

The career of a supermodel is by no means over at the age of 29. But Natalia Vodianova is striving for a greater cause, as she campaigns for her charity organisation, which works to better the lives of kids like her from the heartland of Russia. Altruism's just one way of facing up to life's challenges, though, she's found.

Jina: Do you generally refer to yourself as a philanthropist?

Natalia: In my head, yes, but to be honest, I don't ever use that word – I've met some real philanthropists, some amazing women. But my charity work is definitely my priority.

J: When did that become the case?

N: The Beslan tragedy in 2004. I was still in Moscow in those days, and I watched it on television. I'd never seen anything as brutal in my life. It happened on the first of September, the first day of school in Russia – those people that committed the hostage-taking and shooting, they really knew how to hurt my country.

J: And that made you want to help?

N: I just wasn't sure how I could help the survivors. I was imagining something positive that I could remember from my own childhood in Gorky, like a play park. But when I returned to New York, I talked to my friend Diane von Furstenberg, who's always been very supportive of Russia, since her father was Russian. She helped me put together our first fundraising event. We raised \$350,000, and it just went from there.

J: Have you heard about this new philanthropy school in Paris?

N: No...?

J: It's founded by the French economist Anne-Claire Pache, whose thesis it is that the act of philanthropy comes from feeling guilty.

N: I don't feel guilty. I feel I've a responsibility to do something. I think it's our behaviour in the direst situations that really defines who we are.

J: Do you see yourself as Russian or British?

N: Russian, absolutely.

J: How do you feel when you take your children back there? It's so different from your life in the UK and New York.

N: When my oldest son, Lucas – he's nine years old – sees poverty and ugliness, he wants to do something about it. We lose that sensitivity as adults. But I try not to let that happen to me. I was blessed with a tough start and chose to go the opposite way. It was very hard at the age of 18; I arrived in Paris with a lot of personal baggage.

J: What kind of baggage?

N: I was angry at the world. From the age of 11, I had to protect my disabled sister, I had to fight off drunken men who tried to steal from me. I lived in a horrible, horrible neighbourhood. And when I first came to Paris, I was very defensive as a result. At the same time, I remember walking around being in shock at the beauty of the place. Trying my first *baguette jambon-beurre* – very basic things. And I had to learn to trust in the goodness of people.

J: Would you say you're naive?

N: I guess I am. My grandmother used to say, 'One day the gamecock will bite you on the head, and you'll understand that there's evil out there.'

J: Your childhood was spent selling fruit on the market to help your mother. Which values were important in your upbringing?

N: There was a lot of mother love. I think that's where I got my strength from. And I had amazing role models – strong women like my grandmother. She was very judgemental, though.

J: I read you learned English in just three months before leaving Russia.

N: That's a fairy story. I didn't speak much English until I met my husband. Then of course I had to communicate, and not just in the language of love.

J: Was your husband your first love?

N: Yes, but in the beginning it was difficult to commit. He was very patient.

J: Are you still in love?

N: Unfortunately, we just separated. We do love each other, but it's hard. We're doing our best. It felt easier to stay together, but we decided to take the challenge. Do you know Eckhart Tolle?

J: The spiritual teacher?

N: Yes. He says, 'Stay in love or separate in love.' We're trying to separate in love.

J: Do you sleep well?

N: I fall asleep fast and get about five hours. I love going to sleep, and I love waking up. But that's a very recent thing, over the two last years, maybe. It took a few good books and important people to get here.

J: Which books?

N: Anything by Paulo Coelho. But my favourite book is *Surrender* by Eckhart Tolle. I've tested its principles many times, and it always works. I've also really taken yoga into my life. I do it with my friend Felix. We were on holiday one summer, and it got quite competitive; our goal was to complete 108 sun salutations. Do you know what they are?

J: I've heard of them.

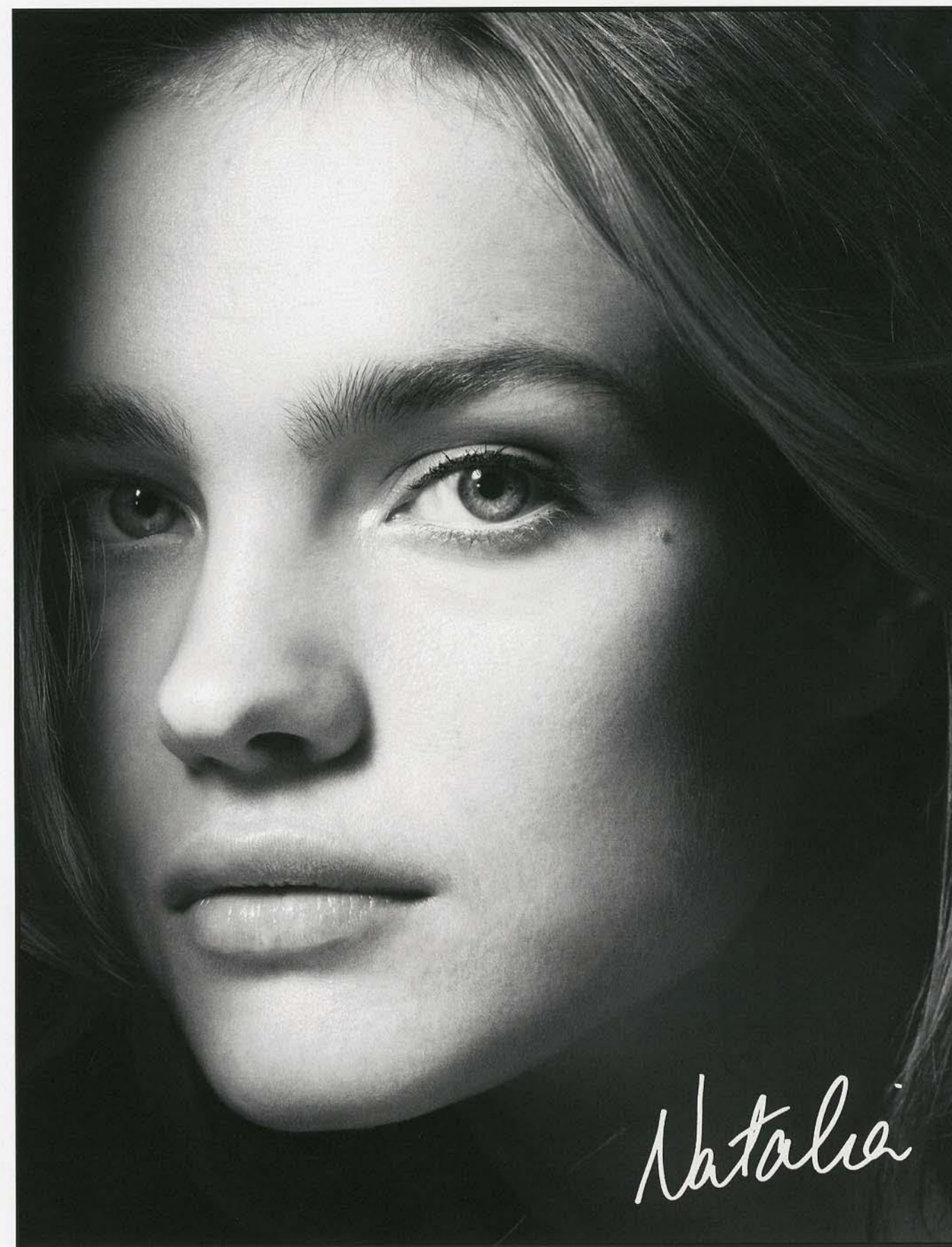
N: We started with six, and by the tenth day, we were at 108. It was really physically challenging! Every morning we'd be doing yoga for about four hours, and by the end of it, I'd hear the children running around screaming, guests arriving, the cook asking questions, and meanwhile, I'd just done 68 sun salutations. I wanted to find some way of prolonging that feeling.

J: Are you a happy person or a lucky person?

N: I'm a happy person, I think. I don't believe in luck. ●

Photography: Liz Collins. Styling: Jonathan Kaye. Hair: Valentin. Make-up: Miranda Joyce. Styling assistance: Max Ortega. Production: Niki Bagdonas at D+V Management. Thanks to Tom at Epilogue.

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