1. Norah's Suitcase

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A Place of Dreams

Desire, Deception and a Wartime Coming of Age

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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.

1. Norah's Suitcase

Paid milkman. If truth be told, I didn't have high hopes for Norah's diaries. *Had perm*. My grandmother, Norah's elder sister, had kept a similar set, her sparse entries simply confirming that she was of that class and generation that didn't dwell on feelings. Even the day in September 1965, when she discovered her unmarried daughter was pregnant – with me, as it happens – my grandmother marked the page not with words but with a single black ╳.

There was every chance that Norah's diaries would be more of the same. Her life was more exotic, that much was true. *Booked taxi to airport* would appear at least once each year. *Bought lovely new high-heeled shoes* would crop up with some frequency too. But like her sister, Norah wasn't one for shows of emotion. In the forty or more years that I knew her, I never once saw her composure disturbed. Her tiny pocket diaries, their daily windows smaller than the side of a matchbox, would allow for nothing more than the barest bones of her life.

Norah had mentioned her diaries to me a few times over the years, including on the last occasion that I saw her – an impromptu visit a few weeks before she died. We had started calling in more frequently that autumn. She had suddenly become very tired, sometimes too weary to even meet up with her friends. She relied on the lunches and outings that structured her weeks to keep the loneliness at bay. That Sunday, we phoned *en route* to instruct her to put the kettle on and then stopped at a farm shop on the outskirts of town to pick up a chocolate sponge and a pint of semi-skimmed.

'It's a rum carry-on', she said, clearly pleased, 'when your visitors have to bring their own cake and milk'.

Sitting in the middle of the settee in her mauve jumper, resting her long calves neatly to one side, Norah looked at least a decade younger than her eighty-four years.

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'When I'm gone, you'll have all this lot to sort out', she said.

There was nothing untoward about this comment or the accompanying chuckle as she surveyed her living room: the colourful ornaments and mementoes that dotted the rosewood sideboard, the red Moroccan table runners, a Thai Buddha and an assortment of Egyptian figurines. Nor even in the way she leant forward, her tea cupped in her hands, to give me a meaningful look.

'And then there's my diaries'.

I already knew that Norah had kept a daily diary, starting when she was a schoolgirl before the Second World War. But when I asked her again what she wrote about, she just laughed.

'My life', she shrugged, as always giving nothing away.

Norah's enigmatic mix of fond familiarity and aloofness foxed me. While her friendly demeanour and her sing-song voice gave the impression that she didn't have a care in the world, we were vaguely aware that behind her poise was a guard that she wouldn't let down. I can't imagine now why my curiosity hadn't driven me further, to try to coax her out from behind her cool self-possession, her polish and reserve.

I regret it now, of course I do.

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If you'd asked me then, before her wartime diaries got me in their grip, I'd have been quite certain that the period of Norah's life that most intrigued me was the 1960s, just before I was born. These were the years in which she met and moved in with Eddy, her German lover. We didn't much care for him, nor he for us. That he had fought on the 'wrong side' during the war had been a factor early on. That he was separated from his second wife but remained a married man was more unsettling. My mum and gran thought that Norah had ended up with him because she had been afraid of being left on the shelf.

'Lord only knows what she sees in him', my grandmother would say, well-versed herself in marital disappointment.

On car journeys to visit Norah when I was a child, my mum and gran would whisper about the silences surrounding her marital status and speculate about Eddy's possible war criminal past. As we neared their suburban bungalow, stern warnings would issue from the front of our Ford Cortina as I sat unbelted in the back. Once inside, my glass of orange squash balancing on my lap, legs dangling above the pale carpet,

my curiosity would start to spill. My eyes were drawn to the shelf of books written in German, the photographs of unfamiliar children and, neatly placed on a polished table to the side of the sofa, a sepia portrait of a dead first wife. 'Uncle Eddy' watched me looking, curled-lipped and red-faced in his armchair throne, while Norah made small-talk, nervously serving up a madeira cake she'd baked that afternoon.

We preferred it when she came to us; alone, of course. At first, you'd hear high heels tap-tapping down the path at the side of the house. Then she'd glide in with her Grace Kelly elegance, her lilting voice and kindly eyes.

Norah and my mother had been close. As a child, my mum had spent long days at Norah's family home, helping her with the dusting and making tea. When my mum passed the 11-plus in 1952, it was Norah who lent my grandmother the money to buy her school uniform. Later, aunt and niece became companions – on walks in the country lanes around the village, Sunday evenings in front of the newly acquired television, shopping trips to Derby and Blackpool holidays. When it became clear that my mother, unmarried, was pregnant, Norah was a confidante for both her sister and niece. And when my mum reneged on an earlier adoption plan, returning from a mother and baby home with a new white and gold carrycot with me inside, Norah became my godmother.

There was a distance between them during the 1970s and 1980s. Norah's 'husband' was a jealous man who demanded her attention and (we believed) thought us beneath him. But after he passed away in the mid-1990s, Norah and my mum settled into years of comfortable companionship, with outings to stately homes, visits to well dressings and weekly chats over cups of tea. After my daughters were born, Norah would spend birthdays and Christmases, and some lunches and Sunday dinners in between, with us in Sheffield. The hour-long journey up the M1 was filled with laughter as she and my mum imagined the cake fashioned by the girls, usually more sculpture than cuisine, or placed bets on what time I'd have dinner on the table. Once here, while my mum helped in the kitchen, Norah's chat drifted through from the front room, as she delighted in her great-grand-nieces' rapturous welcome.

For Norah's 80th birthday in 2005, I arranged for her extended family to converge from all corners of the country on Donington Manor Hotel. The best photograph shows her sitting at the top of the table like a duchess, wearing a smart green suit and a composed smile.

Five years later, in the late November week when I'd begun planning for her 85th celebration the following spring, Norah suddenly died. She had chosen the cemetery at Castle Donington as her final resting place. Her plot, occupied by Eddy, was just down the path from her mother and father and three of her siblings.

Although our family were chapel-goers, we held her funeral service in the thirteenth-century Anglican church which, elegant, with a needle spire, stood on elevated ground at the heart of the village; Norah had long been an admirer. My daughters, nine and six, read a poem and a made-up prayer. My eulogy sketched the surface of her life: her love of family history and the village, her travel adventures, gardening, years with Eddy. While it was better than a thin tribute by a vicar to whom she was an unknown, it felt unsatisfactory, like I was merely wrapping up her life in a tidy way. I didn't really know her at all.

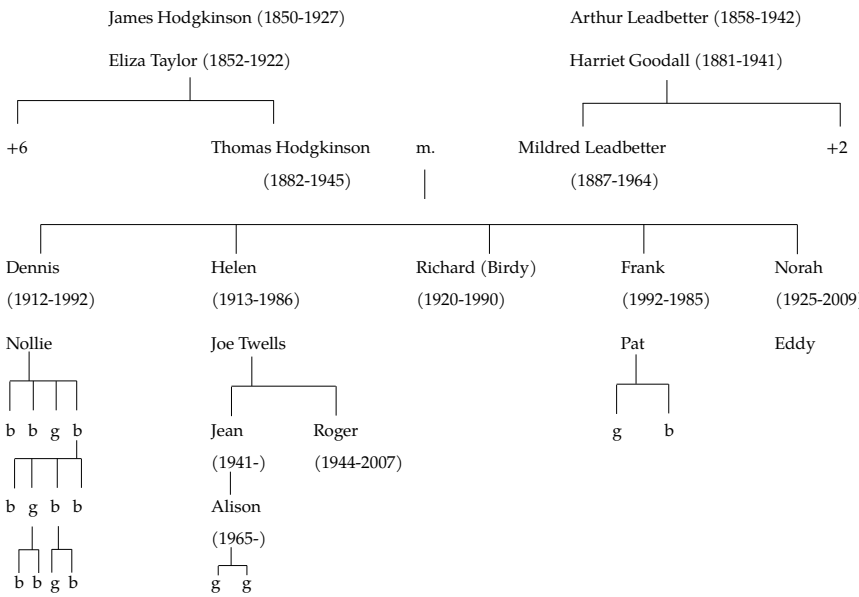

Fig. 1 Hodgkinson family tree, A. Twells, 2025.

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My mum reminded me about the diaries when we arrived at Norah's bungalow in the evening after she died. She had been called that afternoon by a vigilant neighbour who, noticing that Norah's curtains remained drawn, had knocked and then let herself in, to find my great-aunt slumped on the bathroom floor. Norah had died, quickly it seems, during the night.

The undertaker had already been and gone and the place was shrouded in stillness. We were there to pick up precious family photographs, Norah's funeral plan, solicitor's details and her will, the contents of which we already knew: the house left to charity, small amounts of money to family, and all possessions to my mother to dispose of as she saw fit.

Overwhelmed by the task ahead, we sat down for a last cup of tea in the living room, now in cold contrast to the sub-tropical heating Norah had favoured. I reached across to the sideboard to pick up a framed photograph of her parents, my great-grandparents, Tom and Milly Hodgkinson, taken on the occasion of their engagement in 1908:

Fig. 2 Tom and Milly Hodgkinson, J. H. Turnham, Winslow, 1908. Private papers of Norah Hodgkinson.

Tom, a postman, recently discharged from the Grenadier Guards after service in the South African Wars (his papers describe him as 'clean, smart and sober'), wears a dark suit and checked waistcoat, a pocket watch nestling beneath his jacket. He is handsome with dark curly hair, a moustache and a mischievous twinkle in his eyes that has reappeared, an appealing flash of blue, in various grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Milly is seated far enough forward to allow her new fiancé to rest a protective arm on the back of her chair. The daughter of a lockkeeper on the Trent-Mersey canal, she had been in service since the age of twelve, working in big houses in Loughborough, London and now Derby. Tall and graceful, her features are strong, her heavy jaw and brow balanced by the shiny sweep of a loose chestnut bun and offset by delicate, pretty eyes and a general air of shyness. Her pale, embroidered blouse with its fine lace collar will have been sewn by her own hand. The photograph was so familiar to me and yet, suddenly, with Norah gone, it all seemed so long ago.

'Here they are', my mother said fondly, as she returned from the dining room with the two large boxes of photographs that Norah would bring out at family gatherings. The youngest of five, she had outlived all of her siblings. She needed to make sure that we – my mum and I, our cousins and now my own daughters – appreciated our roles as responsible heirs.

'I wonder where her diaries are?' my mum pondered. I'd forgotten about Norah's diaries until that moment. We soon found the grey cardboard suitcase, resting against the teak wardrobe in Norah's bedroom. I laid it flat on the floor and flicked the locks.

'Blimey! Look here!' Dozens of coloured spines – red, blue, brown, green – were packed neatly in rows. I picked out one at random and flicked through the pages.

> *18th April 1942: Laval set up new cabinet in France. Twelve Lancasters made raid on southern Germany & lost seven of them.*
>
> *20th: Received a beautiful letter from my dearest beloved & answered it & Jim's too.*

'*My dearest beloved*? Who was that, then, when she was ...' I looked at my mum as we both worked out the years – 1925 to 1942 – 'just seventeen?'

'It'll be that airman', my mum stated, matter-of-factly.

'What airman?' I frowned.

'You've never heard about Norah's boyfriend? The one who disappeared? You must have done!' My mum shot me a dubious look before telling me that Norah had a boyfriend during the war who was in the RAF and whom she had expected to marry. I remembered a story that Norah had been disappointed in love as a young woman. 'It was all a bit of a mystery, one of those things you knew not to ask about as a child'. My mum paused. 'Or since, for that matter. Now what was his name?' As my mother wrestled with her memory, I read on:

> *21st April: Mum came to Derby. Went up to Kemp's. I'm starting on Friday. Helen has pleurisy. Bought Pride & Prejudice 3/6.*

'Kemp's was the secretarial college, where she did shorthand. Your gran was really poorly with pleurisy'.

> *22nd: Posted my letters. I love my Danny very much.*

'Danny, that's him. Something odd happened. I'm not sure anybody knew exactly what, but it derailed her life somehow, for a while. We always thought he was the root of it'.

'The root of what?' I asked, slightly taken aback.

'How she was. With men. With life'. I had more than a vague sense of what my mum meant. In my lifetime, Norah had been on the edge of our family, her self-imposed distance received as both a puzzle and a minor affront. 'Let's just say, there was a lot we didn't know'.

A quick inspection revealed a mixture of Letts's School-girl's, Railway Clerical Workers' Association, Collins' and gardening diaries, seventy in all, stacked in order of year from 1938, when Norah turned thirteen, to 2008 when she was eighty-three. Tucked in the corner of the suitcase was a stash of letters with 1940s postmarks. A pile of photographs beneath them were of the same two men, one in Royal Navy uniform and the other RAF. I turned over a portrait. It was signed in pencil on the back: 'Danny'. And another: 'Jim'. Both: 'with love'.

My mum glanced across. 'She'd prefer the airman of course. A better *class* of serviceman'. She lengthened the 'a' in class to make it more Queen's English. That wasn't the way Norah spoke, but she did have aspirations.

As I closed the lid and lined up the locks, clicking them into place, my mother turned sharply to face me, her expression frozen and grave.

'Do you think we should burn them?'

'Not a chance', I replied. I knew that this was an archive, an extraordinary document of the century that had seen the most profound changes in women's lives. Seventy-one years of pocket diaries, following the life of a girl who lived in a council house and passed the scholarship exam; an ordinary woman who worked as a clerk, who loved glamour, travel and men, and who ended up in a 'marriage' of which no-one approved. What a gift!

Fig. 3 Norah's suitcase. Photo: A. Twells, 2025.

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'Where shall we start?' I asked as we settled down in my mum's back room with Norah's diaries and two dry sherries. I didn't know what her choice would be – family life at Moira Dale, maybe, for which she was so nostalgic, or Norah's early years with Eddy and her decision to live with him as man and wife. But no, neither of these.

'1965', she replied in a flash, like the question didn't need to be asked. My mum wanted to hear Norah's record of the scandalous pregnancy that she – my mum – had brought to our family as a young unmarried woman. 'September. That's when they all found out; when the shit hit the fan'. We laughed guiltily at our haste. A few hours on and here we were. Nothing could now knock us off this course.

We bond over family history, my mum and I. Life, education mainly, had drawn me away, provoking in her a definite pride, but suspicion too. There is a space between us that can prickle with unease, impatience on my part met by a 'you-clever-bugger' look on hers. My twenties had seen us at a distance – me at a south coast university, then settling in Yorkshire, her leaving Donington briefly, to marry. But my babies' births in the following decade had brought a new kind of kinship, an embeddedness in each other's lives. Family stories and regular reports on Norah's family tree-ing adventures became part of our daily phone calls and weekly visits.

Families are where we first learn about history, about change over time. They are also where we start to sense, in Suzannah Lessard's words, 'how short time is, how close the generations are, how powerfully lives reverberate […], deeply affecting each other'. But the 'genealogical imaginary' – how we use kinship to place ourselves in time – is always selective.[1] Norah favoured her Hodgkinson ancestors – agricultural labourers over centuries in the Derbyshire Dales, dispersed into urban life with her police sergeant grandfather's generation, his daughters, Norah's aunts, marrying up and moving south. My mother and I, by contrast, were most at home with the women on Norah's maternal side. Norah's granny, Harriet Leadbetter, a member of the Independent Labour Party on its formation in 1893, famously neglected housework to pore over Robert Blatchford's *Clarion* and recite Walt Whitman's poems.[2] Self-educated and something of a 'seeker', she and her lock-keeper husband became so utterly disillusioned with religion that they refused to enter a church, even when dead. Milly, their loving daughter and a gentle rebel, disapproved of her parents' domestic distractions and lack of faith, joining the Christadelphians as a young teenage girl in service. With no interest in the trappings of modern life, she found her pleasures in gardening, sewing, crocheting, walking in the lanes around her home and reading her Bible.

'A true Leadbetter', my mum will say, surveying my scrappy lawn and runner bean canes, while casting a critical eye over the breakfast pots, still unwashed at lunchtime. The relaxed approach to housekeeping skipped a generation with her tidiness and cleanliness, a dab of antiseptic from the Twells side, perhaps. But for me, it's come straight down the maternal line.

While my mum and Norah kept family photographs and other mementoes safely stored in boxes and drawers, my house is home to the heirlooms: my gran's green Lloyd Loom chair and ottoman, carefully re-covered; a bookcase and an embroidered stool that Norah crafted at a woodwork class she and my gran had attended in the 1950s – though not my gran's television table, its hilariously too-long legs cut down lest the family permanently crick their necks. On a shelf in my living room, my gran's Singer sewing machine is a thing of beauty – black japanned cast iron with gold filigree engraving – and a reminder of her creativity and capacity for making. And her sideboard, bought from Loughborough Co-op in 1939: on my first weekend alone after a break-up with a man who disliked my ancestral furnishings, I dragged the 'dresser' from its attic storage place to the living room and painted it a glorious teal blue. My mother, more wedded to the idea that an original should not be tampered with, doesn't always approve of my domestic re-imaginings. But these family pieces feel to me to be constitutive of *now* rather than museum-like remnants of the past.[3]

Gardeners, knitters, sewists all, makers of light and airy sponge cakes and perfect trifles. Over the years, Norah and my mother added other talents to this list, decorating, upholstery and car maintenance among them. When Norah relayed the story of a female relative who had exclaimed in some awe and envy that 'you Leadbetter women are just so *capable*', she and my mum had cackled like crones, knowing it to be true. They congratulated each other ever after – on Herculean achievements in the garden, perhaps, or fighting off a flu bug: 'well, what with us being strong Leadbetter women …'

Norah and my mother were in a quieter kind of cahoots over what we might call their 'relationship histories'. For both, their most intimate experiences – 'living in sin' (was Norah married or not?), an unwed pregnancy by a married man – were shaped by secrecy and shame. My mum, in later life an enthusiastic interviewee for a history of unmarried

mothers,[4] was less guarded than Norah. Her oft-told story of her return from the mother and baby home in December 1965, the very next day being marched (by another aunt) down the main shopping street with me in the pram and her head held high, was, to her, two fingers to judgement and shame. It was a tactic she repeated with other women, cowed by varied disgraces. But despite her more buttoned-up approach to her life, Norah too refused to be tethered to norms of respectability when they got in the way of other wants and passions.

And me, writing this? In his 2006 Nobel lecture titled 'My Father's Suitcase', Orhan Pamuk suggests that the starting point for many writers is 'the secret wounds that we carry inside us, wounds so secret that we ourselves are barely aware of them'.[5] It is a long time since the shame of my birth has felt like a wound for either my mother or myself, but Pamuk is surely right and this is the root of our mutual fascination with all matters sex and transgression.

And there's another thing: the way family history is commonly pursued – father's name, male line, 'traditional' family structures – can silence the experiences of women. 'We think back through our mothers if we are women', wrote Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*, evoking an alternative matrix of remembrance.[6] Perhaps in so doing we catch courage from them.[7]

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In those early weeks after Norah's death, my mother lived in what we came to call 'diary time'. It became a compulsion that pinned her to her gold two-seater settee, her arthritic limbs stiffer than ever, keeping her from her routine and from seeing her friends.

'I've been diarying all afternoon', she'd tell me wearily over the phone. 'I'll be glad when I've finished them'.

Less than a month after Norah's funeral, my mum arrived with a brown A3 envelope bulging with diaries. Marooned on the sofa on Christmas night, she offered bulletins from Norah's daily life in the 1940s. She had already read the diaries from my birth in 1965 forwards, through Norah's relationship with Eddy, to the end of her long life, and had now gone back to the beginning, to Norah's schooldays, her early

years as a clerk at 'the railway' and the mystery of her wartime love affair with Danny the airman.

On Boxing Day evening, she arrived at the event she'd been waiting for. 'She's just fallen in love with Danny', my mum announced. And later: 'Danny's been to stay for the weekend'.

'What happened to him?' I asked, shuddering inwardly at the thought of the fighter pilots who were to the Second World War what soldiers in trenches were to the First.'We never knew. Norah expected to marry him. I think he just disappeared.'

I left her to the diaries and went to clear up in the kitchen.

'You won't believe this!' My mum's voice was high with excitement when, a short time later, she joined me. 'Listen to this! *5th September 1943: Things got hot with Danny in bed in the morning*. And then a week later: *Had a beautiful time in bed with my cherub*'. My mum was incredulous. 'Where was Marsie when all that was going on?!' Marsie was the name given by her children to Milly, Norah's mother and my mum's grandmother. She also sounded a bit put out. 'I thought I was the first person in our family to do anything like that', she said, 'as an *unmarried mother*'. She over-enunciated the last two words, Les Dawson style. 'But look at her! It could have been *her*!'

When my mum picked up with Norah's diaries the following afternoon, Danny had not been in touch for a few months and appeared to be missing. Norah was writing a short prayer for him every night: 'Please God take good care of my Danny and bring him home safely to me'. In early 1945, he was back, only to disappear again after his demob later that year.

'I think he's gone for good this time', my mum lamented. 'I wish I could remember more.' She paused for a moment, wrapped in her thoughts. 'I wonder if there is there anything in the letters?'

The letters! I'd brought them back to Sheffield in a shoebox, leaving the suitcase of diaries with my mum. I was saving them for when I could give them my full attention. I was also a tiny bit afraid that they wouldn't contain anything of interest. I already knew just from flicking through that they weren't written by Danny but by someone named Jim.

'Oh Jim!' my mother exclaimed as if he were an old acquaintance of hers. 'Jim's the sailor. You remember the photographs? He's the one she

knitted some socks for, while she was still at school. Schools "adopted" ships, you know. The girls knitted for them and wrote letters'.

I liked the image of teenage Norah knitting socks. It reminded me of the cardigans she had made for my newborn babies and a Christmas afternoon in more recent years when she helped me with the first sleeve of a chunky jumper, chuckling at my unwieldy size 10 pins.

I fetched the box from the bookshelf. The photographs lay on top. A portrait of Jim reveals his open, symmetrical features, his lips and eyebrows full. A second formal snap shows him standing in line with a crew of boyish sailors. Norah's collection of photos of Danny was more extensive: a boy sporting a big flat cap, a suave young man in a clutch of pre-war snaps, and the slender twenty-something whom Norah knew, bright-eyed and smiling in his RAF uniform.

Beneath the photos, the letters were a jumble. Some were not postmarked, while others, many undated, were out of their envelopes. I picked one out, unfolding the unexpectedly thick sheets. It opened with a brief account of Jim's life at sea, but mid-way down, the tone changed.

'Listen to this!' I squeaked.

> Norah if you want Danny don't be afraid to let your feelings go or are you shy. I wish you would tell what you and Danny do when he stays with you, or don't you get the opportunity, meaning being alone. Have you had more than a parting kiss? Norah perhaps I have no right in butting in your private affairs, but you can depend on me and I will do anything to help you. I wish also you would ask me a million questions. Next letter then I will expect a real –?

My mum was wide-eyed. 'Bloody hell! What was she doing getting letters like that?' A pause: 'I wonder if she had romances with both of them?' And then quietly, as a child came into earshot: 'What a bugger she was!'

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Alarmed by her absorption in Norah's revelations, my mother's own diaries didn't see the New Year in.

'I'm not having you lot poring over *my* life like this', she announced in my kitchen one weekend in early January. Her blue eyes flashed at me accusingly, seemingly oblivious to the fact that, at this point in time, she

was the only one to have read Norah's diaries. My ten-year-old daughter looked up from the picture she was sketching at the table, horrified. Inspired by her great-great-aunt, she had asked for her first diary as a Christmas present and had begun writing every night before she went to sleep.

'You can't do that, grandma!'

'I can and I have', my mother replied, pursing her lips. 'When I got back home after Christmas, I shredded the lot'.