

13. If You Love Danny He Is Yours

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This document is the Published Version [VoR]

Citation:

TWELLS, Alison (2025). 13. If You Love Danny He Is Yours. In: A Place of Dreams: Desire, Deception and a Wartime Coming of Age. Open Book Publishers, 147-156. [Book Section]

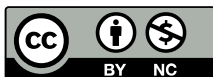
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Alison Twells, *A Place of Dreams: Desire, Deception and a Wartime Coming of Age*.
Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0461>

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Information about any revised edition of this work will be provided at
<https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0461>

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80511-566-3

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80511-567-0

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80511-568-7

ISBN HTML: 978-1-80511-570-0

ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 978-1-80511-569-4

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0461

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

13. If You Love Danny He Is Yours

Jim's Easter letter niggles me, but I can't put my finger on what it is that feels not quite right.

At the beginning of 1942, Jim had changed tack, his letters to Norah coming to focus on her relationship with his brother. 'Danny thinks you're the sweetest girl he has ever known' he wrote in mid-January. 'Please don't tell him I am giving his secrets away'. 'Danny has passed the writing part of his course. I think you will be proud of him', he told Norah the following month. 'I guess you are both longing to see each other again, his latest letter is all about Norah. If ever you want to ask anything concerning Danny, don't be shy to ask me'.

Although Jim seemed straightforward enough in his promises to visit Derby during his upcoming leave, informing Norah of his lodgings in town, he failed to turn up to their planned meeting. His Easter letter, the one that arrived during Danny's visit, offered an explanation for his absence. Here Jim reveals his disappointment, confessing that it had been his 'sole intention' to start an 'intimate friendship' with Norah, but insisting again that his own hopes for romance came second to brotherly love. But the 'fair terms' he mentions puzzle me. If Jim admitted to his brother that he was keen on Norah, why did Danny not offer to back off?

I hear Mark descending the stairs and call him into the front room.

'I just don't get this', I confess. 'Why is Jim claiming he is happy to offer a helping hand in Norah's relationship with his brother, yet that same brother has stolen her from under his nose?'

Mark protests that he hasn't got time, but I know that if I can keep him long enough to hear one choice extract from Jim's letters, he'll be hooked. Mark is a psychologist. A bit of male angst and concealed emotion is right up his street. I read him the lines where Jim explains why he has not visited. I can see from his face that I've reeled him in.

‘What do *you* think is going on?’ His half-amused expression suggests that he expects me to have no idea. He knows from bitter experience that men are a mystery to me.

‘Well, Jim seems quite reasonable’, I start tentatively. ‘He had set his sights on Norah, but when it became apparent she was into Danny, he seems to have set himself up as a sort of go-between’.

Mark looks at me with a quizzical expression. ‘No’, he says flatly. ‘Jim’s fishing. He wants Norah to say something definite, that she really wants to see him, or that Danny is the special one now, so he knows where he stands’. He pauses. ‘He says he won’t come to Derby, but do you think if Norah said she really wanted to meet him, he wouldn’t make that visit?’

‘He’d be there like a shot?’ I venture, the words at odds with my voice as it tails into uncertainty.

‘Of course he would. He wants to see her reaction to him saying he wouldn’t visit. He feels jilted. He knows he can’t be bitter and angry, he’d lose her completely. He’s doesn’t want to be disloyal to his brother, but he wants to win her on his own terms’.

He points me to the phrase ‘since Danny has come in the picture’. ‘He’s an angry man’, Mark says. “‘I had the pleasure of seeing Danny just recently.” Can’t you hear it? “We may meet one day but I would never make a special visit to see you.” This is strong stuff!’

I can see it is a fine line for Jim. He is working hard at being gracious, in the hope that she’ll decide he’s ‘the one’ after all.

‘When Jim says he and Danny “spoke on fair terms” about Norah, that they are “settled” over her: what’s that about?’ I tell Mark my theory that Jim had revealed to his brother the extent of his interest in Norah, in the hope that Danny would step aside.

‘That’s just not how it works’. Mark looks at me with an almost pitying expression. ‘Jim will have played down to his brother how much he wants Norah because he suspected she had an interest in Danny’.

‘But how do you know it worked that way, with these men, then, more than half a century ago?’ I ask. ‘It was a different time. People’s emotional lives, feelings of hurt and pride, are not unchanging, throughout history’.

Mark ignores my question. If I’m a doubting kind of gal, he is a very certain kind of man. And psychologists aren’t generally interested in the historical nuances of fraternal relationships, masculinity and emotion. I

find it helpful to think about Jim's behaviour in terms of questions posed by modern psychology, but only so far. It might ring true, but that's surely because it makes sense to us now. It is no substitute for history.

I realise too that these letters are at the heart of this book; they are my 'exceptional normal'. For a sailor to write sexually explicit letters to a schoolgirl sock-knitter was unusual, if not unknown, as we've seen. As has been said to me many times, it is not typical behaviour. The implication, I think, is that I cannot draw conclusions about actions that are not representative, are not the norm. But I am not suggesting that all men behaved this way (#notallmen, of course. Although always, without fail, a man). I am well aware that servicemen were a thoroughly mixed bag; that very many would find Jim's behaviour abhorrent, then as now. It remains the case, nonetheless, that when properly investigated, Jim's letters burst open a world of usually concealed interaction, revealing more about courtship dynamics in the 1940s than would a more commonplace exchange.¹

Mark and I agree that the arrival of his letter during Danny's visit did Jim no favours. Norah showing it to Danny offered scope for intimacy. 'They could talk about emotion', Mark says. 'Jim's, Norah's upset about his lack of visit, Danny's'. He pauses briefly. 'What happened next?'

As I unfold Jim's next letter, a small slip of lined paper falls out. I catch it and hold it behind the page as I begin to read:

Dear Norah,

I have just received a letter from Danny and your name is mentioned quite a lot. He had a marvellous time with you and your family. I think he is crazy over you. Why should my last letter upset you? I would not hurt your feelings for anything. You know Norah to be candid I would not fit in so well as Danny, remember I am a sailor and my words and ways are different. The life in the navy is reverse to that of the RAF. We are rough. I may be a little different to the average but I am still a sailor. I know definitely you are the swellest girlfriend I have and hope you will always remain so. Norah, is Danny taking you too serious? If you want me to tell him indirectly anything special, you can depend on me to make things right. I do want you to realise I am not put out in any way because when Danny is happy, I am. My brothers are more to me than anything else, especially Danny. I hope you will write me a letter and tell me all

your secrets. Well darling, I close, wishing you and all at 18 Moira Dale all the best.

Your greatest friend,
Jim

'So Norah told him she was upset by his decision not to visit', Mark says, 'but she didn't beg him to change his mind'.

I turn my attention to the small torn-off scrap of paper. It seems to be an extract of a letter sent by Danny to his brother, describing his stay at Norah's home. I start to read:

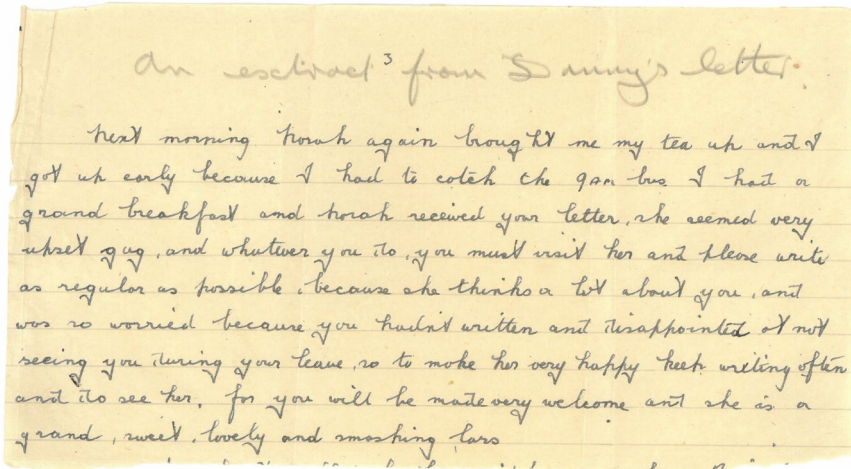


Fig. 27 Snippet from Danny's letter, April 1942. Private papers of Norah Hodgkinson. Photo: A. Twells, 2025.

Next morning Norah again bought me my tea up and I got up early because I had to catch the 9am bus. I had a grand breakfast and Norah received your letter. She seemed very upset, and whatever you do, you must visit her and please write as regular as possible, because she thinks a lot about you, and was so worried because you hadn't written and disappointed at not seeing you during your leave, so to make her very happy keep writing often and do see her, for you will be made very welcome and she is a grand, sweet, lovely and smashing lass.

'A bit odd?' I say. Norah took it at face value. 23rd April: Received a lovely letter from Jim & sent a grand bit out of Danny's letter to him. They're a grand couple. A few days later, she met Danny at the station as he passed

through Derby on his way up north to a Tank Course. *I'm absolutely crazy about him & it was grand to see him.*

But Mark is looking very dubious. 'I just don't believe this', he says. 'I don't believe that's how Danny would describe Norah to his brother'. He pauses. 'Think back to your Uncle John and his mate from Liverpool. What do you think Danny would have said, in the real letter?'

'Oh, you know, some RAF news, maybe some horror that he wanted to share, a near-miss at the base, some lads who had failed to return. He would talk about their family in Eastbourne. And he'd definitely mention his visit to Norah'.

'But *what* about Norah?' he presses. 'The thoroughly wholesome Norah of this description? They will talk about women, boast to each other. Danny won't choose modesty over his own satisfaction at his sexual successes'.

I sift through the stash of letters from Jim, shuffling into date order those postmarked May-July 1942. I know that Mark won't stick around long enough to hear me read them all, so I flick through the next few, picking out eye-catching passages.

'I wish I knew you really and truly loved him. Soon you will be telling me off for being so nosy. Anytime you have any problems concerning Danny please let me help you.'

'My kiss will be cancelled until I am best man.'

'To be candid, I know I should be jealous of Danny so perhaps that is one reason I don't come and see you. Danny is the greatest pal I ever had and please grant him my kisses that will make me just as happy...'

'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 —? Have you any young snaps of yourself?'

'Oh God', I say. "'Young snaps" again. And now he is encouraging Norah to – presumably he means to have sex with his brother?' I move on to Jim's next letter, sent from Great Yarmouth in early June. After

telling her she is the 'swellest friend' he could have, and 'no wonder Danny is crazy over [her]', he then launches into his love life pre-war. 'I was a proper pansy', I read:

and only ate dainty foods and always bought myself Rowntree's blackcurrant pastilles, and with experience girls enjoyed my kisses much better than with fellows who smoked a lot. I used to like to tease girls and get them all unnecessary, which I guess Danny did with you, 'did he'. I am no angel but my motto has always been 'have fun and be good' because five minutes pleasure is not worth a life's worry. When two lovers have known each other for a considerable time and say they are engaged they become more intimate, it is true if the boy is decent and respects his loved one he will never ask too much from her. I have known cases where the girl loves too much and would not refuse, so darling whatever happiness don't forget to marry in white. I don't expect you have any confessions have you.

Mark snorts. 'A "proper pansy"? He's not making it easy to take him seriously'.

Norah does, though. She describes this as a *grand letter*. Boys being considerate, the desirability of the white wedding, not scuppering that by acting in passionate haste, and his signing off: 'Your future brother-in-law'.

On the envelope of his next letter, Jim has scrawled an epitaph: 'In precious memory of our beloved daughter Barbara Forrester, passed away August 29th 1936, aged 16 years. "Gone from us but not forgotten/ Never shall thy memory fade/ Sweetest thoughts shall ever linger/ Round the spot where thou are laid"'. Inside, he explains:

In an early letter I told you my favourite song was 'Smilin Through' and I would like to tell why it is. At the time the picture was showing in Eastbourne my pal and I were friendly with two girlfriends who to this day we both class the best we ever had. Their parents were rather strict and forbade them associating with boys so it was only by scheming and strategy that we saw them and I believe that just several minutes was worth hours to us. Now this is where Smilin Thru comes in and still plays its part, all four of us saw the picture and if you have seen the picture you will see the meaning of my story. Now for the tragedy. My friend caught typhoid fever which caused her death. It was not until a week after her burial did I even know she was ill. My pal and I visited her grave and found her flowers were buried with the coffin so the wreath we placed on her grave was the only one. I selected the words and wrote them on a plain

white card and ended it from friends Nelson and Jim. She was the only daughter and I learned that she was all her mother and father lived for, incidentally her father was a director of a tea plantation in Assam, India. Several months later we visited her grave again and the words on her stone were the ones I had written on the wreath. I expect you can read them on the snap. I know you will understand. I have also enclosed her photo.

What Jim wants to achieve with these letters isn't clear to me.

'The point of this one is to show Norah that he has had girlfriends from good families', Mark replies. 'That he is respectable enough for her. What does she say?'

'18th June', I read. '*Received grand letter from Jim containing a lovely photo of a grand girl called Barbara Forrester*'. So it worked.

I wonder if this is even a true story, whether he had heard a version of it in the mess.

Jim then reverts to his usual chat, declaring that his 'nerve will not allow me to ask those intimate questions because you may look on the rude side and may not wish to correspond again ... Norah what actually is the meaning of a white wedding? ('shy')', he asks. 'If you loved a boy and was engaged to him would you give way a little to satisfy yours and his feelings?'

'I am glad you wangled the time and place to make love to Danny', Jim writes, telling her how Danny had always been popular with girls:

I can remember when he used to play cricket and several girls hung around until the game was over, but he never was interested in girls and so his kisses must have been stored just for you. I expect you know all the answers, especially if you are great pals with your married sister. Passionate kisses are marvellous when both involved respond to each other's. Please tell me how and where you and Danny were alone because the way he wrote to me seemed that all his time with you was always in company with your family. In his first letter, after his visit to your home he told me he plucked up courage and kissed you on the station platform, and he was worrying if he had offended you. I have not heard from Danny but he did say he was looking forward to seeing you when he passed through Derby. Was Danny the first to make real love to you if so what effect did it have on you? –

I am aghast. 'What the hell..?'

'Hang on', Mark cuts in. 'I thought you said Norah and Danny hadn't had sex?'

'They haven't. Mum's read later diaries, there are times when Danny is trying to persuade her to do it, "give in" is the term he uses. Her diaries make it really clear they hadn't'.

'But that sentence – "Was Danny the first ..." It's hardly ambiguous, is it?'

'But they hadn't', I insist. 'It is a fact. And the phrase "making love" meant something different in the 1940s. It covered a lot of things. He could easily be referring to the canoodling over Daleacre'.²

Mark looks dubious. He never believes what I say without hard evidence in front of him. 'Keep going'.

'Do you mind me asking you intimate questions?' Jim continues:

I wish you would ask me some only I don't want to offend my best friend but if you start first it will make it hundred times easier for me. When I look at your photo, to just kiss your hair I would be thrilled. I could ask you lots, but may I? ... I have read your letter several times and it is the kind I like and the promised kiss will mean a sure visit. What can I bet that I can outpace you. Not smoking plays a great part, and it is better for the girl. That is the thing I study, negative onions etc., unusual am I not? I am very fussy over my teeth. Darling this is being written in a great hurry, only I want to write by return of post. I know you will, and make it extra special, and remember Danny will never know and it will never be against him because we both adore (love) him. Cheerio dearest and I will write a longer one next time if you will (help)... Jim X when we meet. Write tonight beautiful.

I am barely finished hooting at the negative onions before I am plunged into maternal mode, horrified by Jim's candid request for Norah to ask him intimate questions. 'Oh my God!'

'Danny's obviously told Jim that he and Norah have done more than they have, if what you say is right', Mark says. 'Jim is trying to ascertain whether Norah is the girl Danny is telling him she is, or whether she is who he sees in her letters. Norah comes across as shy and modest to him. That doesn't match Danny's description'.

I am pondering all of this when suddenly, alarmingly, Mark breaks into song. "We made out, under the dock". Think of Danny Zuko in *Grease* when he is telling his mates about his summer affair. Remember the one who asks – "Tell me more, tell me more, did you get very far?" Danny – Norah's Danny – is exaggerating for his brother. "Met a girl crazy for me, met a boy cute as can be." That's the dynamic. Norah is Sandy,

interested in love and romance and hand-holding and kisses, but there he is, telling his mates: "Well she was good, you know what I mean!"

But there is a puzzle here. Danny seems to be lying to Jim about his escapades with Norah, telling him stories of an intimacy far in advance of what had actually taken place. Jim is downplaying his own feelings to both Norah and his brother: he is deeply jealous and pretty angry and still wants Norah for himself. But Jim is also sending Norah scraps of letters supposedly written by his brother, in which Danny describes her as 'a grand, sweet, lovely and smashing lass'. And Mark is insistent that these are not the words Danny would have used. He thinks Jim has made it up, maybe even persuaded a fellow bored sailor to write it for him.

But the thing is, I have Danny's letter to Marsie and Pop in front of me, the polite 'thank you' letter he sent in September 1941. It is definitely Danny's hand-writing on that snippet that Jim sent on to Norah. But if Mark is right in his insistence that Danny would have used a far fruitier, more boastful language in his letter to his brother – and I have to admit, he is pretty persuasive – what was the purpose of a scrap of paper describing a sweet and smashing Norah bringing him tea in bed? Are Danny and Jim simply in cahoots, trying to hasten her seduction with words she would like to hear?

It seems Norah objected to his line of questioning. 'Why did you take my letter the wrong way, it was not intended to hurt or corrupt', Jim protested. *Received a spiffing letter from my love*, Norah wrote on 9th July. *He's splintered his finger. Had a little apologetic letter and pc from Jim.*

Jim's letters to Norah make for confusing reading. The blackcurrant pastilles and negative onions: the man's a comedian. The schoolgirl photo: a paedophile? He seems to be trying to establish an intimacy with Norah through the only route left open to him: a 1940s equivalent of sexting his brother's girlfriend. His own claims to sexual experience seem to be an attempt to shock Norah, to gain more of a sense of her from her reaction. Maybe he wants her to write the same, to give him some copy to read in the mess, boost his credentials with his fellow ratings.

I can't help but wonder if it is closer to the truth that Jim has had little experience with women and that the endless focus in the mess on sex – the talk, the songs, the bragging – was at times too much for him. That his encounters with prostitutes in port towns were more tentative, that it was as much the kindness of the good women of Chatham that

he needed. Maybe Jim found the petty discipline hard to stomach, didn't enjoy the hyper-masculinity, the much-vaunted brotherhood they all claim to miss once they've disembarked for civilian life.

But I don't know. There really are too many maybes here. And here's another: maybe it had always been this way and Danny, eighteen months Jim's junior, had pipped him to the post: more handsome, a better scholar, the star cricketer, more popular, better prospects all round. Maybe Jim had long played second fiddle and girls had always vaulted over him in their bid to get to Danny. Maybe he had believed that this time it would be different. Norah had knitted the socks for him, after all. But here he is, playing matchmaker in order to keep in touch with Norah, travelling in Danny's slipstream yet again.

Jim's letters in the summer of 1942 are a scattergun of comedy moments, morality tales, sexual impropriety, prying questions and self-revelation. One of these bullets should hit the spot, he hopes, and make Norah declare herself. But none of it works. Norah, reading *Danny* by Walter Brierley, doesn't give him what he wants. After his letter of 18th July, Jim retreats, beaten. It will be a full year before he writes to her again.