

DORIS LESSING **The day that Stalin died**

That day began badly for me with a letter from my Aunt in Bourne-mouth. She reminded me that I had promised to take my cousin Jessie to be photographed at four that afternoon. So I had; and forgotten all about it. Having arranged to meet Bill at four, I had to telephone him to put it off. Bill was a film writer from the United States who, having had some trouble with an un-American Activities Committee, was blacklisted, could no longer earn his living, and was trying to get a permit to live in Britain. He was looking for someone to be a secretary to him. His wife had always been his secretary; but he was divorcing her after twenty years of marriage on the grounds that they had nothing in common. I planned to introduce him to Beatrice.

Beatrice was an old friend from South Africa whose passport had expired. Having been "named" as a communist, she knew that once she went back she would not get out again and wanted to stay another six months in Britain. But she had no money. She needed a job. I imagined that Bill and Beatrice might have a good deal in common; but later it turned out that they disapproved of each other. Beatrice said that Bill was corrupt, because he wrote sexy comedies for T.V. under another name and acted in bad films. She did not think his justification, namely, that a guy has to eat, had anything in its favour. Bill, for his part, had never been able to stand political women. But I was not to know about the incompatibility of my two dear friends; and I spent about an hour following Bill through one switchboard after another, until at last I got him in some studio where he was rehearsing for a film about Lady Hamilton. He said it was quite all right, because he had forgotten about the appointment in any case. Beatrice was not on the telephone so I sent her a telegram.

That left the afternoon free for Cousin Jessie. I was just settling down to work, when comrade Jean rang up to say she wanted to see me during lunch-hour. Jean was for many years my self-appointed guide or mentor towards a correct political viewpoint. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say she was one of several self-appointed guides. It was Jean who, the day after I had my first volume of short stories published, took the morning off work to come and see me, in order to explain that one of the stories, I forget which, gave an incorrect analysis of the class struggle. I remember thinking at the time that there was a good deal in what she said.

When she arrived that day at lunch-time, she had her sandwiches with her in a paper bag, but she accepted some coffee, and said she hoped I didn't mind her disturbing me, but she had been

very upset by something she had been told I had said.

It appeared that a week before, at a meeting, I had remarked that there seemed to be evidence for supposing that a certain amount of dirty work must be going on in the Soviet Union. I would be the first to admit that this remark savoured of flippancy.

Jean was a small brisk woman with glasses, the daughter of a Bishop, whose devotion to the working class was proved by thirty years of work in the Party. Her manner towards me was always patient and kindly. "Comrade," she said, "intellectuals like yourself are under greater pressure from the forces of capitalist corruption than any other type of party cadre. It is not your fault. But you must be on your guard".

I said I thought I had been on my guard; but nevertheless I could not help feeling that there were times when the capitalist press, no doubt inadvertently, spoke the truth.

Jean tidily finished the sandwich she had begun, adjusted her spectacles, and gave me a short lecture about the necessity for unremitting vigilance on the part of the working class. She then said she must go; because she had to be at her office at two. She said that the only way an intellectual with my background could hope to attain to a correct working-class viewpoint was to work harder in the Party; to mix continually with the working class; and in this way my writing would gradually become a real weapon in the class-struggle. She said, further; that she would send me the verbatim record of the Trials in the thirties, and if I read this, I would find my at present vacillating attitude towards Soviet justice much improved. I said I had read the verbatim records a long time ago; and always did think they sounded unconvincing. She said that I wasn't to worry; a really sound working-class attitude would develop with time.

With this she left me. I remember that, for one reason and another, I was rather depressed.

I was just settling down to work again when the telephone rang. It was my cousin Jessie, to say she could not come to my flat as arranged; because she was buying a dress to be photographed in. Could I meet her outside the dress-shop in twenty minutes? I therefore abandoned work for the afternoon and took a taxi. On the way the taxi-man and I discussed the cost of living, the conduct of the government, and discovered that we had everything in common. Then he began telling me about his only daughter, aged eighteen, who wanted to marry his best friend, aged forty-five. He did not hold with this; he'd said so; and thereby lost daughter and friend at one blow. What made it worse was he had just read an article on psychology in the Woman's Magazine his wife took, from which he had suddenly gathered that his daughter was father-fixated. "I felt real bad when I read that," he said,

"It's a terrible thing to come on sudden, a thing like that," He drew up smartly outside the dress-shop and I got out. "I don't see why you should take it to heart," I said. "I wouldn't be at all surprised if we weren't all father-fixated." "That's not the way to talk," he said, holding out his hand for the fare. He was a small bitter-looking man, with a head like a lemon or a pea nut, and his small blue eyes were brooding and bitter. "My old woman's been saying to me for years that I favoured our Hazel too much. What gets me is he might have been in the right of it." "Well," I said, "Look at it this way. It's better to love a child too much than too little." "Love?" he said. "Love, is it? Precious little love or anything else these days if you ask me, and Hazel left home three months ago with my mate George and not so much as a post-card to say where or how."

"Life's pretty difficult for everyone," I said. "What with one thing and another."

"You can say that," he said.

This conversation might have gone on for some time, but I saw my cousin Jessie standing on the pavement watching us. I said goodbye to the taxi-man and turned, with some apprehension, to face her.

"I saw you," she said. "I saw you arguing with him. It's the only thing to do. They're getting so damned insolent these days. My principle is, tip them sixpence regardless of the distance, and if they argue, let them have it. Only yesterday I had one shouting at my back all down the street because I gave him sixpence. But we've got to stand up to them."

My cousin Jessie is a tall girl, broad-shouldered, aged about twenty-five. But she looks eighteen. She has light brown hair which she wears falling loosely around her face, which is round and young and sharp-chinned. Her wide light-blue eyes are virginal and fierce. She is altogether like the daughter of a Viking, particularly when battling with conductors, taximen and porters. She and my Aunt Emma carry on permanent guerilla warfare with the lower orders; an entertainment I begrudge neither of them, because their lives are dreary in the extreme. Besides, I believe their antagonists enjoy it. I remember once after a set-to between cousin Jessie and a taxi-driver, when she marched smartly off, shoulders swinging, he chuckled appreciatively and said: "That's a real' old-fashioned type, that one. They don't make them like that these days."

"Have you bought your dress?" I asked.

"I've got it on," she said.

Cousin Jessie always wears the same outfit: a well-cut suit, a round-necked jersey, and a string of pearls. She looks very nice in it.

"Then we might as well go and get it over," I said.

"Mummy is coming too," she said. She looked at me aggressively.

"But I told her I would not have her with me while I was buying my things. I told her to come and pick me up here. I will not have her choosing my clothes for me."

"Quite right," I said.

My aunt Emma was coming towards us from the tea-room at the corner, where she had been biding her time.

She is a very large woman, and she wears navy-blue and pearls and white gloves like a policeman on traffic duty. She has a big heavy jowled sorrowful face; and her bulldog eyes are nearly always fixed in disappointment on her daughter.

"There!" she said as she saw Jessie's suit. "You might just as well have had me with you."

"What do you mean?" said Jessie quickly.

"I went in to 'Renee's' this morning, and told them you were coming, and I asked them to show you that suit. And you've bought it. You see, I do know your tastes as I know my own."

Jessie lifted her sharp battling chin at her mother, who dropped her eyes in modest triumph, and began poking at the pavement with the point of her umbrella.

"I think we'd better get started," I said.

Aunt Emma and Cousin Jessie, sending off currents of angry electricity into the air all around them, fell in beside me, and we proceeded up the street.

"We can get a bus at the top", I said.

"Yes, I think it would be better," said Aunt Emma. "I don't think I could face the insolence of another taxi-driver today."

"No," said Jessie, "I couldn't either."

We went to the top of the bus, which was empty, and sat side by side along the two seats at the very front.

"I hope this man of yours is going to do Jessie justice," said Aunt Emma.

"I hope so too," I said. Aunt Emma believes that every writer lives in a whirl of photographers, press conferences and publisher's parties. She thought I was the right person to choose a photographer. I wrote to say I wasn't. She wrote back to say it was the least I could do. "It doesn't matter in the slightest anyway," said Jessie, who always speaks in short, breathless, battling sentences, as from an unassuagably painful inner integrity which she doesn't expect anyone else to understand.

It seems that at the boardinghouse where Aunt Emma and Jessie live, there is an old inhabitant who has a brother who is a TV producer. Jessie had been acting in Quiet Wedding with the local Rep. Aunt Emma thought that if there was a nice photo-

graph of Jessie, she could show it to the TV producer when he came to tea with his brother at the boardinghouse, which he was expected to do any week-end now; and if Jessie proved to be photogenic, the TV producer would whisk her off to London to be a TV star.

What Jessie thought of this campaign I did not know. I never did know what she thought of her mother's plans for her future. She might conform or she might not; but it was always the same fierce and breathless integrity of indifference.

"If you're going to take that attitude, dear," said Aunt Emma, "I really don't think it's fair to the photographer."

"Oh, Mummy!" said Jessie.

"There's the conductor," said Aunt Emma, smiling bitterly. "I'm not paying a penny more than I did last time. The fare from Knightsbridge to Little Duchess Street is threepence."

"The fares have gone up," I said.

"Not a penny more," said Aunt Emma.

But it was not the conductor. It was two middle-aged people who steadied each other at the top of the stair, and then sat down not side by side, but one in front of the other. I thought this was odd, particularly as the woman leaned forward over the man's shoulder and said in a loud parrot-voice: "Yes, and if you turn my gold-fish out of doors once more, I'll tell the landlady to turn you out. I've warned you before."

The man, in appearance like a damp grey squashed felt hat, looked in front of him and nodded with the jogging of the bus.

She said: "And there's fungus on my fish. You needn't think I don't know where it came from."

Suddenly he remarked in a high insistent voice: "There are all those little fishes in the depths of the sea, all those little fishes. We explode all these bombs at them, and we're not going to be forgiven for that, are we, we're not going to be forgiven for blowing up the poor little fishes."

She said, in an amiable voice: "I hadn't thought of that," and she left her seat behind him and sat in the same seat with him.

I had known that the afternoon was bound to get out of control at some point; but this conversation upset me., I was relieved when Aunt Emma restored normality by saying: "There. There never used to be people like that. It's the Labour Government."

"Oh Mummy," said Jessie, "I'm not in the mood for politics this afternoon."

We had arrived at the place we wanted, and we got down off the bus. Aunt Emma gave the bus conductor ninepence for the three of us, which he took without comment. "And they're inefficient as well," she said.

It was drizzling and rather cold. We proceeded up the street,

our heads together under Aunt Emma's umbrella.

Then I saw a news-board with the item: Stalin is Dying. I stopped and the umbrella went jerking up the pavement without me. The newspaperman was an old acquaintance. I said to him, "What's this, another of your sales-boosters?" He said: "The old boy's had it if you ask me. Well, the way he's lived, the way I look at it he's had it coming to him. Must have the constitution of a bulldozer." He folded up a paper and gave it to me. "The way I look at it is that it doesn't do anyone any good to live that sort of life. Sedentary. Reading reports and sitting at meetings. That's why I like this job, there's plenty of fresh air." A dozen paces away Aunt Emma and Jessie were standing facing me, huddled together under the wet umbrella. "What's the matter, dear?" shouted Aunt Emma. "Can't you see, she's buying a newspaper," said Jessie crossly.

The newspaperman said: "It's going to make quite a change, with him gone. Not that I hold much with the goings-on out there. But they aren't used to democracy much, are they? What I mean is, if people aren't used to something, they don't miss it."

I ran through the drizzle to the umbrella. "Stalin's dying," I said.

"How do you know?" said Aunt Emma suspiciously.

"It says so in the paper."

"They said he was sick this morning but I expect it's just propaganda. I won't believe it till I see it."

"Oh don't be silly, Mummy, how can you see it?" said Jessie.

We went on up the street. Aunt Emma said: "What do you think, would it have been better if Jessie had bought a nice pretty afternoon dress?"

"Oh Mummy," said Jessie, "can't you see she's upset? It's the same for her as it would be for us if Churchill was dead."

"Oh my dear," said Aunt Emma, shocked, stopping dead. An umbrella spoke scraped across Jessie's scalp, and she squeaked. "Do put that umbrella down now, can't you see its stopped raining?" she said, irritably scratching at her parting.

Aunt Emma pushed and bundled at the umbrella until it collapsed, and Jessie took it and rolled it up. Aunt Emma, flushed and frowning, looked dubiously at me. "Would you like a nice cup of tea?" she said.

"Jessie's going to be late," I said. The photographer's door was just ahead.

"I do hope this man's going to get Jessie's expression," said Aunt Emma. "There's never been one yet that got her look."

Jessie went crossly ahead of us up some rather plushy stairs, that had mauve-and-gold striped wall-paper. At the top there was a burst of Stravinsky as Jessie masterfully opened a door and strode

in. We followed her into what seemed to be a drawing-room, all white and grey and gold. The 'Rites of Spring' tinkled a baby chandelier overhead; and there was no point in speaking until our host, a charming young man in a black velvet jacket, switched off the machine, which he did with an apologetic smile.

"I do hope this is the right place," said Aunt Emma. "I have brought my daughter to be photographed."

"Of course it's the right place," said the young man. "How delightful of you to come." He took my Aunt Emma's white-gloved hands in his own, and seemed to press her down on to a large sofa; a pressure to which she responded with a confused blush. Then he looked at me. I sat down quickly on another divan, a long way from Aunt Emma. He looked professionally at Jessie, smiling. She was standing on the carpet, hands linked behind her back, like an admiral on the job, frowning at him.

"You don't look at all relaxed," he said gently. "It's really no use at all, you know, unless you are relaxed all over."

"I'm perfectly relaxed," said Jessie. "It's my cousin here who isn't relaxed."

I said: "I don't see that it matters whether I'm relaxed or not, because it's not me who is going to be photographed." A book fell off the divan beside me on to the floor. It was 'Prancing Nigger' by Ronald Firbank. Our host dived for it, anxiously.

"Do you read our Ron?" he asked.

"From time to time," I said.

"Personally I never read anything else," he said. "As far as I am concerned he said the last word. When I've read him through, I begin again at the beginning and read him through again. I don't see that there's any point in anyone ever writing another word after Firbank."

This remark discouraged me, and I did not feel inclined to say anything

"I think we could all do with a nice cup of tea," he said. "While I'm making it, would you like the gramophone on again?"

"I can't stand modern music," said Jessie.

"We can't all have the same tastes," he said. He was on his way to the door at the back, when it opened and another young man came in with a tea-tray. He was as light and lithe as the first; with the same friendly ease of manner. He was wearing black jeans and a purple sweater, and his hair looked like two irregular glossy black wings on his head.

"Ah, bless you dear," said our host to him. Then, to us: "Let me introduce my friend and assistant, Jackie Smith. My name you know. Now if we all have a nice cup of tea, I feel that our vibrations might become just a little more harmonious."

All this time Jessie was standing-at-ease on the carpet. He

handed her a cup of tea. She nodded towards me saying: "Give it to her," He took it back and gave it to me. "What's the matter dear?" he asked. "Aren't you feeling well?"

"I am perfectly well," I said, reading the newspaper.

"Stalin is dying," said Aunt Emma. "Or so they would have us believe."

"Stalin?" said our host.

"That man in Russia," said Aunt Emma.

"Oh you mean old uncle Joe. Bless him."

Aunt Emma started. Jessie looked gruffly incredulous.

Jackie Smith came and sat down beside me, and read the newspaper over my shoulder. "Well, well," he said. "Well, well, well, well." Then, he giggled and said: "Nine doctors. If there were fifty doctors I still wouldn't feel very safe, would you?"

"No, not really," I said.

"Silly old nuisance," said Jackie Smith. "Should have bumped him off years ago. Obviously outlived his usefulness at the end of the war, wouldn't you think?"

"It seems rather hard to say," I said.

Our host, a teacup in one hand, raised the other in a peremptory gesture. "I don't like to hear that kind of thing," he said. "I really don't. God knows, if there's one thing I make a point of never knowing a thing about it's politics, but during the war Uncle Joe and Roosevelt were absolutely my pin-up boys. But absolutely."

Here cousin Jessie, who had neither sat down, nor taken a cup of tea, took a stride forward and said angrily: "Look, do you think we could get this damned business over with?" Her virginal pink cheeks shone with emotion, and her eyes were brightly unhappy.

"But my dear," said our host, putting down his cup. "But of course. If you feel like that, of course."

He looked at his assistant Jackie, who reluctantly laid down the newspaper, and pulled the cords of a curtain, revealing an alcove full of cameras and equipment. Then they both thoughtfully examined Jessie. "Perhaps it would help," said our host, "if you could give me an idea what you want it for? Publicity? Dust-jackets? or just your lucky friends?"

"I don't know and I don't care," said cousin Jessie.

Aunt Emma stood up and said: "I would like to catch her expression. It's just a little **look** of hers . . ."

Jessie clenched her fists at her.

"Aunt Emma," I said, "Don't you think it would be a good idea if you and I went out for a little?"

"But my dear . . ."

But our host had put his arm around her, and was easing her to the door. "There's a duck," he was saying. "You do

want me to make a good job of it, don't you? And I never could really do my best, even with the most sympathetic lookers-on.'

Again Aunt Emma went limp, blushing. I took his place at her side, and took her to the door. As we shut it, I heard Jackie Smith saying: "Music, do you think?" And Jessie: "**I loathe** music." And Jackie again: "We do rather find music helps, you know . . ."

The door shut and Aunt Emma and I stood at the landing window, looking down into the street.

"Has that young man done **you**?" she asked.

"He was recommended to me," I said.

Music started up from the room behind us. Aunt Emma's foot tapped on the floor. "Gilbert-and-Sullivan," she said. "Well, she can't say she loathes that. But I suppose she would just to be difficult."

I lit a cigarette. 'The Pirates of Penzance' abruptly stopped.

"Tell me, dear," said Aunt, suddenly roguish, "about all the exciting things you are doing?"

Aunt Emma always says this; and always I try hard to think of portions of my life suitable for presentation to Aunt Emma. "What have you been doing today, for instance?" I considered Bill; I considered Beatrice; I considered comrade Jean.

"I had lunch," I said, "with the daughter of a Bishop."

"Did you dear?" she said doubtfully.

Music again: Cole Porter. "That doesn't sound right to me," said Aunt Emma. "It's modern, isn't it?" The music stopped. The door opened. Cousin Jessie stood there shining with determination. "It's no good," she said. "I'm sorry, Mummy, but I'm not in the mood."

"But we won't be coming to London again for another four months."

Our host and his assistant appeared behind cousin Jessie. Both were smiling rather bravely. "Perhaps we had better forget about it," said Jackie.

Our host said: "Yes, we'll try again later, when everyone is really themselves."

Jessie turned to the two young men and thrust out her hand at them. "I'm very sorry," she said, with her fierce virgin sincerity. "I am really terribly sorry."

Aunt Emma went forward, pushed aside Jessie, and shook their hands. "I must thank you both," she said, "for the tea."

Jackie Smith waved my newspaper over the three heads. "You've forgotten this," he said.

"Never mind, you can keep it," I said.

"Oh bless you, now I can read all the gory details."

The door shut on their friendly smiles.

"Well," said Aunt Emma, "I've never been so ashamed."

"I don't care," said Jessie fiercely. "I really couldn't care less."

We descended into the street. We shook each other's hands. We kissed each other's cheeks. We thanked each other. Aunt Emma and cousin Jessie waved at a taxi. I got on to a bus.

When I got home, the telephone was ringing. It was Beatrice. She said she had got my telegram, but she wanted to see met in any case. "Did you know Stalin was dying?" I said.

"Yes of course. Look, it's absolutely essential to discuss this business on the Copper Belt."

"Why is it?"

"If we don't tell people the truth about it, who is going **to**?"

"Oh well I suppose so," I said.

She said she would be over in an hour. I set out my typewriter and began to work. The telephone rang. It was comrade Jean. "Have you heard the news?" she said. She was crying.

Comrade Jean had left her husband when he became a member of the Labour Party at the time of the Stalin-Hitler Pact, and ever since then had been living in bed-sitting rooms on bread, butter and tea, with a portrait of Stalin over her bed.

"Yes I have," I said.

"It's awful," she said, sobbing. "Terrible. They've murdered him."

"Who has? How do you know?" I said.

"He's been murdered by capitalist agents," she said. "It's perfectly obvious."

"He was 73," I said.

"People don't die just like **that**," she said.

"They do at 73," I said.

"We will have to pledge ourselves to be worthy of him," she said

"Yes," I said, "I suppose we will."