

9. I'm in Love with Him and I Don't Care a Scrap

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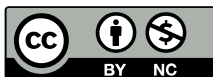
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Cover image: Norah Hodgkinson, 1941, W.W. Winter, Derby. A selection from Norah's archive, Alison Twells, 2025. Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal.

9. I'm in Love with Him and I Don't Care a Scrap

No sooner has he introduced Norah to Danny, than this still non-existent snap, the photo that lies in Winter's developing room, becomes the focus of Jim's jitters. His fear? That she has already sent a copy to his brother. In a strange letter singing Danny's praises and urging Norah to meet him, Jim requests that she saves 'an evening during this winter when I will endeavour to see you. Patience, I have got', he says, 'and can wait until 194.... for a photo. I bet Danny has got one (sorry)'.

There is no evidence at all that Norah had a romantic interest in Danny. Despite his lovely photos, his friendly overtures, it was Jim's letters that she waited for, Jim whom she worried about and had giddied over with friends. But again: 'You must have many admirers (why change your subjects) (sorry) ...Yours Devoted, ~~Danny~~ Jim'. Jim signs as his brother before striking through. Is he bowing out? I can't help but wonder if he has lost out to Danny, his attractive, younger brother all through his life.

Norah seems not to notice, not at first.

19th August: Received a simply marvellous letter from my Jim. I adore him. Enclosed cutting about P[icture] P[ost] adopting 100 Abs [Able Seamen] & two naughty cartoons. Also a lovely letter from Danny. He is to be made a pilot. How awful.

But the following day, after a wry recounting of a visit to a local farmer she believed was sweet on Marsie, Norah ponders the dynamic between herself and these two men:

20th: Ma & I went up to Mr Sharman's. Gave Ma a lettuce like a cabbage, a white rose bud 'The Bride' & a grape each from bunch worth 15/ per lb. It seems to be a fight between Jim & Danny.



Fig. 25 'Between two fires' cartoon, 1941, enclosed in Jim's letter postmarked 17 August 1941. Private papers of Norah Hodgkinson. Photo: A. Twells, 2025.

'Fight' is an interesting choice of word, of course. Why not 'choice'? It was Norah who was doing the choosing after all. But 'fight' performs different work, positioning her as the object of desire. It is Norah who is between two fires.

'My Dream Girl', Jim gushes in early September, as his letters come thick and fast. 'I hope you ignore the saying about sailors because this one do care. I expect my loving brother's letters are more interesting only my schooling was neglected'. He tells Norah that a friend of his is getting on well in the boxing world – 'Freddie Mills, have you heard of him, a future champion, he is in the RAF'. Jim is not yet on the ropes.

1st September: Oxford results: I've passed. Received letter & photo from my sweetheart. I'm absolutely crazy about him. Also one from Danny, who says he too is fond of me. I like him a lot.

2nd: Received letter from Station. Auntie Mabel & Uncle Roadley came. I'm still in love with —

3rd: Replied to Danny.

But three weeks into September, Jim blows it. In a letter with 'I LOVE YOU' written in kisses across the top, he engages in some general chitchat – congrats on her exam success, another request for a photo – and then asks, should his ship visit Grimsby, whether Norah 'would or could see me secretly for an hour or two'. He hopes that she will 'understand this unusual procedure on a first meeting... As I have said before I am casual and different but I will not promise to refrain from kissing if you give me an opportunity'.

Norah is affronted. It is an *awful letter* [...] *I'm terribly upset & disappointed*. What sort of girl meets a man in secret? And secretly from whom? Does Jim mean his brother, with whom Norah is now acquainted?

13th September: Received letter from Danny. Says he's coming today. Went to Derby to meet him but missed him. Came home and found him here. He's absolutely spiffing. Went down with Helen in dark. He gave me some wings and all stayed up til 12. Danny is absolutely lovely, marvellous, wonderful.

14th: Danny & I went down to Hemington to phone & see Helen. Went to see him off at Derby. He kissed me on the station and I liked it. He'll reach Filey at 7.33pm.

15th: Talked of no-one but Danny. Went down town with H & J.

16th: Received short note from Jim who has not heard from me yet. Shah of Iran abdicated.

18th: Ma received lovely letter from Danny. Replied at night. Replied to Jim.

The *lovely letter* sent to Ma is the only one from Danny that seems to have survived. And what a letter it is.

RAF Filey
16th September 1941

Dear Mr and Mrs Hodgkinson,

I wish to tender my sincere thanks to you all for the wonderful hospitality that you bestowed upon me. It was exceedingly fine and

nice of you to welcome me to your home like you did, seeing I am quite a stranger, although you made me feel as though I was a son, and I appreciated it very much indeed.

Marsie would have been more than happy to open her home to him that weekend. It went without saying. 'Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares'.¹

It was a grand though short week end and the welcome I received will live in my mind forever, and I enjoyed myself exceedingly and I left Castle Donington with a hang in my heart.

The journey was a tedious and tiring one seeing it was between 9.30 to 10 pm when I arrived at camp but I never cared how long it took for I had the lovely memories of you all especially Norah.

He was an impressive young man: charming, polite, well educated, conversing so easily with them all and, it now transpired, quite the letter writer. (Unavoidable: the contrast with his brother.)

And Norah? How did she read this letter from Danny? (Danny who writes her name four times!)

When I left Norah at the station I sincerely hope the dear girl arrived home quite safely, it was very sweet of her to accompany me to the station, seeing it's such a distance from home. I shall never forget our parting, it really made me sad to see Norah waving to me as the train was pulling out.

No mention of the kiss, of course.

After his description of the slow journey back to Filey and his arrival at his very basic – *no lights, no comfort* – hut, his two days of note-taking (on the Thompson Machine Gun, and then on revolvers), she crops up again:

Norah was vastly different to what I imagined, in fact she was far above my already high estimation of her. I think she is a fine, well-mannered and sweet young lady, and a daughter to be proud of. Also she has the sense of a much older person, and I couldn't help but take to her the first time we met.

He signs off:

Well dear friends there is very little to write about at the moment so I will have to draw to a close. Please convey my very best regards to Frank, Richard, your eldest daughter and little Jean, and not forgetting Norah, give her my very best, and my sincere wishes to yourselves. Hoping this

finds you all enjoying the very best of health. Hoping to see you all again very soon.

Thanking you from the bottom of my Heart.

I am

Yours sincerely,

Danny

19th September: Received sweet letter from Danny. Enclosed beautiful photo and cutting called 'sweetheart'. I'm in love with him & I don't care a scrap. Went to Derby. Bought blue dress material & fed swans in river gardens.

Did this next *sweet letter*, addressed just to her and to her alone, drop through the letterbox as Norah enjoyed her first cup of tea of the day, sitting at the table in a living room ablaze with autumnal morning sun? Its arrival will have put a spring in her step, as she prepared to leave the house for the bus. I picture her throwing her coat over her shoulders, kissing Marsie on the cheek, casually rebuffing some caustic remark thrown her way by Birdy, and reporting that she'll be back after lunch – or dinner, as we didn't call it lunch back then.

The ten-minute walk to the bus station is mostly downhill, the gradient adding momentum to Norah's jaunty stride. The birds sing. She flutters past neighbours and acquaintances and flashes them a smile with her sing-song 'hello'.

Forty minutes later, does Norah head straight to Midland Drapery, dithering over a flowery cotton fabric before dismissing it as too summery, settling instead on a vivid blue? As the haberdashery assistant measures two yards, snips with scissors and then tears through, does she imagine herself in the finished dress, walking out with Danny, holding his hand, in his arms? Not yet ready to catch the bus home, maybe she nips into the Market Hall for a white cob and, after a brief inward tussle, buys a celebratory bar of Cadbury's chocolate from the sweet stall (yes, chocolate was available during the war). Leaving by the Guildhall exit, she walks the hundred or so yards to the River Gardens. Good manners force her to head for the nearest available bench, but she feels too animated and eats half of the cob standing up, not registering her usual feeling of boredom, without even wishing for potted meat mixed with a thick spread of butter against the doughy bread.

Perhaps, true to form, Norah is eager to move onto dessert as she edges to the banks of the river and breaks the remaining bread into pieces. She stands there, slender and bright eyed, the breeze catching her dark hair and the skirt of her dress. Two swans glide towards her as she scatters the bread on the water, trying to make sure they get the same sized handful but half-noticing that one of them swiftly moves in on every last crumb.

Norah is sixteen and a half. Everything in her life has been moving towards this day. She'd had a momentary creeping doubt that summer, a worry that it wouldn't work out; that she'd become pot-bound when all she wanted was to burst into bloom, like Marsie's single agapanthus, chic and shimmering under a cloudless blue sky. But then, it all fell into place. The exam at the LMS Railway HQ. Her Oxford results – a respectable clutch of credits (Art, Domestic Science, English Language and French), passes (Arithmetic, Biology and Geography) and just the one fail (Shakespeare). An invitation to interview and her clerical position confirmed. And then, beyond her wildest dreams, this handsome airman walks up from the bus station and into her life.

I'm in love with him and I don't care a scrap.

Why should she care a scrap? Maybe she was harbouring a nagging concern about allowing herself to be kissed by a boy – indeed, a grown man – whom she had only just met. Danny, ready to board the train at Derby station, had turned and kissed her full on the mouth, lingering just long enough for her to move beyond the awkwardness and feel an unholy desire.

Did anyone see? What if some busy-body reported the scene to Marsie that morning as she queued at the Co-op meat-counter? Norah could not imagine her mother behaving that way when she was courted by Tom in 1908. But things were different back then. Now, romance and glamour were the order of the day and Norah wanted both as she headed for married life. As she stands on the edge of the Derwent throwing bread to the swans, does she wonder if she will walk up the aisle at the Baptist Chapel to meet Danny at the altar, sometime after this blessed war is over?

Or is the not caring a scrap a bid to suppress a sense of guilt about Jim? *My minesweeper*, now passed over in favour of his swish younger brother. Lovely, marvellous, wonderful Danny. Danny with his wings,

and looking spiffing in Air Force blue. Danny, at ease with all the family, so sweet with baby Jean, so charming with her mother, chatting with Birdy, Frank and Pop, as they all stayed up until 12. Danny who kissed her like she'd never been kissed before, sparking feelings she didn't know she even possessed, leaving her utterly transformed.

Norah wondered if Jim would make a fuss. But it *was* he who had put her in touch with his brother. And he *was* a sailor. And he'd said he was casual. It must have been now, in the autumn of 1941 that she copied the following words into the back of her diary:

Some men would make a terrible scene, but my experience of sea going men tells me that they have a sound knowledge of human nature. They know that girls change their minds: that people fall in & out of love, that one has to accept what comes as one has to accept storms at sea. They are usually broad minded and philosophical.

I wonder where it came from. A women's magazine, maybe? I try various searches, with no success.

A few days later, when Norah's photograph comes through the post, she clean forgets her promise to Jim. *20th September 1941: Photos from Winter's arrived. Sent D. one.*

