



Photography by Danilo Scarpati

H E L E N

In Milan, learning how to problem solve with a professional. Words by Laura Rysman

Outside the hallowed La Scala opera hall, the sidewalks are jammed with fashionistas vamping between runway shows. In Milan, fashion week manifests itself on the streets. Inside a bustling café, among the more distinguished representatives of the dressed-up throng, there's a young man in a gold pillbox hat strung with shoulder-length gold beads and a woman in a Gucci fur coat and rainbow-colored Chullo hat. Most diners are staring keenly at a more magnetic presence, however: a woman in a simple oversized cardigan and a high turban, holding court at the far edge of the black marble bar.

Admired for her acumen as well as for her eccentric headwear, Helen Nonini first made a name for herself as a professional problem solver for the exceedingly affluent, answering anxious calls to locate everything from a yoga instructor for dogs to a misplaced diamond-encrusted G-string. Though she is not famous, she is very recognizable, especially since becoming one of the ambassadors of a recent ad campaign for Pomellato jewelry. Vaulting from her reputation as a guru of taste and a master of missions impossible, she now heads her own independent agency for brand strategy.

Today, Nonini has met two friends and collaborators for coffee before we're scheduled to spend the afternoon together. To her right is the photographer Brigitte Niedermair, a collaborator on Nonini's art fabric project for the Dedar textile brand, while to her left sits *Corriere della Sera*'s art director, Gianluigi Colin.

"Helen is a woman of immense talents and intelligence," Colin pronounces theatrically over the clanging of porcelain demitasses from behind the coffee counter. "I used to have a hard time understanding clearly what she does, but now I get it. One could say that she is an anthropologist of communication."

For years, Nonini was a top steward at the luxury concierge service Quintessentially, a position she jokingly describes as being a "social assistant to bored rich people." She built her reputation as a problem solver there, through her psychological study of human nature, her talent for emotional manipulation (in the service of keeping people happy),



Left: Helen wears a top and trousers by Krizia and a turtleneck by COS. Right: She wears a silk tunic by Marco Zanini and a coat by COS. All turbans by Altalen, and all jewelry by Pomellato.

Styling: Carola Bianchi, Makeup: Giovanni Iovine



Helen wears a jacket, skirt, silk stockings and boots by Fendi.





and her almost maniacal research into the tastes and preferences of not only the people she served, but also their assistants as well as hotel staff, restaurant personnel, and anyone else who could help her obtain what she needed to satisfy her clients.

“You have to play to the six-year-old in every adult,” she says, as she clinks her espresso cup into its dish and hands each of her friends a foil-wrapped chocolate. Her voice is husky and fast-paced as she glides over thoughts. “What makes them feel pampered, cared for, spoiled? Someone who spends 300,000 euros in a shop isn’t impressed by fancy gifts—they’d prefer to have the exact song they want to hear come on the stereo when they step into their Ferrari, without having to think about it.” And the way to find out someone’s favorite song, apparently, is to pander to their assistants—Nonini’s source for priceless details. “It’s always a question of ego. When you nourish the ego of others—and you’re not too heavy-handed about it—people feel appreciated, so they’ll help you.”

She is an expert in the game of behavior, and that game often involved convincing clients that the real-world substitution she was actually able to find was no less valuable than the impossible thing they desired. Want to do aerobics with Madonna? That proved too tough even for Nonini’s wiles. Instead, that client received stage-side box seats and an autographed album.

“In a Willy Wonka world, you don’t try to grasp at logic,” says Nonini. “You just look for solutions.” She sits dancer-straight on her high stool, long-necked and almond-eyed, the crown of her red and black leaf print turban extending her silhouette. “If someone says they need a pair of pigeons in Venice, I don’t ask why. I just ask what gender.”

Her parsing of human desires is a sixth sense she developed in a childhood of enduring outsiderdom. Nonini was born in Egypt with what she describes as four ethnicities in her blood—Sunni Iranian and Egyptian Shiite from her mother’s side, and Italian from the diverse regions of Friuli and the Valtellina on her father’s side. She found herself in a new school and a new country every three months, moving for her father’s construction projects until the family settled in the Valtellina when she was 12. “In Egypt, I’m not an Egyptian. In Italy, I’m not an Italian. In Iran, I’m not an Iranian,” Nonini says, leaning an elbow among the accumulating coffee cups. “I’m always different, always peering out

at things from an angle. It’s obvious that it changes your perspective.” One becomes, above all, an observer of humanity.

As a teen in her first summer job, Nonini was already taking advantage of her zealous monitoring of others to get ahead. Working at a roadside pizza shop for tips, she kept detailed notes on the families that made regular pit stops at the restaurant; like a spy, she recorded the make of their cars, their license plate numbers, and their typical pizza orders. When she recognized a familiar car pulling up in the parking lot, she would place their order before the family had even walked in the door—anticipating desires, seeking to please customers, studying and obsessively recording the behavior of others at an age when most of us are deliriously self-centered.

“Be a lawyer,” Nonini’s mother commanded her, “or be a lawyer.” But Nonini preferred sociology, was financially cut off by her parents and ended up in a desperate search for a way to support herself. She stumbled upon a well-paid position in finance, where she honed the skills of charm: sending secretaries presents and making herself known to their bosses by harnessing a database of the personal information (favorite music, wife’s favorite music, children’s names, birthdays) she extracted from them.

“For all those men at Morgan Stanley and Goldman Sachs, I was irrelevant because I was young, I was a woman, and I was trying to sell services to them,” Nonini says. But she created what was essentially an early version of what she would go on to do at Quintessentially—playing to the egos of wealthy and powerful clients, and becoming indispensable through her studied research. “Working as a waiter is the smartest training someone can do for marketing,” she says. But her past includes even more diverse professions: a year in India after her finance phase working with a charity opening schools, and, after Quintessentially, authoring a semi-fictional novel about the life of a problem solver.

Niedermair and Colin having departed, Nonini and I slide off our bar stools and head to the two-seater Smart car she has for the day. “People see me as a socialite—as someone who spends a lot of time at parties and grooming myself in front of the mirror.” She maneuvers our diminutive car into traffic. “It’s true I have over a hundred turbans,” she confides, “But otherwise I’m a minimalist.”

“If someone says they need a pair of pigeons in Venice, I don’t ask why. I just ask what gender.”

Helen wears a dress by Kenzo, turban by Altalen and ring by Pomellato.

A plastic crocodile and chicken arancini (at 3:00 a.m.) are among the more unusual items Helen was asked to source during her time as a professional problem solver.



We both need to be at the Missoni runway show in an hour. But first, to pick up her headwear for the evening, there’s a visit to Altalen, the artisan milliner boutique that has been custom-creating Nonini’s turbans since she began sporting them in 2012. Though she resists the burden of image, she acknowledges the public power it exerts. “When my photograph comes out in magazines, it does two things: It tells people who’ve lost their hair that wearing a turban can be considered cool, but it also reassures the businesses I work with that I’m an important person—that I’m noteworthy.” She shrugs. “That’s what convinces people in the fashion world.”

We’re driving through the streets of Milan’s Montena­poleone district, past Armani and Versace and Bulgari and all the gleaming Italian luxury shops. “I’m very practical really,” she says, pointing at her low-heeled black ankle boots on the car pedals. “I wear flats and jeans. I might wear some heels in the evening but I’m still very covered up and comfy.” Under her thick turban, her hair is short. On a sunless, blustery afternoon, such practicality on the sidewalks is hard to find. There are bare legs and bare midriffs; a coatless woman in a short red dress tottering in heels; a huddle of friends standing with open jackets propped on their shoulders.

Nonini sighs, shifting down a gear as we hit congestion. “I don’t need to be seductive. I need to go to meetings, have ideas, and get paid for them. Either I’m going to be valued because of what I say or because I have a nice ass—it can’t be both.” Her voice is quickening; she slaps the steering wheel. “If you conceive of yourself as an object and you behave like an object, then you’re going to get treated like an object.”

We pass a tram whose cars are covered in brightly colored ads for Hogan. “I did that,” she says, pointing and suddenly cheerful. In 2015, she launched her H. Edge agency, specializing in brand experience and brand image. With her all-female team (“I have nothing against men, it just happened like that”), she’s recently repositioned fashion brands including Hogan, Krizia and Faye. And she’s brought her magic to corporations looking for her intuitive strategies—to Audi, to the Juventus soccer franchise, and to the Fidenza Village outlet complex, which she turned into a Las Vegas-like show for Christmas and which, at her behest, became pet-friendly this spring.

“To be a free thinker is truly the greatest luxury.”



Left: Helen wears a suit by Krizia, a turban by Altalen and rings by Pomellato. Above: She wears a dress by Erika Cavallini and a turban by Altalen.



Left: Helen wears a top and skirt by Gabriele Colangelo, shoes by Céline, turban by Altalen and jewelry from Pomellato.

Nonini does not maintain an office. Preferring the vitality of public places, she conducts her daily research in the 19th-century library at Milan's Philological Society and her meetings at the café of the city's Triennale design museum. She also involves herself with sponsoring the arts so that she can be credible, she says, when persuading brands to do the same as part of her plan for them. "Art is much more relevant in our daily lives, and for these brands, than people imagine," she says.

Nonini's agency appears to be a world apart from the quixotic treasure hunts of her problem-solving days, but pragmatically it's another opportunity to capitalize on her wide-ranging knowledge, her intricate web of contacts, and her hyper-developed understanding of human desire. "When we create a plan for a brand, we imagine it first as a person—who would Hermès be, for example? She would be attentive, ironic, animated, tasteful. You need to understand a brand's personality to understand exactly what it is that's needed"—just as she formerly did with her bored rich clients.

We slide neatly into a petite parking space, but the car jerks once and my pen slips from my hand and falls between the parking brake and its plastic chassis. Nonini starts to feel around on the floor, then tugs at the chassis, sticks her fingers inside, and bangs it a few times, all in vain. The pen is lost forever, and a flicker of panic flashes across Nonini's face as she feels the imperative to problem solve. She grits her teeth: "I'll get you a pen."

Inside Altalen, we're greeted by owners Elena Todros and Antonina De Luca, in identical red and black striped tops. "Helen," they murmur as they stroke her arms and kiss her cheeks. Among the legions of wire hat stands and wooden shelves are framed pictures of Nonini. She wears birdlike turbans, her headdresses folded and pleated into soaring, winged creations, her expression direct and scorching. Meanwhile, in real life, by a bouquet of lilies and pussy willows, Nonini is rummaging through the drawers of the shop's counter.

"Don't you have any pens with caps?" she beseeches. Finally, Nonini hands me a bald Bic ballpoint. It's one of her practical substitutions and a definitive step down from my lost Japanese fine-point pen, but the problem is solved.

Decompressing, Nonini tries on the lime-green turban she'll match with a borrowed Missoni outfit for a dinner later that evening. Her connection to turbans is stylistic, not religious or traditional, but she tells me proudly that she feels justified in her choice—the turban was born in Iran, her grandfather's homeland.

Before we leave, Nonini pulls up a photo on her phone of the Suzuki sisters, eccentric Japanese twins with matching flamingo-colored bobs and coordinated pink furs, snapped on their way to the Gucci show. "Look at them! I had to photograph them—people need to pay attention to these two." The Altalen designers purr their approval.

We head off to Missoni. "People see me as some sort of trendsetter, but I'm not," Nonini insists as we arrive and slip between the clusters of journalists and PR people gathered in front of the show. "I'm simply someone capable of looking at reality from different viewpoints—of zooming in and zooming out. It's my outsider specialty." Consumed with understanding an ever-changing physical and social landscape, she has adopted a perspective of flexibility, of infinite inspection.

"To be a free thinker is truly the greatest luxury," she says, before a photographer leads her away to the photo op wall where, astonishingly, the Suzuki twins are waiting (apparently summoned by the Missoni team after spotting the pair on Nonini's Instagram account). They flank Nonini as the photographer takes their photo—a striking woman in a simple oversized knit cardigan and a high turban holding court.