



La Belle Russe

SUPERMODEL NATALIA VODIANOVA'S RAGS-TO-RICHES RISE IS AS COMPELLING AS ANY FAIRYTALE. NOW THE RUSSIAN PHILANTHROPIST IS SPREADING HER GOOD FORTUNE WITH HER NAKED HEART FOUNDATION CHARITY AND BREAKING INTO MOVIES

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WAITING FOR NATALIA VODIANOVA IN THE DARK.

velvety silence of the Doitchester Hotel lounge in London. I almost miss her. She is startlingly different from her pictures, more like the teenage girl-next-door – all coltish prettiness and shyness – than an international stunner. Meeting her feels more surreal than any other celebrity. Perhaps because I'm so used to seeing the 29-year-old Russian supermodel and philanthropist everywhere. She has been the face of Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Hugo Boss and Calvin Klein among others, looking poised and perfect in hundreds of glossy magazines and billboards. She is regularly on the best-dressed lists and *Harper's Bazaar* named her Woman of the Year in 2010.

Hers is a subtle, slow-burning beauty, with the type of face that draws you into it – a turned-up nose, a rosebud mouth and the wide-set eyes of a lioness. Dressed in a beige tracksuit ensemble and glittering in diamonds, she has a fresh-out-of-bed look. She says

she's been working like mad and is staying here en route to another exotic locale. But even in the morning, with tangled hair and without make-up, she is luminous. "I've always loved jewellery," she says shyly in Russian-accented English when I notice her priceless sparklers. "When I was little and went to my grandmother's she had so many beautiful little things."

Inside the hotel restaurant, she sinks down on the velvet banquette beside me. Talking about her life in the countryside with her three children aged 3, 4 and 9, her cats and horses, her icy-blue eyes sparkle. "I think the two little ones Neva and Victor will be artists. They love painting and playing the piano. My children's lives are so different from my own childhood. I was never really a child, that is something I missed out on." When she's not juggling around on glamorous assignments and exotic adventures, the family live between a rambling 14th-century converted mill house in West Sussex, an apartment in Manhattan and a retreat in Uruguay. >

Did she ever dream that she would be living such an extraordinary life? "I didn't have time to dream, never dream of being something or somebody. I was literally living hand-to-mouth, trying to survive every day and couldn't think about the future," she recalls without self-pity.

Her mother worked around the clock and her father left when she was still a toddler. From the age of six, she had to assume adult-sized responsibilities, cooking, cleaning and looking after her two younger half-siblings, one of whom who was born with cerebral palsy. "I raised my sister who is brain damaged. Someone had to be with her while I was at school so my mother would work at night, take washing home from a factory, and then she would clean floors in my school and wash dishes. She had relationships with abusive men, and then she would clean floors in my school and wash dishes. She had relationships with abusive men. Sometimes we had no food. I know it's terrible and some people would've wanted to kill themselves, but strangely I was happy. I realised things were difficult but I managed to find a lot of light there."

She has a mesmerising quality of witfulness and steeliness. "Even if I stayed in Russia, I would've been fine as I wouldn't have anything to compare it to," she reasons. "I was never miserable and always made the most of what I had. But it's amazing how quickly you do forget."

She is philosophical about her fortune and doesn't ever want to lose touch with real life. It's one of reasons, she says, she started her charity, which has raised millions of pounds to build playgrounds for disadvantaged children in some of the poorest, remotest communities in Russia. "I believe in a higher purpose. When you become a mother, you think less about yourself and care more about the world as a whole. And when you're a parent, it's even more heart-breaking to see other children suffering."

Spurred on by the Beslan school siege, when at least 334 hostages were killed, including 186 children, in September 2004, she set up the charity in 2005. She was in Moscow with her husband and recalls watching television as the siege unfolded. "I was on my way back from Moscow to New York, where we used to live – and I cried the whole journey. As soon as we landed, I called my friend, the designer, Diane von Furstenberg. She gave me a space to work from and a list of contacts. I had never organised an event in my life, but we had 700 people turn up and we raised \$350,000."

Vodianova fundraises by throwing huge charity balls – her last one, the Love Ball, was during London Fashion Week last year at the Roundhouse and she also hosted a glittering three-day gala at the Tsaritsino estate in Moscow, complete with an ice palace and ice rink on Red Square. "We're going to hold the next Love Ball in Paris this summer at Valentino's chateau. But next month we're celebrating five years of



Naked Heart Foundation in Moscow," she says.

The first playground was built in her hometown of Nizhny Novgorod in 2006. "Children absolutely love them," she says, recalling how, as a child she roamed the streets with her disabled sister Oksana because they didn't have anywhere to go – "only deserted buildings and basements where wild dogs roamed and teenagers were drinking." When she took her sister outside to play or travelled on the bus, the neighbourhood kids would tease them. "I was with her all the time and it was hard for me because the other children didn't like to have her around because she was dribbling. It was very painful and the injustice of it is still with me."

Vodianova wants to broaden her charity's focus to help disabled children as well. "There are so many forgotten children in orphanages and institutions," she says, telling me how she discovered that some were tied up in cots all day after reading a memoir, *The Boy from Baby House 10*, which tells the story of a frail little boy with a big spirit, who was misdiagnosed



Above and top right, Vodianova with her co-star Jonathan Rhys Meyers in the upcoming film *Belle de Séigneur*. Opposite page, with two of her children, nine-year-old Lucas and four-year-old Neva at a Paris fashion show last year

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as an invalid and incarcerated in a mental asylum from which he, miraculously, managed to escape.

"I was shocked," adds Vodianova, whose mother resisted pressure to give up her disabled sister to state care after her stepfather walked out. "It taught me how children with disabilities are treated and also what would have happened to my sister if she had been abandoned in an institution. I want to find ways to keep children with their families and prevent needless suffering."

She hopes the recent World Cup win "will be a great opportunity for social change." "I go back to Russia often because of my charity work. But we need to sort out these issues left over from the Soviet era. I love my country. I think it's wonderful, the people, nature and everything about it. There's so much darkness there as well."

The story of how she was discovered selling fruit at a roadside stall in the grim industrial city of Nizhny

Novgorod, 250 miles from Moscow, is now the stuff of fashion legend, worthy of any classic Russian heroine. The reality, however, is only slightly less romantic. At 15, Vodianova left home to fend for herself and help support her family running her own fruit stand. At 17, after her 22-year-old model boyfriend convinced her to go to a casting call, she caught the eye of a French model scout and went to try her luck in Paris. "I had so little! I had nothing to lose.

I remember sitting in the corner at the agency and suddenly everyone was coming up and looking at me. I was confused and thought they were upset that I was there. At the time, my mother had a big debt and the debt collectors were doing some horrible things to her, and the owner of the agency lent me the money to pay it off before I'd earned it, and it was like a dream."

Her story certainly isn't unique, but no one has risen quite so spectacularly fast. Within weeks of leaving Russia on New Year's Eve in 1999, she was already being booked for international shows. Soon after, she met Justin Portman, a scion of the aristocratic property-owning family who own great swathes of Oxford Street. After a whirlwind romance, she fell pregnant at 19 and, in 2002, they married in an extravagant wedding in St Petersburg that lasted three days and Tom Ford made her dress in silver pearl-grey satin.

In that heady summer between the collections, her career also soared. She made the cover of *Vanity Fair* along with the new wave of Eastern European beauties and went on to scoop the most coveted multi-million-dollar contract as the face of Calvin Klein – the same contract that made Kate Moss a star in the Nineties and Brooke Shields in the Eighties. Portman put his career as an aspiring artist on the back burner to follow her, along with their children, on shoots and shows around the world.

"We were very much together from the start," she says of Portman, 13 years her senior. "But the truth is I was so young and didn't speak much English. We were very different. My husband wasn't emotional and I'm just the opposite. It's the Russian way. The dark, sad emotions are more intense. They give you more to appreciate the happy moments and hopefully life."

Vodianova says simply that being a mother is the most important thing for her. Glancing around the high-ceilinged room, she has a nostalgic moment. "I suffered a lot when my first child Lucas was born," she says, with downcast eyes, swivling her porridge. "I didn't have my family, Justin, like any new dad, didn't know what to do and he didn't support me at all. The first few weeks of Lucas's life I was basically by myself caring for a child, which is really trying. I remember sleeping with the baby in the middle of the night at Justin's mother's house in the countryside. There were lots of friends and relations and I could hear them all laughing and having fun. And I was sitting there upset, breastfeeding and Justin wouldn't come in to even say, 'Are you alright?' I just left so alone. I tried to talk to him but he didn't understand. But it's not his fault," she adds generously. "When you grow up with a really instead of a loving mother you lose out on the nanny

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feelings of love. It's important for children to know that other side, when you're tired or things aren't alright. If you never knew that you can't really support people around you. My mother always spoke to me about herself. She was so young and I was like her sister. Although there are certain things I wouldn't say to my children, because they don't need to know. But it's important to let them know your real feelings."

Does she feel sad about her lost childhood? "Not so much sad, but lonely. Because of my childhood I was always by myself. I'm a survivor," she adds, pausing to collect her thoughts. "I have a lot of people that I absolutely love and I know love me. But I can't get rid of that feeling of loneliness – no matter who I'm with – even with my children. I know they'll eventually have their own lives. I hope to create the type of family life that when my children are older, they'll come back with their girlfriends, their husbands and their children and hopefully then that feeling of

loneliness will go. But at the moment, I feel very lonely alone. This is my fight."

What hopes does she have for her own children? "All I want for them is to be happy and to be good people, to have something that they enjoy doing. It's hard because of their situation. They are children who will never need or lack anything. They'll always have us and friends of their mother and father. However, I want to give them the tools to make their own way in the world. I think it's vital to have a purpose and passion in life."

A month after we meet, Vodlanova invites me to meet her family at their home in Sussex, but later, out of the blue, texts to say that she's off to Luxembourg to start filming for two months. Many models have attempted to break into acting – everyone from Cindy Crawford, Gisele Bündchen to the newer generation Liya Kebede and Lily Cole – but a rare few have made a successful transition. After bit parts in a couple summer blockbusters, including a minor turn in *Clash of the Titans* as the snake-hipped Medusa, Vodlanova is starring opposite Irish actor Jonathan Rhys Meyers in the upcoming flick *Belle du Seigneur*, based on Albert Cohen's bestselling 1968 French novel.

"I thought it was a joke," she recalls when the director Glenio Bonier, an old friend, asked her to audition for his first feature film. They first met when he was shooting her for the Calvin Klein ads. "I couldn't get my head around why he wanted me for the leading role when there are so many great actresses around. Then I met the producers, read script and slowly the puzzle came together and it felt right."

She threw herself wholeheartedly into her role of a Swiss woman who has an affair with Meyers, a Jewish diplomat during WWII. Set against the backdrop of an impending war and the sweeping anti-Semitism of Europe in the mid-1930s, the two must struggle to keep their passion alive. "I found Ariane a good match for me and I could relate to her as a woman and that is why I chose to do it. I've opened my suitcase of emotions a lot and I'm very glad it's not empty."

As for the future, she plans to do more charity work and cultivate her acting career. "I will continue to work as a model to fulfill contracts, but I'm really looking forward to new characters to live on screen. For the moment, though, I see my life in England and travelling to Hollywood if necessary."

Was it hard being away from her family for such long periods? "It was very difficult to be away from my children, of course. However, it was worth it. You have to deal with a whole new situation. It was a decision I had to make. But I think if they know where their mom is they will cope well. Lucas, my oldest son, visited me for three days on the set in Luxembourg."

"I'm very excited about my new journey," she says. "I never really expected much from life, so I am grateful for everything." ♦

Naked Heart Foundation is celebrating five years on 24 March with a dinner and auction of international and Russian modern art in Moscow. Tickets cost \$1,000 per seat and \$10,000 per table of 10. Visit nakedheart.org.

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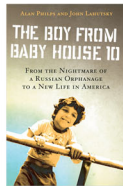


Photo: Getty Images

Above: *The Boy from Baby House 10* by Alan Philips with John Lahrusky, published by Phoenix at £8.99, with foreword from Natalia Vodlanova. Top left: Vodlanova with her husband Justin Perthen and their son Lucas at last year's Love Ball in London