



AN AGELESS LEGEND

By Ava Roosevelt with Matt Rich

Photographer @FadilBerisha

“Enjoy yourself, at no-one else's expense.”

- CARMEN DELL' OREFICE

A brief encounter with Carmen Dell'Orefice at Fadil Berisha's photo studio left us spellbound by her beauty, elegance and grace.

At age 93, she exudes strength and kindness. We watched her while she and Fadil created visual magic.... Carmen appeared on her first cover of Vogue America at just 15 years of age.

Decades of modeling in front of the camera and on the runways distinguished her undisputed skill: *Carmen is an utmost perfectionist - a pro.*

Sifting through the stunning covers that Carmen appeared on, it was hard to see her life as anything but perfect.

Born in New York City to parents of Italian and Hungarian descent, Carmen was exposed to their frequent break ups and reconciliations, often forcing her to live in foster homes or with other relatives.

Frequently malnourished, she famously roller-skated to assignments to save on bus fares. Appearing on covers of Vogue, Vanity Fair, W and Harper's Bazaar, Carmen's modest modeling fees could not sustain her and her mother. Despite being malnourished, however, she famously roller-skated to assignments, to save on bus fares.

Carmen was invited to join the famed Ford Modeling Agency in 1953, and modeled for Isaac Mizrahi's clothing line at Target, as well as Cho Cheng and Rolex. She was featured regularly in those and other advertising campaigns. Carmen's career, spanning eight decades, makes her the undisputed longest living working model in the history of fashion. Fueled by her zeal to survive, Carmen became a symbol of feminine courage and persistence, all along making it look effortless.

Resembling the familiar pattern of her parents' existence, Carmen became an unwilling victim of her own two husbands' financial exploitation, and an untimely stock market crash. In 1994, on the advice of her then-boyfriend Norman Levy, Carmen invested all she had left with Bernie Madoff. Unbeknownst to the super model, for twelve years Ruth and Bernie, along with Carmen and Norman, enjoyed a lavish life-style, financed by Madoff's Ponzi scheme. In December 2008, Carmen and the rest of the world were shocked to learn that all of the investors were bankrupted by the scheme, including her.

"For the second time in my life, I've lost all of my life's savings."

Carmen's career was resurrected through her friendship with iconic photographer Fadil Berisha, who brought her lucrative commercial campaigns. She was by then already in her 80's. In recognition of her immense contributions to the world of fashion, Carmen was awarded an honorary doctorate degree from the prestigious University of the Arts, London.

Ava and Matt: How did you manage being separated from your parents at such an early age?



Carmen:

Many children have substantial trauma growing up. I count myself fortunate that I was removed from the worst of it.

Ava and Matt: Did you lose trust in others as a result of childhood traumas?

Carmen:

Yes, but I learned how to withdraw, isolate myself from others and depend on myself solely. In retrospect, these experiences, as unpleasant as they were, made me strong. However, I still made some huge mistakes in placing trust in certain people.

Ava and Matt: Do you ever compare your trust issues to being financially insolvent, through no fault of your own doing?

Carmen:

Fortunately, even late in life money can be earned again. The loss of parental love, and the security it was supposed to provide, marked me for life.

Ava and Matt: In an industry addicted to youth and beauty, what measures have you taken to keep yourself vibrant and relevant for so many decades?

Carmen:

Unlike many of my modeling colleagues, getting older never phased me, but it requires discipline. I exercise every day. Stretching is a very big part of it. I love to eat and have an occasional drink, but all in moderation. It has been my life's doctrine. Staying away from negative individuals has helped me to stay healthy and inspired. Nobody lives life in a vacuum. Having great friends helped me along. I rejoice in being alive.

Ava and Matt: Did you know at 15, how the cover of Vogue shot by Erwin Blumenthal in 1946 would affect the rest of your life?



Carmen:

I could hardly believe it was me! Eventually, I became Erwin's favorite, and I credit him with changing my life. I can trace back so many of my life's successes to that cover.

Ava and Matt: We hear about cat fights between high-end models. Were you ever pitted against another Supermodel who caused problems?

Carmen:

As I became more established and respected for my work, my professional reputation shielded me from the envy and jealousy of other models. Remember, in order to survive, I learned early on to stay away from problems and people who create them; and there were many!

Ava and Matt: Your runway walk is iconic amongst all models and designers. How did you perfect it?

Carmen:

I faked it! Seriously, I did most of my work in front of the camera. The few runway assignments gave me lots of joy. I would sing a song in my head and dance it down the runway. I never practiced, it just happened.

Ava and Matt: If you had to do it all over again, what would you change?

Carmen:

Absolutely nothing! Fortunately, we live life forward, don't we?

Image expert Matt Rich was PR man for Donald Trump's Miss Universe.

Ava Roosevelt, published author of "The Racing Heart," is also a noted philanthropist & producer.

