



LENINGRAD

by Jamesine Cundell Walker

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# **Leningrad**

**By Jamesine Cundell Walker**

## **Cast**

**Jenny aged early 50s**

**Georgie aged early 50s**

**Hamish aged late 40s, good looking, charismatic.**

The play tells the story of an independent, intelligent older woman looking for love who becomes the victim of coercive control.

**(As the lights go up. Jenny and Georgie sit on two contrasting chairs in different parts of the stage. Georgie is reading an email on her phone until she speaks. A third, different chair sits centre stage, it will host Hamish as the story progresses. Jenny is anxious and distracted, but she wants to tell her story. All the characters will move but they don't interact with the others, until indicated.)**

**Jenny:** I wouldn't care, I don't even like the cold, but then I don't really get to choose. First of all there was going to be a very quiet ceremony, just the two of us, the registrar and any two witnesses we could get hold of; fifteenth of March two thousand and five.

**(Pause)**

I don't know why I agreed to do it like that really. I understand he doesn't have family, but I do, quite a large family. They were hurt that they weren't invited. But he was always very persuasive, full of enthusiasm for yet another great idea, another grand scheme. 'Let's just do it, there's no reason to wait'.

And it was in the end, rather special and very romantic, the sort of secret event you'd expect from a man like him, I suppose. Typical.

We didn't go away straight after; there was a week at home first. Packing the cases, checking the passports and, inevitably lots of post wedding sex; not only trying all the rooms, but sometimes amid the wedding present packaging. Sex on the bubble wrap became one of our euphemisms for his favourite position, or his phrase anyway, for the way he liked it. I was swept along with it, happy, almost euphoric but also just strangely uneasy. Something I couldn't quite identify, something just on the edge of consciousness which had brought in a doubt even years ago even in the first months. Those dreamy early days in the big house set in its beautiful woodland, waiting for the bluebells to bloom.

**(Pause)**

So, my honeymoon was to be St Petersburg in March; believe me it's not an enticing prospect. The spectacle of a snow covered Russia is in the past and the heat of the summer hasn't started; rain was a distinct possibility.

**Georgie: (She speaks rapidly, but doesn't engage with Jenny)** You know, I think it's to save money. I think something's wrong. But Jenny said definitely not, it's just because it's Russia. She says it's like that there. She says it's just another whim of his, or maybe it was linked to a business meeting of some kind. That had happened before, she says.

**Jenny:** We docked in a very industrial looking berth, and even the brass band playing couldn't compensate for the sight of all the sinister looking grey limos. There was a row of them parked on the dockside, with blacked out windows as though they

belonged to a Mafia boss or some KGB officer. Every one of them had a uniformed driver standing to attention; good looking young men wearing dark glasses, even though it was overcast and cloudy, posers really.

And there was that depressing persistent drizzle that keeps every cold surface moist and makes you feel really wet and really cold. It felt dangerous, to be honest. Dark and very communist, even though we're supposed to believe that those days are long gone and the Cold War is far behind. Yeah right! It still felt like a place ruled by a powerful elite; a place where you needed to be careful of what you said. It was frightening but with a little bit of thrill, like being in a Bond movie. Leningrad- that's what it used to be called. It seemed a more appropriate name. St Petersburg was for the rich, it was gay- in the old sense- and very Parisian. It belonged to the days of the Czars when the serfs were kept under the boot. This place still felt like Communism, the United Soviet Socialist Republic. A place pretending to be something it isn't; a place of secrets.

We embarked not to a limousine, but to a rather elderly looking coach. I was surprised. When you're married to a man like this you get used to being whisked away in luxury. That's what had happened before. But he told me it was to do with getting visas and not being permitted to travel, except in a tourist group. That made sense, and part of me would have been a bit afraid to get in a car with one of those drivers, possibly with no English, destination unknown. God, I mean they could have taken you anywhere. At least surrounded by other tourists I felt a little bit safer. Surely this courier woman and all these old folks wouldn't be taking any risks with their safety?

**Georgie:** Anyway, I imagine they'll be safe on this tour. It's an organised thing, not like the holidays they generally go on. There'll be a tour guide and everything. She'll be OK.

**Jenny:** We're staying in the Russ Hotel in Tsentralny area, so we can be close to some of the attractions. The Winter Palace and the Hermitage obviously, but one of the main things he wanted to see was the Smolny Institute where you can find Lenin's office and apartment. I thought it was a strange thing to be interested in on your honeymoon, especially as we had to jump through loads of hoops to get through security beforehand.

You see it's still a Russian government building in parts and clearly they think that everyone in the west is a spy of some sort. I just worried that something might have come out on the security check and because of that we wouldn't get our tickets. And he was usually so cautious about anything like that. That's what made this holiday so different from any of the other places we'd visited in our time together. This is Russia, still recovering from Communism, not the sort of place I would have expected him to go for pleasure.

I thought there would be risks for a man like him.

**Georgie:** I thought there might be risks for him, going to a country like Russia. I mean if all he says is true about his SAS undercover work, then I'm sure he must be on their radar. Well, you'd think so anyway. I think she's scared. And she knows something's wrong. I mean who goes to St Petersburg on honeymoon? But I think there's a British Embassy or something.

Somebody would be able to help her if she needed to get back home, surely.

**Jenny:** Everything was bound to be basic; I understood that, so there were none of the usual treats. I was fully prepared for that. And I'd had lots of treats before, let's be honest! When we went to Pompeii we were met at the docks in Naples by a uniformed chauffeur who spoke broken English and explained to us the best way to see the ruins without the queues.

Then there was the perfectly timed drive down the Amalfi Coast to Sorrento for dinner with still plenty of time to get back to the ship. A lot of the time I'm just embarrassed by that sort of treatment. I think you have to have been born to it to take it in your stride, but I have to admit sliding into the air conditioned car after the baking hot stone of Pompeii felt like a luxury I could just about put up with. Actually it was lush!

But things had changed recently. To start with it felt like I was surrounded by glamour, and a hint of danger. It was romantic, heady, I couldn't believe my luck. And then, after 9/11 he had to go back to the army rifle range to test his skills were still sharp. He used to be in the SAS you see, and still did some work for them from time to time. When he got back he told me so proudly that he'd scored seven bulls out of ten shots on the range. But it did seem strange that he set off in a suit and tie, looked more like a business meeting.

And as to his other interests, well business was brisk, apparently. He went away on a regular basis to do deals in Spain where he had a factory. I didn't mind. I was happy at home and it gave me more time to see Mum and Dad and visit my kids. There were long mobile phone conversations with Indonesia where his import/export business was run by a local man in Jakarta. He said he was a great guy and he could totally trust him to run everything out there. Normally he went out once a year to check, but he hadn't really done that since we'd met.

I'd never seen much stuff happening because the computer server was based in Gibraltar apparently, but he did travel for work quite a lot and finally he persuaded me to give up my job to be able to travel with him whenever we could.

**Georgie:** Things changed after 9/11. That was the start of it. They're at home a lot more now. They used to go away about every six weeks; fabulous places, health spas, amazing hotels, cruises.

That was part of the reason he persuaded her to give up her job, or so she told me. He wanted her to travel with him when he went away on business.

**Jenny:** And then suddenly travel was less, we stayed home more, didn't eat out as often. He blamed the impact of the Boxing Day Tsunami; said it had changed everything. Ships were damaged, harbours destroyed, the export business halted, at least for the moment. There were new import rules and it wasn't so easy for him to travel.

When we were in Gibraltar he was away a big part of the night arranging a deal. That was to do with the Middle East apparently, something else under wraps, although he hinted at armaments.

I did start to worry then, because since the Tsunami, there did seem to be a lot of anxiety about money. Strange things were said; the American IRS was apparently interested in his business activities, money was blocked, accounts frozen. I'd never taken any notice before but there did seem to be lots of things to be concerned about now.

But still, there was the wedding and the Russia trip, so things couldn't be too bad. And I still had a small amount of savings I could lend him if they were needed; just a temporary arrangement of course.

**Georgie:** I think he's spending her money. She says she's grateful she never pays any bills now, but I don't know. I think he's found a way to get at her money and she just hasn't found out yet. He just never seems to be at work. There's never any evidence of his business, he doesn't have an office. I can't pin it down but it's all wrong.

**Jenny:** The Smolny Institute was originally a school for girls, the first in Russia, founded by Catherine the Great. Later it became the headquarters of Russia's Bolshevik Party immediately before the October Revolution.

The tour was timed for about ninety minutes and was all in Russian, but we did have a local interpreter with our group. We were tailed all the way round by a security guard. He was obviously trying to conceal a gun under that smart suit jacket, even I was aware of that. It felt really oppressive with him walking behind us and lurking in the corridors while we admired the rooms. I couldn't figure out what we could possibly see or steal that was of enough importance to warrant this level of scrutiny.

Did this always happen or was it actually the presence of my husband raising the alert level? After all we'd provided our passport details several weeks ago in order to buy the tickets. They had probably traced his military background, they probably knew the full details that I didn't know.

I had the same feelings there as on the dockside. I was genuinely spooked, even in the apparent safety of the group. Lenin had lived and worked there during frightening times, and in one of the main corridors the leader of the Leningrad Communist Party was assassinated. The guide didn't seem to be able to tell us how or where, something else which was veiled in secrecy, like so much of my life nowadays.