light of his deep life-knowledge, and I was so grateful to be absorbing it all. I was lucky to have met Jimmy.

We decided to start our own little enterprise – a workshop, gallery and shop. Call it coincidence or call it synchronicity – but we found the perfect spot for it on East 77th street, right across from my apartment. I ended up becoming the business manager, and James continued doing what he did best: state-of-the-art crafts. He moved into the basement and set up his workshop, where he had apprentices coming from Canada and all across the United States. They had come from far and wide



to learn and work in the workshop. You could hear them all day long banging on copper pots, retinning them and creating beautiful artwork out of the scrap we found lying around.

We found amazing treasures in the trash heaps on Park and Fifth avenue. Early in the mornings, we'd sift through the trash, and find old, broken furniture and cast-away household items, even works of art that were near-ruined.

We didn't mind – with the skills at our disposal we could restore them, good as new. A little bit of imagination, lots of know-how, some hard work... And presto! Something new and beautiful out of something old and abused.

In our company, there was also a Czechoslovakian man, Tony Merka, who was a genius at mixing paints. He had an incredible knack at restoring the canvases we found. He was so talented that he could bring any artwork back to life again, no matter how dirty, ripped or spoiled it was. We dragged all the trash back to our little workshop, and – like magic – we would create things of beauty.

We named our business *European Craftsmen Limited* – and it was a success. More and more apprentice workers got to know about us, and they wanted to come study under the master. When they were finished with their training, they went off and started their own businesses. We trained jewelry makers, furniture restorers, painters, carpenters, and entrepreneurs. I learned so much about arts and crafts during that time – and gained a world of understanding about antiques too.

In 1969 we were able to take part in an event sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation called *Forging a Nation*. James became one of the featured artists. During that event, limousines would arrive in the morning to take him to the show, while trucks picked up the tools and workbenches, and carted them off to the Rockefeller Center. We made the news, and they even featured us on television channels, such as CBS, NBC and ABC. They all ran a story on "James Capovan, the master metalworker from Venice."

Those Were the Days

To be honest, I don't know how I managed it. I had to run the business in my spare time – and there wasn't very much of that. Most days I would get back from work at Kenneth's at six or seven in the evening and take a nap until ten or eleven; and then, after a quick shower and shave, I would be back at it again. If I wasn't at the workshop, I was at the clubs. In ten years of New York life, I don't think I ever slept – I must have survived on naps only! Life was just too exciting for sleep.

In those years you could go out to the cafes like *The Kettle of Fish*, *White Horse Tavern* or *Gas Light*; or to the discos in Greenwich Village and catch performances by Barbara Streisand, Mary Hopkins, Tony Curtis, or any number of up-and-coming stars. The folk music scene was famous too. It was a melting pot and an artist's canvas of a brand-new world culture. The Mary Hopkins hit song from 1968 springs to mind:



"Once upon a time there was a tavern
Where we used to raise a glass or two
Remember how we laughed away the hours
And dreamed of all the great things we would do
Those were the days my friend
We thought they'd never end
We'd sing and dance forever and a day
We'd live the life we choose
We'd fight and never lose
For we were young and sure to have our way
La la la la..."

It was a time like no other. The culture of Greenwich Village, the bohemians, and the energy of New York... The adventure of a lifetime! There I was, burning the candle at both ends, hardly getting any sleep, and studying the lessons of the University of Life. It was also during this time that I met two amazing people who became my 'adopted' parents, Bernie and Evelyn – and that's the story I want to share in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: The Hasnamuss on the Mountaintop

Mrs. Esperanza remains a mystery to me, even to this day. I'm still not sure how she knew what to say, or why she felt she needed to say anything to me at all – but she did, and it had a massive impact. As we sat in that circle in the basement, she looked me straight into my eyes, and simply said to me: "BE YOURSELF." It was as if I were hearing a GOD/DESS speaking to me saying "BE YOURSELF". Hearing this brought me into a higher state of consciousness as if I were watching all that was going on outside myself, somehow having an OUT OF BODY EXPERIENCE.

The entire room was silent, and those two words of hers struck me with great force. The words themselves are innocent enough. To be quite honest, they're even a bit of a cliché, and I've heard them a hundred times since then, though never in quite the same way. At that particular moment those words seemed to contain more than what is possible to convey in everyday language, even if I spoke for hours. Something inside me just clicked into place. Again and again, whenever I hear just a powerful title I realize there is no need to read the whole book, *when you get the message, hang up the phone*.

Upon hearing her say it, I suddenly entered a state of altered consciousness. It was a kind of heightened awareness a deeper energy field, as if time itself stood still, and as if my mind was suddenly operating on a different frequency. I sat there, stunned, but fully awake, for the longest time, with a deep sense of self-realization coming over me in waves.

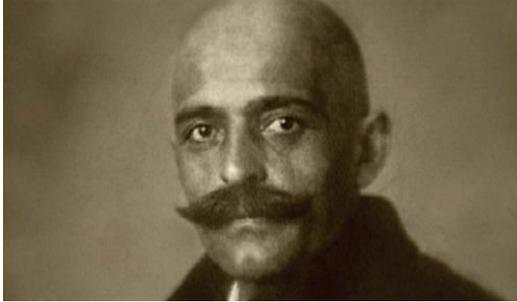
Mrs. Esperanza was saying how she arrived here from Italy after WW2 with her Father and how she saw the horror of war and that her beloved country's soil was soaked in blood from all of the murdering and horror she had witnessed. She went on to say that if America did not WAKE UP it would soon be the same here: more senseless killings by unconscious beings. She also added that she had no interest in being part of our group nor any group, that she had a husband and three children who needed her more than any of us needed her. She was not interested in being paid for her words of wisdom and reiterated that the only reason she came to this meeting was that she was certain that I would completely hear her words if spoken in front of my friends. Therefore, she was only here to tell Antonio "BE YOURSELF".

When my mental state returned to normal, more or less, I noticed that she had already left the room. I asked one of the other ladies present to check the ladies restroom and see if she was there, but it was no use; I knew someplace deep down inside myself that she had vanished: Mrs. Esperanza was gone, and though I searched everywhere for her, hoping to get some kind of explanation about what had happened, I never saw her again.

The Inner Circle

The following weekend a trip was arranged to the mountain, where the new inner group was to meet up with the 'Master.' It was said that he was a deeply knowledgeable and highly conscious individual. He could speak on the most widely divergent subjects, and he was going to teach us about the secrets of consciousness. I was intrigued. It was exactly what I was looking for. Now that I was given the Secret Elixir I was ready for any adventure and "BE YOURSELF" was echoing inside my very being. I felt magnetized once again knowing this was the Journey I was searching for.

Those of us that were invited were expected to read certain books before we went. I'd never heard of these books. One of them was entitled *In Search of the Miraculous*, and it was written by a Russian— P.D. Ouspensky. He in turn was a student of George Ivanovich Gurdjieff. I didn't know it at the time, but these ideas would later inspire a lot of growth in me. Gurdjieff would take me to another dimension and create a search in me that would bring me half way around the World and back again to face myself, so I could "BE MYSELF".



I later came to know more about the teachings and the life of this great man, Gurdjieff, who would become my First Real Spiritual Teacher. He was one of the most influential spiritual teachers of the twentieth century, even though he wasn't very well known, probably because in those days during the early 1900's, when he was alive, there were no iphones, nor Google, nor Twitter. As a young man Gurdjieff travelled the world widely, on expeditions in search of truth, and he went to great lengths in search of ancient spiritual teachings. Some of these journeys are described in his book *Meetings with Remarkable Men*.

It was rumored that Mr. Gurdjieff had gone to and studied with the same ancient Monasteries that Jesus Christ was claimed to have studied with. It is known that Jesus Christ disappeared from age 13 to 30 and it was during this time it was mentioned that Jesus traveled from one brotherhood monastery to another in Search of the Miraculous!

His quest led him to the secretive Sarmoung brotherhood, among many other teachers and remarkable individuals; and he developed a unique system of teaching. I could describe him as part guru, part mystic, part scientist, and part dance instructor. I wished I had got the chance to meet him, but sadly he died in 1949. Yet, I was soon to meet and to study with the so-called 1st-People. These are folks who actually lived and studied with Mr. Gurdjieff during the last years of his life.

The man we were going to meet on the mountain was supposedly one of Gurdjieff's students, and he claimed to be in possession of similar spiritual understanding and charisma. Like Ouspensky, he was supposed to teach us about the system called "The Fourth Way."

I didn't read as much of the material I was supposed to because I found the books difficult to digest at the time. They seemed interesting enough, but way too complicated. The book by Gurdjieff's student, though, was different. *In Search of the Miraculous* had a profound effect on me, and it opened my eyes to a new world. I realized that my views of religion, Catholicism in particular, and spirituality were completely inadequate, and his ideas were ringing the bells, somewhere deep inside my psyche. The one book that held my complete interest was written by Fritz Peters, "Boyhood with Gurdjieff". It was this book that peaked my interest the most and that pushed me more to where this journey was leading me to.

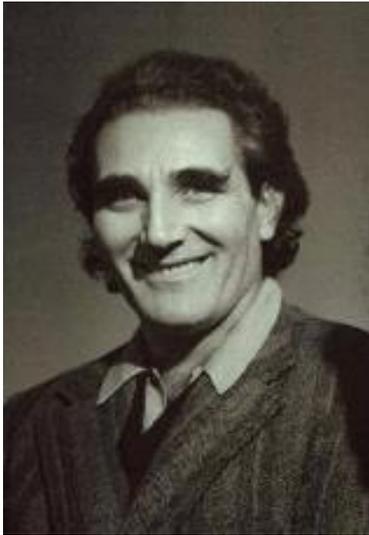
Instead of the usual religious dogma, which you have to believe without understanding, here were words that smacked of truth and first-hand knowledge of the ancient esoteric secrets. I will talk more about Gurdjieff later in my story – but for now let me describe what happened when I went to meet Alex Horn.

Anticipation grew all week while I went about my business at Elizabeth Arden's offices and salon. I was to join a car pool that was leaving from North Beach Park on Friday and I couldn't wait for it to happen. It felt like the start of an important journey – my personal quest for the truth, and the search for meaning and fulfilment. I wouldn't have missed that trip for the world, so when the departure time arrived, I was there, packed and ready to go. All the 'students' were divided up into cars. We set off, and we would soon be leaving San Francisco behind, heading up into the wine country in Napa Sonoma.

Long after the sun set we arrived at Louie Martini's winery and continued up a dirt road to the top of a hill, where there was a small settlement and a couple of buildings around. We were shown to our rooms, where we crashed out, exhausted after the long drive.

I was almost certain that what everybody was so excitingly talking about was going to be exactly what I had been searching for...

Alex Horn a Mystic or a Villain



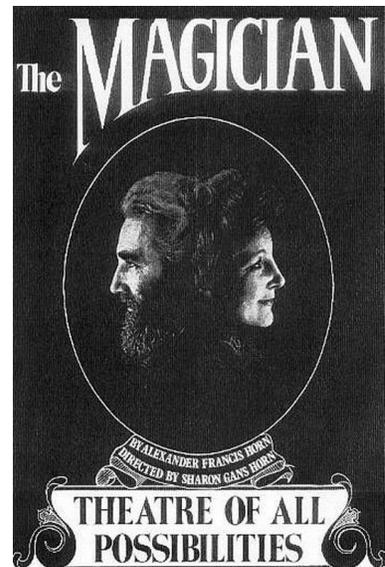
In the morning we assembled for breakfast, and Alex made his appearance.

He was a large man, very charismatic, almost theatrical in nature, and he was smiling from ear to ear as he strode towards us. He seemed totally in control of himself, and extremely self-assured. He appeared to be open and friendly, and intimidating at the same time. We all assumed that this was what it meant to have "presence" – as the leaders in the group had been explaining it to us all along. Alex got into his discussion right away. He told us that he had purchased the property we were on from the Martini vineyards, and he had a vision of what he was going to create there – and we were going to be a part of it. This made us all thrilled, of course.

He told us why we had asked us to come, and wanted to assure us that he had found the meaning of existence. He made all kinds of promises, including showing us the fountain of youth. He bragged about how he had traveled the world, and how he had met remarkable men who showed him esoteric secrets that had transformed him into a conscious man. The alarm bells should have been ringing in my mind already, but I was in awe of this man, and still not sure about what I had gotten myself into. I was going along with it, hoping it was all true. I had finally met my first Real Conscious Being and I was going to make the most out of all of it.

Alex was an incredibly persuasive man, and he had a way with words. He had been a playwright and an actor, he was well educated, and could quote anyone from Blake to Ibsen, to the Greek classics. He was a master manipulator and could switch from being totally intimidating to being as charming and mild as a daisy in a second. It threw you off balance and you never knew what to expect from him. He started going around the group of new arrivals, asking each of us "What is your *Question*?"

As each person replied with their own ideas, he would quickly shut them down, saying that their question wasn't a 'real question' after all, and he kept challenging us to find "*The Question*." His energy was so explosive, and so



dynamic, and when he gave you his full attention, it felt like all the doubts were dissolving in your mind. We were all very impressed, and there seemed to be something solid behind his teachings, which put all the silly thoughts in our minds out of reach. Everyone else seemed small and insignificant in his presence.

His system of teaching was very loosely based on what the true master, Gurdjieff, used to do. It was a combination of transferring head knowledge through explanations and arguments and transferring something deeper through hard physical work. I spent that weekend on the hilltop and went back again the following weekend for another visit, even though I was inwardly becoming skeptical about what Alex was teaching us. Despite my doubts, it was exhilarating to be there. We were told we were transforming grapes into wine and thus we were ourselves soon to become wine through our hard labor and insights. Alex kept promising us all that true Transformation would happen on his Hill Top Retreat Center.

We were loaded into trucks and taken to the fields where we were supposed to plant vines. It was explained to us that this work was "outer" work – and it was supposed to correspond with the work we would do on ourselves – the "real" work. These terms had been borrowed from teachings in The Fourth Way. It was like a living metaphor: as the vines would grow and mature, so would we. As the outer work would yield rewards in the form of wine, so the inner work would bring us the joys of heightened consciousness. That part made sense, and it was amazing to see it unfold.

Everyone was enthusiastic, and there was a buzz of energy that drove us to work harder than we had ever worked before. It was quite an experience. The sun was blistering, and the soil was rock hard, but we worked as if we were possessed. We amazed ourselves at how much we could lift, how long we could endure, and what we could accomplish. It was unlike anything we had experienced before. We felt superhuman. Alex oversaw the work and spurred us on to lift heavier and heavier rocks, and to work harder and harder. The energy was contagious, and we transcended ourselves, in a way. Alex and his wife, Anne Burrage, kept on telling us that we could do the impossible, and that we could do it easily. We couldn't believe what was happening. It was otherworldly.

Anne was overseeing work on a massive wall made out of stones that were collected from the surrounding area. We were lifting rocks that weighed more than a hundred pounds and carrying them around as if they were bags of groceries. We got no sleep at all, and just kept working, learning, listening to Alex, and then working some more. Alex and Anne were explaining that when you work on yourself consciously, you are able to unleash higher potentials in yourself, physically, mentally and emotionally – and from what we were experiencing, it seemed to be true. I felt incredibly, physically powerful during the whole weekend; but there was something about what they were saying that didn't sit right with me.

Alex introduced us to some ideas from the tradition of Gurdjieff, and some of what he said was absolutely true. A lot more of what he said was just the product of his imagination, and blatant lies. I came to see that his motives were not pure. He told us about his plans to set up a village in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, which was in preparation for the bleak future. He made prophecies about a coming world disaster, which would occur within the next two or three years. According to him, the economy was about to collapse, major cities would be destroyed, and the world as we knew it was coming to a catastrophic end.

Each student was expected to pay \$100 in cash to him directly, each weekend, and there was no receipt, of course. Even more alarming, he told us that if we were prepared to hand over all our worldly possessions to him, personally, we would be fast-tracked for development. That was the final straw for me! There was a lot of talk, and a lot of philosophy – and there was a unique camaraderie in the group. But Alex was a master manipulator, and it was becoming clearer to me. When he wasn't bullying or intimidating you, he was sweet talking, and he knew exactly which buttons to push to get control over people. He had a knack for spotting people's weaknesses, and relentlessly taking advantage – all in the name of 'inner work' on yourself, or some esoteric principle or another – whichever one suited him at the time.

My misgivings about this strange place, and these strange people started growing, and I began to doubt everything I was learning. If these were truly 'conscious beings,' then why did they need all that money? Certainly, anyone who was conscious could create more money out of thin air. As amazing as it was, there was something dark and ominous about that ranch. It was clearly a cult, and nobody could say for certain what Alex and his wife's true motives were. Perhaps they were sincere, or more likely they were con artists, but as my eyes began to open, I realized that this was not the place for me.

The tension bubbled up to the surface and, on my last night there, I confronted Alex on the question of money. I wanted to know why he got the sole right to decide everything, and why he got to own everything that the community was contributing towards. There was a hot debate on the subject and, as usual, Alex rose to the occasion theatrically. He told everyone that was listening that the fault was with me. I was clearly suffering from a lack of consciousness and that he, as the only truly conscious one among us, clearly had the right to do as he pleased. Completely disillusioned and with a feeling of disgust, I walked out, gathered my belongings, and hiked down the long dirt road alone. It was clear to me that I was leaving Alex, Anne and their ranch behind, and was heading back towards San Francisco feeling elated yet mystified on how to continue my *Search for the Miraculous*.

As I trudged towards the main road, I felt a kind of elation and let out a big sigh of relief. I had surely dodged a bullet – who knows where I would have ended up with those people. But even though I had seen through their illusions, there were certain ideas that I had come across with that were calling to me. What I had discovered about Gurdjieff, and his authentic teachings seemed like a bright light in comparison to what Alex and his wife had been saying. I later discovered that they had been loosely quoting from Gurdjieff and Ouspensky's teachings on the Fourth Way, and that they had invented all the rest to suit their own tastes.

Later, I would learn firsthand from Lord Pentland and Mr. John G Bennett that Alex Horn was truly a *Hassnamuissan*, a piece of shit burning itself out of the Universe, another one of Gurdjieff's made up words to explain the unexplainable. The words that had started me off on this journey still rang in my head: "BE YOURSELF." And I was determined to do exactly that. As bizarre as this 'cult' experience had been, it had shown me another important part of the puzzle – the need to work on myself, in my deepest nature. I had seen the possibilities of how unlocking the secrets of consciousness could revolutionize my life, and even if these people were charlatans, there was still some value in the whole experience, at least. More importantly, they had inadvertently introduced me to a true teacher – Gurdjieff, and I was determined to follow up on that lead.

I knew that my time in San Francisco was coming to an end, and that I had found the clues that I had needed to find. It still wasn't the final answer – in fact, I probably had more questions now than I did at the start – but I felt like I was progressing, learning, and discovering incredible new depths to life – and they were all right there, inside me. I sensed that I was on the right track. Truly the way OUT was IN. It was a comforting feeling and as I walked, I dusted off my regrets as if they were nothing and kept heading down the road. Upon reaching the main road, I felt a relief and knew that there was a new life ahead of me. I thought about hitchhiking back to the city, but realized there were no cars on this road. So, instead, I kept walking and sang along the way, while feeling a surge of relief because I had finally found my entrance point into my Journey and learned that I would never really know what I wanted as I was discovering understanding vs knowledge. Yet, I truly found out what I *Did Not Want* and that was anything more to do with Alex Horn and his fake, false teachings. It was a green light to get out, move forward and not to go any further on this road of cultism.

My first awakening

After what seemed hours of just walking in exhilaration, singing and feeling a true sense of what it meant to be truly happy, I suddenly heard a distant roar of a car engine heading towards me in the pitch-black road ahead. The car that was clearly going at a high speed whizzed by me at lightning speed, but then shortly came to a halt before reversing. I could hear the tires screeching as it reversed and headed back to where I was walking. The car stopped suddenly and let me get in. I got into the back seat and two young men sat in the front.

Exchanging brief introductions, it seemed that these two guys were quite stoned and headed to San Francisco and would be able to drop me off right at North Shore, which was about one block from where I lived. I sat there in silence in the back seat piecing all that had happened in just the past 3 days while the two new friends in the front talked all the way back to San Francisco as though I no longer existed. A few hours later we arrived in North Beach and they pulled to the side of the park to drop me off. I was elated to have gotten home so easily from that deserted road. This was truly a miracle! I offered them some money for the generosity of bringing me to my door, but they declined and simply wished me well. I wasn't going to just take "no" for an answer, so, I got my belongings together and then dropped a \$20 bill on the back seat in gratitude for being saved at the last hour.

Upon arriving home, I dropped down into bed and fell off into a deep sleep. It had almost been 72 hours since I had last slept, and all the mad happenings were spinning in my head as I slipped off to BE YOURSELF. I was back to square one, but with a new insight into Mr. Gurdifeff's Search of the Miraculous.