

## LIFE AS AN OLIGARCH'S EX-GIRLFRIEND

Alexandra Tolstoy had use of a suite at Claridge's, a yacht in Monaco and a house in Chelsea after she fell for the man dubbed 'Putin's banker'. The British writer and her Russian billionaire had three children and travelled the world by private jet. But the super-rich lifestyle ended when he fled the country. Now she is being evicted from the London home they shared. Interview by Hilary Rose



lexandra Tolstoy's life has been many things, but she can never complain that it's been dull.

Take her romantic CV. Her first marriage was to a penniless, alcoholic Cossack horseman, whom she met on the Silk Road. Her next relationship was with a billionaire Russian oligarch, Sergei Pugachev, a Russian senator known as Putin's banker. They

senator known as Putin's banker. They travelled the world and had three children, but it did not end well, as anyone who saw *The Countess and the Russian Billionaire*, a recent fly-on-the-wall documentary filmed over five years, knows.

"As we went along, everything went completely pear-shaped," she says, sitting on a sofa which will shortly be sold, in a house from which she will soon be evicted. Two years ago, she lost a court case over who owns the house, two vast, converted artist's studios knocked into one, in the heart of Chelsea.

Was it in trust for the children, as she thought? Or in fact owned by their father? The courts ruled that the trust was a sham, and that Pugachev was the true owner of the house. His assets had previously been frozen by the Russian government, as part of a long-running dispute, and they duly seized the house. Tolstoy was told she could stay until they sold it. Now, suddenly and out of the blue, she's been given 12 days' notice to get out. Three days after we meet, on May 31, she is losing the family home that she moved into 11 years ago, when she left hospital with her oldest son, Alexei, known as Aliosha, since joined by Ivan, now 9, and Maria, 8.

"Evicting a single mother with three children in the middle of a global pandemic is just disgusting," she says, dressed in a pretty boho dress, fiddling nervily with her hair. "When we lost the case, I'm sure Sergei thought, great, they've nowhere to live."

That isn't strictly true. She has nowhere to live in London, and London is where her work is and where the children are at school. But she does in fact own what she describes as a cottage in Oxfordshire, although it's currently rented out because she needs the cash. But does she really think Pugachev is happy that his three children and their 46-year-old mother are in this position?

"Oh, absolutely. I sent him the letter last week and said we're being told to leave. He effectively said, 'It's your problem.' He's happy."

In his response, Pugachev wrote, "Sorry, there is no news. This is a matter of your negotiations. You yourself signed an agreement with the Russians. I did not participate in this. What can I do?"

She says that he has also sent her deeply upsetting emails, in which he calls her a bitch and a fool and compares her to cattle.



## 'I SAID I WAS NEVER GOING TO LIVE AT THE CHÂTEAU. THERE ARE GUARDS WITH GUNS'

To the casual observer, her former life with a billionaire sounds idyllic. They divided their time between a vast, fully staffed château in the south of France, where a Titian was propped against the wall, a house in London, an estate in Herefordshire and a villa in St Bart's worth some £32 million, which she says was fabulous. They had a suite on permanent standby at Claridge's, a yacht moored in Monaco and travelled by private jet. Pugachev would take her shopping in Chanel and buy her whatever she wanted, "although I never got into that couture thing". She was 34 when they first met in 2007, and he was 44. Her marriage was failing, his had already ended, and she was hired to teach him English. They met again the following year at an awards ceremony. Within a month, she had left her husband for him and was pregnant with their first child.

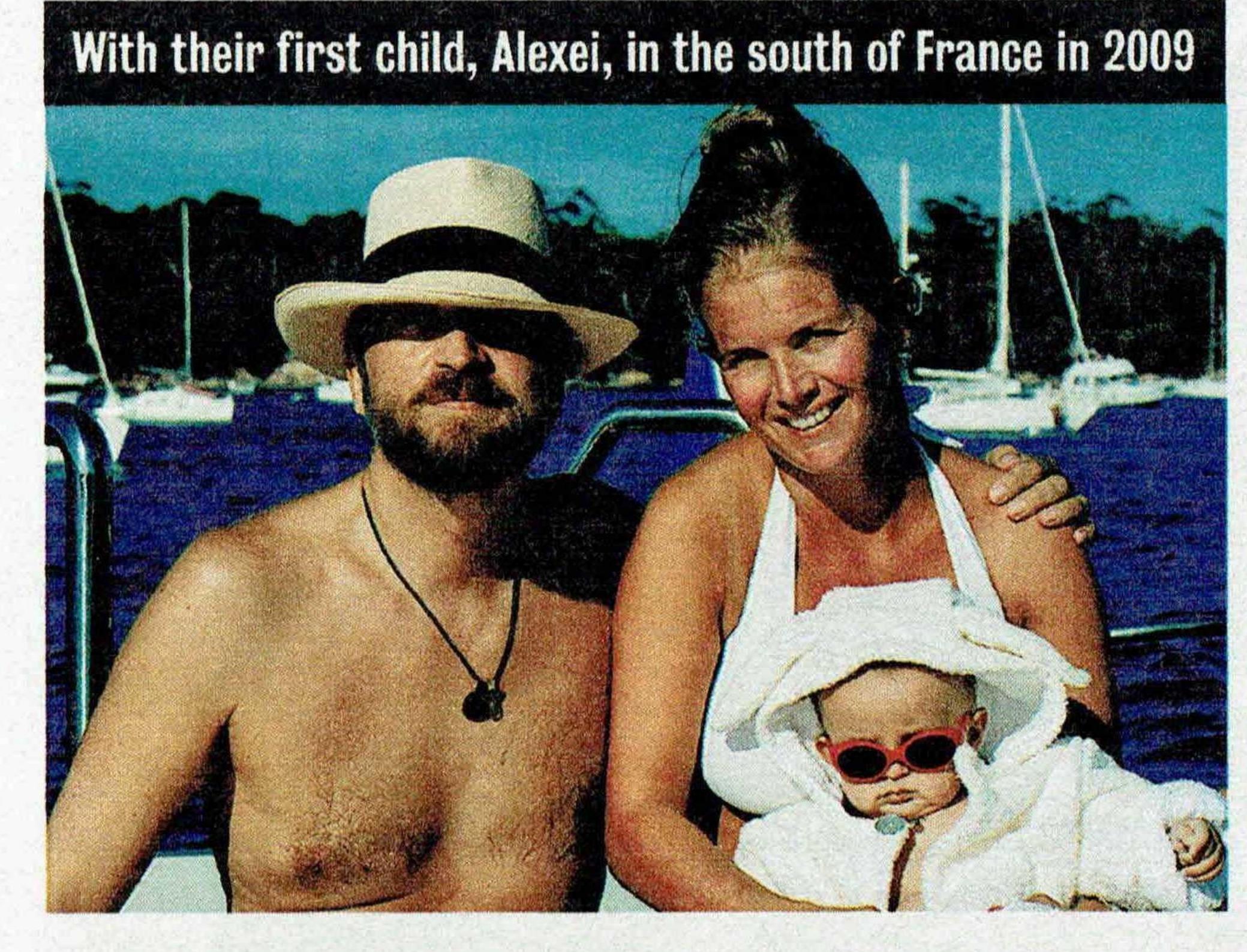
"He's superficially extremely charming. He's got a really good sense of humour, he can be very ironic and self-deprecating and he sees the funny side of things. And he's physically very, very attractive. That was completely and utterly electric and addictive and he was very loving, or what I thought was loving. I found

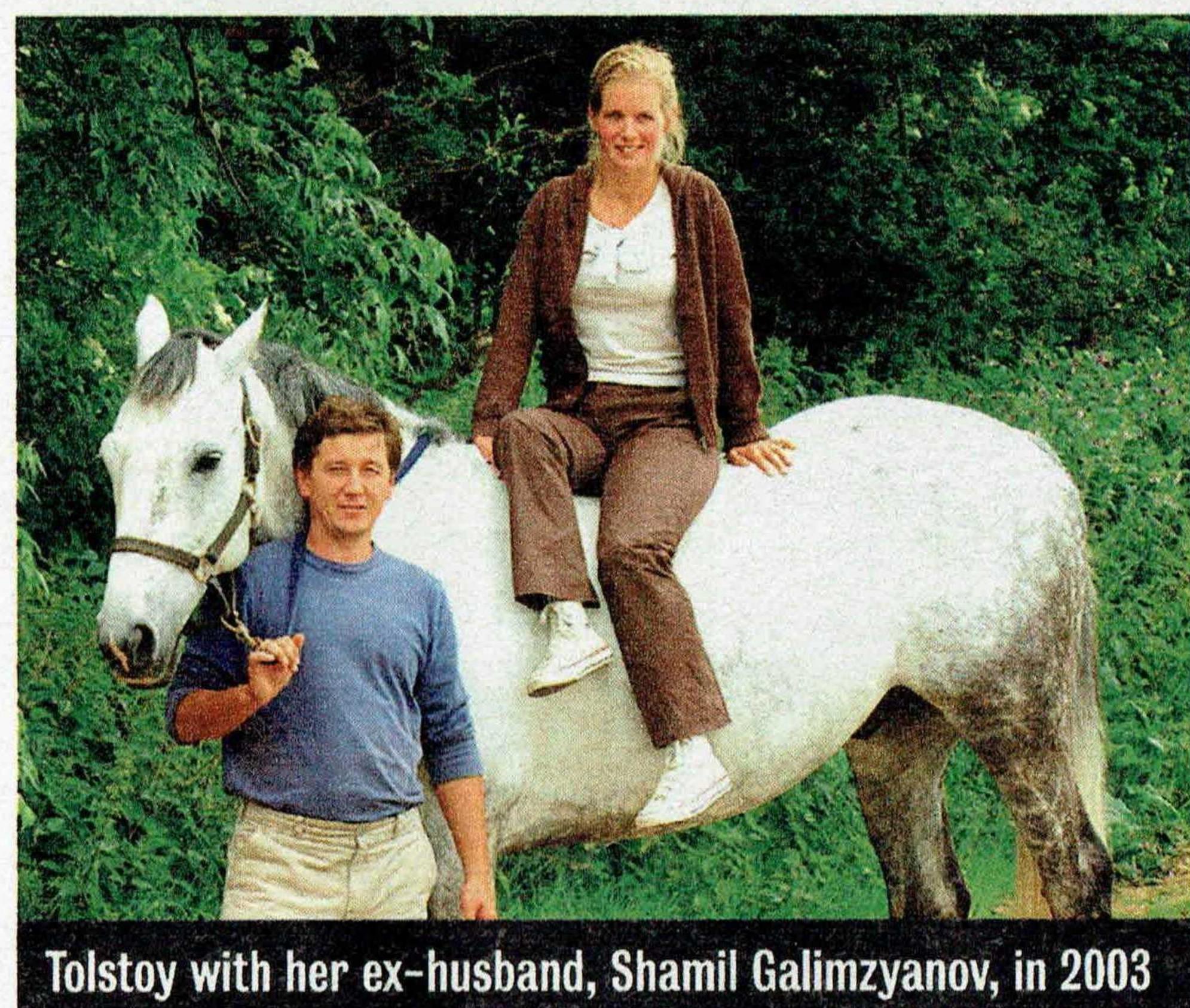
him attractive and funny and interesting, but he also made me feel very safe."

Her life was one of monied leisure, mixing with other billionaires and their trophy wives, and attending the 2011 wedding of Prince Albert of Monaco. But it was not, she says now, all it was cracked up to be. She says she misses "nothing, absolutely nothing" about her old life, although her children reminisce about it and recently changed her Apple ID picture to one of their father's yacht. Back then, she felt that she had to live up to being an oligarch's girlfriend, not just by looking the part, but stopping work and never mentioning that she'd ever done any, including some documentaries about horses for the BBC of which she remains very proud.

"Subconsciously, I was in awe of these ridiculous Russian socialites. They were totally not me at all. They're ridiculous, ridiculous. They're so empty, just so empty. I've had a very rich life; I come from a family with a lot of interests. I cannot describe to you how empty these poor people are."

One oligarch's wife once asked a friend of Tolstoy, "Do you think one million a season is enough for my wardrobe?" Often from





impoverished backgrounds themselves, Tolstoy says, with no cultural hinterland, they can never be natural because they're always on show.

"Their life is like being on some perpetual shoot, just hanging around. It's so boring, because it's rootless. They all felt like random people. There can't really be any genuine friendship. Sergei had about two friends who were useful. It's a cut-throat, weird world."

Behind the gloss, all was not well with their relationship. He always refused to marry her, an early bone of contention.

She slept for barely an hour a night, suffered from panic attacks and lived every day on the edge. She has described him in the past as a "tyrannical and paranoid bully", whose behaviour "became increasingly volatile", and told the BBC of one incident in which "Sergei had one of his explosions where he physically attacked me".

She felt trapped, because she had three young children and no means to support them. She found life without work stultifying. She volunteered in the Russian department at Sotheby's, but it was short-lived. Her colleagues could plausibly have wondered what a billionaire's girlfriend was doing there, but never asked.

Even their sleeping habits were incompatible. Pugachev went to bed at 4am and got up at 3pm. Tolstoy was an early riser, but she says that he expected her to wait inside for him until he woke.



Then came her 40th birthday party at the château, seven years ago. The invitations went out six months before, and all her friends and family flew in for it. On the morning of the party, the whole thing was called off after an argument. She was distraught.

"That's when I left him. It was horrendous. We came back here to the UK and sort of floated around. Then my son needed to start school and my parents said you've just got to get on with it."

The separation lasted barely two months before she felt she had no choice but to reunite in London. She could see no future without him, no means of earning her own living or providing for her children. The relationship staggered on until 2016. In the midst of his dispute with the Russian state, the British courts had ordered him to surrender his passport. Instead, he fled to France, where he now lives in exile at the château. He was sentenced in his absence to two years in prison for lying to the court and breaching its orders. He had left without telling her, on the night of her father's 80th birthday party. He said he was going out and he'd be back later, but she says that he never showed up. For three weeks, she had no idea where he was. Eventually, his assistant called and told her to join him in France immediately, with the children, which she did.

"I told him I was never, ever going to live there. There are security guards with guns and I said I will visit you with the children, but they are staying at school in London. I don't think he loved me; he wanted to keep me and the children."

Pugachev has previously denied abandoning his family, claiming Tolstoy had effectively barred access to his children.

Tolstoy had an unremarkable middle-class upbringing in rural Oxfordshire. Her father, Count Nikolai Tolstoy, was a writer and distant cousin of Leo Tolstoy, the famous Russian author. Her mother, Georgina, was a stay-at-home mum. The eldest of four children, she went to Downe House, the boarding school briefly and unhappily attended by the Duchess of Cambridge, then to Edinburgh University. In her gap year between the two, her father insisted that she spend six months living in Moscow, learning Russian. She arrived in 1992, as the Soviet Union was collapsing, knowing no one and speaking not a word of the language. She left in love with the country and its people.

Back in Britain, she switched her degree course from philosophy to Russian. After graduating, she won a place on the highly competitive graduate trainee scheme at Credit Suisse First Boston, and was sent to New York to train on the eastern European desk.

"I do feel I've had a streak of luck in my life. But what I didn't appreciate was that you cannot work in the markets if you're not interested in them. It's like saying, 'Go and be a cook,' but you're not interested in food."

After six months, her boss told her she could either pull her finger out or leave, so she left. A friend from university was planning a trip riding along the Silk Road, and Tolstoy started working as a temp, to save enough money to go too. It was on that trip, in Uzbekistan, that she met and married her Cossack, Shamil Galimzyanov. She met him in 1999, when she was 29 and 4 weeks into the eight-month Silk Road trek with her friend. In Bukhara, Uzbekistan, Galimzyanov turned up as their guide for the next leg.

"Shamil rode his horse bare-chested," she wrote in an article at the time, "wearing faded jodhpurs and leather chaps. He had light hair, boyish bright blue eyes and his chest was a deep shade of chestnut. He was everything I imagined a Cossack to be: a free spirit, accountable to nobody and valuing pride and honour more than life itself. We talked, joked and flirted."

She was smitten, but accepted the relationship was over when she got home to Oxfordshire. But she visited him the following year, and later spent six months riding across Mongolia and Siberia with him, before eventually rekindling the relationship in 2003, on a trip to Uzbekistan with her parents.

"They instantly adored him," she wrote, "and after two days they said, 'You have to marry him." He visited her in England and she said he fitted in perfectly with her friends and her black-tie ball lifestyle, and they married in 2003 at a Russian Orthodox church in west London. The reception was held in the garden at her parents' house, where a Mongolian yurt was set up in the garden, a balalaika band was flown in from Paris and the bride was led in by her new husband on a white horse. They planned to live with her parents, but spend a third of their time in Uzbekistan, taking clients on treks. "I know that wherever we are, we'll be happy," she wrote. "Even though we are from completely different cultures. I feel that we were made for each other."

Alas, it was not to be, and Galimzyanov later talked bitterly of how she'd cheated on him with Pugachev. Speaking of him now, she looks sad.

"He was kind and good, but we were just from two different worlds. It couldn't work. If we spoke the same language, it would never have happened."

She's no longer in touch with him, but says that he started seeing someone else as soon as she left him and has been with her ever since, so she assumes he's happy.

Having been so sure that he was the one for her, and even discussing having children with him, does she now regret marrying him?



## 'SERGEI HAD TWO FRIENDS WHO WERE USEFUL. ITS A CUT-THROAT WORLD'

"It's awful to make a promise that you can't keep." Five years ago, she described the marriage as rash and thoughtless and said she'd given no real thought to how they were going to earn the money to support a home and family. Having moved to Moscow, where she taught English, she said, "I was the breadwinner and he would get angry because our roles were reversed."

Today, she's hardly destitute. A friend is helping with the school fees of two of her children, although she won't say who or why. Lockdown life at her parents' house, which she chronicles on Instagram, looks idyllic, although her parents don't want her to live there permanently. Her step-grandfather, Patrick O'Brian, left her the royalties from his *Master and Commander* books, which must bring in a fair bit. But she's also the sole breadwinner. The Family Division of the High Court ordered Pugachev in 2016 to pay £35,000 a month in maintenance, of which she says she has never received a penny.

The children no longer have any contact with their father. She says she begged him to agree a legally binding access agreement so that they could. Without such an agreement, she doesn't feel comfortable agreeing access. The police and social services have put in place a border alert, whereby the children are only allowed to be taken out of the country by her. And with their home effectively sold from under her, she's loath to disrupt their

lives further by moving out of London. Their life has been one of enormous drama and confusing extremes. She breaks down in tears talking about it.

"I know and that's what I don't like for my children. It's stressful. There's been very little continuity in their lives and their education is paramount. It would be too cruel to change that. I lie awake at night worrying about what I've done to them. They've suffered so much and there are so many difficult things to explain: why they don't see their father; why we're losing the house; why I'm so stressed, so often."

She scoffs at Pugachev's saying in the past that she was only with him for his money.

"If I were with him for the money, I would have followed him to France. It would have been a much easier life; he's living in luxury in a massive château. So no, of course I'm not with him for the money."

In a statement to *The Times* in 2017, Pugachev said of Tolstoy, "Her aim in life was to obtain luxury, wealth and glamour. And to meet with me was a unique opportunity for her to realise her dreams."

Today, Tolstoy has set up a company selling clothes for her friends, prelovedby-alexandratolstoy.com, charges commission and says it's doing surprisingly well. Once the virus is over, she'll be able to restart her travel business, taking small groups on personalised tours to Moscow and Kyrgyzstan. She had four trips booked in this later this year, all now cancelled, but next year they should keep her ticking over financially. She's in talks to do more TV work, which she hopes will bear fruit. A regular attender at the Russian Orthodox church, she says the religion teaches that God gives you the cross that you can bear, and she takes comfort in that.

She hopes the final eviction order won't come through until after the end of term, when she can spend the summer at her parents' house. She's long since sold all the trappings of her life with Pugachev, the designer clothes and handbags and jewellery. In the autumn, the eradication of her billionaire lifestyle will be complete, when Bonhams sells all the Chelsea furniture. The children begged her to keep one particular sofa and their rocking horse but, apart from that, everything must go. She hopes that the proceeds will allow her to rent somewhere small, south of the river. She says, with wavering conviction, that she's optimistic about the future.

"I think this has made me tougher and more enterprising. When I look back on my life, the tightest corners are when I've performed the best. All this," she says, waving round the room, "is just stuff. You travel light through life. And I have my children! Aren't I lucky?"

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