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The Life of Nonny Gardner Cangelosi, First Wife of Irving Penn

Suppose you wanted to tell a story. You could set it in England, where many childhood stories are set. The main character is a beautiful young girl with wavy red hair, whose parents have separated and sent her to live with grandparents and then to a boarding school. She thrives there, surrounded by a community of writers, artists and thinkers, and a rich American heiress in charge. As the story continues, the girl earns a scholarship from the school and realizes her dream to go to America to study art. She enters college in Philadelphia. Now we get to the boy-meets-girl part. Our young lady meets a talented American student and they fall in love.

After graduation, the scene moves to New York and a backdrop of the thriving surrealist and modern art scene. The couple gets married. The young lady works as a docent in the Museum of Modern Art and the husband works as the art director for Saks Fifth Avenue. They decide to go live in Mexico for a while and return a year later, as the war in Europe heats up.

Things begin to fall apart. They divorce, and the husband goes to Europe to drive an ambulance. He later becomes an internationally famous photographer. The young lady joins the war effort, working in the Brooklyn Navy Yard for the Sperry Company, drafting isometric diagrams for machinery assembly. She meets a handsome engineer and they marry and move to Long Island, where they live and raise a family.

Their four children grow up, and 50 years later, they are cleaning out their childhood home after their parents have died. They discover an album of photographs of their mother at art school and then on a trip to Mexico. Something about the glamorous shots and interesting poses of those photographs makes them wonder who was behind the lens. They search for clues and discover his identity. The photographer was Irving Penn. The album is donated to the Art Institute of Chicago. The children are awed by this discovery, and by the fact that all these years they never knew the story of the first marriage of their mother—my mother.

Nonny Gardner was born on August 7, 1914. Her name comes from Shakespeare's "Much Ado about Nothing":

Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more,
Men were deceivers ever,
One foot in sea and one on shore,
To one thing constant never.
Then sigh not so, but let them go,
And be you blithe and bonny,
Converting all your sounds of woe
Into Hey, nonny nonny.

The story she told us was that her father, Rex Gardner, was reading the play to her mother, Eva Birch, while they were preparing for the birth of their first child. This was in England at the start of World War I. Rex was an architect and craftsman and a conscientious objector, who spent time in jail because of his beliefs. Mom got from him her red hair, fiery spirit and love of art and nature. Eva was a gentle and loving woman. At the end of the war, they lived in a thatched cottage, where her brother, Rex, was born, and she felt the comfort and security of a family. That ended in 1920, when her parents separated. Her mother could not support two children alone, and so their father assumed responsibility for them. His new wife, however, did not want to share that responsibility.

Nonny grew up mostly at her grandparents' house in Letchworth Garden City, north of London. The first "Garden City" in England was in the forefront of an effort at town planning in order to bring parks and fresh air to England as the population grew and towns got bigger. It had a reputation as a city of "cranks"; George Bernard Shaw lived near there. Mom was given a proper English education—her vocabulary made her impossible to beat at "Scrabble." She became a dancer and a gymnast. Pictures of her at age 12 show her doing full splits and back bends. Mom learned to think independently and to take risks, but she also yearned for more of a normal childhood and for stability. The tension this created in her became the source of both her triumphs and her struggles throughout her life.

Nonny enrolled as a student in Dartington Hall, in Totnes, Devon, near where both her parents lived. Her father was hired by the owners of the school, Dorothy Whitney and her second husband, Leonard Elmhirst, to help restore a manor

property from the Middle Ages. Whitney wanted to establish a progressive school of the arts there. My mother danced, studied theater, designed costumes, painted, and met a variety of interesting people—artists, dancers, thinkers and writers, with a variety of views on life, politics, and philosophy. She proved herself intelligent, energetic and capable. For these qualities, she was given a scholarship to study art in America at the Philadelphia Museum School of Industrial Art. After crossing the ocean in the summer of 1933, and then crossing America by plane, train, and auto with her school friends, Beatrice Straight (daughter of Dorothy Whitney and her first husband) and Bridget D'Oyly Carte and Bethene Miller (dance students at Dartington Hall), to California, and then back to the East Coast, she enrolled at PMSIA.

Nonny took courses in photography, costume design, theater, and other areas, enlarging her artistic vision and learning and perfecting her artistic skills. She gave up dancing because she didn't have the "right" body. She was too short, but she never lost her interest in dance. Years later I found among her possessions two programs, from the tour of the Ballets Russes to the US in the 1930s. During the summers she went off to work in a theater program at Western Reserve University in Cleveland. In the summer of 1940, she visited the Michael Chekhov Theater School in Ridgefield, Connecticut. The Chekhov School had been established first at Dartington Hall, but moved to Connecticut in 1938 as the threat of war grew in Europe. She already had many friends there.

Her years in Philadelphia were busy and productive. She was surrounded by people with the talent and ability to make things happen. It was a time when Surrealism was making its controversial entrance and engaging the public's imagination. Perhaps it is not surprising that she connected her interest in Shakespeare and Surrealism when she wrote and designed the costumes for the play "Shakespeare Paranoically Speaking", which was performed at the annual Alumni Ball of the Philadelphia Museum School of Industrial Art to raise money for the Alumni Association. She was quoted in an article from the *Conshohocken Recorder*, Conshohocken, PA, on March 15, 1937:

"If you were to come as Nero in conventional Roman toga and with a fiddle—that would hardly be Surrealistic. But come in the same toga, carrying but half a fiddle, and with a belt of broiled crabs strung on a chain, with multicolored shoes, and perhaps a lamb chop or two thrown over your shoulder, and you will feel at home."

While at PMSIA, she met fellow student Irving Penn. They both studied photography with Alexey Brodovich, and Penn, of course, showed great talent, although he was also interested in painting at that time. Their relationship grew in their student days and continued after graduation. My mother kept many of the photographs of herself taken by him and by the other students of photography. As the costume designer for the student production at the Alumni Ball, her albums contain dozens of photographs of herself and others modeling her costume creations.

After school they lived in New York City. Nonny worked as a docent at the Museum of Modern Art. At that time, it was moving to its new building on 53rd Street. She received an invitation (which she kept—she kept everything!) to the opening ceremonies. On occasion, Irving Penn's brother, Arthur, came up from Philadelphia to visit them in New York City. They took him around to movies, theater, museums, etc., and introduced him to their friends. Arthur Penn grew up to become a well-known movie and TV director (his works include "The Miracle Worker", "Bonnie and Clyde", etc.) Arthur is very complimentary of her as a "take-charge" type of person. Reflecting on those times he said, in his later years:

"Irving taught me everything," Arthur muses. "He taught me not to spit on the street (what did I know? I was a street kid; it's what you did). At that time, he was going with a terrific woman named Nonny, whom he would later marry, who sort of took me under her wing." Nonny had studied costume design at England's historic Dartington Hall and insisted on bringing Arthur to museums where modern art was making its controversial debut. "It was nuts to me," Penn now blushes, adding, "I was just sixteen." With Irving and Nonny living together, it allowed Arthur to avoid his father, preferring his brother and Nonny's Bohemian crowd.

"I was sort of funny and saucy and snotty," he remembers, "but not with them. It was a nice experience to suddenly be in a kind of community, albeit that they were five or six years older than I was." Together they explored the rapidly changing American creative scene, including WPA [Works Progress Administration] productions of "One Third of a Nation" and the cautionary anti-venereal disease play "Spirochete". Seeing theater at professional levels further nudged Arthur in that direction." (Arthur Penn: American Director, Nat Segaloff, 2010).

They were married in New York City in 1940. Soon after, they took off on a new adventure—a trip to Mexico, taking photos along the way. They travelled by train to Washington, DC, and through the South to New Orleans. The photos then jump to shots of Mexico and the local people and markets. There are also several still-life shots, with plants and animals. Nonny appears in many of the shots, sometimes as the subject and sometimes camouflaged among the dense vegetation in the gardens. In one shot she holds 2 baby chicks—on her head!

My mother had lots of stories to tell about that year, although none of them included the fact that she was married to Irving Penn. She brought back lots of things: skirts, painted toys, and a wooden painted box bought in the market. The vendor told her it was a 300 year old jewelry box from Spain, but we really don't know for sure. She also brought back a taste for tropical fruits and Mexican food, although mangos weren't easy to find at the local Long Island supermarket.

They came back to America as the threat of war in Europe grew. Penn's father had fallen very ill. Penn destroyed all his paintings before leaving Mexico. His future would be in photography. Their paths began to diverge. Soon after, they separated and divorced. Rejected by the army, Penn wanted to go to Europe to drive an ambulance in Italy. Nonny found a job with the Sperry Company, drafting isometric diagrams for machinery assembly. She worked in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. My father, John Cangelosi, an aerospace engineer and the son of immigrants from Sicily, was also working at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, designing naval aircraft. They fell in love and married in 1944. My mother left New York City and the life she had been living there.

They moved to East Northport, Long Island, and raised four children. It was only 50 miles away, but she left behind her career and her friends and turned her energy towards having a family, something she had always wanted. For us, it was a typical 1950s suburban childhood. But it was different in some aspects. Our childhoods were filled with the intensity of our mother's personality and her interests. She worked very hard, she cared a lot; it meant so much to her to be a mother. She gave us a love of music, from Beethoven to the Beatles; an appreciation of wacky British humor—I'm sure we all remember her collapsed in laughter on her couch over "Monty Python" or "Fawlty Towers"; an appreciation for the birds she always fed in our garden; a respect for cactus—she grew hundreds from seed for the Northport High School Mexican Fiesta; and a love of play acting and dress-up. Occasionally, she showed us photographs of her family

in England; and then there were those pictures of her in one of her albums, looking like a glamorous movie star. Where did she get those?

She did everything with passion—like the eight giant tanks of tropical fish that inhabited our dining room for a few years. I'm sure we were the only kids in the neighborhood in the 1950's who had Hawaiian chicken, artichokes or tacos for dinner. Our yard was the one filled with children—she cared less about the grass than other mothers did. She planned the most elaborate birthday parties in the neighborhood, including pony rides in the front yard; a “Come dressed as your mother or father” party; a carnival, with multiple games and a fortune teller (my older sister, Nonny). In our teenage years, she decorated the basement as the Peppermint Lounge.

My mom didn't talk about her marriage to Irving Penn. She told her eldest daughter, Nonny, that she had been married once before but didn't really want to say much about it. Nonny eventually told my brother, my younger sister and me when we were all adults and on our own. It was one of those things which we just didn't feel comfortable asking for details about, and she never brought it up. We eventually figured it out.

When my dad was in the nursing home in 1999, at the end of his life, he was rambling on one day when I was visiting. He mentioned something about my mom and "Penn" and then went on to talk about other things. I went through some of my mom's photos and papers and found a program from “Shakespeare Paranoically Speaking” which had her name on it and Irving Penn's name as well, so we had a clue. But my mom was never mentioned in any biography or other information about Penn, so we really had questions in our mind about all this.

We occasionally tried to find things on the Internet, but nothing at all came up until September 2012, when the pages from the Arthur Penn biography, by Nat Segaloff, published in 2010, turned up on the computer (discovered by my brother-in-law during a moment of web-surfing).

I contacted the author and we talked about my mom. He didn't know much about her background, so I filled him in. He was very interested in hearing her story. He contacted the former head of the photography department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Maria Hambourg, who had curated shows of Penn's photographs, and she got in touch with me. She was in the process of writing a book about Irving Penn's work after the War. We got together and I showed her

my mother's album with the photos taken on their trip to Mexico. There were spaces in the album where some photos had been removed. Were they shots of Penn? Many of the photos were recognizable as examples of Penn's particular style.

The albums (she made three other albums with photographs of England and her travels across country and her years in Philadelphia and New York City) and a box of photo negatives, letters from her family, and other memorabilia were stored in the attic of our home in East Northport for 50 years. After my parents moved to a nursing home, we had to deal with the contents of the house. We knew there were lots of photographs and letters that were stored away, but as we pulled all the boxes and suitcases out of the closet, it was a bit overwhelming. There were many more boxes with papers and objects that we had never seen, or didn't remember seeing.

My sister Nonny stored almost everything in the basement of her house. When she downsized to an apartment, I took everything and stashed it in closets and bureaus, under beds, anywhere I could find space. I retired from my job at the United Nations in September 2010, and a couple of years later, after finding the reference in Nat Segaloff's book online, I took off on my search for the story behind the photographs in the album of her trip to Mexico. The search led me to the Irving Penn Foundation in New York, where I received confirmation of the identity of the man behind the lens, and went on to learn more about my mother's life. The album from this trip was given the name "The Nonny Gardner Album of Photographs by Irving Penn from the Collection of Nonny Gardner" by the appraiser. We donated it to the Art Institute of Chicago, which holds the archives and work of Irving Penn.

My mother lived such an interesting life, adapting her identity as she went along. She was a child of a broken home, raised by grandparents born in the Victorian era; a young dancer and student at a "progressive" school; a teenager who left her family and country and traveled to the United States during the Depression to study art, as Surrealism and modern art were changing established views; the wife of Irving Penn, and a "big sister" to Arthur Penn; a docent at the Museum of Modern Art; an artist trained in drawing and design, joining the war effort; and for over fifty years, a wife and mother in East Northport, Long Island. Her journey was not easy, but out of crisis she seized the opportunity to create a new and more fulfilling path throughout her life. She made us laugh; she made us cry. We will always miss her.

NONNY GARDNER

Timeline

1914: Born August 7, 1914, Leicester, England.

1920: Parents (Eva Birch and Rex W. Gardner) separate. Sent to live with grandparents in Letchworth Garden City. Visits parents in Devon on holidays and in the summer. Sees brother, Rex Gardner, on these occasions.

1929-1932 (approximate): Student at Dartington Hall, a progressive school of the arts in Devon, founded by Dorothy Whitney and her second husband, Leonard Elmhirst. Nonny's father, Rex W. Gardner, is an architect working on the restoration of Dartington Hall. She receives a scholarship from Dartington Hall and Dorothy Whitney to study art in the US.

1932: Takes courses at the Heatherley School of Fine Art, London.

1933: Arrives in New York. During the summer, she travels across the US with Beatrice Straight (Dartington Hall student and daughter of Dorothy W. S. Elmhirst), and Bridget D'Oyly Carte and Bethene Miller (dance students at D. Hall).

1933-1937: Attends the Philadelphia Museum School of Industrial Art. As a student, designs costumes for the Surrealist Ball, and writes script and oversees production of "Shakespeare Paranoically Speaking." Fellow student Irving Penn is also involved in this production.

1935, 1936 (approximate): Attends summer theater programs at Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio.

1937: Graduates from the Philadelphia Museum School of Industrial Art. Takes post-graduate courses at PMSIA, 1938.

1938 (summer): Takes trip to Devon, England, to visit family.

1939 (spring): Works as a docent at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Invited to the opening of the new MoMA building on May 10, 1939.

1940 (summer): During the summer visits the Michael Chekhov Theater, Ridgefield, Connecticut. Originally located at Dartington Hall, the Chekhov Theater moves to Connecticut during World War II.

October 1940: Marries Irving Penn in New York City.

1941-1942 (approximate): Travels with Penn to Coyoacan, Mexico; they stay in the house of Mrs. Georgia Etter. Upon return to New York, they separate and are divorced in 1943.

1943: Trains to work for the war effort at Sperry Gyroscope Co., in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, creating isometric drawings for machine assembly.

1944: Marries John Cangelosi, aeronautical engineer.

1945, 1946, 1950, 1954: Children born. Lives in East Northport, Long Island, NY.

1998: Buried in Lincoln Cemetery, Massachusetts.