

FABERGE

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3 Success in the antiques business is not a story of hard work, perseverance and incremental
4 successes. It is rather a tale of timing luck and windfalls. It would have been impossible to
5 consciously prepare for and achieve success through hard work. My story starts on Lincoln
6 Road, a once fashionable shopping street on Miami Beach that by 1968 that was reduced to a run
7 down mall with struggling retail businesses and a refuge for the homeless. I was on leave from
8 Fairchild Camera working on master's degree in environmental engineering at the University of
9 Florida. My mother was managing the small apartment building that I had grown up in on Miami
10 Beach.

11 The building was sold, Mom lost her job, and didn't have any prospects. An opportunity
12 to buy out the inventory of a small antique shop came up. She had been a customer of the shop,
13 and it was now going out of business. The aging owner was afraid to be in the deteriorating
14 neighborhood near downtown Miami, didn't have the strength to move, and was ready to retire.

15 Financing the antique shop on Meridian Avenue near Lincoln Road seemed like a good
16 idea. The money came from savings accumulated while I worked for Fairchild. Mom found a
17 new location on Miami Beach, a tiny, former tailor's shop on Michigan Avenue near Lincoln
18 Road. It was barely four hundred square feet and had a small upstairs storage loft. The total
19 investment — including rent, deposits and inventory — amounted to less than a thousand dollars.
20 My mother was smart and creative. Almost everybody liked her. I hoped she might eke out a
21 living doing something she enjoyed.

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As an undergraduate at the University of Florida, five years before, I hunted pigs around Gainesville with my roommates. On one of those excursions we came across an abandoned barn full of milk cans where a dairy once existed. The change in technology from hand milking to milking machines rendered the cans obsolete. By the time I got to graduate school, decorating these now “antique” milk cans had become a craft industry, and unpainted ones sold in Miami for fifteen dollars apiece. Now peripherally involved in the antiques business, I remembered the barn full of milk cans, located its owner, and made a deal with him to purchase all the cans I wanted for a dollar and a half each. About a dozen fit in — and on top of — my Volvo on trips back to Miami Beach. A loft full of milk cans became the mainstay of the store’s inventory.

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Paul Wimbish, a local real estate broker and his wife Sissy, specialized in waterfront homes. His accountant had an office near Mom’s antiques store. One day on his way home from the accountant he passed the store. Concerned about the contents of a furnished house he bought, he dropped in.

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“I just bought a furnished house on North Bay Road and don’t know what to do with the contents. My wife’s brother is an antiques dealer in New Smyrna Beach. He came in to look at the stuff with his boyfriend. They offered us \$5,000. It sounded low.”

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My mother recognized him immediately. “What would you like me to do?”

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“Come take a look and let me know what you think.”

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It was an opportunity she couldn’t pass up. Wimbish was the premier real estate broker

43 on Miami Beach dealing in high end residential property. He wasn't much to look at with plaid
44 pants, a club blazer, ascot tied around his neck for dramatic effect, and a red toupee that never
45 quite sat right. The *pièce de résistance* was that he often wore mismatched shoes. A fancy shoe
46 store had closed on Lincoln Road. The inventory of shoes was sold off in bulk. The balance of
47 the furniture, fixtures, and shoes remaining on display were left behind and liquidated to the
48 public. Unfortunately, there were no pairs of display shoes. The shoes matching those on
49 display were shipped out in their boxes with the inventory. That didn't bother Wimbish. He
50 simply tried the display shoes on until he found two that fit. If they were the same color that was
51 good enough.

52 Most of Wimbish's clients were wealthy gentiles. Many of them took exception to
53 selling property in their neighborhoods to Jews. As a result, he had a reputation of being an anti-
54 Semite. I later learned that he cared as much about religion and race as he did sartorial splendor.

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56 Mom closed the store and followed Wimbish to the house on North Bay Road in her
57 broken down Studebaker Lark. They pulled up to a sprawling Mediterranean-style mansion in a
58 neighborhood where my mother had only dreamed of working. Dazzled by the contents, she
59 found herself surrounded by objects suitable for museums. Things that she had only fantasized
60 about.

61 Not one for small talk Wimbish asked "What do you think?"

62 Barely able to respond Mom replied "These are treasures."

63 "Can you sell'em?"

85 much as Wimbish's brother-in-law had offered for all the contents of the house, and enough to
86 guarantee that she would meet her promise to him.

87 "How about \$7,000?"

88 "Done!"

89 Other dealers drawn to the negotiation saw that they also might be able to buy some of
90 the things. An impromptu auction began. Before she could get back to Sylvia's booth
91 everything was sold. The show buzzed with stories of the treasures my mother sold during the
92 setup. That provenance alone was enough to command a premium price, and many of the items
93 resold, some several times. The Russian figurine never appeared again. Legend has it that it was
94 solid gold and made by Carl Faberge as a gift for the Tsar.

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96 Wimbish netted \$35,000, my mother bought a brand-new station wagon, and they became
97 lifelong friends. He used the North Bay Road house as a seasonal rental, and between tenants
98 restocked my mother's store. My mother lived off the proceeds for years and learned the
99 antiques business researching things as they came in. I finished my master's and went to work
100 for the State of California's Air Resources Board to manage research projects, with no clue about
101 what the future might hold back on Miami Beach.