



# PICTURING HELENA

Helena Christensen, Danish supermodel and photographer, has transformed what could have been a short-lived appearance on the catwalk into a successful career still in motion. For someone not that keen on becoming a model in the first place, she has done pretty well and has never been busier. Here, in a series of mental snapshots of the past, she looks back on a job that turned into a life.

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I remember running around as a child in the streets of Lima, Peru, with my sister and a bunch of local kids. My parents would give us some small change so we could buy ourselves that most Peruvian of street foods, *anticuchos*; beef heart, marinated, skewered, and seared on the grill. We had strawberry smoothies to go, turning the whole thing into a wild combination of flavours. The taste to this day reminds me of my childhood and it triggered an early fondness of food in me. Maybe it comes from growing up with a Peruvian mother who would make the most wonderful dishes, making the whole house smell of food. In retrospect, I believe that's the reason I enjoy food so much and why I usually take that pleasure to a whole new level. I will turn any meal into a sensorial experience, even if it's just a bowl of oatmeal with sugar and milk.

I was born in Amager, a district in central Copenhagen, and grew up in a one-bedroom flat on a side-street to the busy thoroughfare *Amagerbrogade*. Later on my dad, who is an avid horse-race gambler, got lucky with a bet, and we moved to a little terrace house with a garden. I don't remember thinking that being in a one-bedroom apartment with my sister, parents, and later my aunt, who lived with us for many years, felt cramped, on the contrary, when I look back on living in that place, there seemed to be so much space, particularly in my dad's big, red leather chair. My mom worked in the financial department of an airline company, my dad worked as a typographer. One of the perks of having a mom in the airline industry was cheap tickets. We made the most of those discounts and would visit relatives in Peru and Miami and spend holidays in Thailand. I remember always being dressed up very elegantly for those flights. We would board the flight

sense of compassion and thus receive more money from pedestrians. Stories like that stuck in my head, hard as they were to fathom when you are raised in a loving family. I still remember my wonder when we visited wealthy friends of my parents in Lima, who had seven phones in their home. Seven phones! For me, at that age, that was the height of opulence. The fact they also had butlers, luxury cars, and a huge mansion wasn't what impressed me. It was those multiple phones.

I have lived in NYC most of my adult life, but I still feel very Danish. Maybe even more so now, since living abroad makes you appreciate your origins. Danes are surrounded by nature, by sea and forests, and we have adapted to long dark winters that invariably have an impact on our mentality. But the older I get, the more I also feel my Peruvian roots pull me in a different direction. At this point I think like I could actually live there. That's a new sensation to me, since I never felt I could live anywhere but New York. I've returned to Peru a lot in recent years, with Oxfam, an organization that I'm a global ambassador for and travel the world with in order to document the disastrous effects of climate changes, and those trips have obviously given me a completely different perspective on Peru. I recently went there with my mom and it was just so beautiful, experiencing her emotions as she was visiting her native country for the first time in 13 years. She's Latin, obviously, so she has this inner fire burning that attracts people. She'll walk into a room and talk to anyone and everyone will want to talk to her in turn. My dad, on the other hand, is what my boyfriend refers to as 'a real cool cat': Easy-going and not much of a talker, until he all of a sudden makes one of his ironic, dry-wit remarks that makes people laugh out loud. I hope I'm a little bit of both.

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only if there were seats available and would be entering at the last minute. Sometimes it meant sitting in Business Class, sometimes it meant taking different flights: My mom and I in one, my sister and my dad in another. It was pretty fantastic to travel so much – and pretty stressful at the same time.

Those trips shaped my early horizons. There's something profound about seeing the world as child. I've realized those experiences helped me cope with a lot of issues later in life. In many ways, my childhood was a normal, happy Danish childhood, but it also had a lot of outside influence given my mother's Peruvian origins. My mom would only speak Spanish to me, and via American relatives my sister and I also learned English from a very early age. Being trilingual added a third dimension to those childhood trips, since I was able to speak with people in the countries we visited and learn so many personal things about them and their culture.

It had a huge impact on me witnessing poverty in countries such as my mother's home country Peru. Seeing that kind of misery at such a young age is different from a grownup's perspective. As a child you take in all those impressions in their most naked manifestation with no mental reservation or prejudice. I was shocked by the huge social inequality between the Peruvian upper and lower classes. I remember seeing young mothers with their sick new-born babies, begging for money in the streets and I recall horror stories about desperate parents breaking their children's limbs in order to appeal to people's

As much as I admire Danish way of life, we have some shortcomings. Denmark is normally seen as a perfect society with a high quality of living, but one thing that makes me frustrated is the way we treat our senior citizens. I have a 98-year old grandmother and I often hear stories about our public health care system that seriously anger me. Doctors, nurses, and home care-providers are overwhelmed with work. It's tragic that we aren't able to give a lot of our elders a more dignified existence. My grandmother was born during World War 1, lived through World War 2, and remembers everything. She knows things that Wikipedia can't ever match. We are wasting tremendous resources of human stories, of heart and soul, by neglecting our elders. We can learn from Latin-American countries, where older generations are revered in a very different way, and where families live together and help each other.

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Helena Christensen, 45, started modelling as a child and teenager before becoming one of the fashion world darlings, heralding the era of the supermodel along with the likes of Naomi Campbell, Cindy Crawford, and Linda Evangelista. In recent years she has worked on campaigns for brands including Reebok and Triumph, while launching collaborations in her capacity as a model, photographer, and designer with underground art projects and publications.

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in a photo-shoot you go through all different kind of emotions, it almost feels like being in a silent movie. I think the superficiality that might exist in the business made it easier for me to not be distressed by the fact that I was in a line of work where people judge you by appearances. It was never a big deal to me whether I was accepted in the industry or not. I'm also very much aware of my

I'd say that the biggest challenge for me embarking on a modeling career was the loneliness on the road and the responsibility of travelling without anyone looking out for you. I was barely 20, a stage in life where your friends are extremely important, and all of a sudden I would find myself in a strange location in Hong Kong by myself, sometimes even stranded for hours on end in an airport with no one picking me up.

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grounded, loving, and disciplined Danish upbringing having a lot to do with this. I basically said to myself 'I'll give this opportunity a couple of weeks'. If it didn't pan out, I'd move right on. A couple of weeks definitely aren't enough to make it in any business, but that's basically how little enthusiasm and ambition I felt for this career in the beginning. It was probably also a way of protecting myself. But then I had the incredibly good fortune of meeting and working with legendary photographers from the very beginning. I am extremely grateful for that. It allowed me to experience this career on a surreal level I could've never imagined. Maybe that's why I have a hard time criticizing the industry. I had so many meaningful and profound experiences. The interesting people you meet, the travels you do, the historical places you visit. I remember once doing a shoot in a Russian church as a 22-year-old, a place that had never been opened to the public, and just being in awe of the whole experience. It was wild, bizarre, and wonderful. That's why, today, I see my career as an education.

This was before cell phones. There was no easy way of coping with that at first, but I learned that crying your eyes out for a while usually helps. Then you clear your mind, get the anxiety out and start thinking constructively...or, someone takes pity on you and helps you out! The upside? You get very focused, very responsible, and very proactive, very fast.

Looking back, I met so many interesting people. When you have conversations with people like Bill Clinton or Robert de Niro, you can't help but to feel a little impressed and think to yourself, 'How cool is this?!' But the only time I've actually felt star struck was when I met Lucian Freud. I'm a huge admirer of his work. After all, my 15-year-old son Mingus' middle name is Lucian, inspired by him. I was at a restaurant and sat at the table next to Mr. Freud. All evening I tried mobilizing the courage to approach him, but in the end I just couldn't do it. Sadly, two weeks later he passed away. I've regretted ever since not having shaken his hand, but I just didn't know how to express my admiration to him. His talent was simply overwhelming.

