

8. Where Is That Photo? A Summer of Snaps and Studio Portraits

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Cover image: Norah Hodgkinson, 1941, W.W. Winter, Derby. A selection from Norah's archive, Alison Twells, 2025. Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal.

8. Where Is That Photo? A Summer of Snaps and Studio Portraits

‘Darling’, Jim writes to Norah in mid-June, ‘I am longing for your photo so I can have it on view when writing to you’. Jim has been pressing for weeks now for a photograph ‘for keeps’. He continues to nudge over the coming weeks: ‘How are the snap’s of you looking. I will have time to study them now I am home’. But Norah has nothing to give him, not yet. She is short on snaps in 1941. As revealed by Jim’s ‘dearest dimples’ address, she had sent him her most recent portrait, her bridesmaid photo from August 1939.

But suddenly, that summer, it was snaps all round. In the lead up to her final exams, Norah borrows a camera (from whom, we don’t know) to take photographs of schoolteachers and friends on the bench in the grassy ‘quad’. That same week, Jim sends her more *lovely photos of Danny*, his younger brother who was on a training course in Derby.

These snaps are surely among those in Norah’s suitcase and which I now have laid out on my desk. I dearly wish I could show them to you but for now, at least, ethical considerations must prevail. You’ll have to take my word for it that they are two good-looking boys. Jim, sailor-suited and in his Royal Navy cap, is shorter and stockier than his brother, his features – broad, full lips, straight nose, hazel eyes – pleasant and even. On another photo, sent to Norah at a later date, his handsome appearance is ever so slightly spoiled by the sense that his mouth is crowded with too many teeth.

Danny was suave. One pre-war snap shows him lounging in a park, cool and casual in an open-necked polo shirt. In another, he wears a camel coat and cashmere scarf as he leans against a tree trunk in a studio in Westward Ho! Then we see him besuited, Brylcreem-ed and oozing prospects, standing at a gate on a street of modern houses. Two wartime snaps show a smart and chisel-boned officer cadet in the shiny modern RAF. He is most handsome on the second of these, dated 1944. His smile

makes the difference, tautening the skin across his cheekbones and adding a twinkle to his eyes.

Jim reveals in this June letter that he has asked Danny to meet Norah and sincerely hopes she 'will not be offended' by this request. Is this introduction a way of building familiarity and trust, drawing her more securely into his life? Or is it borne of an anxiety, suggested by his questions about schooling and dormitories, a hope that his brother will confirm that Norah is not a too-posh grammar school girl, out of his reach? *20th June: Received a letter from my sweetie. He's going home. Hope he's not ill because I've got it pretty bad on him. Says Danny will try to meet me.*

Norah is not offended, not in the slightest. But when, on 5th July, Danny does *not turn up*, she is unperturbed. She has plenty else to think about. After her *last Scripture, Gym & Art lessons ever!*, followed by her *last Tutorial, French test, Arithmetic & Biology lessons* the following week, Norah is headlong into her Oxford School Certificate exams – some *ghastly*, one *lousy*, a few *not bad*. She continues to follow the war, noting the Syrian Armistice and the pact of allegiance between Britain and the USSR. She worries about Jim, who is out of touch again. *Where on earth has Jim got to? Where is my Jim?* As she leaves school forever, a letter arrives from Danny. At an airbase in Wiltshire, he is due to go home for a week's leave (*on a motorbike*, Norah writes). It seems that *he too has not heard from Jim for a very long time*. He encloses *a lovely photo of him for keeps*.

These airmen: they had allure. The 1930s had seen the RAF transformed from a rudimentary fleet – biplanes with open cockpits, wooden propellers and engines of no more than 650 horsepower – to the most modern and technologically advanced of the armed services; a 'new class of warriors'. And if the nation had been ambivalent about their youthful, carefree swagger, everything had changed the previous summer. While the Army was so far away in the Med and North Africa, the men of Fighter Command, Churchill's glorious few, were dog-fighting in British skies, and the 'bomber boys' in the great four-engined machines – the Lancasters, Stirlings and Halifaxes – risking it all with their nightly German raids.¹

'I can't describe the effect wings have on a WAAF', wrote Joan Wyndham, referring to the pilot's badge above the left breast. Quite how much airmen should cash in on their erotic appeal was a subject of disagreement in the RAF. Many among the top brass thought it best crew members steered clear of women, lest they were distracted from the job at hand. But as Nevil Shute wrote in his 1944 novel. *Pastoral*: for 'everybody at Hartley aerodrome [...] love was as essential a commodity as petrol, and much more interesting'.²

But for now, at least, Norah is perfectly happy with her sailor. *Where is my beloved?* she writes, as Jim falls silent again.

Norah was displeased with her first attempt to get a decent photograph of herself. Taken in Derby by a 'Mr. B.', it was *horrid. Absolutely lousy*. She couldn't possibly send it to Jim. She and Marsie made another trip, this time to the well-established studio of W. W. Winter on Midland Road.

In these years just before camera prices dropped and ordinary families began taking their own snaps, a trip to a photographic studio was quite an event. Not cheap, involving anticipation and forward planning, such portraits often marked a moment of transition: an engagement, a new baby, the entry into adulthood with a first job, an imminent death.³ They were a rarity for the Hodgkinson family. We have photos of Marsie and Pop on their engagement (although, oddly, not their wedding day), some portraits of propped-up chubby babes and growing children, then – none at all. We can only assume it was the lack of funds that prohibited a series of 'pop as paterfamilias' portraits that Norah's paternal grandparents had enjoyed in later life.

This trip to Winter's: what would Norah tell me, if I was able to sit with her and talk about her studio photo, as historian Penny Tinkler has done with her interviewees?⁴ Would she remember anything of how she felt that morning as she ironed her best frock and darkened her newly shaped brows? Would she remember snatches of her conversation with Marsie – about not wearing too much make-up, maybe, or which bus they should catch into town? Once at Winter's, she will have given her dark hair one last brush, checking her deep parting, re-gripping, hoping perhaps that her lighter brown roots would not be too noticeable in the sepia-toned image. Did she feel relaxed as she listened to the photographer's instructions: how to stand, hold her arms, perch against the bench?

I'd ask her about her dress. It must have been a special one as we found the pattern among her possessions when she died. I assume that it was made by Marsie in 1940, the year of the missing diary. It is not 'Utility': buttons, size of collar, gathered yoke and plentiful knife pleats to the skirt place it at the start of the war.⁵ The colour? If only because Norah records in her diary that she bought blue and then green dress fabric in 1941, my guess is russet red or milk chocolate brown.



Fig. 24 Norah, W. W. Winter, Derby, 1941. Private papers of Norah Hodgkinson.

I'd quiz her too about the range of 'looks' on offer. While the studio style had become more relaxed, the question still stands of how much control the sitter could exert over her depiction. There would be a small number of options, including the one that Norah chose: informal but not too casual, half-sitting on a bench, with a backdrop of plain 'domestic' walls. What were the possibilities that she rejected? Too stiff and stuffy, perhaps? Too sultry? Without her Victorian-born mother watching on, might she have been more exploratory, made a different choice?⁶

And how do we see her, you the reader, and me, her great-niece? In *Camera Lucida*, his extraordinary study of photography and grief on the death of his mother, Roland Barthes proposes the idea of the *punctum*, the element of a photographic image that unexpectedly moves the viewer. The word is from the Latin, meaning to prick or to wound, and refers to an unexpected but arresting detail that affects us on an emotional level, unintended by both photographer and sitter and not necessarily noticed by other viewers. It is often something small, even banal, that bursts through the planned elements of the image – the set, the careful pose – to catch us off guard, to elicit a response, to feel, in Barthes' words, a laceration or 'tiny jubilations ... buried in myself.'⁷

Barthes' *punctum* requires no prior knowledge of a photograph or its setting; its purest impact is on a viewer coming to it fresh. But my sense of Norah's later life shapes the power of her image. I am struck most of all by the contrast with her later portrait from 1945, the one that graces my mantelpiece (see Fig. 28). Her adopted movie-star gaze – elegantly impassive, eyes resting on the middle distance – is far removed from the immediacy of this earlier photo, where Norah smiles directly at the camera, her symmetrical features innocent, youthful and open.

I have known this portrait of Norah forever and yet it is only now, in the context of the adventure that was her life in 1941, that I can see its essence; the meaning that lies outside of the frame. At sixteen, with a sailor boyfriend and an impending first job in Derby, nine miles in the opposite direction from her school, her world is opening up, unfurling before her like rolling green meadows on a fresh summer's day. She is on the cusp of a new life, anticipating happiness, poised to seize the day.

And what was it that Jim had said? That her bridesmaid snap had kept his spirits high. Norah hoped this pic would do the same trick. And more besides, perhaps.⁸

Three weeks, Winter's said. When the photo arrived, she'd send a copy straight to Jim.

