

Natasha

Natasha Bulova was born in Samara, a small town in Russia in 1987. She had a difficult relationship with her half-sister and found it very hard to watch her mother, a schoolteacher, being regularly beaten up by her drunken, abusive father, a factory worker, who would plunge into a *zapoï*, an alcoholic oblivion which would sometimes last a whole week. She spent her childhood running away from home and left school at the earliest possible opportunity at 16 to look for work and fulfil her **dream** of earning enough money to leave home once and for all. There was little work available. She and her friend Marina ended up washing lorries for 12 hours a day earning 60 roubles, the equivalent of £1, per day which even by Russian standards would not have been enough to rent a room.

One day, Marina saw an advert in the local paper for waitresses wanted for work in Spain. They applied and were amazed to be taken on despite the fact that they spoke no Spanish. They were also surprised because the agency agreed to pay all the costs to take them to Spain. Olga from the recruitment agency arranged the paperwork. Natasha's case was more complicated than Marina's because she was underage. Natasha needed a letter from her mother giving her permission to get a passport, a letter from her mother's employer, the headteacher, to confirm that she was working in that school and her mother's photograph. Natasha had to spin a story that she wanted to go abroad for a week's holiday with her boyfriend. Her mother eventually caved in.

In November 2003, Natasha and Marina left home. Their **journey** began with a 15 hour train ride to Moscow. They had no money to buy food or drink or even a pillow to lean against. As the train was packed they had to travel sitting up during the whole time. Olga met them in Moscow, took them to a hotel and gave them 1500 roubles to spend. She took them to the French embassy to apply for a visa. Apparently it was easy to get into France and from there they could travel all over Europe. That was the plan. However, their application was refused. Olga said that it could take up to six months to have their passports 'cleaned' up and new, false visas inserted. It would also cost them more money. They were handed over to Sergei who took them to a flat which they shared with four other girls who were also promised similar jobs elsewhere. Marina and Natasha had to sleep on a single dirty mattress on the floor and share one pillow for a month. Natasha was told that her visa had come through first so she and Marina would have to travel separately. Natasha was very unhappy about this but had no choice but to agree.

She travelled by coach to Frankfurt. She was told that she would be met by György at the end of her two day journey. He was six hours late, during which time Natasha became frantic with anxiety. She fell asleep on the long car journey. When she awoke she noticed

the signs for Brussels. When she asked why they were not heading to Spain, he told her that her employer in Barcelona had changed his mind and a pimp in Brussels has asked for her. She said she had not agreed to this. He was a rude and rough guy who was not prepared to negotiate. They were on the motorway. She knew she could not run away. She thought she would wait until she got to Brussels. Once there, she was taken to a McDonalds and made to sit on her own while György bargained with two men at another table in a language that Natasha could not understand. One of the men, Poly bought her for €2000. He did not speak Russian and Natasha spoke only a little French. György warned her that if she ran away, he would kill her mother and poke Natasha's eyes out. She was raped by Poly on the very first night and every other night after that. After a brief struggle, she gave up, realising that she had nowhere to run.

Poly put her to work on the streets of Brussels for two months. As a way of resisting her situation, Natasha would hang back in the crowd of prostitutes so that she was less likely to be noticed by the punters. Even then, she serviced between 3-6 men every night, seven days a week. Within six weeks, Natasha believed that she had earned Poly enough money to repay her debt and hoped that he would free her. However, Poly would increase the sum she owed him every time by adding an inflated sum for her living expenses so that it became a rolling debt that could never be paid off – a form of debt bondage. On one occasion, Natasha had a terrifying ordeal at the hands of a violent punter, after which she refused to work on the streets. Poly then sold her on to Niki who drove her to Ostend where they waited for a few days till they could find a lorry to take her to London. He handed her false Lithuanian passport to the driver. On **arrival** in London, Natasha was met by friends of Niki who looked after her until he joined them. When Niki turned up two days later, her ordeal started again when he raped her and put her to work for him in a Bayswater flat where she worked with two other girls.

Niki took Natasha to a studio where she was photographed wearing a nurse's uniform, sexy underwear and in the nude. These were put up on a website advertising her as 'the youngest escort in town'. However, Niki felt that she was not making enough money for him in the flat and would yell at her for not pleasing the clients. Once, she plucked up the courage to show some **resistance**: she asked him to let her go home if he thought that she was young and stupid. He hit her so hard that she was bruised for days and could not go to work. Even his loss of earnings did not stop him losing his temper. Her fear of his unpredictable violence made her compliant. It was a way of ensuring her **entrapment**. He also went everywhere with her. Even on the rare occasions when she travelled to work on her own, she could not run away because he had her passport, she had no money, friends, language skills or knowledge of British laws.

Natasha had been working at a massage parlour in Sudbury Hill when a police raid took place in June 2004. They discovered that she was only 17 years old and took her into

care. At first the authorities were going to deport her but soon realised that they would not be able to do so because she was underage and because she did not have her passport. A social worker was assigned to her and housing was provided. Although Natasha had made her **escape** from Niki, she lived in fear of bumping into him until he was caught by the police, especially as they had housed her close to where he lived. Over the following months after many changes of mind, Natasha took the difficult decision to give evidence in the trial against her pimp. Not only was she worried about the retaliation that she or her family might face from Niki and his associates, she found the prospect of coming face to face with him unbearable. As she was the main witness, there could not have been a trial without her co-operation. At the trial Niki denied working as a pimp, raping Natasha or even living with her. When the police produced Natasha's clothes in court however, he could not explain how they were found in his room. His defence was that Natasha had been working as a prostitute of her own free will. The police produced Natasha's Russian passport which she hadn't seen since she left Russia which proved decisively that Niki had been holding Natasha against her will. He was convicted and sentenced for seven years in prison.

Natasha applied for asylum but her application was rejected in February 2005. She appealed and won indefinite leave to remain (ILR) in July 2005. She has a travel document which allows her to travel to any country but Russia on the basis that she applied for asylum because she will be in danger if she returns home. Until she gets her British passport, she will not be able to travel home for a holiday. In order to meet her mother, Natasha went to Spain for a week. Her mother still does not know what happened to her as Natasha finds it difficult to talk about her experience. She has tried very hard to persuade her mother to leave her father. But now Natasha's older sister, Sveta, has a little girl and her mother feels she needs to be in Samara to support her.

Since getting her leave to remain, Natasha has been slowly putting her life back together. She has enrolled at a college to study law. She lives in **fear** of the day when Niki will be released from prison and will come in search of her and kill her.