

17. Please God ... Waiting for Danny

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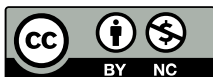
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Cover image: Norah Hodgkinson, 1941, W.W. Winter, Derby. A selection from Norah's archive, Alison Twells, 2025. Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal.

17. Please God ... Waiting for Danny

11th October 1943: No letter from my cherub, I wonder where he can be?

At first, Norah assumes that Danny's next letter is merely taking its time to arrive; she is more frustrated than unduly concerned. But after marking his 26th birthday in his absence, the anxiety starts to kick in.

27th October: Please God keep my Danny safe & please don't let him be overseas and please let him write soon.

1st November: Please God take care of my Danny and let him write very soon.

7th: Please God keep my Danny safe always and let him write soon, please don't make him be in the 2nd front. The Russians are 40 miles beyond Kiev.

14th: Made another lovely sponge cake. Started my Fair Isle gloves. Please God keep my Danny safe and please let him still be in England.

When Danny still doesn't write, Norah finds his parents' address in one of Jim's early letters and drops them a line. Does she introduce herself as a friend of their son who is anxious for reassurance about his safety, leaving them to fill in the gaps? Or perhaps she assumes that on one of his visits Danny has told his mother that he has a young sweetheart in Derby, whom he had met, could she believe, via Jim and a pair of socks? Might Norah have taken a leap of faith and said how much she was looking forward to meeting them, once this dreadful war was over and Danny was safely home? *16th November: Posted a letter to Danny's Mother and Father. Please God, let it be alright.*

Apart from the Sword of Stalingrad, a personal gift from King George to the Russians, bejewelled and resplendent and passing through Derby

on its triumphal tour, everything is doom and gloom. Norah injures herself falling up some steps at work. She witnesses a dog run over by her bus and sees a girl killed in a traffic accident on Litchurch Street. She comforts Mrs Harris, who breaks down in the office after receiving photographs of the funeral in southern Bohemia of her son John. *26th November: No letter from my love or Eastbourne. Tomorrow, D.V. Please God keep him safe and let him write very soon.*

Norah distracts herself with knitting and reading (*Ivanhoe: just about the best book I ever read*). Marsie gives her a cookery book as an early Christmas present and she makes celery soup, batter pudding and potato cakes for tea. With Doreen, her old school-friend, she attends the annual Carol Service at Loughborough High School (*just grand*). Afterwards, they walk into town, killing time in Bolesworth's Tea Rooms before the early doors showing of *You Were Never Lovelier* with Rita Hayworth and Fred Astaire (*super*). Does Doreen press Norah on the progress of her love affair with Danny? Would Norah confide, or does she brush off too much concern as she perfects the breezy brightness of her later years? *17th December: I wonder if my love is in Corsica? Please God watch over him and bring him home safe again.*

Norah spends Christmas Day with Marsie and Pop, Birdy, Helen, Joe and little Jeannie, now nearly three. The food shortage has kicked in and they have *stringy cockerel* from their own coop. On Boxing Day, Pop and Birdy go off to the Baseball Ground (*Derby beat Forest 2.1*) and Norah, her sister and niece take a walk up to the coppice on the eastern edge of Donington Park. Frank, on Army duty in Newcastle, comes home on the 29th, only to be called back by telegram two days later. *31st December: I wonder if the 2nd Front is going to open soon. Please God take care of my Danny and bring him back safe as soon as possible.*

No Christmas or New Year telegram from Danny.

1944 starts as 1943 ended: with life as normal as it gets in wartime. Norah has a perm, knits a skull cap and buys a lacy duchess set for her bottom drawer. She and Mrs Harris sample Kardomah, a posh new coffee lounge, and a new fish and chip shop on Babington Lane. She sees Phyllis Calvert and Stewart Grainger in *Fanny by Gaslight* (*very*

good), Noel Coward's *This Happy Breed* (quite good) and, with Helen and Jeannie, *Cinderella*. She helps her sister to clean the cold, north-facing cottage that she has taken on the main shopping street in Castle Donington. Now unofficially pregnant with her second child, it will be handy for the Co-op, the school and Marsie. She prays for Danny.

But where the devil is he? Norah wonders if Danny is with the RAF squadrons that have *made a new landing near Rome* to bomb a route ahead of the Army as it threads its way up through Italy, forcing the Germans – now alone, after Mussolini's surrender – further and further north. *I wonder if that is where my love is. Please God keep him safe always.* She follows the anxious progress of the Anzio Bridgehead, where the surprise amphibious assault had resulted in stalemate, our men trapped behind a line of artillery units. *I don't think my love can be at Anzio now,* she writes in late February. *Please God take care of him always & bring him home safely asap.*

The truth of it is, Danny could be anywhere. The Allies are well and truly on the offensive in early 1944 and the RAF, replenished and fortified, is engaged in crucial service in Europe and beyond. Danny could be with Coastal Command, striking at the enemy ships ploughing the North Sea in a desperate bid to beat the blockades. He could be on ops over Berlin, the daylight raids made possible by the new P-51 Mustang, its powerful Merlin engine manufactured at Royce's just down the road. He could be on sorties to other parts of Germany, or dropping supplies to the Yugoslav Partisans, or even further afield, assisting at Imphal and Kohima where our troops were besieged by the Japanese. *22nd March: Helen told us that she is expecting another baby in September. Please God take care of my Danny & please don't let him be fighting the Japs.*

The fact of the matter is that Norah hasn't a clue as to Danny's whereabouts. And despite his opening promise in his next letter, Jim is not about to offer any illumination.

HMS Gazelle
6.2.44

Dear Norah,

Just a line which I hope finds you well. I guess you are somewhat mystified about Danny, well I will enlighten you, he is abroad for an indefinite period and before he left asked me to convey thanks to yourself and your family for swell times spent at your home. No-one's received

news of him yet. Danny said you would understand why he never told you of his departure. My mother apologizes for not replying to your letter so I hope this covers all.

Cheerio,
Your Friend,
Jim

Thanks to yourself and your family? The message relayed by Jim from Danny is oddly formal, not at all what you would expect from the man you are planning to marry. *I hope this covers all? Danny said you would understand?* Norah must have puzzled its contents throughout the day. His mother had received her letter, but had left it to Jim to reply. Norah writes back and, just for good measure, posts another letter to Mrs Gilbert. *8th February: Received strange letter from Jim saying Danny is overseas. Wrote to Jim and his mother.*

Her own mother has lost hope. *9th March 1944: Had nice letter from Norman. My 19th birthday. Mum thinks that Danny won't write again, but please God don't let that be so & please keep him safe.* Marsie will have taken no pleasure in voicing her concerns. On her letter-bearing missions to Derby, she shared in Norah's longing for Danny's news. But now she fears that he is a fly-by-night. She no doubt feels a hollow dread that her youngest daughter is facing her first of life's big let-downs. But when Norah bats her concern away, she doesn't have the heart to press it home.

27th March: Had pleasant surprise when Frank arrived home on leave. Frank thinks it is quite probable that my love is in Yugoslavia. Had Norah followed the British government's U-turn, announced by Churchill in December 1943, as they withdrew their backing for the Chetniks and pledged to support Marshall Tito and his communist Partisans? She committed to 'genning up'. *18th April: Had Yugoslavia book from library. Please God take care of my Danny always and please God bring him home safely as soon as possible.* Did it make her feel closer to him, reading about the places he might pass through, seeing photos of fairy-tale towns and cities and the beautiful Dalmatian Coast, some of the sights he might see? Connie tells Norah about two RAF officers – ordinary airmen and not from the SOE (Special Operations Executive) – just back from Yugoslavia after parachuting into Tito's Split HQ early that year. *We think that my Danny must be there.*

In early May, Norah attends an exhibition on Occupied Europe at the Art Gallery in town. The map alone was terrifying: Nazi control carpeting the continent, from France across to Russia, the top of Finland down to Greece. There were a few neutrals (Ireland, Switzerland, Sweden) and then the Allies: just a growing number of Italians, the Soviets, and us.

In the face of no information – from Danny, Jim or their mother – Norah recasts herself as a waiting woman. England in 1944 was full of women waiting. Mothers and wives worried themselves ill. Small children forgot the details of their fathers' faces. Girlfriends dreamed of forbidden intimacies, homes of their own, the children to follow. Time was suspended, its spooling towards the future interrupted. What more could they do, except hope and pray and post chirpy letters to unknown destinations? *Please God take care of my Danny & bring him home alive & safe & well as soon as possible.*

3rd May 1944: Had nice dinner at Pingpongs. Kath Fowkes was married. I love you so my darling & please God bring him home safely as soon as possible. Even for Kath, one of the lucky ones, the waiting seemed endless. Her new husband, Ron Jones, a Dunkirk survivor, would be in France within the month. (Sometimes the waiting momentarily slipped her mind, Kath told me, and she was too-easily occupied with films and dances, coupons and swapping clothes. 'They were good times', she smiled, remembering a blue silk box-pleat skirt she bought from a girl at work. But as she left her office at Chilwell Depot, she'd be pulled up sharp. 'Then I'd see the soldiers, it was there all the time'.)¹

Perhaps waiting became part of the romance. 'How many of our greatest love stories depend on suspense, on temporary disappointment and frustration before fulfilment?' *Woman's Own* had asked in 1940. 'Separation only serves to deepen their love, and every letter strengthens it'.²

If only he'd write.

Norah's diary that summer traces the gradual rolling back of the German occupation. *New Offensive in Italy started*, Norah writes on 12th May. Once the Anzio Bridgehead was joined up with the rest of Italy, it was only a matter of time before the Allies were able to break *through Kesselring's last line before Rome*. As Rome falls in early June, 150,000 Allied troops finally land on the Normandy beaches. Then onto Bayeaux, Elba, Assisi, Perugia, Cherbourg, Caen: *reports say they are going strong*. 19th June 1944: *Churchill says the war will probably end this year*.

Connie's brother Bill is killed at Normandy. Audrey's brother, Barbara's brother: both dead. The navigator boyfriend of another girl at work is lost at sea. Norman's ship, HMS *Wishart*, is involved in a skirmish with German U-boats off Gibraltar. Norah makes a phone call to Mr Morley, his boss, to check that he is safe.

Still going fine in France, Norah reports throughout August as the Americans push the Germans back & out of the Brest peninsula. The Allies make a second landing, between Nice & Marseilles, while others cross the Seine, covering Paris on two sides. Please God... As Helen gives birth to a baby boy, the French capital is liberated by the Allies... The Rumanians liberate their capital, Bucharest... The Bulgarians ask the Allies for Peace Terms.. The Allies take Verdun and advance into Belgium. The Czechoslovaks rise ... Please God... Finland breaks... The British enter Holland and Brussels falls. The British capture Antwerp & cut off the Germans in Northern France. The Allies ... The British ... All going strong.

Norah keeps an eye on the Slavic states as, from the east, the vengeful Russians roll through Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and finally, Yugoslavia, where Danny must surely be.

7th September: Saw in 'Monitor' that Audrey was married last Saturday. The blackouts to be lifted from the 17th. The Russians contacted Marshall Tito's forces in Yugoslavia. Please God bless my Danny.

9th: [in pencil: Danny home? In pen: no]. Read in 'Herald' about Yugoslav girl partisans being trained on Vis Island. I think that must be where my Danny is.

24th: Mrs Wall knows an ATS girl who hadn't heard from her now repatriated husband for over a year.

26th: Read in paper and heard on wireless about our men who were dropped in Yugoslavia. Please God take care of my Danny and bring him home safely to me as soon as possible, as I love him very dearly.

28th: Read some more in paper about our men in Yugoslavia. I am pretty certain my Danny must be there.

1st October: Made sponge cake. The Russians liberated 20 Yugoslav towns. It is a year today since I last saw my dearest.

Norah's diary entries continue to smack of superstition. It is not just the daily exhortation to God, or her plaintive *Danny home?* on September

9th with its disappointing rejoinder: *no*. There's also *Danny home on leave 7/7/44* pencilled in a diary window for October, the July date referring to the summer's day when Norah made the hopeful prediction, although on the basis of what it is impossible to tell. *Danny home 4.25 am on 2/11/44 according to cookery book*, Norah wrote, again in pencil, in the first week of November. Like those airmen who were big on 'magical thinking' – the lucky rabbit's foot, four-leaf clover, a stocking belonging to a girlfriend, their aim to allay anxiety, bring comfort and inject a semblance of control – Norah uses the weights of ingredients like some random opening of the Bible to receive a sign.³

In the autumn, Norah's attention shifts southwards. *8th October 1944: Heard on the wireless about our troops who were landed in Greece. I think that must be where my love is*. Was Danny among the Allied forces who had seized the airfield at Araxos? Did he look on as the last German soldiers took down the swastika from the acropolis, enjoying the spectacle of thousands of joyous Greeks ringing bells and waving flags as they jeered the Gerries northwards and home? Was Danny horrified at the state of the country after three and a half years of occupation: the destruction of industries, ports, roads, railways and bridges; the plunder, looting, torching and massacres; the deaths from starvation of 40,000 Athenians alone? Maybe he was surprised at how little they needed to do, as large parts of the mountainous interior were already liberated by the partisans. Or that when fighting did occur, the Allies found themselves teaming up with former collaborators against the Resistance movement itself, now deemed too dangerous on account of its communist wing?⁴ *4th November 1944: Danny home 26/9/44 [in pencil]. No [in pen]. Heard that Greece has been absolutely cleared of the Germans, so please God bring my Danny home safely to me as soon as possible because I love him so dearly*.

'It appears your feelings are still for Danny', Jim wrote in a letter of late November, 'and if it will enlighten his are the same towards you. It is his wish to keep you mystified why he has not wrote...' 'Mystified' will be Norah's word: 'I am absolutely mystified as to why I haven't heard from Danny', she might have written. 'We spent all that time together last September and then I've heard nothing from him since, not a word in a whole year'. Norah surely must have wondered why Danny was managing to communicate with Jim, but wasn't writing directly to her, letting her know that he was safe. One thing was certain: with the news

from Jim that his family had decamped back to south London, 'where we originally came from', she would not be writing to his mother to find out. Norah focuses not on her own worries for their relationship, nor on Jim's predictable quip ('remember "good looking" no is not an answer if it's love'), but on Danny's safety and his feelings for her. *24th November: Had a beautiful surprise when I received a letter from Jim saying my Danny still loves me and has been in hospital a month and that I can write to him. Thank you so much God. Please take care of him.*

Mary Twells gets engaged to John, her airman at her 21st birthday party on Christmas Eve. In Greece, WW2 gives way to civil war. Connie's Frank has his leave cancelled *because of the trouble*. Churchill and Eden impose a government on Athens, the Greek people now wondering what the hell they had been fighting for. *Please God bless my Danny always and take good care of him and send him to me as soon as possible so we can get engaged by my 20th birthday*, she writes on New Year's Eve, *and please God let him be better now.*

Norah knits and stitches her way into 1945: a pair of khaki gloves for Frank, some fabric-covered coat hangers for Mrs Harris' birthday, a jacket for herself made from an old black coat belonging to Ma, and a hem-stitched tablecloth and embroidered 'lady' cushion cover in wove, both for her bottom drawer. She reads *All Quiet on the Western Front* (*very good in patches*) and enjoys the high jinx of 'Humpty Dumpty' at the panto with little Jeannie, now nearly four. With Jean from work, she attends an ENSA performance and a 'smoking concert' at the Institute, accompanied by Mr Hearne and Mr Maclean who, despite the lack of first names, are *getting pally*, the latter flirting by trying to teach her jujitsu in the office.

In his first letter of the new year, Jim rattles on a bit too long about his brother Jack, currently stationed at Spitalgate, Lincolnshire and keen to contact Norah. She isn't interested, not in Jack, nor in bomb aimer Bob, yet another brother to whom Jim has given her home address. Jim says he has 'no dope' on Danny and Norah homes in on the details that he does provide. Danny who is out of hospital and on the mend and who may be able to set a date to see her soon. Danny who 'still thinks you are

the sweetest girl in the world' ('So do I', Jim adds, though Norah misses – ignores? – that quiet reminder). *22nd January: Wrote to Jim. I love you so much my sweetheart. Please God take care of him. Read in paper of men from Greece who arrived here last night.*

Jim's letters change in tone again and lurch towards sleazy. 'Please remember, I am your best friend so share your secrets', he writes, although he no longer sounds very friendly. He calls Norah an 'iceberg', says he would 'gamble my life that no boy has ever been allowed to put his hand up your knickers', asks her if 'girls ever get the feeling that they want an intercourse? I do hope you will confide in me a little'. He requests schoolgirl snaps, twice more: 'Please send school photos in your next and let me keep one. Have you one about 12-14 years'. He issues low-level threats: 'It would be fatal for both of us if Danny knew of our intimate letters so you can depend on me that I shall never mention anything'. He claims to have been out with 'hundreds of girls, all nationalities'. He has 'never failed to go so far', he writes, 'and believe me never against their will, perhaps a little persuading, but it is generally shyness and embarrassing at times and refusing often offends and who would me (I would say you)'. 'It is possible you will give in to Danny on your next meeting...', he says, before telling her that he collects 'a very rare souvenir' from his girlfriends 'which you would not guess or give.' He asks all the same: 'The only thing I would like is a souvenir... It is a curl from _____. I told you it was an unusual souvenir, but please ignore the rude and embarrassing side of it (please Norah)'. 'Please return and write an intimate letter if you wish. I can be trusted'.

I'm utterly bored with Jim now. Norah is too. When he sends extracts from letters from 'some girls I have been out with', she tells him what she thinks. What is there to lose? 'PLEASE DON'T CONDEMN', he writes in his reply. 'I knew what attitude you would take after reading those girls' letters, please don't blame them entirely, because my unique technique has got me whatever I wanted, and it is plain to see what I usually wanted'.

But Jim is still her only route to Danny. 'I am now writing Danny's letter, so the next time I answer yours I may have some good news'. 'I am still going to keep you in the dark about Danny but he is on his way home and he sends his love to you alone'. 'Would you marry Danny if

you had the chance? I could help you with that'. 'Yes Norah, I can play a big part in your love affair with Danny'.

Does Jim think Norah owes him something? Of course he does. He's out in the bloody North Sea, risking his life to keep her safe. It's her job, to send him comforts and photos and romantic letters, to keep him happy. And it was he who found her in the first place. Those socks were his. How is she still waiting for Danny after all this time? She continues to puzzle him. Her letters give him Norah the nice girl whereas what he wants is what his brother seems to have had: Norah the sex object, the girl who can boost his standing among his fellow ratings.

That's a factor, surely: the ship. All of his mates will know about Norah. He will have bragged about her, shown off her picture. He is hardly going to confess that she has gone off with his brother.

Is there more to say about this kind of environment? Australian Defence Corps veteran and sociologist Ben Wadham thinks there is. In his view, this type of attitude to women is not an individual aberration – Jim as a random 'bad egg' – but a style of masculinity seen as 'crucial to making soldiers', and 'a structured and inherent element of institutional masculine culture'. 'Mateship', as he terms it, is forged against a range of 'others', including civilians and the feminine in themselves (which must be obliterated), and sometimes involves sexually abusive practices.⁵ The latter are constantly in the news. As I write, the man rather comically known as the First Sea Lord is attempting to defend the way the Royal Navy handles allegations of rape and sexual abuse, while London Fire Brigade, until recently an all-male workplace, is accused of institutional misogyny. Don't even get me started on the Met.⁶

The possibility that Danny and Jim were less than in control of the situation, that what started as a bit of a lark but got out of hand, fits with Wadham's account. It may even have been circumstantial, like Jim might not have been interested in a fifteen-year-old girl until one turned up – in his sock, as it were. But living in the stoker's mess or at a RAF base, men weren't under surveillance like they would have been at home. As one twenty-seven-year-old newspaper reporter recalled, 'Uniforms and postings to places where they were unknown gave our lovers anonymity and a lack of self-consciousness'.⁷ It makes me think of internet dating. A man could make himself out to be anyone he wanted, someone completely different to each new woman. And maybe they believed,

in the words of George Ryley Scott, that girls and young women were 'prepared to fall in love with any young man wearing a uniform'; that for some, the obsession went to such 'ridiculous lengths' as to rank as 'a fetish'. That the uniform combined with patriotism removed the 'ordinary standards, social and otherwise' by which more discerning judgements would normally be made.⁸

And goaded on by each other... On the ship, a bit of a loner, Jim feels the pressure from the other men. We shouldn't underestimate that.

What does Norah make of Jim's behaviour? What I see as part of a continuum of sexist abuse – Jim knows Norah doesn't want the sexual content of his letters but sends it anyway – she sees, I guess, as smut. But she's not really listening to him. It is the possibility of news about Danny that keeps her hooked in.

For her twentieth birthday on 9th March, Norah receives a box of truffles and two handkerchiefs from Mrs Harris and a kiss from Mr Marsh. Jean treats her to a plaice and chip supper at Jimmie's Chip Shop. They see *The Mikado* and discuss their holiday plans – Cornwall or North Wales? – for the summer.

Norah notes that local girl Madge Hudson has married her airman, while Lily Smith's boyfriend has been killed in action.

It could still go either way.

