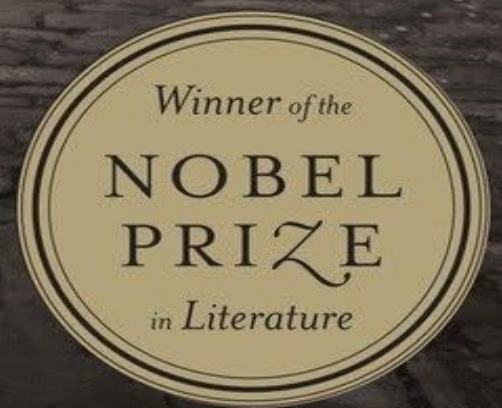


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DORIS  
LESSING

THE  
GOOD  
TERRORIST



**DORIS LESSING**

**THE GOOD  
TERRORIST**

Doris Lessing is the author of numerous award-winning books of fiction and nonfiction, including *The Golden Notebook* and *The Grass Is Singing*. In 2007 she was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. She lives in London.



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# THE GOOD TERRORIST

*Doris Lessing*

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**First Page**

*Also by Doris Lessing*



The house was set back from the noisy main road in what seemed to be a rubbish tip. A large house. Solid. Black tiles stood at angles along the gutter, and into a gap near the base of a fat chimney a bird flew, trailing a piece of grass several times its length.

“I should think 1910,” said Alice. “Look how thick the walls are.” This could be seen through the broken window just above them on the first floor. She got no response, but nevertheless shrugged off her backpack, letting it tumble onto a living rug of young nettles that was trying to digest rusting tins and plastic cups. She took a step back to get a better view of the roof. This brought Jasper into vision. His face, as she expected it would be, was critical and meant to be noticed. For her part, she did not have to be told that she was wearing *her look*, described by him as silly. “Stop it,” he ordered. His hand shot out, and her wrist was encircled by hard bone. It hurt. She faced him, undefiant but confident, and said, “I wonder if they will accept us?” And, as she had known he would, he said, “It is a question of whether we will accept them.”

She had withstood the test on her, that bony pain, and he let her wrist go and went on to the door. It was a front door, solid and sure of itself, in a little side street full of suburban gardens and similar comfortable houses. They did not have slates missing and broken windows.

“Why, why, *why?*” asked Alice angrily, addressing the question, probably, to the universe itself, her heart full of pain because of the capacious, beautiful, and unloved house. She dragged her backpack by its strap after her and joined him.

“Profit, of course,” he said, and pressed the bell, which did not ring. He gave the door a sharp push and they went into a large shadowy hall where stairs went strongly up, turned at a wide landing, and rose out of sight. The scene was illuminated by a hurricane lamp that stood on the floor, in a corner. From a side room came the sound of soft drumming. Jasper pushed open this door, too. The windows were covered by blankets, leaving not a chink of light. A black youth looked up from his family of drums, his

cheeks and teeth shining in candlelight. “Hi,” he said, all his fingers and both feet at work, so that it seemed he was dancing as he sat, or was perhaps on some kind of exercise machine.

This smiling jolly black boy who looked like an advertisement for an attractive holiday in the Caribbean struck Alice’s organ of credibility falsely, and she tucked away a little memo to herself not to forget a first impression of anxiety or even sorrow, which was the real message her nerves were getting from him. She found herself actually on the verge of saying, “It’s all right, it’s okay, don’t worry!” But meanwhile Jasper was demanding, “Where’s Bert?”

The black youth shrugged, nonchalantly, still smiling, and did not for one moment stop his energetic attack on his instruments. Jasper’s tight grip on her upper arm took her out of the room into the hall, where Alice said, “This place smells.”

“Well,” said Jasper, in the clumsily placating way she knew was meant as love, “I suppose you’ll put a stop to that.”

At once, feeling her advantage, she said, “Don’t forget you’ve been living soft for four years. You’re not going to find it easy after that.”

“Don’t call me soft,” he said, and kicked her on the ankle. Not hard, but enough.

This time she went ahead of him and opened a door she felt must be to the kitchen. Light fell on desolation. Worse, danger: she was looking at electric cables ripped out of the wall and dangling, raw-ended. The cooker was pulled out and lying on the floor. The broken windows had admitted rainwater, which lay in puddles everywhere. There was a dead bird on the floor. It stank. Alice began to cry from pure rage. “The bastards,” she cursed. “The filthy stinking fascist bastards.”

They already knew that the Council, to prevent squatters, had sent in the workmen to make the place uninhabitable. “They didn’t even make those wires safe. They didn’t even ...” Suddenly alive with energy, she whirled about, opening doors. Two lavatories on this floor, the bowls filled with cement.

She cursed steadily, the tears streaming. “The filthy shitty swine, the shitty fucking fascist swine ...” She was full of the energy of hate.

Incredulous with it, for she had never been able to believe, in some corner of her, that anybody, particularly not a member of the working class, could obey an order to destroy a house. In that corner of her brain that was perpetually incredulous began the monologue that Jasper never heard, for he would not have authorised it: But they are *people*, people did this. To stop other people from living. I don't believe it. Who can they be? What can they be like? I've never met anyone who could. Why, it must be people like Len and Bob and Bill, *friends*. They did it. They came in and filled the lavatory bowls with cement and ripped out all the cables and blocked up the gas.

Jasper stood and watched her. He was pleased. This fury of energy had banished *her look*, which he hated, when she seemed, all of her, to be swollen and glistening, as if not merely her face but her whole body filled with tears, which oozed from every pore.

Without referring to him, she ran up the stairs, and he followed slowly, listening to how she banged on doors, and then, hearing nothing, flung them open. On the first-floor landing they stood looking into order, not chaos. Here every room had sleeping bags, one or two, or three. Candles or hurricane lamps. Even chairs with little tables beside them. Books. Newspapers. But no one was in.

The smell on this floor was strong. It came from upstairs. More slowly they went up generously wide stairs, and confronted a stench that made Jasper briefly retch. Alice's face was stern and proud. She flung open a door onto a scene of plastic buckets, topped with shit. But this room had been deemed sufficiently filled, and the one next to it had been started. Ten or so red, yellow, and orange buckets stood in a group, waiting.

There were other rooms on this floor, but none were used. None could be used, the smell was so strong.

They went down the stairs, silent, watching their feet, for there was rubbish everywhere, and the light came dimly through dirty windows.

"We are not here," said he, anticipating her, "to make ourselves comfortable. We aren't here for that."

She said, "I don't understand anyone choosing to live like this. Not when it's so easy."

Now she sounded listless, flat, all the incandescence of fury gone.

He was about to start a speech about her bourgeois inclinations, as she could see; but the front door opened, and against the sunlight was outlined a military-looking figure.

“Bert!” he shouted, and jumped down the stairs three at a time. “Bert. It’s Jasper....”

Alice thought maternally, hearing that glad voice ring out, It’s because of his shitty father. But this was part of her private stream, since of course Jasper did not allow her the right to such ideas.

“Jasper,” acknowledged Bert, and then peered through the gloom up at herself.

“Alice—I told you,” said Jasper.

“Comrade Alice,” said Bert. His voice was curt, stern, and pure, insisting on standards, and Jasper’s voice fell into step. “We have just come,” he said. “There was no one to report to.”

“We spoke to him, in there,” remarked Alice, arriving beside them, indicating the room from which came the soft drumming.

“Oh, Jim,” dismissed Bert. He strode to a door they had not opened, kicked it open since it had lost its knob, and went in without looking to see if they followed.

This room was as near to normal as they had seen. With the door shut, you could believe this was a sitting room in an ordinary house, although everything—chairs, a sofa, the carpet—was dingy. The smell was almost shut out, but to Alice it seemed that an invisible film of stench clung to everything, and she would feel it slippery on her fingers if she touched.

Bert stood upright, slightly bent forward, arms at ease, looking at her. But he did not see her, she knew that. He was a dark, thin young man, probably twenty-eight or thirty. His face was full of black shining hairs, and his dark eyes and a red mouth and white teeth gleamed from among them. He wore new stiff dark-blue jeans and a close-fitting dark-blue jacket, buttoned up and tidy. Jasper wore light-blue linen trousers and a striped tee shirt like a sailor’s; but Alice knew he would soon be in clothes like Bert’s, which were

in fact his normal gear. He had had a brief escapade into frivolity due to some influence or other.

Alice knew that the two men would now talk, without concerning themselves with her, and set herself to guard her interests, while she looked out of the bow window into the garden, where rubbish of all kinds reached to the sills. Sparrows were at work on the piles, scratching and digging. A blackbird sat on a milk carton and looked straight at her. Beyond the birds, she saw a thin cat crouched under a hydrangea in young green leaf and slim coronets of pink and blue that would be flowers. The cat was watching her, too, with bright, starved eyes.

Bert reached into a cupboard and took out a Thermos the size of a bucket, and three mugs.

“Oh, you do have electricity, then?” she asked.

“No. A comrade in the next street fills it for me every morning,” he said.

Alice, watching the scene with half her attention, saw how Jasper eyed the flask, and the pouring of the coffee. She knew he was hungry. Because of the row with her mother he had slammed out of the house and not breakfasted. And he had not had time to drink the coffee she had taken up to him. She thought, “But that’s Bert’s supply for the day,” and indicated she only wanted half a cup. Which she was given, exactly as specified.

Jasper drank down his cup at once, and sat looking at the Thermos, wanting more. Bert did not notice.

“The situation has changed,” Bert began, as if this were a continuation of some meeting or other. “My analysis was incorrect, as it happened. I underestimated the political maturity of the cadres. When I put the question to the vote, half decided against, and they left here at once.”

Jasper said, “Then they would have proved unreliable. Good riddance.”

“Precisely.”

“What was the question?” enquired Alice. She used her “meeting voice,” for she had learned that this was necessary if she was to hold her own. To her it sounded false and cold, and she was always embarrassed by it; because of the effort it required, she sounded indifferent, even absent-minded. Yet her eyes were steadily and even severely observing the scene in

front of her: Bert looking at her, or, rather, at what she had said; Jasper looking at the Thermos. Suddenly he was unable to stop himself, and he reached for the jug. Bert said “Sorry,” and pushed it towards him.

“You know what the question was,” said Jasper, sour. “I told you. We are going to join the IRA.”

“You mean,” said Alice, “you *voted* on whether to join the IRA?” She sounded breathless; Bert took it as fear, and he said, with loud, cold contempt, “Shit-scared. They ran like little rabbits.”

Alice persisted, “How was it put to the vote?”

Bert said, after a pause, “That this group should make approaches to the IRA leadership, offering our services as an England-based entity.”

Alice digested this, looking strained because of the effort it cost her to believe it, and said, “But Jasper told me that this house was Communist Centre Union?”

“Correct. This is a CCU squat.”

“But has the leadership of the CCU decided to offer the services of the whole CCU to the IRA? I don’t understand,” she said fiercely, not at all in her “political” voice, and Bert said, curt and offhand, because, as she could see, he was uncomfortable, “No.”

“Then how can a *branch* of the CCU offer its services?”

Here she observed that Jasper was seeking to engage Bert’s eyes in “Take no notice of her” looks, and she forestalled him. “It doesn’t make sense.”

Bert admitted, “You are correct, in a way. The point was discussed. It was agreed that, while approaches could not be made as a group of the CCU, it would be permissible for a group of CCU members to make the approach, as associated individuals.”

“But ...” Alice lost interest. They are at it again, she was thinking. Fudging it. She returned her attention to the rubbish pile a yard beyond the dirty glass. The blackbird had gone. The poor cat was sniffing around the edges of the heap, where flies were crawling.

She said, “What do you do for food here?”

“Take-away.”

“This rubbish is a health hazard. There must be rats.”

“That’s what the police said.”

“Have they been?”

“They were here last night.”

“Oh, I see, that’s why the others left.”

“No,” said Bert. “They left because they got the shits. About the IRA.”

“What did the police say?”

“They gave us four days to leave.”

“Why don’t we go to the Council?” said Alice, in an irritated wail; and as Jasper said, “Oh, there she goes again,” the door opened and a young woman came in. She had short shiny black hair that had been expertly cut, black quick eyes, red lips, a clear white skin. She was glossy and hard, like a fresh cherry. She looked carefully at Bert, at Jasper, and at Alice, and Alice knew she was being seen.

“I’m Pat,” she said. “Bert told me about you two.” And then, “You are brother and sister?”

At once Jasper snapped, “No, we are not!”

But Alice liked it when people made the mistake, and she said, “People often take us for brother and sister.”

Pat examined them again. Jasper fidgeted under the look and turned away, hands in his jacket pockets, as if trying to seem indifferent to an attack.

They were both fair, with reddish gleams in hair that wanted to go into little curls and wisps. Jasper’s was cut very short; Alice’s was short and chunky and serviceable. She cut it herself. They both had pinkish freckled skin. Jasper’s little blue eyes were in round white shallows, and this gave him an angelic, candid air. He was very thin, and wore skin-tight clothes. Alice was stocky, and she had a pudgy, formless look to her. Sometimes a girl of twelve, even thirteen, before she is lit by pubescence, is as she will be in middle age. A group of women are standing on a platform in the Underground. Middle-aged women, with carrier bags, gossiping. Very short women, surely? No, they are girls, of twelve or so. Forty years of being

women will boil through them and leave them as they are now, heavy and cautious, and anxious to please. Alice could seem like a fattish clumsy girl or, sometimes, about fifty, but never looked her age, which was thirty-six. Now it was a girl who returned Pat's look with friendly curiosity from small blue-grey eyes set under sandy lashes.

"Well," said Pat, strolling to the window to stand by Alice, "have you heard that this happy little community is for the chop?"

She looked much older than Alice, was ten years younger. She offered Alice a cigarette, which was refused, and smoked hers needfully, greedily.

"Yes, and I said, Why not negotiate with the Council?"

"I heard you. But they prefer their romantic squalour."

"Romantic," said Alice, disgusted.

"It does go against the grain, negotiating with the Establishment," said Bert.

"Do you mean that this commune is breaking up?" said Jasper suddenly, sounding so like a small boy that Alice glanced quickly to see whether it had been noticed. It had: by Pat, who stood, holding her cigarette to her lips between two fingers and distancing them, then bringing them back, so that she could puff and exhale, puff and exhale. Looking at Jasper. Diagnosis.

Alice said quickly, her heart full of a familiar soft ache, on Jasper's account, "It doesn't go against my grain. I've done it often."

"Oh, you have, have you?" said Pat. "So have I. Where?"

"In Birmingham. A group of seven of us went to the Council over a scheduled house. We paid gas and electricity and water, and we stayed there thirteen months."

"Good for you."

"And in Halifax, I was in a negotiated squat for six months. And when I was in digs in Manchester—that was when I was at university—there was a house full of students, nearly twenty of us. It started off as a squat, the Council came to terms, and it ended up as a student house."

During this the two men listened, proceedings suspended. Jasper had again filled his mug. Bert indicated to Pat that the Thermos was empty, and



she shook her head, listening to Alice.

“Why don’t we go to the Council?” said Alice directly to Pat.

“I would. But I’m leaving anyway.” Alice saw Bert’s body stiffen, and he sat angry and silent.

Pat said to Bert, “I told you last night I was leaving.”

Alice had understood that this was more than political. She saw that a personal relationship was breaking up because of some political thing! Every instinct repudiated this. She thought, involuntarily, What nonsense, letting politics upset a personal relationship! This was not really her belief: she would not have stood by it if challenged. But similar thoughts often did pass through her mind.

Pat said, to Bert’s half-averted face, “What the fuck did you expect? At an ordinary meeting like that—two of them from outside, we didn’t know anything about them. We don’t know anything about the couple who came last week. Jim was in the room, and he isn’t even CCU. Suddenly putting forward that resolution.”

“It wasn’t sudden.”

“When we discussed it before, we decided to make individual approaches. To discuss it with individuals, carefully.”

Her voice was full of contempt. She was looking at—presumably—her lover as though he was fit for the dustbin.

“You’ve changed your mind, at any rate,” said Bert, his red lips shining angrily from his thickets of beard. “You agreed that to support the IRA was the logical position for this stage.”

“It is the only correct attitude; Ireland is the fulcrum of the imperialist attack,” said Jasper.

“I haven’t changed my mind,” said Pat. “But if I am going to work with the IRA or anyone else, then I’m going to know who I am working with.”

“You don’t know us,” said Alice, with a pang of painful realisation: she and Jasper were part of the reason for this couple’s breakup.

“No hard feelings,” said Pat. “Nothing personal. But yes. The first I heard of you was when Bert said he had met Jasper at the CND rally Saturday.

And I gather Bert hadn't even met you."

"No," said Alice.

"Well, I'm sorry, but that's not the way to do things."

"I see your point," said Alice.

A silence. The two young women stood at the window, in an aromatic cloud from Pat's cigarette. The two men were in chairs, in the centre of the room. The rainlike pattering of the drum came from Jim beyond the hall.

Alice said, "How many people are left here now?"

Pat did not answer, and at last Bert said, "With you two, seven." He added, "I don't know about you, Pat."

"Yes, you do," said Pat, sharp and cold. But they were looking at each other now, and Alice thought: No, it won't be easy for them to split up. She said, "Well, if it's seven, then four of us are here now. Five if Pat ... Where are the other two? I want to get an agreement that I go to the Council."

"The lavatories full of cement. The electricity cables torn out. Pipes smashed," said Bert on a fine rising, derisive note.

"It's not difficult to put it right," said Alice. "We did it in Birmingham. The Council smashed the place to a ruin. They pulled the lavatories completely out there. All the pipes. Filled the bath with cement. Piled garbage in all the rooms. We got it clean."

"Who is going to pay for it?" That was Bert.

"We are."

"Out of what?"

"Oh, belt up," said Pat, "it costs us more in take-away and running around cadging baths and showers than it would to pay electricity and gas."

"It's a point," said Bert.

"And it would keep Old Bill off our backs," said Alice.

Silence. She knew that some people—and she suspected Bert, though not Pat, of this—would be sorry to hear it. They enjoyed encounters with the police.

Bert said unexpectedly, “Well, if we are going to build up our organisation, we aren’t going to need attention from Old Bill.”

“Right on,” said Pat. “As I’ve been saying.”

Silence again. Alice saw it was up to her. She said, “One problem. In this borough they need someone to guarantee the electricity and gas. Who is in work?”

“Three of the comrades who left last night were.”

“Comrades!” said Bert. “Opportunistic shits.”

“They are very good, honest communists,” said Pat. “They happen not to want to work with the IRA.”

Bert began to heave with silent theatrical laughter, and Jasper joined him.

“So we are all on Social Security,” said Alice.

“So no point in going to the Council,” said Bert.

Alice hesitated and said painfully, “I could ask my mother ...”

At this Jasper exploded in raucous laughter and jeers, his face scarlet. “Her mother, bourgeois pigs ...”

“Shut up,” said Alice. “We were living with my mother for four years,” she explained in a breathless, balanced voice, which seemed to her unkindly cold and hostile. “Four years. Bourgeois or not.”

“Take the rich middle class for what you can get,” said Jasper. “Get everything out of them you can. That’s my line.”

“Yes, yes,” said Alice. “I agree. But she did keep us for four years.” Then, capitulating, “Well, why shouldn’t she? She *is* my mother.” This last was said in a trembling, painful little voice.

“Right,” said Pat, examining her curiously. “Well, no point in asking mine. Haven’t seen her for years.”

“Well, then,” said Bert, suddenly getting up from the chair and standing in front of Pat, a challenge, his black eyes full on her. “So you’re not leaving after all?”

“We’ve got to discuss it, Bert,” she said, hurriedly, and walked over to him, and looked up into his face. He put his arm around her and they went out.

Alice surveyed the room. Skilfully. A family sitting room it had been. Comfortable. The paint was not too bad; the chairs and sofa probably stood where they had then. There was a fireplace, not even plastered over.

“Are you going to ask your mother? I mean, to be a guarantor?” Jasper sounded forlorn. “And who’s going to pay for getting it all straight?”

“I’ll ask the others if they’ll contribute.”

“And if they won’t?” he said, knowingly, sharing expertise with her, a friendly moment.

“Some won’t, we know that,” she said, “but we’ll manage. We always do, don’t we?”

But this was too direct an appeal to intimacy. At once he backed away into criticism. “And who’s going to do all the work?”

As he had been saying now for fourteen, fifteen years.

In the house in Manchester she had shared with four other students she had been housemother, doing the cooking and shopping, housekeeping. She loved it. She got an adequate degree, but did not even try for a job. She was still in the house when the next batch of students arrived, and she stayed to look after them. That was how Jasper found her, coming in one evening for supper. He was not a student, had graduated poorly, had failed to find a job after halfhearted efforts. He stayed on in the house, not formally living there but as Alice’s “guest.” After all, it was only because of Alice’s efforts that the place had become a student house: it had been a squat. And Jasper did not leave. She knew he had become dependent on her. But then and since he had complained she was nothing but a servant, wasting her life on other people. As they moved from squat to squat, commune to commune, this pattern remained: she looked after him, and he complained that other people exploited her.

At her mother’s he had said the same. “She’s just exploiting you,” he said. “Cooking and shopping. Why do you do it?”

“We’ve got four days,” said Alice now. “I’m going to get moving.” She did not look at him, but walked steadily past him and into the hall. She carried her backpack into the room where Jim was drumming and said,