

20. A Terrific Surprise

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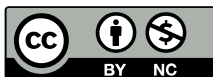
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Cover image: Norah Hodgkinson, 1941, W.W. Winter, Derby. A selection from Norah's archive, Alison Twells, 2025. Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal.

20. A Terrific Surprise

In the early summer of 1947, Norah and her mother accepted an invitation from Marsie's brother, (another) Frank, to join him and Mary and their nine-year old daughter, (another) Jean, on a holiday in – of all places – Eastbourne. Norah's diary reports that they had booked into a guest house a few streets back from the front and enjoyed long *boiling hot* days on the beach and evening walks along the prom.

Eastbourne: Danny's home town. Norah must surely have imagined a chance encounter. Is that why she agreed to the trip? Did she choose her holiday wardrobe with him in mind? Was she looking out for him on every corner, seeing his family members in random people in the street? Did she plot his home address and her hotel on a map, maybe finding some time alone to wander in his direction?

She'd had a few little flirtations in 1947. The year had kicked off with a string of dates with a good-looking lad called Alan who had just started work in her office and with whom she had a *smashing time*. But a few weeks in, after Norah missed the last bus home and he abandoned her rather than miss his own, she turned down his next invitation (though was a bit put out when he was spotted with a new girlfriend in less than a month and was engaged before the summer's end). Then there was 'P' at work, who invited her to go with him to Bakewell Show and offered her some clothing coupons (*AT A PRICE*). And George, who told her he had a crush on her. While Norah didn't believe he had finished with Beryl, she was flattered all the same.

At the time of her Eastbourne holiday, Norah was enjoying a flirtation with 'Blondie', a driver on the Trent bus. He was a *smasher*, a bit of a hero who had steered his passengers to safety when the river burst its banks. Renamed 'Ginger' by a sarcastic Birdy, in the hot early summer he had an ice cream waiting for her on the 5.40 bus home. *5th June 1947: Blondie called me glamour girl and threw me kisses*. Norah did her homework,

discovered that his name was Jack and he lived in Aston-on-Trent, suddenly a new destination for evening bike rides with Peggy (*Aston is lovely*). The potential for romance was abruptly curtailed, however, when Norah discovered that what she had assumed was Jack's bachelor boy's motorbike was actually *a motor-bike and side-car!!* Some days later, she saw Ginger's wife on the 10pm bus. *She didn't look very thrilling.*

Everyone was getting engaged, married or having babies that year, from Princess Elizabeth to Irene next door. Both were younger than Norah. *15th September 1947: meet HIM 15/5.* This diary entry is written in pencil, a horoscope prediction from a magazine that she had read around the time of her Eastbourne trip in May.

In the meantime, she was perfectly busy. With Sadie, the replacement for Connie who hadn't returned to work after Frank's demob, she lunched at Pingpongs, tried out new cafés and signed up for classes at Derby's Progressive School of Dancing, learning to tango, quickstep and waltz. She knitted and sewed and slowly replenished her wardrobe, which wasn't easy with rationing still in force. She picked up her shorthand again and she read, this year a number of classics, including *Persuasion* (*the best book I've ever read*) and *Jane Eyre* (*lovely*). She made many, many trips to the cinema and went with Birdy and Frank to the Baseball Ground on Saturday afternoons (*Derby knocked out the cup by Liverpool. 1.0. Heartbroken*). She attended lectures by a local vicar on contemporary social issues: reconstruction, German history, the Soviet Union and more. She read the Labour Party's *The Way of Recovery* (*wonderful*) and ordered the *Economic Survey for 1947*, the controversial White Paper on the need for a planned economy. She became a paid-up party member later that year.

The following month, out of the blue, days after Norah remembered Danny's *30th (?) birthday* (the question mark surely denoting her suspicion that Danny hadn't told the truth about his age?), a letter arrived from Jim:

27 October 1947,
HMS Challenger

Dear Norah,

Undoubtedly you will be somewhat mystified at my letter, so please read on and I will endeavour to enlighten. Before mentioning any further, I sincerely hope these few lines won't offend or cause any ill feeling towards anyone. Naturally a sailor does the most crazy things

and introducing my brother to you was one of them. Little did I realise that a close friendship was to be established which Danny and myself knew could not materialise. We are of a poor family although a happy one and Danny knew it would not be fair to you or your loving family to have gone any further than just a friend. Many times during and after the war we have talked about you and the terrible and most ungrateful way we treated you and we both apologise and wish you all the happiness in the world.

Jim

31st October 1947: Had a terrific surprise when Mum bought me a letter from Jim. He says Danny packed up because his family were poor. Could she possibly have believed Jim's explanation, when Danny had spent weekends at 18 Moira Dale? He knew about the council house, the blue-collar jobs, the scholarship successes. But maybe it was the apology that mattered; the bit about them treating her dreadfully and ungratefully; that they were sorry.

I wish Jim had left it at that. His next letter is harmless enough, written in early December from Aden where he is aboard HMS *Challenger* on his way to the Persian Gulf. There is 'trouble ashore with the Jews and Arabs', he writes. 'I thought when the war ended I might get a bit of shore time, but they mean to get a good twelve years out of me'. He replies to Norah's news that she has been to Eastbourne on holiday ('a grand place') and sends his congratulations on Derby beating Arsenal. 'I bet you have many admirers now you are grown up', he writes, 'or would you rather take Danny a cup of morning tea and a kiss (blushing). Did he tell you I knew, "well we are brothers"'. I suppose you say "the same old Jim"'. He asks her for a photo. Norah takes the compliment. *12th December: Received lovely letter from Jim, he's based in the Gulf of Persia. Tells me to always stay as nice as Danny says I am.* I note the conversation between the brothers and wonder about the tag-team correspondence between the two men and my young great-aunt.

23rd December 1947: Had lovely trifle, fruit jelly, sponge cake, rock cakes, mince pies, biscuits, tangerines, apples, nuts, cider and parsnip wine. As Norah enjoys her office Christmas party, a truly post-war feast, Jim writes again. 'Oh boy aren't you pretty', he says, though Norah's photograph seems to catalyse his need to launch into his 'wide experience with girls all over the world' and his quibble with English women, 'so cold and narrow minded'. 'Did Danny want more than your friendship', Jim writes at the end of March. 'If he did I know love would never get a yes from you'. Norah notes the arrival of his letters but that is all. She takes weeks to reply.

In a letter sent in April from Port Said, Jim takes 'a chance in writing my views on sex', asking her if she has 'ever felt that you have wanted to relieve your feelings', and why it is that 'girls always get the impression that only the boy gains'. For me, as a historian, Jim's challenge to the buttoned-up 1940s and his questions about female desire are interesting. As we know, even during the war, it was far from acceptable to have an *appetite*, to be seen as a libidinous woman. But as Norah's great-niece and a mother of daughters, I'd rather he didn't grapple with these questions in his letters to her. He tells her that Danny is working in civil aviation before snidely signing off: 'I bet you will marry in white (nasty Jim again). Fancy Danny failing'. This comment gives me pause. Was that it? A bet that Danny could seduce Norah, get her to 'give in'? Or is that just Jim's take, as the jealous and rejected older brother?

In his final letter, dated 15th May 1948, Jim continues in much the same vein. He is disappointed that Norah didn't reveal her secrets, he says. He thinks he'd have 'gained a yes' if he'd been in Danny's shoes. He tells her again that boys go elsewhere if they don't get what they want. And that is it. Norah can't even be bothered to reply, let alone complain. In fact, apart from a passing reference in the early 1980s, she doesn't mention Jim again until 2008, the year before she died. *30th September: Found some letters from Jim Gilbert. He was a silly, empty person.*

It is not quite the end for me, however. I feel compelled to find out what happened to the brothers – whether they married and had families, lived to be old men.

It is a warm August day and I am sitting at home in my small study at the front of the house. The sun, lighting up the park across the road, has not yet moved round to slant through the wooden blinds. The dog is lying at my feet, having taken to shooting up the forbidden stairs as soon as her lord and master leaves for work.

I have logged into Ancestry.co.uk., the family history website. I decide to start with Jim and type in his surname, which is not Gilbert (you'll soon see why), and then his forenames (which did not include Jim), which were written out in full on the back of the envelope which contained his first letter to Norah. There are results, I am informed, but they can only be read if I join. I do so; membership is free for a fortnight.

I write a reminder in my diary to cancel before I get stung for a year's subscription. I am aware that I am delaying.

I type in Jim's name again and there he is, in an instant: birth, marriage and death records listed down the the right hand of the screen. According to Ancestry, he was born in London in 1912. He died in the late 1970s, aged sixty-six. There appear to be two marriage records for him. One in 1948, in Sussex, and another in London, in 1951. He must have married as soon as he left the Navy. I wonder if his need for 'relief' got the better of him as it seems to have been a hasty affair which didn't work out. There is no sign of a divorce but I know I am not using this website very proficiently. I quickly compute the dates. Jim was nearly thirty when he began writing his mucky letters to schoolgirl Norah in 1941.

Danny. It is time. I take a deep breath before typing in his real names and, giving him the benefit of doubt, the birth date he gave to Norah: 26th October 1917. Then, true to her suspicions, I select the option for 'plus/minus 5 years'.

Again, the results flood in.

Danny did indeed lie about his age. He was born in 1914. He died in Eastbourne in 1996, an old man of eighty-two.

A public member tree pops up on the screen. I click on it. A shiver goes down my spine.

'I've found him'. I phone my mum that instant. I am pacing up and down the landing, unable to sit still at my desk.

'Who?' she asks, puzzled.

'Danny boy. I'm on Ancestry'.

'Oooh', she says in a low tone. 'And?'

'It says he got married in early 1940. His wife's name was Evelyn. She was 20'.

'1940?' I can hear her working it out. 'He met Norah in 1941. He was already a married man?' Silence.

'That's not all', I continue. 'You remember that September when he stayed at Moira Dale on three different weekends? When Norah was looking at engagement rings and making her golden dressing gown?' My mum is silent, waiting. 'Well, it looks like Donington was a break in his journey to and from Eastbourne. That's when his first baby was born'.

My mum takes a sharp in-breath. 'Do you think Norah ever knew?'

'No', I say, 'she can't have done. She'd have mentioned it in the diaries'.

A pause. An outward breath. 'The swine'.

