

## **16. Unconditional Surrender?**

TWELLS, Alison <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2602-0029>>

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This document is the Published Version [VoR]

### **Citation:**

TWELLS, Alison (2025). 16. Unconditional Surrender? In: A Place of Dreams: Desire, Deception and a Wartime Coming of Age. Open Book Publishers, 169-174. [Book Section]

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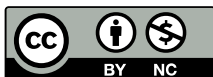
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Alison Twells, *A Place of Dreams: Desire, Deception and a Wartime Coming of Age*.  
Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0461>

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Information about any revised edition of this work will be provided at  
<https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0461>

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80511-566-3

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80511-567-0

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80511-568-7

ISBN HTML: 978-1-80511-570-0

ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 978-1-80511-569-4

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0461

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

## 16. Unconditional Surrender?

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Norah was cross with Danny again in early May 1943. His visits to Castle Donington that Easter had been so special (*marvellous, glorious, beautiful*), and then, would you believe it, he sent a *lousy little postcard from Eastbourne, which I promptly tore up. Please God what have I done to Danny to make him like this*, she wrote the following day, *and please bring him safely back to me*. Two days later a rotten little letter from Danny arrived in the post. *Replied to him [...] It ought to shake him up a bit*.

What does Norah tell Danny, to make him buck up his ideas? Does she mention the *little airman* with whom she chats on the bus home from work? Or poor strung-along Norman, whose occasional hopeful letters have started up again? And then there's Alan, another young man who helped her in the street with some unspecified problem in February 1943 and, after sending her a *mystery Valentine (post-marked Ambergate)*, pursued her through that spring and summer? She'd had no plans to respond to his letters requesting a date – *had another letter from Alan, which I didn't welcome* – but if Danny was going to treat her so shabbily... Whatever she says to him, she soon regrets her haste. *12th May: I love my Danny terribly and I am sorry I sent that letter. Please God let him take it the right way and come back to me*.

One reason Norah feels so guilty is because she has a sense of the magnitude of all that she doesn't know. Danny was night flying from Orkney, for heaven's sake! That meant escorting convoys, providing fighter cover for merchant ships travelling between Scapa Flow and Murmansk. He got low, miserable, and was it any wonder? And Skeabrae was a dreary place. Beyond a cinema at the base, there was nothing there. Who could blame him for the occasional scrappy letter?

Norah didn't see what the women on the stations saw, of course. WAAFs like Joan Wyndham, who waved the flyers off, awaited their return, debriefed them after ops. Who kept a close eye on them as the

sorties progressed and noted the general air of irritability and restlessness around the base, the sweaty palms, nervous tics, upset stomachs and other aches and pains as their fear crept 'closer and closer, like a cat stalking a sparrow'. They saved for her the stuff that couldn't be shared with other men. The brief distraction of sex, then sleeplessness, weeping in her arms, confessing that going 'back on ops, tomorrow' left them 'scared witless'.<sup>1</sup>

Norah didn't see this, but she knew: the horrifying deaths, the lives ruined by missing limbs or disfigurement through fire, the futures suspended. Acts of love and everyday care were the essential commodity in this war, not shirty letters. It would be her own selfish fault if she'd blown it. On a walk over Daleacre with Marsie, she fought back the tears as she remembered the lovely time she'd spent there with Danny only a few short weeks before. Tucked into her diary for that week are horoscopes that she had cut out from the newspaper. Along with all Pisceans, Norah could face 'storms ... with difficulties coming to a head on Wednesday', but improvements were expected before the end of the week. Danny's stars – Scorpio – suggest he'd feel let down 'in connection with social life' and warned against any 'experiments'.

Finally, she received *a beautiful and unexpected letter from Danny who asked forgiveness etc. The happiest day of my life*. She brought a book titled 'France', packed it up for him and posted it. A few days later, another *beautiful letter asked for forgiveness. I love him dearly*. Yet another *beautiful letter* arrived the following week. *He is ill and has pains in his stomach*.

After that upset, Norah's relationship with Danny enters a new, settled phase in which she vows to give him comfort and care and not get worked up over some absent silly romantic words; to be more like a wife in wartime. The victories were coming in thick and fast now: the North African campaign finished in May, and in June the war in the Atlantic was turned around, by Danny in the air and Jim at sea. It could all be over any day soon, and marriage would then be on the cards.

Eighteen-year-old Norah starts collecting Crown Derby and Wedgewood for her bottom drawer. She borrows a library book on Eastbourne, Danny's home town, where he has the promise of a sports master's job after the war. She spruces up her housewifery skills. *13th June 1943: I cooked all the dinner: roast lamb, new potatoes, cabbage, mint sauce and gooseberry pie. Her flaky pastry that wasn't too flaky* was soon improved and she managed

some nice cheese straws into the bargain, soon extending her repertoire to include rock cakes, chocolate cakes, mutton pies, dumplings and suet puddings. She'd spoil him rotten when he came home.

Danny's *beautiful, loving letters* continue to arrive throughout June and July. He calls Norah his *little passion flower*, sends her a parcel *containing 1lb of lovely farm butter*, asks her *to go away with him on his leave*. He is her *cherub*, her *love*, *mon cher*, the man she was going to marry. *I love you so very much, mon ange. Je vous aime beaucoup.*

She buys *lovely blue material for some pyjamas* and a gold quilting for a dressing gown and is thrilled to find a matching golden girdle (2/11). Mary Twells compares her to Deanna Durbin, the star of *The Amazing Mrs Holliday*, which Norah saw that summer. I Google the popular actress: Norah was indeed a homelier version of the girl-next-door Hollywood star. It is easy to imagine Miss Durbin perched elegantly at a dressing table in an English guesthouse, Norah's golden gown falling open from her pretty shoulders, brushing out her glossy chestnut hair, while Danny waits in bed. *22nd July 1943: Saw a beautiful engagement ring in Smith's (£50).* (Actually, it might be £30. The 5 (or 3) has bled into an illegible sterling smudge.)

This plan to go away together... Norah swayed gradually towards sex that summer. Before the weekend away could be arranged, Danny was moved from Warmwell in Dorset, to Lincoln, and came to stay.

*4th September: Danny came. He's adorable.*

*5th: Things got hot with Danny in bed in the morning. He had to go back on 6.55 bus to Nottingham.*

*6th: Mum and I went to Nottingham and bought 2 stockings 6/4 each. Posted letter to my cherub. I do miss him so.*

*7th: Wrote to my love again. Received letter from Doreen. Helen made me mad about Danny and me getting engaged.*

We don't know what Helen said that riled Norah. Maybe she took the moral high-ground, suggesting that an engagement should precede the cheeky weekend. Or maybe she implied that Danny was dragging his feet, that Norah should be careful. Perhaps she was just plain jealous. The war had come too late for her. She had dawdled into her marriage in 1939 and was now resigned to a lifetime with butcher Joe Twells, reserved in nature and occupation. Was she already weighed down with

worry and, without Marsie's patience or her faith, grudgingly accepting the drudgery of housework, the drag of childcare and the never-ending struggle to make ends meet?

'She always thought Norah had it so easy', my mum says, 'the High School education that she waltzed into, the white-collar wage, the nice clothes...' and now this smooth and courteous airman with his bright eyes and ready smile.

My mother is shocked by all this bedroom activity, nonetheless.

'Where was Marsie when all that was going on? She wouldn't have allowed a carry-on like that in her house!'

'Norah just did what we've all done', I say. 'Waited 'til the coast was clear, then jumped into bed with him. They probably had an hour while Marsie went to the Co-op'.

She glances at me suspiciously. 'Do you think she's making it up?'

'No', I laugh. 'The diaries are too small. There isn't room for a fantasy sex life'.

She looks me in the eye and stifles a giggle, dropping to a whisper as a child drifts into earshot: 'What a bugger she was!'

*8th September: Returned to work. Received lovely letter from my sweetheart. Replied to my dearest and to Doreen. Italy capitulated with unconditional surrender.*

*9th: Posted letter to my love. Ma and Pa went to Bristol.*

*10th: Rumour that 7th Army has invaded France. Received lovely affectionate letter from my darling.*

*11th: My dearest one came. Had beautiful time.*

*12th: Had a beautiful time in bed with my cherub. Went a walk in the afternoon. I do love him so dearly.*

Of course, this again begs the question of what precisely Danny and Norah *did*. We know from her diaries that despite the kisses, the love bites, the late period and the *hot* and *beautiful* times, Norah and Danny might have come very close to it, but they hadn't done the deed.

But, just like Italy in Norah's diary entry of 8<sup>th</sup> September, was an unconditional surrender on the cards?

Was she making it up? I don't believe she was. If Philippe Lejeune is right, while diarists can tell lies if they so wish, they rarely do. When writing for herself, in such a tiny space: why would she? But we should

hold Norah to the same scrutiny as the men and their letters. There is no doubt that the rendition of the self in a diary can be a similarly performative act, even if just for the author. Do we see it here in the language of love that Norah chooses: *my cherub*? Despite the concealment in her reportage that *things got hot* (what *things*, precisely?), she distils an undoubtedly more complex experience – fumbling, uncertainty, lack of confidence, desire? – into this (idealised? knowing? grown up?) sexual encounter. Or maybe not. Maybe it was just as she says it; that *things got hot*.

Totally unexpectedly, Jim gets back in touch, penning a short letter on 24<sup>th</sup> August which, through some postal system mishap, Norah does not receive until the end of September. ‘Dear Norah’, he writes, ‘At last I am introducing pen to paper, “about time” says you. Danny usually kept me informed of your health and activities, because I had neglected my pen duties do not think you were dismissed from my thoughts. Have you ever regretted knitting socks for sailors? I am rather cheeky and full of cracks tonight, but you should know me by now, unlike Danny’.

Norah does not pick up on this strange aside. Danny visits again on 2<sup>nd</sup> October, his third weekend in four at Moira Dale. Again, he and Norah walk over Daleacre and have a marvellous, beautiful time. He returns to Grantham on the 6.50 train the following evening and Norah misses him instantly. He writes three letters the following week, telling her on the 9<sup>th</sup> that *he would be coming, but he didn’t. The staff officers must have stayed there all day. Please God let my Danny stay at Grantham for another course, she writes the following day, or I won’t be seeing him in a long while.*

But after that letter of 9<sup>th</sup> October 1943, Danny simply disappears.



