

22. Men's Regrets

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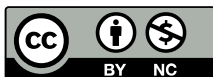
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Cover image: Norah Hodgkinson, 1941, W.W. Winter, Derby. A selection from Norah's archive, Alison Twells, 2025. Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal.

22. Men's Regrets

Although we have exhausted the diaries and letters, and have ruled out other ways forward, I find myself replaying certain scenes in my head. These incidents, about which I can find out nothing more, are to my mind pivotal to the whole affair. My proposition is this: that based on my now intimate acquaintance with the characters in this story, an imagined vignette will take me closer to the truth.. Some historians will hate it, of course, but I'm prepared to take the chance. Let's try it once and then call it a day.

The first letter in that final post-war spate of correspondence from Jim plays on my mind. This is the one in which he describes introducing Norah to his brother as a 'crazy' idea, where he claims it was his family's poverty that was the barrier to their romance before apologising for his and Danny's 'terrible and most ungrateful' behaviour. This letter surely emerged from a conversation between the two men in which they talked about their treatment of Norah and decided to write to her, to make them feel better about the sorry affair.

I know it's neither here nor there that in my mind this letter takes shape in an Eastbourne pub, or that Danny has initiated the 'talk' while Jim is less than keen. I picture Jim tapping a Senior Service cigarette on the packet and bringing it to his lips, taking his time to light it, drawing and then catching his brother's eye as he exhales. Why should he do Danny's dirty work for him? He never made himself out to be anything he wasn't. It was Danny the married man, pretending to be foot-loose and fancy-free, who was to blame.

Jim was fed up to the back teeth with it all. He was still in the Navy with nearly a year to go. He was hacked off with the RAF. Already, the war barely over, and they were the true heroes, the boys in bloody blue. It hadn't exactly been a cruise for him, on board a minesweeper, knowing he could be torpedoed at any minute, nothing around but the night sky

and dark sea, miles in width and depth. Hearing the boat behind you in the convoy taking a hit, the deck buckling, lads screaming as they fought for their last breath in boiling oil. Danny the hero. Danny who had Evelyn at home, worrying about him, waiting to look after him. And it's not as if he hadn't tried to warn Norah. He'd sent that fortune-telling card, right at the start. Later on, he'd tried to tell her she didn't know Danny like she thought she did, but all to no avail.

But Danny saw the whole caper as Jim's idea. It is true, his brother had himself in mind when he asked Danny to check Norah out. He hadn't exactly jumped at it, had cancelled their first date. But then her letters had been so friendly and when he met her and she was so pretty and so open to him; he was flattered, he supposed. The kiss at Derby station; he hadn't planned it.

She wasn't the only one, of course. Norah had questioned him about a photo with WAAFs. He'd slipped up when he sent that. But with the women at the base and the others: it was just a bit of fun. Lots of men were in the same boat, marrying hastily as they joined up, then thrown together with the opposite sex.

Norah was so trusting, so innocent. And her family... Her father was an odd ball, a bit of an old Bolshevik, but the way her mother welcomed him into their home... He could tell, that last time, after Norway, that she knew he was a fraud. It seemed unreal now, how easily he had stepped into a new life, like a character actor in a film. He'd behaved as if he would marry her. And he'd believed it himself, somehow. It was like he'd been two separate people. He couldn't explain it. Had he needed the anxiety and excitement of the bombing raids to be matched in his personal life? Being a pilot was thrilling as well as terrifying. It stirred up a restless energy. Coming home had not been the comfort he'd expected. There had been times when he felt he wouldn't be able to go back to Evelyn, to settle into that life. He considered leaving her in 1942. But staying with Norah's family either side of his leave to see his newborn daughter... Did he really do that?

His daughter. Not only had the sight of his baby nestling in her mother's arms led him to vow to bring an end to his wayward days, but I'll bet my bottom dollar that she was a factor in that apologetic letter. She was nearly four now and Danny loved her dearly. It was seeing her grow that brought it home. In no time at all she'd be the same age as

Norah had been when he first met her. If any man treated her like that, he'd break his legs.

Does this ring true? I could make Danny more self-congratulatory, more pleased with himself for his wartime conquests. And maybe he was, at other times. But on this occasion, he genuinely feels a degree of remorse. Maybe I shouldn't allow him to redeem himself. Never mind Jim and his 'young snaps', his grooming behaviour and souvenir curl: Danny was just as unpleasant. Was he really only interested in persuading Norah to have sex with him? Remember those sulks on the phone after he arrived back at camp? She was a young girl of seventeen, trying to find a path through respectability and desire. He had schemed, had as good as promised marriage. He'd even written letters to her gentle, trusting mother.

With a story as rich as this, I don't need to make things up. But even if my version of events doesn't tally with yours, it takes us to the heart of the story, to a kernel of truth that helps us to work things out. Like the emotion squeezed between the lines in a letter, the feeling in your bones, like intuition and faith, truth can lie somewhere other than with visible evidence, with what is written on the page.

Like Danny, men had regrets, some far greater than his and Jim's. We're back to that odd juxtaposition. On the one hand, the mild and gentle serviceman, kindly, good tempered, homely, brave when he needed to be, with a sense of decency and fair play; a kind of uniformed boy-next-door.¹ And then, the lies, the deceit, the abandoned mothers, 'unwanted intimacies'. And that's just at home, not even in theatres of war, where violence against women was 'standard operating procedure', an 'authorised transgression' which officers expected of their men and for which they would cover up. Where sexual violence served different functions: as entertainment, a male bonding activity, a bribe to induce men to fight, a means to enforce women's compliance in camps. We know this despite the silencing of evidence by sexual and moral norms, and neglect by historians.²

Not that we 'remember' any of this, of course. Since the last quarter of the twentieth century, Britain has undergone a very selective 'memory boom' about the Second World War, all invocations of 'Blitz spirit' and punchy slogans – Keep Calm and Carry On – that were little more than propaganda tools at the time. According to the French historian

Peirre Nora, in times of rapid social change and lost bearings, it is commonplace to become attached to a historical 'memory' which gives us a sense of stability and calm, but which may well be a world apart from what actually happened. The myths we live by: this is powerful stuff, shaping memories and various national 'forgettings': the wrongs done to 'enemy aliens', for example, or that the Brits didn't 'stand alone' in 1940 but had help from colonial subjects all over the globe, or the curious re-prioritisation of events which sees street parties on the 75th anniversary of VE Day and VJ Day all but ignored.³

And the ways in which women are collateral in wartime; there's so little discussion of this. In our rush towards easy myths and banal hyperbole, we idealise as heroes men who were perhaps just brave, preferring to set them up like one-dimensional icons for 'a form of ancestor worship', rather than seeing the messy complexity of lives.⁴

Some years ago, a student on a women's history course told me that when she tried to ask her grandfather about his wartime experience as a British serviceman in Italy, he broke down and cried. She sensed, somehow, from other choked-up silences, that sex and violence were involved, and that the sight of her, his raven-haired flesh and blood, the twenty-year-old granddaughter who loved him, made him weep with shame.

Danny's regrets about Norah, they were small-fry compared to that.