



'We Didn't Have Much – But I Was Surrounded With Love'

Actress Olga Kurylenko and her mother, Maryna, talk about living with poverty, Olga's life-changing career, and why it's better to be single than with the wrong man. **Photograph by Terry O'Neill**

UKRAINIAN ACTRESS OLGA KURYLENKO, 30, rose to fame opposite Daniel Craig in Bond movie *Quantum of Solace*. She lives in London and is soon to release her next film, *Centurion*, co-starring Dominic West. Her mother, Maryna, 53, is an art teacher and lives in Ukraine.

Olga's story

I've always been close to Mum. Growing up, we lived in a three-bedroom apartment with my grandparents, uncle, aunt and cousin in Berdyansk, a small seaside town in Ukraine. It was pretty squashed with seven of us, but times were hard. I shared a bed with Mum until I was nine.

My father lived there at first, but Mum threw him out – he wasn't exactly Prince Charming. I remember meeting him only three times. The first was when I was eight, and he knocked on our door. I don't know who was more surprised, Mum or Gran, but we invited him in and he sang while Mum played the piano. For a while I begged Mum to take him back, but of course she didn't. Now I admire her resolve, the way she refused to coast along when something wasn't right. I've definitely taken that from her, going through two tricky divorces [from French photographer Cedric Van Mol and American entrepreneur Damian Gabrielle]. I'm not scared of walking away from a relationship or being alone because she's shown me that there are other things I can be doing with my time.

I'll always remember 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed, as the period when

things got really tough. The government stopped salaries for months, and we struggled to make ends meet. My clothes were full of holes and we lived almost entirely on rice. I never left the table feeling satisfied. But when I was 15, a chance encounter changed our lives. I was approached by a model scout and signed to an agency. A year later, I got my first job in France which paid me \$30 [£18.55], the equivalent of Mum's monthly salary. It was an amazing feeling: like I'd been given wings. Since then, everything's gone brilliantly, but I'll always remain thankful to Mum. We didn't have much but she surrounded me with such love. It's why I'm involved with Hope and Homes for Children, a charity that places children without families in foster homes. It's sad to think that some kids will never have this wonderful relationship I've had.

Maryna's story

I always knew something unusual would happen to Olga. She was so beautiful as a child that people would stop and coo at her in the supermarket. At school, she became very artistic and talented, maybe because I pushed her into every extra-curricular activity going. Piano lessons, dance club, drama... I was determined to keep her busy so she wouldn't hang out on the streets.

Back then, life was bleak in Berdyansk. As a single parent, I didn't have much money and, when the Soviet Union disbanded, everyone struggled to survive. I remember Olga being hungry, but we just couldn't give

1987
Olga, aged 7, dressed up for a ballet performance



'My first job paid \$30 – the equivalent of Mum's monthly salary. It was an amazing feeling'

her anything more to eat. Looking back, I don't know how we got by. Even so, I never regretted my decision to ask Olga's dad to leave. He wasn't a good husband or parent, and as my mother put it, he didn't 'pass the test'. He and I had an exceptionally passionate relationship, but deep down I knew she was right. There were days when he completely ignored Olga, or wouldn't read her a story because he was watching TV.

At heart, I've always been an optimist. I always held hope that our lives would change. But when Olga was asked to become a model, I was completely overwhelmed. I constantly thought: 'Why us? How did we get so lucky?' The only thing now is that I'd like her to have kids, but she'll do it in her own time. She's stubborn, like me, and independent. If there's one thing I've taught her, it's that she can be happy on her own; that she doesn't need a man to be content in life.

To find out more about Olga and Maryna's involvement in Hope and Homes for Children, visit marieclaire.co.uk/hopeandhomesforchildren.

1998
Olga, aged 18, with Maryna and Raisa, her maternal grandmother



Interview by Megan Conner. Styled by Nicole Smallwood. Hair by Maria Kontos at Ena Salon (enason.com). Make-up by Nefira V Pirsaud using Lancôme. Olga wears dress, Christopher Kane at Browns. Maryna wears dress, Alberta Ferretti. See Directory for stylist details