

21. Son of Danny

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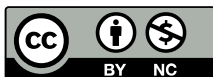
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Cover image: Norah Hodgkinson, 1941, W.W. Winter, Derby. A selection from Norah's archive, Alison Twells, 2025. Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal.

21. Son of Danny

I want to know more about these two men and their post-war lives: Danny's marriage, if he stayed with his wife, whether Jim was ever hauled up on an indecency charge...

I return to the family history website, Ancestry. Via some poking about and playing around with the 'search' facility – typing in parents' details, nosing at a Public Member's Tree – I discover that Danny and Evelyn had three children over as many decades, including a son, a change-baby no doubt, who is a contemporary of mine. The daughters have first names popular in those years and, both married, surnames that are not uncommon. They would be difficult to chase down. But that last-born son...

What I didn't realise is that when you nosy at someone's profile on LinkedIn, the fact of you being there is recorded, passed on. For those as unaware as I was, I should explain. LinkedIn – linked in, not linkideln, as I was mispronouncing to myself until I twigged that the second 'l' was in fact a capital 'I' – is a professional networking site on the internet. You type in your details, your work, and put yourself out there. So when I discovered that Danny's son is a member, I signed up to the service to get a better look. I had no idea that he was informed that I'd been snooping, not until this email dropped into my inbox:

Dear Alison,

You have been looking at my profile on LinkedIn. Please feel free to get in touch.

Regards,

Rob Gilbert

Lordy! I froze in my seat as my heart began beating fast. I was unsure whether this was an automated message, generated by any visit to

Rob Gilbert's LinkedIn site, or whether he really knew that I had been looking and had sent it, knowingly, specifically, for me.

If the latter, it is worse than he imagines, because I have learned quite a lot about him in recent weeks. Not only do I know that he is a former local government officer now working for a charity (that's the LinkedIn info), but going by family photographs on his daughter's facebook site (oh yes, I'm afraid so, the teenage girl with the same surname living in Bexhill is one of his three daughters), he has been married more than once. This daughter's profile leads me seamlessly to her sister's wedding, Rob giving her away. He is the image of Danny, his dad.

It would be so easy. My fingers would run away with me. I'd tell him that I had an aunt who died and left me her diaries spanning seventy-one years, and a bundle of letters and photographs, mostly of Danny and Jim Gilbert. I'd say that she got to know them through knitting socks for the Royal Navy Comforts Fund as a schoolgirl and that there was a romantic entanglement. I'd make it clear that I am a historian by training and that I am writing a book. Obviously I'd tell him that I have disguised the names. And I'd drop it in that I plan to use some of the photographs, of Jim in his sailor's uniform and of a very dapper Danny as a young airman. I wouldn't ask his permission, just see what unfolds.

And then there is the hard bit: at what point would I tell him that neither Danny nor Jim comes out of this little affair very well? When would I offer the reassurance that I didn't set out to discredit them? That to the contrary, I have read lots about the experience of being a pilot in WW2, to understand more about the emotional impact of those night flights and bombing raids. That I would love to hear more about what Danny did, how the war affected him, what he was like as a husband and a dad (and, of course, where he went in 1943-44...). I get ahead of myself. Due a trip to Brighton to see friends, I am already in the Pavilion Gardens café on a sunny summer's afternoon, enjoying a cup of tea with Danny's son.

But I don't pursue. I feel a vague sense of unease, a nagging self-doubt, and decide to sit on it for a while. When eventually I mention the possibility of contacting Rob Gilbert to colleagues, the strength of feeling, the polarised responses, leave me startled.

Writers are generally very keen.

'Holy shit!' they exclaim, or words to that effect. 'What a chapter!'

Historians, to a woman, are dead against. 'You're surely not serious?' two very professional oral historians looked aghast as I told them the story over a beer in a Sheffield pub. Everything goes through an ethics committee with them. It was like I had gone down ten notches in their estimation for even entertaining the idea.

I told them what a shock it was, receiving the message.

'I think what's more shocking is you stalking this poor guy on social media', one said reproachfully. 'You know his whole life story! And looking at his daughters' facebook profiles...' She laughed, deadly serious, and sipped her drink. 'What are you, a historian or a tabloid journalist?'

I'm less troubled than some by the social media voyeurism. Facebook has privacy settings afterall. But when I tell Mark later that night, he agrees with them.

'But he's *our age*'. I am emphatic. 'Surely people know odd things happened during the war? Could it really be so devastating to find your father had an unconsummated love affair years before you were born? He stayed with his mother after all'.

'You just don't know what you'd be raking up', Mark says. 'You could unravel his story of his life'. He pauses. 'Ok. I'll put myself in his shoes... A woman gets in touch to talk about an affair my dad had before I was born. My dad and mum are both dead. I have good memories of a happy childhood. My dad was hard working and attentive, he might have had a bit of a roving eye, but he was devoted to my mum, who loved him dearly. Then this woman turns up out the blue. She wants to pull that rug from under my feet, to give me a different view of my dad, of my whole childhood, all because she wants good copy for her book. What possible benefit to me is this piece of information? How dare she intrude on my life in this way..?'

I find it so hard to believe this, but some anxiety about my ability to judge what is right and proper holds me back.

How do we respect the living when we write about the dead? (How do we respect the dead when we write about their lives?) What are

the limits of the historian's right to know, especially in an age of digital traceability, when so little is out of bounds?

People are vulnerable in death. Perhaps I should care more that Danny can't respond to my allegations that Norah was groomed by him and his brother; innocent until proven guilty, and all that. But he is isn't my worry here. Abusers and their victims are not equal before the law. The evidence is clear. How else can it be read?

My concern is Danny's living children who, I don't doubt, can well do without my posthumous revelations. I tend to agree with Thomas Couser as he urges lifewriters to always undertake a 'conscientious and scrupulous consideration of who might be hurt by life writing and how';¹ to do no harm.

But. (There is always a 'but' for me, often more than one...) The question of which takes precedence, the story, or a subject's privacy, is never as clear cut as that. How can anything ever be written, when 'my' story, Norah's story, is also 'theirs'?

And: we can't possibly know what their reactions will be. We can *guess*, of course, but is it really a foregone conclusion that harm would be done? I know nothing about Danny's children and their relationships with their father and their uncle Jim (though I can't help but note that Danny's granddaughters are not friends with Jim's children on Facebook...). 'A family without secrets is rare indeed', Annette Kuhn has written, and those secrets 'haunt our memory-stories, giving them pattern and shape'.² What if my revelations confirm long-held suspicions; spark some kind of closure they'd sought for years?

(Indeed, might we even say that there are other ethical considerations – like recovering the lives of women in history, for example, and telling long-concealed stories, about sex and secrets, about the abuse of power and the wrongs done to girls...?)

But... the thing that holds me back is my knowledge that I have a tendency to be rash. The email to arrange that cup of tea with Rob Gilbert in Brighton Pavillion Gardens? It wouldn't be the first time in my adult life that my enjoyment of uncertainty, of the unknown, overrode consideration of unintended consequences. What if I stopped to really interrogate my own motivations, to delve into my heart and mind, as life writers suggest I should?³ I suspect I would find that as much as my need to know the whys and wherefores of Danny's war, it is the

sheer pleasure of stories spooling forward in unexpected ways, the fresh perspectives on Danny's wartime affair with Norah, the new topics, emotions, theatres of war that I can then explore, that I find so very compelling and that spur me on.

There's the legal stuff as well, of course: invasion of privacy, defamation, libel, slander. Scary words. I don't go there, despite Mark's best efforts ('And what if he tries to stop you from publishing your book. It might only take a phone call to the university...'). I began this project so long ago that it falls outside of the university's ethics process, whereby any project that involves human research must obtain ethics approval prior to commencement. I'd already commenced, undertaken some interviews, delved into Ancestry. I'm more interested in personal moralities than policy and the law. But I know the gist: to change names and identifying characteristics, to decline from using photographs. I want to balance honesty, the book's integrity, with empathy for Danny's living children. And also: I'm too long in the tooth now for feelings of regret.

Without a conversation with Danny's son, there is no way of knowing for certain why Danny disappeared from Norah's life between October 1943 and March 1945. Whether he flew out of English skies one autumn day into some European horror that prevented him from visiting or writing to Norah for eighteen months. (Remember that 'Norway again' in one of Norah's diary entries for May 1945.) Or if the sight of his baby daughter nestling in her mother's arms was just so heart-wrenching that he vowed to bring an end to his wayward days? I can't know without asking what war stories Danny's children grew up with: his near misses on night flights from Skeabrae, maybe? his back injury at Arnhem? the remarkable double agent 'Garbo', who was crucial to Operation Fortitude and its success? his repeated tellings of (or his silences about) small heroic acts that would show more of him?

I realised too very late in the day that it has taken me so long to write this book that the MoD policy of releasing information to no-one but the next of kin for twenty-five years after an airman's death no longer applies. But – by then I was reconciled. Because: to what end? This story was Norah's all along.

