

18. Danny

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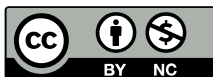
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Cover image: Norah Hodgkinson, 1941, W.W. Winter, Derby. A selection from Norah's archive, Alison Twells, 2025. Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal.

18. Danny

At the end of March 1945, Norah receives the letter she's been waiting for.

24th March: Received the most beautiful surprise of my life when I found a letter from my Danny at home. He's in East Lothian in Scotland. Thank you God. I do love him so. Replied to him & posted it. Went to Gift Sale at Council School. The British are across the Rhine.

25th: Thank you God for my Danny & for taking care of him for me. I do love him so, I hope he will be able to come home to me for Easter.

'[T]he joyful Easter promise of a resurrection of life seems startlingly applicable to temporal affairs', writes Mollie Panter Downes on 1st April. 'Every dazzling headline is a promise that the hard, dark years are nearly over and that at any moment now the incredible word of Victory may come'.¹

'Thank the Lord for that', my mother says, during one of her daily phone bulletins. 'I was getting heartily fed up with all that praying'.

Danny's *beautiful letters* keep coming, but beyond that he is in Scotland and carrying an injury, Norah reveals nothing about the adventure that has kept him away for almost eighteen months.

I am intrigued to know where Danny has been. His service number takes me nowhere. The Ministry of Defence embargo on servicemen's records means his papers are irretrievable to all but next-of-kin. But looking again at his Blair Athol address at the back of Norah's 1945 dairy, I see that it includes a squadron number. A spot of Googling reveals that Squadron 2737 was at Dyce Airfield near Aberdeen for a few weeks that spring, and that before that, for a whole year from 5th February 1944, at Macmerry in East Lothian. So far, it all squares.

It turns out that 2737 was one of the squadrons engaged in an elaborate 'deception plan' known as Operation Fortitude North. This

was part of a ploy to trick the German High Command into believing that a huge army was assembled in Scotland, poised to invade Norway. The idea, of course, was to divert German attention – and troops – away from northern France prior to the D-Day landings. Kitted out in mountain gear, snow boots and white camouflage smocks, servicemen were transported in their hundreds from the south of England, returning under the cover of night to make the journey again the next day. As per the plan, the troops were spotted by German planes.²

However – and this is where we come unstuck – just because Danny was with 2737 in early 1945 does not mean his whereabouts in 1943 and 1944 can be matched with that squadron's activities. If I have learned anything about the wartime RAF, it is that squadrons merged and were abandoned, reformed and renumbered. Men moved between them, depending on depletion and demand. A single airman might be attached to four or five squadrons during his wartime career.

We know from Norah's diaries that Danny was at Skeabrae Airfield until July 1943. He then had a brief period at Warmwell in Dorset before arriving at Grantham in early September. These places don't tally with the information I have gleaned about 2737 which, formed in March 1943 at Fairlop in Essex, was in Cornwall, East Sussex, Norfolk and Suffolk, before passing through Gibbet Hill in Warwickshire en route to Macmerry. But Danny could have joined 2737 that October and from all of those airfields, he would have been involved in sorties over Europe. Jim's announcement in his letter of late 1944 that Danny had been in hospital but was now on the mend is not out of keeping with this version of events. All we know, however, is that as soon as he was well enough, he was sent to Aberdeen. Where he was in 1943-1944 is anybody's guess.

Danny doesn't come for Easter, as she hoped he would, and Norah worries that he might be sent back overseas. To lose him now...

By early May, the war is drawing to a close. Dresden is razed. The last V-2 rocket drops on Kent. The Allies enter Buchenwald and the Russians and Americans meet at the Elbe. 'The war is shaping up to some vast Wagnerian finale', writes Frances Partridge. 'The Russian army has completely encircled Berlin and is pressing through the suburbs to the heart of it'. In Italy, Mussolini is executed, he and his mistress 'strung up like turkeys' in a Milanese square. Hitler is reported dead.³ *3rd May:*

Berlin gave in to the Russians... (And of course, Berlin didn't 'give in'. The Russians rampaged through the city, raping and killing at will.)

Danny writes to tell her that he is due to go to Norway to oversee the transition to peace. He has sex on his mind. *7th May: Received beautiful letter from my love who wants me to give in when he comes again. The Germans surrendered unconditionally & tomorrow is to be VE Day. Replied to my love. Please God take care of him always.*

That 'giving in' again... I have to pause here, this phrase is central to my story.⁴

It is possible, of course, that Danny means Norah should 'give in' to her own desires. But I think not. I think not because the evidence surrounding this particular black hole points to the contrary. If in the culture at large, sex is something that respectable girls don't do, that they have to be cajoled into, their modesty coaxed to one side... And if this is then combined with a wartime role of patriotic femininity, essential to buoying up men's morale and to serving the nation... Danny's meaning seems clear. What it might mean to Norah, however, secretly, excitedly, slightly ashamedly, is another matter altogether.

I am reminded of a post-coital exchange in H. E. Bates' 1944 novel *Fair Stood the Wind for France* between Franklin, the main character, and Françoise, known as 'the girl', the daughter of the family where he had found protection after his plane had come down in occupied territory.

'Did you mind what happened tonight?' Franklin asked, after they'd had sex.

'No. I wanted it to happen', 'the girl' replied.

She wanted it to happen: all good. But his question: did she *mind*?

'Did she MIND?' asks Jess, a reviewer on Goodreads. For her, Françoise is no more than a plot device. Bates fails to give her a character or even to use her name. From her role in the Resistance, we can assume that 'the girl' is a brave, resourceful young woman, but all we know is that Franklin is attracted to her. As Jess writes, 'Franklin cannot describe any interaction without paying an interminable tribute to her "clear, dark eyes" or "smooth breasts beneath her blouse"'.

I see this. Indeed, my natural sympathies are with this view, if slightly tempered. In a culture in which women cannot express desire, in which desire in a woman is 'unseemly', an acceptable level of enthusiasm might not extend beyond making it easier for a man remove a blouse. But I pause at 'Did you mind?' The fact that even in the act, Franklin hadn't been able to tell... Sex, quite simply, didn't require her participation, or her pleasure.

'This is not sensible', she had said (when Franklin began to undress her).

'You said you would do anything for me'.

'Yes, I will do anything', she said.⁵

'She is living out the double bind in which women exist', writes Katherine Angel of a much more recent encounter. '[T]hat saying no may be difficult, but so too is saying yes'.⁶

Novelist Elizabeth Howard lost her virginity around the same time that Bates' novel is set. She had no idea what to expect. Her later reflection was that it had been 'surprising'. Pete had been loving and gentle, it hadn't hurt much and 'he'd repeatedly told me how lovely I was and how much he'd enjoyed it. Somehow I'd thought I'd enjoyed it too, but nothing was said about that. This, I concluded, was because women – and surely now I was one – did it for love, and if you loved somebody, you must want to please them'.⁷

Giving in. 'Appeals to patriotism could fuel sexual coercion', writes Amanda Littauer. Commentators in wartime America acknowledged the pressures exerted by some servicemen. *The Ladies Home Journal* reported that 'many a teenage girl was told that having intercourse with a soldier ... was a way to contribute to the war effort'. The *Washington Post* quoted a sailor who was overheard telling a young woman, 'Now, we're going overseas in a day or two and this may be your last chance to do a good turn for your country'. Another recalled the sense of sexual obligation: 'If you weren't interested they'd say "that's what we're fighting for," ... and you'd feel guilty for not wanting to go to bed with them'. 'You Can't Say No to a Soldier', declared the popular song.⁸

In his study of the wartime RAF, Martin Francis writes of servicemen who saw the 'pursuit of love' as both 'a welcome release from the alternating boredom and terror of war' and 'a fitting reward for those who had undertaken the obligations of military service'.⁹ The problem surely is when the 'release' of sex and romance tips over into practices which are altogether more entitled; the expectation of a 'reward'. When love and

romance as part of their support for men in the forces is combined with sexual ignorance and the requirement not to be too keen, girls are made vulnerable. ('You said you'd do anything for me', Franklin cajoled, just before he was due to row down a river in occupied France...)

According to Nesta Wells, a woman police surgeon in Manchester during and after the war, there was a drop in sex crimes the early 1940s because so many men were away and the foreign troops hadn't yet arrived. When assaults did occur, the ignorance of the girls was a major factor. These were often girls who were 'taken advantage of', because, while not willing partners, they didn't know what the man was up to until it was too late.¹⁰ I've heard other accounts that corroborate this, including a story of a local girl raped in a Sheffield hotel room by an American GI she had been dating for a while. She thought she was meeting him for a goodbye kiss and cuddle and didn't know what he had in mind until, her underwear briskly removed, she felt a burning pain inside.¹¹

To be clear: 'the girl' Françoise was not raped and passively 'giving in' to a man's advances might be the only acceptable way to say yes. But as Elizabeth Howard suggests, this could make for an ambivalent experience. 'Modernity was constructed as a culture of greater sexual openness that contrasted with "Victorian" prudery', historian Adrian Bingham writes, 'but there were widespread silences about the disparities of power between the sexes that ensured that these greater freedoms would be exploited in profoundly unequal ways'.¹²

Norah attends the VE Day party in Borough Street where four-year-old Jeannie and nine-month-old Roger enjoy their Victory Tea. *8th May: Churchill broadcast at 3pm and the King at 9pm. It's so lovely to have it over, thank you God, especially for taking care of my Danny & Frank & everyone. Posted letter to my sweet. I love him so.*

Norah worries about *conflicting reports of whether or not the Germans will fight in Norway*. Even in the final days of war, as the Czechs rose in Prague and the Red Army ransacked Berlin, as high-standing Nazis killed their families and then themselves, Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz, Commander-in-Chief of the German Navy, was pressing to fight on. In

the event, when the instrument of surrender was signed on 7th May, the 350,000 German soldiers in Norway gave themselves up peacefully. The weather was more troublesome. Three of the Short Stirlings that flew out of Great Dunmow crashed at Gardermoen aerodrome in heavy rain and fog, killing all on board. With the war over and Europe celebrating, it felt like a terrible injustice that these lads were lost in extra time.

14th May: Received letter from my love saying he is going back to Norway & is probably now on his way. Please God take care of him and bring him safely to me very soon for always. Danny's squadron travelled to Norway with the First Airborne Division, an army unit that had been regrouped after the losses at Arnhem the previous year. Their plan was to remain until the arrival of Force 134, raised in part from the 12,000 young men who had fled over the border to Sweden in 1940. *15th May: Posted letter to my dearest one. Please God watch over him and take care of him and bring him safely to me within two months or so, for always please God, I love him so.*

Christiansand, Norah writes on the 20th. Danny might have described the picturesque old town with its low, white, wooden houses, the rune stones at the ancient parish church, the harbour and cannon-dotted coastline. Was he among the airmen who, marching through Karl Johansgatan, were offered aquavit and mobbed for their autographs by flower-holding girls? Or who saluted the newly-returned King Haakon VII as he travelled to and from the palace on his bike? Did Danny help with the rounding up Gestapo agents? Or with the Russian POWs, all 80,000 of them, hearing their stories of gratitude to local people who left them packages of food in unlikely places, saving them from sure starvation? We can't know. Other than *he is now at Christiansand and has good billets, that he hopes to come home on leave in July and be home for keeps in August*, Norah reports little of what Danny had to say.

Winging their way from Castle Donington to Kristiansand during the summer of 1945 are copies of *Punch* and the *Dispatch*, the *Herald*, *Mirror*, *Chronicle*, *News of the World*, *Empire News*, *Leader* and *Lilliput*. Norah searches for a dictionary for Danny and posts some election papers, no doubt telling him that she had been to hear Dr Mont Follick, the prospective Labour MP, at a pre-election rally in Castle Donington. (In an otherwise *lovely* later letter from Danny, she is disconcerted to discover that he *seems to favour the Tories*.) She cancels the holiday in Abersoch she has planned for September with her friend Jean, reads

Happy Times in Norway by Nobel prize-winner Sigrid Undset and orders a copy of *The Hero of the World*.

At Midsummer, just a fortnight before the general election which saw Labour's landslide win, Norah's father dies. She had noted in her diary his recent spells in hospital with an enlarged spleen and the fainting episodes that followed, that the doctor had said there was nothing more they could do. She doesn't mention her regret that he didn't live to see Atlee installed as PM. After his funeral, she and Marsie travel by train to London to visit Dennis and his growing family. They have dinner at the Strand Corner House, taking in sights – Westminster Abbey, St. Paul's, Buckingham Palace, Tower Bridge – that have miraculously survived the Blitz. The next day Norah sunbathes in the back garden and chats with a visiting airman friend of her brother before going with Nollie to see 'Arsenic & Old Lace' in the West End.

When she next hears from Danny, Norah writes that he was *a bit upset about me talking to that airman at Dennis's*. *God bless*. She is comforted by his jealousy; it shows how much he cares. Marsie, however, has other ideas. *4th August: Mum and I had a row, as she thinks my Danny breaks his promises, but I love him so. Please God, let him be alright.*

VJ Day has supplied some of the most iconic images of the twentieth century. A sailor kissing a nurse in Times Square. A pirouetting man in a Sydney street. Piccadilly Circus in the sunshine, servicemen, WAAFs and civilian women laughing and dancing while linking arms. Japanese POWs, reflecting on Emperor Hirohito's announcement of surrender, heads bowed low in shame.

Sadly, we haven't been able to locate a single photograph of the street party on Moira Dale.

'I can just remember it', my mum says. She was four-and-a-half years old and sat outside number 18 at a long table piled high with sandwiches. 'They were a rowdy lot!'

Irene Marsh, Norah's next-door neighbour, can remember more, especially the races to the far end of the street and back again that preceded the tea. Aged thirteen and built like a whippet, she won them all. She remembers the bunting fetched out again, the trestle tables, her dad's

piano dragged into the street by men in shirtsleeves and the jubilant but weary women, dishing out beef spread sandwiches to small boys in tank-tops and bobbed-haired girls. After the jelly (or junket) and homemade cake – food which had been in such short supply but which materialised quite miraculously from who knows where – the tables were hoisted onto the pavements, the neighbours taking turns on the piano as the dancing began. Heart-felt renditions of popular war songs – ‘Keep the home fires burning’, ‘We’ll meet again’ – followed the National Anthem and toasts to the King and Queen and all absent friends.

16th August: Jeannie went to our tea party in the street. Jim had his piano out in the street and everyone had a singsong. Had another huge bonfire & a lovely Lantern Parade. Wrote to my love again (12 pages). God bless. Irene and her sisters were not allowed to hold the metal lanterns, hangovers from the blackout, which were suspended on sticks and carried with arms outstretched. The blazing bonfire, built on waste ground down the road, burned through the night and into a new post-war world.

*17th August: Mum brought me a letter from my love, he’s been very depressed. He is flying to Tromsø and says Group 20 will be out by 31st. Norah’s diary entries describe Danny’s misery and the delays and uncertainties surrounding his demob date. 23rd: Received a censored letter from my dearest love who says he may be at Tromsø a fortnight but is hoping for leave. She hears on the one o’clock news that the 1st Airborne Division will be leaving Norway within a fortnight. In the last week of August, Norah sees a new statement on RAF demobilisation: *Group 22 will be out by the end of October*. The next day, the newspaper reports that *all our men will be home from Norway by Christmas. Please God...* I find this confusing, not least because it is impossible to make out whether Danny is in Group 20 or 22 or whether these demobilisations are merely markers on the road to his own return. All we know is that he is delayed, temporarily hospitalised with an injured back. *Danny hopes to be home by the 20th September. DV.**

Norah is reading *Arnhem Lift: Diary of a Glider Pilot*. She might just want a better understanding of what it had been like for him, an airman in this terrible war, so that she can really look after him once she gets him home. Or Danny might have told her that he had been in Holland in September 1944, nowhere near Yugoslavia or Greece after all. The Allies’ largest airborne operation had intended to capture the

bridges to the south of the Rhine but was disastrously thwarted by fog. I Google the images: the parachutes eerily descending like jellyfish in the daybreak sky. Maybe Danny had landed under the enemy fire so badly underestimated by Allied leaders. Maybe that is where he damaged his back. We can only guess.

From his Tromsø hospital bed in, Danny sends Norah *twelve marvellous snaps*. It is one of these photographs that we found in a transparent wallet tucked inside Norah's last diary, together with a scrap of paper with the phone numbers for two people with the surname Gilbert, both with the Eastbourne area code. Danny poses beside the driver's door of a military car against a background of tall pines and gabled roofs. He is slender, smart, unsmiling, his hands clasped behind his back in that neat folded-up way in which men used to stand.

22nd September 1945: Mary Twells was married to John, her airman. Jeannie was bridesmaid. Two days' later, Norah notes her work-mate Jean's 21st birthday (*no engagement ring forthcoming*). In early October, Connie's Frank is demobbed and she is given eight weeks' leave. Norah hears from a woman in the Night Office that Norman has returned safely and is now engaged. *7th October: Spring cleaned my best clothes in preparation for my Danny, DV.*

Was it a worry too? 'Will your man be changed?' asked *Woman's Own* in April 1945, declaring the following month that 'a reunion can be more frightening than a parting'. For many it was. The men were 'strangers in the house', war-damaged, unknown to their own children, struggling with newly independent wives. In the words of one woman, 'When their war ended, our war began'.¹³

Norah again borrows a book about Eastbourne from Derby Library. As she leafs through the photographs, she surely imagines herself enjoying Saturday morning coffees with Danny in one of the shiny new cafes, matinée shows at the green-domed Winter Gardens and Sunday afternoon strolls along the bright undercliff, arm in arm. She'd love a detached house on one of the many new tree-lined avenues or, if Danny's salary didn't stretch that far, a neat, light, dormer bungalow in a nice part of town.

Norah books in at W. W. Winter's to have her photograph taken. With her dark waves and shaped brows, her almond-shaped eyes gazing

dreamily beyond the camera, she looks every inch the wartime glamour girl. She will raise his spirits, and reel him in.



Fig. 28 Norah, W. W. Winter, Derby, 1945. Private papers of Norah Hodgkinson.

In early November, as Norah's youngest brother Frank departs for India with the Royal Engineers, Danny lands in England. He writes to say he is hoping to come to Grantham at the end of the month. Norah phones him from the telephone box in Hemington, but – oh! the frustration! – the line is so crackly she can hardly make him out. More letters arrive, including snaps of Tromsø in the midnight sun. After two false alarms, Norah has a *glorious surprise when my love rang me up from Derby. He's here 'til Thursday.*