

6. Dearest Dimples

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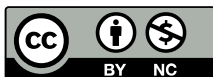
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Cover image: Norah Hodgkinson, 1941, W.W. Winter, Derby. A selection from Norah's archive, Alison Twells, 2025. Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal.

6. Dearest Dimples

‘Dear Norah’, Jim writes on 5th March, ‘your letter has reached me at a time when things seem dull and uninteresting, but thanks to you for raising my spirits from the depths of the sea to the heights of the heavens above’. After filling her in on his naval career to date, Jim tells Norah about his family life. Four of his five brothers are in the Services, he reports, one in the RAF, the others in the Army, Armoured Corps and Air Force Cadets, while the youngest is still at school. Their father is a locomotive shed chageman, an air raid warden and in the Home Guard. ‘We are a loving family’, he writes, ‘and we keep in constant touch with one another’. (Jim also has two sisters and a mother. Why they fail to get a mention here, I have no idea.)

Is Jim hoping to ascertain how posh she is, when he asks whether Norah had won a scholarship, like his little brother? ‘I think you must have swell times at those kinds of schools’, he writes, lamenting his own focus on sport and subsequent status as ‘the poorest scholar in my family’. Hence, he is a Royal Navy stoker while two of his brothers, on account of their education, had become corporals in just one year. But Jim isn’t daft. ‘Every time I come in contact with my grammar school brother he gets me on a spelling B’, he writes. ‘This was his last one: “It is painful to witness the embarrassment of a harassed pedlar gauging the symmetry of a peeled potato.” I made one mistake, put one m in symmetry’.

We can hear Norah’s questions in Jim’s replies. Romances are his preferred read, he tells her, citing as his favourites Rider Haggard’s *She* and *King Solomon’s Mines* and a trio of novels by Warwick Deeping. Jim has ‘also’ seen the film *Balalaika*, and his favourite stars are Alice Fay, Gloria Jean, Deanna Durbin, Jean Muir, Madge Evans and Paulette Goddard. He likes listening to Vera Lynn, Evelyn Dall and Kitty Masters, but is ‘no lover of swing or dance jazz’. We hear too

Norah's expressions of admiration. 'Our job is nothing', Jim writes, 'and we are happy when tossing about the ocean just hoping there will be a fan mail when we return to harbour'. He tells her about the *Elgin* being mined, and that their rescue of survivors from the *Dunoon* had resulted in medals for the captain and the coxswain; 'but it is all in our day's work'.

'I see you have the Arsenal's colours, red and white', Jim says, in reference to her school scarf and hat ribbon. The north London club is his team; with his claim never to have heard of Derby County, he edges gently into banter. In April, five letters in, Jim tells Norah that he tries to picture her, 'Blonde about 5' 6"'. He will 'sleep with her in his thoughts', he says, signing off 'Cheerio Blondie?' She must have put him right, as he opens his next letter with a half-hearted apology: 'I am sorry about the blonde and brunette affair, but being candid, the brunette is preferred'. He asks what her family have to say about their correspondence; she must get her leg pulled. He steps it up: 'We are just leaving port for an unknown destination but it does not stop me corresponding to my —?'

'Dearest Norah', Jim writes, his 'cheerio' now accompanied by 'lots of love'. Norah confides to her diary that he has sent *two beautiful snaps of him & one of brother Danny in RAF* and asked to see a photo in return. Just as Jim's photos of himself and his family – of sentimental value – are to be admired and then returned, Norah can trust him with her snap.

But Norah really has only one photo to send him: her bridesmaid snap from Helen's wedding, taken in the garden at Moira Dale before the little group made their way to the Baptist Chapel in the village. She liked the photo very much, just as she had loved everything about that day. But as she had stood in front of the man brandishing the Box Brownie in August 1939, her concerns were no doubt very different from those in 1941. Not to catch the peach net over-dress on the rose thorns. That her nose was well powdered and her hair, set to curl the night before, still bobbed neatly. That as the shutter clicked, she wasn't caught in the sunlight, squinting like a bag of nails. Wind forward twenty months, to Norah a little uneasy that she looked too young in this photo, too childish, to send it to Jim.



Fig. 21 Norah as bridesmaid at her sister Helen's wedding, August 1939. Private papers of Norah Hodgkinson.

She needn't have worried.

'Dearest Dimples', Jim opens his next letter of 12th April: 'We have just returned off night patrol, and half an hour afterwards your nice letter was handed to me. Gee! I think you are very attractive and pretty'. He now asks for a snap to keep, 'for my writing box looks rather bare without a girl's photo'. He likes it that she ended her last letter 'with love' and imagines walking with her down a country lane. 'I thought of you 5.30pm Good Friday when your favourite song came through on the ship's wireless, Smoke Gets in Your Eyes'. *14th April 1941: Received a rather romantic letter from Jim. Called me 'dearest dimples'.*

Folded inside the envelope with Jim's next letter is a lovely 'Royal Navy' handkerchief.



Fig. 22 Royal Navy silk handkerchief. Private papers etc. of Norah Hodgkinson.
Photo: A. Twells, 2025.

A beautiful piece of handiwork, delicate lace framing a silk centrepiece of the most unexpectedly glorious purple, it had quite possibly been sewn by Jim himself.¹ Norah is delighted: *it is terribly sweet of him*.

Within a few short weeks she is 'my darling', my 'dream girl'. Jim tells her that he hopes one day 'to collect the four kisses' she had placed with her signature. 'Do you mind my intimate feelings towards you?', he asks. He would like a lock of her hair: 'it is a common thing in our ship and I would like to be in fashion'. He is still careful: 'Norah if you do not approve of some of my saucy remarks tell me where to get off, but please don't. I shall let smiling through play its part if your Prince Charming comes along ... Tons of love and xxxxx xxxxx', he writes, ending with a suggestive 'P.S. The best things in life are free but very hard to get.'

As Jim steps up the intimacy, we do not know if Norah finds him a little too bold. If she has any qualms, she pushes them to one side. He is aboard a minesweeper, in the freezing North Sea, and if her letters and photo make him 'the happiest person afloat', as he claims, then that is good enough for her. And his chat is just within the acceptable parameters of banter which, growing up with three brothers and their

friends, she will know well enough. Just sixteen, about to take her exams and leave school that summer, she is enjoying this introduction to a new grown-up world of flirtation and romance.

28th April 1941: No letter. Terribly disappointed. When Jim's letters fail to arrive at the end of April, Norah's disappointment soon spirals into anxiety. *29th: Still no letter. ON 6 & 9 NEWS THAT H.M.S ELGIN HAD BROUGHT DOWN HEINKEL III. OH JIM! Went about in a trance. Heard cuckoo.* We see here another kind of 'diary time': a day split between the postman's fleeting failure to deliver the longed-for letter that morning and the six o'clock news; a day in which birdsong is the only other event of note.

Norah will have heard about ships around Britain that had been bombed, blown up or sunk. As well as the Luftwaffe's heavy blows on the ports at Bristol, Merseyside and the Clyde, the three months between late February and late May 1941 had seen 142 merchant ships sunk by U-boats and a further 179 in air attacks. In mid-April, Churchill had ordered the Ministry of Information to stop publishing the weekly shipping losses, fearing their usefulness to the Germans and their impact on morale at home. In that week alone, one ship in a convoy near Cromer went down, as did an anti-aircraft vessel off the Tyne. HMS *Raleigh* took a direct hit at Portsmouth, forty-two dead and thirteen injured. A minesweeper off Milford Haven was sunk with 'all hands lost'.²

Did Norah imagine the range of feelings that accompanied the signal from the skipper that enemy planes were approaching? Fifty miles off, then twenty-five, ten, five. An initial excitement maybe: it could be so dull on board, a bit of a scrap was a welcome change. Then the first sighting of the tiny black dots in the sky and hearts skipping beats. Fear giving way to purposefulness as men jump to their duties, pointing their guns. Resignation as bombs rain down, just missing them, dropping into the sea or hitting other ships full of boys and men just like them, which go up – and then down – in seconds. But the *Elgin* on that April night not only survived with no casualties but brought down an enemy plane. Petty Officer Archie Snook and Able Seaman Robert White were decorated after the war.

Norah knows none of this and yet she seems to know it all.

30th April: Returned to school. Still no news so had a good old weep. Mock Oxford on May 8th & Practical Domestic Science on May 26th.

1st May: Had Hygiene instead of Music Appreciation. Oh, Jim where have you got to?

2nd: Rolled tennis court. 48,000 British troops evacuated from Greece. Wonder whether Jim is there. If he doesn't write soon I'll go mad. Had clothes inspection.

3rd: Still no news. Bought blue shoes from Wyles. Churchill made speech.

Norah's use of parataxis, the juxtaposition of unrelated daily events, is at its comical best in these entries. The high drama of the war at sea and the first cuckoo of spring. Churchill's speech and her new blue shoes.³ Her sense of melodrama too, expressed in her tears, dramatic trance and capitalised expressions of worry. I imagine giddy breaktimes in the High School 'quad' (remember Bernard Limb?) as Norah and her friends make their correspondents the focus of their days. There may well have been girls amongst her friends who were in a similar boat. While Mary Belton's exchange with a seaman extended to only a couple of letters, did Kathleen, Doreen or Agnes enjoy an ongoing correspondence with a romantic sailor boy?

Central to their excitement, no doubt, was the question of where it might lead. 'Marriage is one of the few things the war has not knocked sideways', wrote Leonora Eyles in *Woman's Own*. 'It flourishes in wartime.' In 1940, 534,000 weddings took place, 40,000 more than in 1939 and an increase of 125,000 on 1938. Granted, these were mainly weddings between couples who had met before the war, many shortening their courtships due to the call-up, others catapulted by heightened emotion into hastily-arranged matches. Weddings between people who met because of the war – like all the local girls whose affairs with soldiers and airmen billeted in Castle Donington Norah will note in her future diaries – would come in a few years' time. But their courtships were starting now, at dances up and down the country, maybe even through letter-writing and sock-knitting... As Lord Castlemaine had said, if a girl ended up not married after the war, then she simply was not trying hard enough.⁴

I am reminded of Millicent King, the main character in Margaret Forster's *Diary of an Ordinary Woman*, who is shocked by the obsession

with marriage among the young women with whom she shares a hut as a WAAF. 'In our hut at night, the talk is endlessly about men and marriage, it's absolutely incessant [...] The girl in the next bed to me is at this moment describing how she will have dark red roses at her wedding and the bridesmaids will be in blue and silver, yet she hasn't even a boyfriend'.⁵

Indeed, it is hard to overestimate the prominence of love and romance in the lives of girls of Norah's generation. The 1920s had been a watershed decade as the booming mass market of consumer capitalism and new focus on leisure and pleasure promised young women lives that were vastly different from those of their mothers. Romance was at the heart of it, replacing the pragmatic approach to courtship of past generations: finding a spouse who was capable and reliable, who could earn a family wage or budget and keep a clean house. Hair bobbed, noses powdered and skirts shortened, young women devoured the new magazines, full of the pleasures and perils of men. They flocked to the cinema, often multiple times a week, and at dance halls, they cast off chaperones and old notions of propriety to foxtrot and flirt.⁶ 'God is love' became 'love is God' in these decades, writes philosopher Simon May, as romance, tasked with filling the gap left by the retreat of religion, became the 'ultimate source of meaning and happiness'.⁷

As Norah and her friends began their High School careers in the mid-1930s, young women were immersed in a new world of feminine beauty, glamour and romance. These were the years when J. B. Priestley described lipstickied factory girls as 'looking like actresses' and George Orwell noted the mass production of clothes that allowed women to dream of being Greta Garbo.⁸ A film-star style, achievable by all. Norah decorated her Latin exam paper in 1941 with doodles of glamorous Hollywood stars; her copy-cat bolero knitting project was inspired by teenage actress Deanna Durbin. While her 'crazes' for 1938 included celebrity sportsmen rather than film stars, her list captures perfectly the giddy search for romance that was an essential part of being a modern girl.⁹

For some among the older generation, young women's devotion to romance was cause for concern. A particular worry were girls of the working class, especially those with a bit of hard-earned cash, characterised in one memorable description by by their 'emphasized

erotic attitude, [...] their love of dancing and cinema, their loud shrieks of laughter in the streets'. In her studies of girls' leisure in the 1940s, Pearl Jephcott emphasised young women's 'unrealistic expectations and unsuitable values', including an unhealthy preoccupation with the opposite sex, nurtured by romance magazines. 'It boils down to this', she wrote: while girls knew that the world presented in such magazines is 'quite unlike the real world', they nonetheless hoped that some glamour may come their way: 'It is just possible that the boss's son may ask them to marry him, or a pilot-officer may invite them to his father's country mansion next week-end'.¹⁰

The focus on romance and sex appeal was amplified during the Second World War. Young women were tasked by films, magazines and government propaganda with keeping up men's morale through gentle flirtation and looking good. Yardley's No Surrender range promoted 'the subtle bond between good looks and good morale... Never must we consider careful grooming a quisling gesture. PUT YOUR BEST FACE FORWARD'. Readers of *Picture Post* were advised at the start of the war to 'invest in a warm dressing gown with large pockets to keep your air raid beauty make up in...' while Ursula Bloom in *Woman's Own* recommended beauty preparations for 'His' leave: 'the right make-up for your kind of face helps you to look radiantly lovely for a very special occasion'. Despite shortages, make-up was protected during the war years in 'one of the most complicated of the controls over manufacture and supply that had been evolved within the Board of Trade'.¹¹

Men in the forces were encouraged to share this expectation. The Navy circulated pictures of pin-up girls and 'bathing belles', to keep the sailors happy, while the Army used the same to teach map reading and camouflage techniques to new recruits. The British forces' newspaper, *Union Jack*, reprinted *The Daily Mirror's* popular cartoon strip, 'Jane', which famously featured a scatty and glamorous young woman, previously a socialite and now variously a land girl or munitions worker, with a hallmark ability to accidentally lose her clothes and bare her breasts. As one member of the wartime Admiralty recalled, none of his colleagues 'ever settled down to his day's work until he had looked to see whether the young lady's clothes were on or off. During periods of bad news the editor always kept up morale by keeping her clothes

off'. Another serviceman put it rather more wryly: 'Many of us follow her adventures with more interest than the war against Japan'.¹²

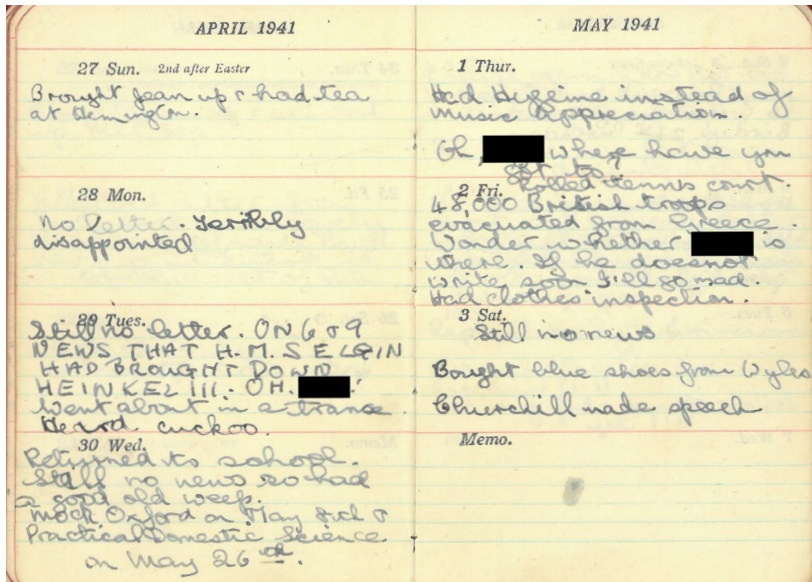


Fig. 23 Extract from Norah's diary, April 1941. Jim's real name has been obscured in these entries. Private papers of Norah Hodgkinson. Photo: A. Twells, 2025.

When finally he writes, Jim is bound by confidentiality and restricted by the censor to keep his wartime duties strictly under wraps. 'We have had a busy and exciting time so I have been unable to write to my good-looking friend', he tells Norah. He is full of banter: 'It is impossible to wrap up one of your dimples so what else can I cadge off you? ... What are Arsenal's chances in the cup, I bet you a kiss [...] Have you found a photo for me, of course I prefer you in person, but there is a war on'. His cheek and fun make Norah laugh: *10th May: Replied to Jim. Arsenal & Preston drew in Cup Final (1-1). So my fate is not sealed yet!!!*

When Jim again fails to reply to her letters a few weeks later, Norah picks up his wartime catchphrase, popularised that year by Vera Lynn. *My last letter to Jim returned saying 'No Trace'. Wonder what has happened. Must keep 'Smilin Thro'.* Her resolve doesn't last: *If Jim never writes again,*

I'm sure I'll go crazy. On 5th June, as Castle Donington raises £83,000 for War Weapons Week and Preston beat Arsenal 3-2 in the Cup Final replay, Jim replies: *At last HE has written to me*, Norah writes. While Norah is genuinely worried for Jim's safety, she is a modern girl, her diaries revealing the new set of grown-up romantic emotions that she is trying on for size. *Oh, Jim!*¹³

'Dear Norah, you cannot imagine how happy your letter made me today'. Jim skips back and forth between war news and poorly punctuated flirtation. Did she know they had brought a Heinkel down? His brother is at Derby for a Parachute Jump Instructor course. 'Darling! what about a snap, honestly I regard you a dream lover (may I?). Do you show your mother all your letters. What about a love letter from you "shy"'. He signs off: 'Cheerio sweetheart, all my love xxxxxxxxxx Jim. Always thinking of you'.

What do Norah's letters really mean to Jim? Is she, as he claims, his only girl correspondent, holding a special place in his affections? Or are her letters trophies among his fellow sailors, read out in the mess to bawdy comments, her photograph passed round like a tin of sweets?