

15. Danny Told Me a Thing or Two

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

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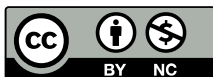
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Cover image: Norah Hodgkinson, 1941, W.W. Winter, Derby. A selection from Norah's archive, Alison Twells, 2025. Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal.

15. Danny Told Me a Thing or Two

In mid-January 1943, Norah booked tickets for the pantomime (6/1 in *Orchestra Stalls*) and then heard that Danny was *ill in bed again with flu*. I do wish I could get down to look after him. He reassured her: he would try & come next weekend.

20th January: The office gang went to the panto. British Army is 40 miles to Tripoli.

23rd: My sweet did arrive last night & rang me up from Hemington. I dashed home & went to meet him. He's adorable. Went to the pantomime & it was grand. Had a really wicked night kiss. Left me a terrible 'love mark' etc.

Norah doesn't mention her theatre-going companions, but she will surely have been chaperoned by Marsie, Birdy and maybe Helen and Jeannie, who at twenty-two months was perhaps still a bit too young to enjoy the slapstick fun. In any case, Norah would have been less concerned with introducing her little niece to the ribald joys of the panto than with the pleasure of being out with Danny: the cosiness of the stalls, the secret hand-holding, the surreptitious pressing together of knees. Sharing laughter and innuendo, she would have felt like they were a proper courting couple.

24th January: Danny told me a thing or two about 'things' such as ...? He's going to ask me when I will marry him when I'm eighteen. He went back on the 6pm to London.

25th: I've never been so miserable in all my life now my love has gone away. Told Mrs Harris something that shocked the office.

Was it some snippet of sexual knowledge which stopped the office that Monday afternoon? Did she divulge to Mrs Harris the reasons for her high-necked blouse? Was she trying out a new persona, keen to cast off the innocent school leaver and emerge, butterfly-like, as a worldly young woman?

Danny, now stationed at Skeabrae in the Orkneys, was back again at Easter.

12th April: Received letter from my love to say he was coming tonight. He turned up about 7 o'clock. Went to Helen's to see Jeannie bathed. Had another glorious night and retired about twelve.

The trip to Helen's in Hemington would be less about seeing little Jean frolicking in her bath water than providing a useful cover for the courting couple. After the walk down Lady's Close, squeezing through the kissing gates at each end of the field, Norah and Danny will have checked the time – an hour until sunset – most likely deciding against the left turn into Main Street and the direct, two-minute walk to Helen's cottage, choosing instead the longer route: Church Lane, Dark Lane, a deserted Daleacre at dusk. After some brief fun seeing Jeannie splashing around, the walk home would be a similarly dilatory stroll up Lady's Close in the moonlight.

13th April: Danny hadn't to go back until 10.30 so I asked the Boss for time off. Did Norah travel into Derby station that morning, waving him off before ambling into the office for a late-morning start? I imagine her fluttering to the very end of the platform as the train pulled out, waving her smiling, sad goodbyes.

The day after Danny's departure, Marsie took the bus into Derby to bring Norah another letter bearing the news that he was coming again on Saturday. This was some trip, five hundred and ninety-four miles from the Orkneys to the English Midlands, twice in one week. These visits were surely about more than the bleakness and boredom of the island base. Danny was keen.

Marsie was enjoying her daughter's romance, as well as the opportunity for some of the pleasures of town life; the life she'd wanted when she married Tom, thirty years before. She could see how Norah was totally bowled over. She might even have thought it a blessing that it couldn't be a new, modern courtship, that Norah was sending him

copies of *Punch* and parcels of tobacco, giving him love and care rather than pining for flimsy tokens of romance and other fleeting things.

17th April: My love came. Went up Daleacre in the moonlight and had a glorious time.

18th: Had a marvellous time up Daleacre with Danny in afternoon. He had to return at 8.50pm.

Marvellous. Glorious. Beautiful. Norah feels the sweet rush of longing. It is the wonder of sexual desire as well as the starry-eyed charm of romance that makes her feel alive.

Oh, but it was hard.

I've taught women's history for very many years and am shocked every time – every teaching year, every fresh lecture crafted, every new piece of reading – by the historical horrors of women and sex.

In Victorian England, it was alleged – by medical authority – that women wished only to be wives and mothers and suffered sex purely to that end. Dr William Acton was 'ready to maintain' that 'as a general rule, a modest woman seldom desires any sexual gratification for herself. She submits to her husband's embraces, but principally to gratify him: and were it not for the desire of maternity, would far rather be relieved of his attentions'. Any hint of sexual desire and a woman was at risk of condemnation: a nymphomaniac, a whore, unnatural, unsexed.¹

The people who challenged this unscientific claptrap were the early feminists. Society had been moulded on this 'false assertion', wrote Dr Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman to receive a medical degree (in the United States, because she couldn't study for one in the UK). But in actual fact, women were put off sexual relations by fear of conception or damage from childbirth or 'brutal or awkward conjugal approaches'. The crux of the matter was this: women had 'been taught sexual passion as lust and as sin – a sin which it would be a shame for a pure woman to feel, and which she would die rather than confess'.²

Although romance had arrived with great fanfare by the time Norah was growing up, an essential ingredient in the modern world, it remained a fine line. Being marriageable was still everything. Anything too libidinal in a woman could jeopardise that. And even in marriage,

supposedly revolutionised by Marie Stopes' emphasis on mutual fulfilment in her best-selling *Married Love* (1918), a wife didn't initiate but responded to advances. 'It's nice, for a woman to enjoy sex', said one of Kate Fisher's interviewees, 'because a man likes you to enjoy it doesn't 'e?'³

But not too much. A study of working-class marriage conducted in 1943 by Moya Woodside and Eliot Slater revealed that men considered sex their conjugal right and neither expected nor particularly welcomed responsiveness in a woman. Both men and women believed that 'for a woman to feel lustful would be an unseemly thing'. 'Men and women have very different attitudes towards sex in marriage', Woodside wrote in 1946. 'The pattern is of habit and duty, of "rights" and submission. Men are satisfied; women are bored or indifferent, or mention active dislike'.⁴ Raised in ignorance, loaded with guilt and unfocused feelings of shame and fear, denied the possibility that a physical relationship might be a source of pleasure, many women put up with sex, to keep their husbands happy, to stop them from wandering, to anchor them at home.

How babies were made (and born) was unknown to many young women in the 1940s. They saw their mother's bodies ruined through endless childbearing. They grew up hearing terrifying tales of pregnant unmarried girls drowned with their babies in the dead of night, or rolled in carpets and suffocated, or just cast out of their families in shame. They 'knew' that men had urges that once set in train, could not be stopped; that they needed vigilance, to take utmost care.⁵

Indeed, many girls colluded in their ignorance, carefully avoiding exposure to sexual information, their innocence an essential component of their respectability. Thus Richard Hoggart, in his widely acclaimed study of changes in working-class culture in the face of new forms of mass entertainment, described as 'wonderful' how many working-class girls 'can walk through the howling valley of sex-approaches from the local lads and probably of sex-talk at work' and yet 'retain both an ignorance of the facts of sex and an air of inviolability towards its whole atmosphere that would not have been unbecoming in a mid-nineteenth-century young lady of the middle-classes'.⁶ Wonderful, indeed.

While books on the mechanics of sex and contraception were becoming more readily available in the 1930s and more risqué topics appeared in newspapers and magazines, there was very little in the new

mass-market magazines for young women beyond her depiction as a 'sweet untaught girl'.⁷ Their mothers, young women in late-Victorian Britain, are unlikely to have broached the subject. If morality was insinuated by pursed-lipped silence at home, school provided nothing more than the most basic of biological and physiological facts, with a likely dose of scaremongering about pregnancy or venereal disease. The National Union of Teachers specifically stated in 1933 that the provision of 'class sex instruction' was 'undesirable', even when head teachers were keen. Their worry? That they would be charged with 'low morals' and exciting 'undue interest' among their pupils.⁸ *Had domestic science until break*, Norah had written in her diary in 1939. *Miss Martin told us about the boy & his –. Had craft until dinner. (The boy & his –, and above, Danny told me a thing or two about 'things' such as ...?: we should note the self-censorship in Norah's diary, her concealment of sexual knowledge.)*

Even decades later, when relaying their memories of courtship, sex and marriage, women distanced themselves from a too-active sexuality. Their focus was respectability and restraint, with little reference to romance and passion. As young women, they had known too well that the ease with which they gave in to sexual advances would be used by men to test their wifely suitability; that they risked being labelled 'loose' and 'easy'. It was down to them to police these boundaries, to play 'hard to get'. In the words of a factory worker born in 1923, who rejected her future husband's advances: 'well if I let 'im 'ave his own way, he'll think what sort of a person is she, yer know, so that's why I never encouraged him at all'. There was so much at stake.⁹

Some women worried about their own feelings. 'I heard talk on the wireless lately, that if you marry simply because you are violently in love, your marriage may fail', a young woman opined to *Woman's Own* in 1945. 'My boyfriend and I are passionately in love, and now I feel worried in case we are making a mistake...' But mostly, their concern was how to manage sexual pressure. 'Coping' was the term women used to denote staving off a randy man: 'I like Bill and he is a Squadron Leader and all that', wrote a Mass Observation respondent, 'but I simply can't face the coping I have to do every evening'. As another young woman wrote to *Woman's Own*, 'Is love real? [...] I am engaged to a boy who is very passionate and, although he has never tried to do anything wrong,

his life seems to be one long fight against temptation. Are all men like this? It makes me feel that love is nothing but desire'.¹⁰

Indeed, in the world of most women's magazines, especially those read by Norah, the jury was not even out. 'It's not romantic. It's not grand and unusual and altogether up to date. It's not even kind to the man', Rosita Forbes had written in *Woman's Own* in 1940. 'You can love him with all your heart and yet have sufficient courage to wait. Of course it's hard. You do agree, don't you, it's up to you to give him the best. So give him faith and honesty and courage. Give him love that is going to last, that he can look forward to, and that he can trust for the rest of his life'. As another agony aunt replied to a letter in 1942: 'If you do such things to keep another's love, you will lose it and your self-respect with it'.¹¹

But change was afoot. The stats suggest that attitudes to sex were liberalising. While 36% of women born between 1904-1914 engaged in pre-marital sexual activity, this rose to 39% and 43% of those born between 1914-1924 and 1924-1934, Norah's generation. Alongside a general approval of marital virginity, petting – an American term for various non-coital physical expressions of desire – was promoted in sex manuals from the 1940s. For women as well as men, there was a growing acceptance that testing the water was not so bad an idea.¹²

As novels from the time suggest, the war sped up this change. 'Girls like me were brought up to be respectable', says Polly, a character in Mary Wesley's *The Camomile Lawn*. 'The atmosphere of the war shook that [...] There were dozens of girls who went on being virtuous, but we broke out'. There was an intensity to daily life, an openness to connection and experience; meeting a glance straight on and holding it, instead of averting the eyes. 'Walls went down', wrote Elizabeth Bowen, 'and we felt, if not knew, each other. We all lived in a state of lucid abnormality'. Even a pair of heels tapping in the black-out could sound suggestive, like 'an illicit semaphore' in the night. 'War [...] was sex', muses Prudence, a character in Henry Green's *Caught*, written at the time of the author's own affairs during the London Blitz.¹³

But, for women, as Katherine Angel writes, desire can be 'most difficult to tell'.¹⁴ While many women shared Birmingham diary writer Lillian Rogers' wartime delight in 'flying her kite', an over-focus on sudden sexual 'liberation' is too simple. It took time to cast off what Norah's contemporary Jean Lucey Pratt describes as '[r]eason,

upbringing and fear all preaching caution', to gather up whatever it took to go with the 'impulse and instinct urging you violently to take the plunge'. But plunge Jean did – and before long, it was the times without a lover when she felt like 'an unlit lamp'. 'Felt very pleased with immediate life and our bodies', young London civil servant Olivia Cockett wrote in her Mass Observation diary. 'Man and I have thoroughly enjoyed our three nights together. Abandon and experiment have brought us into closer and closer tenderness'.¹⁵

Doreen Bates was another young woman who moved gradually towards sexual exploration. She was a twenty-seven-year-old civil servant when she began an affair in 1933 with 'E', an older married man with whom she shared an office in Paddington. She describes how she 'lost the fear of sex that I must have had even 18 months ago and dug up at least some of the repressions I had, and that before I was too old to wake up and find that everything had passed; this is entirely due to E – his consideration and understanding and restraint and honesty; this is a priceless gift which he has given me'. 'I was unafraid and unashamed' she wrote on another occasion. And later still: 'It was one of the quickest and loveliest fucks we have ever had, so easy and light-hearted and gorgeous'.¹⁶

An expert on romance, Norah is short on sexual knowledge. She wants passion, but still we sense her careful negotiations: desire battling it out with self-consciousness, ignorance, the terrible fear of pregnancy, the dire warnings about being thought too easy by a man who, in that moment, you truly believed could never think badly of you and would never let you down. Could she trust him? Was he genuine? If in these years 'men began to focus on how far a woman would let them go', the dilemma for women was 'how to tell if his feelings were sincere'.¹⁷

Norah's diary entries make clear the full extent of her sexual ignorance. In July 1943, when she welcomed her period with the customary tick in her diary, she wrote the words *Thank God*. Usually a clockwork twenty-eight days, she was six days late. She had not seen Danny for three months, had had two periods since, but clearly believed that she might still be pregnant. And they hadn't even 'done it'. I'm reminded of Marion Paul, a young woman from a small village near Doncaster, who received her sex education on entering the ATS: 'I'd led a very sheltered life. I used to sit on my bed and my ears were like tureens, listening to all this conversation, half of which I didn't understand, and half of which

I never knew. I mean I thought you could get a baby from a lavatory seat...'¹⁸ Norah clearly worried that kissing and canoodling on Daleacre might leave her in the family way.

14th April 1943: Jean, Connie and I went a walk at dinner-time. Back at work after Danny's visit, Norah enjoyed a stroll with the office girls. Jean's Cyril was in the Army, as was Frank, whom Connie had married the previous autumn on a forty-eight-hour pass. The three of them were to spend a lot of time together that spring and summer, sharing lunchtimes at Pingpongs and Pierpont and evenings out to see 'The Gondoliers' and 'The Gentle Sex'. On this April day, Connie and Jean will have been keen to hear about Danny. And in telling them, Norah surely revealed all that she didn't know. *26th May 1943: Con bought two Birth Control books so I had one. Oh boy, what a book!!! What diagrams!!!*

She was a good friend, was Connie Cooper.