



Untouchable Helen

Inspired by W. B. Yeats's love for Maude Gonne

Anne Kim

*I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.*

From 'He wishes for the Cloths of Heaven'
by William Butler Yeats, 1899

He was a television with only one channel; a rainbow with a single hue; a lifetime lived for the love of her, and her alone. She had been and would forever be the ceiling of his world — once an infantile pair of arms around his neck; now a slender flower to rotate in his arms at parties; soon a white hand glittering with a single pearl of promise.

He loved Helen without understanding her at all; he lived for her ferocity of living, admired her steadiness of gaze, and feared the ravenous certainty of her dreams. To Tom, those ambitions seemed almost tangible things to dread, like tenacious trees precisely placed upon the precipice of the far end of her life so far, shaken occasionally by the gales of imaginings that swept her deep eyes far from his.

Sometimes she frightened him, for he truly was as simple as his earnest love, the sweet little rural rose, and he could not comprehend the massiveness of her hope, her intense eagerness and impatience for the rise of a curtain, the ring of a telephone, the tapping of heels at her door. She had expected

great things in the minutes that had compacted into seventeen years of anticipation; and tonight, on New Year's Eve, more than ever, she was ripe for the beginning of it all.

That evening she heard the town clock ringing with its impassive announcement and closed her eyes, imagining the New Year as an enormous white ship drawing silently through the filth of the past year, winding through the streets to rest on the unmuddied shores of her future with a creak and a sigh, sails filled with sweet foreign air, bearing mysterious cargo scented with the most tantalising possibilities ...

That night, she was sure, an unseen hand had drawn a page over in the volume of her life. Suddenly she caught sight of a street of unopened doors winking light through the darkness of the new chapter before her.

Savouring this amazing revelation, she bided her time, feeling the discontent creep like a stain through her heart. Drifting irritably through the town, she longed for the erratic life in the big city where the only constant is perpetual change, and where she could finally live the life she was born to dream about.

One evening as they sat on the shore of a river together, Tom turned to her suddenly.

Exquisite Helen! His heart was full with the beauty of the pale night, dim as it seemed compared to her, and the delicate words his clumsy lips ached to utter bubbled up irrepressibly in his throat. An intense hope he had never felt before agitated his chest as he reached for the ring he had carefully protected and carried around for months in his back pocket. He smiled — then stopped. Tom had glimpsed the expression on her face glimmering in the moonlight.

Never had he felt more distant from her than he did then. She looked as remote as the cold stars above them, and as she gazed out unsmilingly at the black expanse of water, he suddenly realised she was slipping away from him, as elusive as a trickling stream of sand in an hourglass.

Just one week later, she showed him her ticket to New York. Desperately, Tom told he couldn't let her go, knowing she didn't care enough to stay. She laughed charmingly, thrilling and fleeting; and for a cracked moment he thought he heard the subtle sighing of children falling in love at her happiness.

But she was flattered, wretched, amused — and that was all.

It wasn't. She was also exasperated by his appalling sentimentality, so chillingly absent in herself. What he had forgotten, or perhaps never realised, was that she had fallen in love with another vision long ago, a dubious promise that she utterly, fatally believed was her future. There was no way he could have survived in the big city, and so it followed for Helen that as a matter of course there was no way he could be with her. She loved him, but she could not deny her nature — that nature he so loved and treasured best.

She left him shuddering on a doorstep. Loss was but a word — she, the sun of his world, had left him.

For 17 slow and steady years the Midwest had tenderly harboured Helen. She was that remarkable phenomenon of a country girl through whose reluctant veins the gentle wholesomeness of the small town ran natural as a brook, making her as fresh and untouchable as a child, irreconcilable with the artificial glamour of her illusion.

In the East she fascinated everyone she passed in the street with her loveliness.

A Hollywood actress, perhaps, or a famous model. An artist's muse, they whispered, or a Broadway star. Twenty-four men fell deeply in love with her, and she went dancing every night — a slender, blue-eyed flower moving with slow loveliness through the crowd of less beautiful and older people.

Now if you are someone famous with very good teeth, or perhaps stupendously wealthy, Helen will find you, make you

love her, hold you for a season — perhaps two — and you will enjoy half a year in a kind of daze, lightly steered by her impersonal golden grip through numerous parties and important luncheons and giddy dances before she tires and drops you like a hot coal.

Should you ever meet her, you will recognise her at once by her vibrancy and immediacy. Exquisite as a calla lily, and just as poisonous, she burns much brighter than the competitive, insecure, miserable world she so longs to belong in, with a ruthless light that will hurt you with its intensity if you get too close.

When she finally relinquishes her incredible hold on life and her fire is inexorably quenched in death, the world will emerge an infinitely sadder, wiser and far more desolate place.



Anne Kim wrote this in 2012 when she was in Year 11 at Canberra Girls' Grammar School in Australian Capital Territory.