

INTERVIEW

Hunting my husband's KGB killers

Ten years after her husband was fatally poisoned, Marina Litvinenko is still fighting for justice, finds *Elizabeth Day*

Marina Litvinenko wore her wedding ring for three years after her husband died. It took a long time for her to accept that the love of her life and the father of her son wasn't coming back. Eventually, she told herself that he wouldn't have wanted her to carry on grieving. So she slipped the ring off, storing it away in a box with his. "Sasha would never ask me to be a widow," she says now, blinking to keep the tears back. "I'm absolutely sure that he wants us to be happy."

"Sasha" is the affectionate name by which she refers to her late husband, the former spy and critic of President Putin, Alexander Litvinenko, who was fatally poisoned in central London in November 2006, when he ingested radioactive polonium-210. It was believed to have been administered in a cup of tea. A British public inquiry into Litvinenko's death last year concluded that there was a "strong probability" he was murdered by two Russian agents on Putin's personal orders.

More than a decade on, no one has been brought to account for the crime. Marina is still fighting for justice. "Many questions have still not been answered," she says when we meet in a London cafe. Her English is accented but fluent and she speaks rapidly, with a clear, steady gaze. Occasionally, she will dab at her eyes with the corner of a napkin, but

insists on carrying on. It's too important, she says, to stay silent. She wants to be strong for Litvinenko, and to keep his story alive. It's why she's agreed to take part in *Hunting the KGB Killers*, a new Channel 4 documentary to be broadcast on Monday, and also why she's doing this interview, however painful the memories.

"It's ridiculous a man like Putin is the head of a great country like Russia," she says. Putin's support of Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, and the recent chemical attacks should not come as any great surprise, she insists.

"Why do you think this person [Putin] will be different after 17 years? It makes me angry that after killing off prominent journalists, poisoning Sasha Litvinenko in London, the Ukrainian war, he's still there. People don't like to learn lessons, unfortunately."

Shortly after the findings of the public inquiry, Marina took her 22-year-old son, Anatoly, to a meeting with Theresa May, who was then home secretary. "She is a smart woman," says Marina. "She has no illusions about Putin." Still, nothing has been done.

As a vocal critic of Putin, does Marina fear she is being watched? "Of course, I'm monitored," she replies. Her 80-year-old mother still lives in Moscow, and Marina hasn't been back to visit her for 17 years. "It's not so easy a decision for me to go to Russia," she says.

Marina never asked to be in the spotlight. When she first met Litvinenko in June 1993, he was just a man one of her friends had brought round to her Moscow apartment. It was the day of her 31st birthday, and she offered him a plate of strawberries. Years later, when they were married, Litvinenko told her he remembered this as the moment he fell in love.

"Sasha was the funniest, friendliest, excellent man," Marina says now, at the age of 55. At the time they met, she was a professional ballroom dancer, and he was an officer for the FSB – the successor to the KGB. "He looked very young, more like a boy than a strong man doing security service, working against organised crime."

In fact, he was so gentle that when



Marina, top, is the widow of Alexander Litvinenko, the former Russian agent hospitalised in 2006, above, after he ingested polonium-210

they had Anatoly, it was Marina who was the disciplinarian: "Sasha was always too soft to say no to him."

For the first years of their marriage, Marina was worried about her husband's work putting him in dangerous situations, but not unduly so. The main impact was that it was impossible to book holidays or expect him home for dinner because his hours were so unpredictable.

But after Litvinenko started fiercely criticising the Kremlin, it became too dangerous for them to stay in Russia and the family fled first to Turkey and then to London. From the relative safety of the UK, Litvinenko wrote a book publicly condemning Putin. The family applied for British citizenship,

which was granted in October 2006. Finally, Marina began to feel safe. One month later, Litvinenko was poisoned.

At first, she thought her husband had the flu. He had been in town all day for meetings and when he returned for dinner that November evening, he started to feel unwell and took to his bed. On the second night, he began to have trouble breathing and Marina called an ambulance. The paramedics couldn't find anything wrong with him. But the following day, Litvinenko's condition worsened and he began to cough up blood.

He was taken to hospital, but still the doctors were mystified. It was Litvinenko himself who suspected he had been poisoned, and when blood

'It makes me angry that after 17 years, Putin is still there. People don't like to learn lessons'



Marina with her son, Anatoly, after last year's inquiry into Litvinenko's death

tests were carried out they showed high levels of radioactive metals in his bloodstream.

Every day, Marina would visit him, never thinking he would die. When he was first admitted to University College Hospital, "he was able to walk. His room had a private bathroom and the shower didn't work and he said: 'I can fix it.' He was OK!"

"I thought, 'He's in hospital, they know what to do with him, they will start to give him the antidote. I thought it was all under control.'"

They spent hours talking about what they would do when Litvinenko was released, how he would start running again, and "how we would be pensioners one day – very fit, very healthy, spending our life-long time together". She smiles, aware of how naive that might now sound.

"And the next day, it was a different picture. In two days, he was moved to intensive care, where he was fixed with all these support machines. It was so quick ... And I'm suddenly starting to cry because in that second, I believe Sasha will die."

It took almost three weeks for Litvinenko to die, by which stage he was a shrunken, pale version of his former self – his scalp denuded, his hollowed-out eyes staring out from a photograph that was reprinted on front pages across the world.

Marina took her son to the hospital the night before her husband passed away. Anatoly was in his pyjamas, getting ready for bed, but something made Marina do it. "Sasha did not look well, of course. We spent maybe a few seconds in the room, but it was a huge trauma for Anatoly."

To this day, she asks herself if she should have done it. "But," she says, crying now, "I think it was right."

As he lay dying, Litvinenko asked his wife to tell the world about what had happened to him. He wanted her to explain, he said, so that people would know.

She returns to that conversation a lot in her mind and it's this that has enabled her not to be bitter about her husband's murder.

"All the time," she says, "I try to remind myself I'm not doing this against Russia as a country. I did this for love. I did this for Sasha. I did this for truth."

Hunting the KGB Killers is on Channel 4 next Monday at 9pm

The 'kidult' generation that's back in the toy box

And you thought Lego was for children. *Guy Kelly* finds out why millennials are returning to the joy of playtime

For Rob Willner, when work finishes, playtime begins. He likes nothing more when he gets home than to kick off his shoes and upturn a crate of sleek Scandinavian Lego.

"It's not like I'm obsessed with it, but there's a simplicity to Lego models that's quite nice – to clear your mind and help it focus a bit," he says, only a touch sheepishly.

Willner is 25 years old, and combines studying for a PhD in anthropology and religion at the University of Kent with youth work in north London, where he lives with his wife, Adele, a teacher. And he is not alone in his childish habits.

According to new research



conducted by NPD Group, a retail analyst, sales of toys to adults have increased by almost two thirds over the past five years, and by more than 20 per cent in just the last year. As a result, the "toys for adults" market (which, by the way, is a careful Google search, best done at home) is now worth £300 million, and said to be growing three times faster than the children's toy market itself.

Millennials are largely to blame. More than half of the "kidult" spend comes from 18- to 34-year-olds, snapping up everything from £500 Scalextric sets to drones, Nerf guns and £200 Star Wars Lego models.

For some it's a chance to recapture the carefree raptures of childhood, while for others it's a chance to escape the hassle and hardships of grown-up life – akin to other "mindfulness aids" like adult colouring books and dot-to-dot. For Willner, it's both.

"It reminds me of the playful side of life, but also helps me to keep perspective. Lego isn't transcendent, but it's fun, and gives you a chance to think about what's really important."

At home in Enfield, he has two

Games like Scalextric have found a market with 'grown-ups' seeking nostalgic fun

technicolour crates of loose childhood Lego tucked away under a bed, but also various large "sentimental" models ornamenting the house. For instance, there's a Lego VW campervan (worth £85) he and Adele received as a wedding present last summer, reminding them of the full-size version they drove across New Zealand. And a Star Wars "X-wing fighter" his youth group clubbed together to get him as a thank-you present. Privately, he adds to his collection with a new model every two months or so, normally from the infrastructure-for-fun Lego City range.

"In a way, this comes around with each generation," says Lou Ellerton, a brand consultant with considerable experience tracking consumer trends. "A decade ago, people might remember board game cafes being all over the news. That was Generation X experiencing the same nostalgia and backlash against work; we called them 'greenagers' – grown-up teenagers. What we're seeing now is Generation Y having the same feelings, and they're less ashamed about it."

Indeed, as millennials have sought to return to the games of their own childhoods, clever (or cynical) brands have pandered to their every need,

JOHN LEWIS'S TOP TOYS FOR ADULTS

1. Lego – £3-£274.99
2. Wooden Noughts & Crosses – £9.60
3. Micro Scooters – £119-£194.99
4. Subbuteo retro football – £29.95
5. Mega Monopoly – £25.99



often charging very adult prices for essentially souped-up versions of Nineties toys. Could it be that Gen Y, unable to afford to move on with their lives in the traditional sense – getting a mortgage, for one – are seeking more immediate pleasures?

"Probably true," says Ellerton. "If they put every spare pound they get into savings now, it could [still] take 10 or 15 years to get a deposit. This generation is characterised by not

putting off today for tomorrow – they spend on experiences, so £500 for a toy is worth it to them."

And it's not just millennials. The "middle-aged" bracket of 34-50 may be least likely to buy their own toys – as they're most likely to have young children themselves – but baby boomers account for a fifth of the "kidult" market spend.

"I have a lot of toys around the house, but it's more of a way of connecting with the kids," says Andrew Birkin, a 71-year-old screenwriter with young children from his second marriage. "[The toys] went away when my older ones grew up, but now I get them out to spend time with them and fiddle about myself. I'm fortunate – my five-year-old loves World War One and rockets and planes, so that's interesting for me. I even bought a drone, to take photos and show him."

Willner's motivations are slightly more profound. When he became a man, it was important he didn't put away childish things.

"I don't want to be one of these people surrounded by models or spending all my money [on toys], but it's more like a symbol of what really matters – fun."

The Telegraph
Premium

Exclusive preview screening
Their Finest

1940, London, the Blitz; with the country's morale at stake, Catrin (Gemma Arterton), an untried screenwriter, and a makeshift cast and crew, work under fire to make a film to lift the nation's flagging spirits, and inspire America to join the war.

Partnered with fellow screenwriter Buckley (Sam Claflin) and eccentric actor Ambrose Hilliard (Bill Nighy), the trio set off to make a film that will warm the hearts of the nation and capture the imagination of the American population.

Their Finest, based on Lissa Evans' novel *Their Finest Hour and a Half*, is a witty, romantic and moving portrayal of a young woman finding her way, and her voice, in the mayhem of war.

The film boasts a stellar British cast including Jack Huston, Helen McCrory, Eddie Marsan, Rachael Stirling, Richard E Grant and Jeremy Irons.

Their Finest is in cinemas nationwide Friday, April 21, 2017.

Subscriber offer
Telegraph subscribers can claim free tickets to advanced screenings of *Their Finest* taking place at 6.30pm at a range of cinemas across the UK on Wednesday, April 19, 2017.

How to book
Visit telegraph.co.uk/subscriber and click on 'Rewards', then 'Culture'. Follow the instructions and enter the password **SCREENWRITER** to claim your tickets. Your tickets will be sent by email. Please arrive 30 minutes prior to the start time. Late arrivals will not be admitted to the screening.

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