Sheffield Hallam University

23. Still Part of Me

TWELLS, Alison <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2602-0029>

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A Place of Dreams

Desire, Deception and a Wartime Coming of Age

Alison Twells

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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.

23. Still Part of Me

I thought about opening this book with Norah's silent diary for 1946, where the absence of any mention of Danny surely reflects her desolation at his disappearance after their scuppered night of love. The narrative would move backwards in time, like Sarah Waters' Booker Prize-listed novel *The Night Watch* (2006), which tells four interconnected stories from 1947 to 1941. Kay, a former ambulance driver, is in and out of relationships with women, looking for love. Helen, Kay's ex, lives with her losing-interest lover, Julia, a crime novelist, and works in a lonely-hearts agency with the glamorous Viv, who is involved with a married ex-serviceman she met during the war. Duncan, Viv's brother, works in a candle factory and lives with an elderly man whom he describes as his 'uncle' after spending some years in prison. The book's main story, in the words of Philip Hensher, is 'the slow revelation of why people have become as they are'.[1]

This backwards movement ought to feel confining, as if potential futures are being closed down, yet it has the opposite effect, revealing life stories that might have developed in any number of directions. In presenting her characters and their relationships with one another prior to revealing the events that shaped them – love, desire, disappointment, loss – Waters echoes the many historical studies that focus on the lack of measurable change in women's lives, despite the common myths about the war as a herald of liberation. Kay, in her element on the Home Front, now receives sniggers at her man's suit ('Don't you know the war's over?') and is sneeringly called 'Colonel Barker'. Explaining to her friend Mickey her tendency to watch films in two halves, the second half first, Kay says 'I almost prefer them that way – people's pasts, you know, being so much more interesting than their futures'. Referring to their work in the Blitz, Kay says: 'I've got lost in my rubble, Mickey. I can't seem to find my way across it. I don't think I *want* to cross it, that's the thing. The rubble has all my life in it still –'.[2]

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To read Norah's life backwards in this way would not work, as her past, while full of promise, hadn't quite happened. The war was all hope for her. But Norah too had got lost in her rubble. Her future had come tumbling down with Danny's disappearances in October 1943, in December 1945, in January 1946 when her letters were returned 'unknown', and even that next Christmas, when the family polished off his champagne. It wasn't that Norah didn't want to move forward. But like Nehemiah rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, how would she pick through the charred rubble and build a new life? And at each hard-won step forward, what did it mean that Danny, his memory, kept turning up, like a stone in her shoe?

***

Fig. 29 Norah, 1948. Private papers of Norah Hodgkinson.

Danny is there when Norah ends her first post-war love affair – with Vic, a man she met at work. Their first date, in May 1948, just as Jim's final letters fizzled out, was a trip to the cricket: *Derbyshire v Warwickshire. We lost.* A host of nice times followed: more cricket, then football, midweek films at the Regal and the Gaumont, weekend nights at the Hippodrome, Thursday evening tea with his mother and holidays in London and Devon. By December, informally engaged, they were spending their lunchtimes perusing houses on Derby's new estates, saving hard.[3]

But it never felt quite right. It doesn't take much reading between the lines to see that after Danny, with his school master prospects and sophisticated ways, Vic was a bit of a come-down. *Am I falling in love???* Norah asked herself hopefully, on 12th June. *Vic wants me to be his girl, thinks I'm a smasher, think he loves me. Please God make things be allright.* She confessed to her diary that she felt *a bit downhearted about V and me. But I suppose there are other things in life besides social standing.* Norah knew full well that a woman didn't just marry a man, she married a life. 'The status of a woman is primarily determined by the status of her husband', wrote Ferdynand Zweig in his study of women's lives in 1952. 'It is a reflected, not an autonomous, status... Marriage, not work or study, is the main door of escape from class membership'.[4]

Vic's lack of prospects aside: she just didn't *feel* it. All her *my angels, my precious, my dearest ones* feel forced. She complains to her diary, wishing that Vic was more demonstrative, made more effort, both in company and when they were alone; that he was less moody and jealous when she spoke to other men (unavoidable in her office) and less pushy, sexually (*had a row because I wouldn't let him give me a French kiss*). An outburst by Marsie sealed it, on a picnic over Daleacre. *13th May 1950: Ma dislikes Vic very much and hopes I won't marry him. She says he's ill mannered, uncouth and ignorant. She wishes I could get Danny back. I wish I could too!*

When the break-up came, Norah felt giddy, free, and very soon, despondent.

'She's on the shelf', my mum says again. 'Waiting for Danny, then wasting over two years with Vic. She's high and dry'. A pause. 'Who was next? The one who died?'

'There was a non-event with a handsome policeman named Freddie before him', I say. As it tells us something of Norah, and post-war romance, I dig out the diary and launch in:

> *6th January 1951: Mum says I must marry Freddie.*
>
> *13th: Birdy says Freddie doesn't talk much. Please God let me find my husband soon.*
>
> *25th: 'Taffy' says I ought to be thinking about getting married soon!*

My mum remembers 'Taffy', a Welshman (of course) who came to Donington during the war and who on this occasion helped pick Norah

up when she slipped on ice on Borough Street. It seems everybody's got an opinion on Norah needing to be married.

> *27th January: Peggy said that Jean finished with her Charles in December, she'll be 26 in September.*
>
> *28th: Frank says Freddie sometimes goes to dances!*
>
> *18th February: Mum says she saw Freddie when she went down for her bus about 2.45pm.*
>
> *23rd Had a terrific thrill at night when I met Freddie in Borough Street. He really is the most handsome man I've ever seen. Please God.*
>
> *24th: Freddie you gorgeous beast! I can't get him out of my mind and I don't want to!*

[Laughter.]

> *28th: Shanklin looks a beautiful place, especially for a honeymoon.*

[More laughter.]

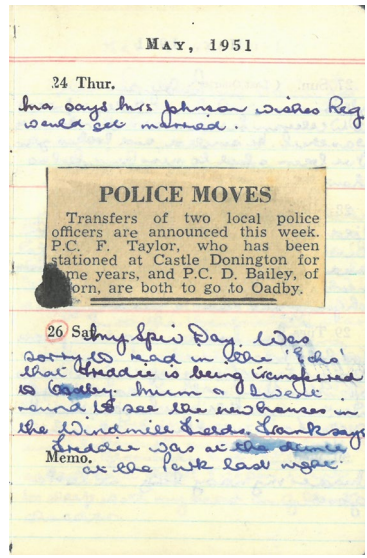
> *9th March: My 26th birthday. I'm getting old! … Saw Freddie's muddy triumph outside his house at night.*
>
> *14th: Helen thinks I should marry Freddie, then I'd have a nice house built for me. I wish he thought so too.*
>
> *15th: The Bailey Bridge is to be repaired over the next eight nights and the police have to be there to hold up traffic. My poor Freddie!*
>
> *22nd: It's nine days since I saw Freddie, I must rectify this as soon as possible.*
>
> *7th April: Saw Freddie at the Moira with two other policemen.*
>
> *14th: My Freddie came cycling round Moira Dale in the afternoon. Please God let him do it for me.*
>
> *24th: Was thrilled to see my Freddie in grubby civvies tonight outside his digs. Gosh isn't he bald! He wears a ring on his right hand. Smiled sweetly at him.*

It seems that she can't actually speak to him.

'Oooh no, that would be far too forward', my mum says. 'This is 1951'.

> *6th May: I'm completely and thoroughly fed up with life. Please please God let something come up soon.*

Then, showing us perhaps that diaries are not just words, that they can include all sorts of extra-textual matter – photos of film stars, horoscopes, news about a would-be love of your life – there's this scrap of paper stuck in a late-May day:


MAY, 1951

24 Thur.

Ina says Mrs Johnson wishes Reg would see me/me.

POLICE MOVES

Transfers of two local police officers are announced this week. P.C. F. Taylor, who has been stationed at Castle Donington for [illegible] years, and P.C. D. Bailey, of [illegible]orn, are both to go to Oadby.

26 Sat My Spec Day. Was sorry to read in the 'Echo' that Freddie is being transferred to Oadby. Mum & Uncle went to see the new houses in the Windmill Fields. Hank says Freddie was at the dance Memo. at the Park last night.

Fig. 30 Freddie, Norah's 1951 diary. Private papers of Norah Hodgkinson. Photo: A. Twells, 2025.

My mum is helpless with laughing. 'Oh no! Poor Norah!'

> *27th May: Helen and I went to the Wesleyan sermons tonight. Freddie was there. He smiled and looked grand. I've been a fool to miss him, feel as though disaster has overtaken me.*
>
> *28th: Mum says Doris Moody told her that Freddie comes from Burton, is sorry to be leaving Donington and is an exceptionally well mannered and cultured man, never swears etc. Oh God, what have I missed?*
>
> *29th: I'm broken hearted.*

While my mum thinks Norah was a drama queen, I feel more sympathy. Marriage was everywhere in the 1950s: universal, ever younger. After all the damage done by the war – the evacuations, separations, adultery and illegitimate births – the Fifties, in Lorna Sage's words, saw a 'postwar moral rearmament, with everyone conscripted to normality and

standing to attention'. Novels, films, women's magazines, even the new welfare state were all awash with the new family life, the breadwinner husband and his dependent wife.[5]

Peggy and Kathleen, Norah's friends from school, and Sadie and Gwen, from work, were all married one week in May 1951. Florence and Enid walked up the aisle on the same October day. Norman popped into the office with his little girl, a three-and-half-year-old named Ann. *Please God help me too.*

In theory, there were plenty of available men for Norah's generation. This wasn't the 1920s, afterall. But as we've seen, most had been snapped up well before she joined the market. Norah knew lots of men at work: all married. Or like Vic: a waste of space. She knew men in Donington, although they were mostly blue collar and she had set her sights above that now (that school, etc.) Where on earth would she find him? A few decades later, we'd say it was a case of waiting for the divorcees, but there were not too many of those in England in 1951.

Fig. 31 Jean (my mum), Milly and Norah, Breedon-on-the-Hill, 1952. Private papers of Norah Hodgkinson.

Hot on the heels of the disappointment with Freddie, Norah went on the office outing to Dublin in early June. After a slap-up breakfast at the Wicklow Hotel, she spent the day sunning herself on the buttercup-strewn cliff-tops on the north side of Dublin Bay. The night crossing home from Dùn Laoghaire was rough, enlivened further by Mrs Harris being caught at Customs. On board the Irish Mail from Holyhead to Crewe, Norah dozed on Gerry Harland's shoulder. Transferring to the Derby train at 3am, to stand in the station until the 6.50 departure, they found a secluded carriage:

> *3rd June 1951: 'Slept' with Gerry, he loved and kissed me. Sheer ecstasy. Arrived home 11am. Went to bed at 6pm.*
>
> *4th: Returned to work. Gerry told me he meant all he did yesterday. Held my hand. Kissed me beautifully and told me he has loved me for three years. Geoff Duke won the Junior TT in record time.*

There was just the one problem: Gerry Harland was married. Unhappily so, he told Norah. He and his wife had talked about separation and she was willing to give him a divorce. Norah felt bad, *wicked, poor Mrs Harland*. But if the marriage was on the rocks anyway, was already on its way out… Gerry felt guilty too, but more for Norah than his wife. She deserved *a proper courtship with a decent chap*. They settled into a regular routine of lunchtime loving: Darley Park, Alvaston Park, Allestree Park, Allenton allotments, Markeaton Park, *our wood in Sinfin*, *our lane*.

Once news got round at work, they were shunned. Marsie only knew what she guessed at, but was none too impressed. *Adultery is second only to murder*, she told Norah, *in God's eyes*. This opinion was not uncommon. A Mass Observation study conducted in 1949 found that 63% of its sample disapproved of extra-marital sex. A survey by the anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer in 1955, based upon detailed questionnaire responses received from over 10,000 readers of *The People* newspaper, heralded similar results. At the same time, beneath a general feeling in favour of marriage, both surveys revealed considerable dissatisfaction with marital sex: men who complained their wives were cold and disinterested and women who resented being used 'like a chamber pot'.[6]

Single women involved with married men received a special opprobrium. Opinion was consistent with that expressed by Leonora

Eyles during the war that such women were 'shockingly dishonourable'. The *Woman's Own* problem page, by the 1950s presided over by Mary Grant, was dominated by letters relating to extra-marital affairs. The adultery stories presented on just one day in August 1955 included a woman in love with and pregnant by her brother-in-law, a wife who wanted to adopt the child which her husband had fathered through an affair, a woman who suspected her brother-in-law of having an affair, a wife who suspected the same of her husband, and an eighteen-year-old involved in an affair with a forty-five-year-old married man. Mary Grant's advice to the latter was unequivocal: 'He is talking nonsense about divorcing her. Stop seeing him'.[7]

But Norah had fallen. *I can't possibly give him up now*, she wrote in her diary, some weeks in. She *would die* if they *had to part.* Their lovemaking was *sheer ecstasy*. Both did regular 'overtime': *loved in the office til 7pm*. They saw Derby County (away, of course), made day trips to Cheltenham and Liverpool, spent a weekend in London and had a glorious time at Kew. Gerry gave her a blue Lloyd Loom ottoman (from the Co-op, 48/), a wristwatch, a powder compact, a purse. Norah bought him a sports jacket and knitted him a pullover. A few weeks later, Norah received a letter from Mrs Harland, begging her to leave her husband alone. The following week, his angry wife set to work unravelling Norah's jumper.

Norah trusted Gerry to do the right thing and it was now, ten months in, in April 1952, that she incinerated Danny's letters. They sat there, the whole stash of them, at the front of her dressing table drawer, still occupying a poll position in her life, a daily reminder of what might have been. She could destroy them now, in 1952, because the future finally looked bright.

> *13th April: Gloriously hot. Re-read and then scrapped a lot of Danny's letters. I think he did love me once!*
>
> *19th: Lovely & hot for most of the day, but thundered, lightened and rained about tea time. G & I stayed in the office til 12.30 pm. Had a simply wonderful time. Please God, let it all come right for us sometime soon, we love each other much too dearly to lose each other now. Other news: Ma went to Frat. at Derby, Birdy went to Silverstone. Set the chimney*

> *on fire when burning Danny's letters! Was terrified. A voice from the grave??!!*

I'm surprised at her query as to whether Danny was dead and wonder if that's what she told herself, to manage the mystery of his disappearance and rejection. She'd clearly stopped analysing it in any depth. Unlike when Danny crops up in Norah's diaries sporadically throughout her later life, it is a positive entry, forward-looking, anxious but happy.

But Gerry was a let-down. He didn't get a divorce, and he and Norah staggered on until 1955, when she was despondent.

> *5th March 1955: I really must finish this business and look for someone for keeps.*
>
> *1st April: The fun's gone out of it.*
>
> *3rd May. Says I'm heartless and never could have cared.*
>
> *4th: I'm so miserable.*
>
> *5th: Friends again, but it's the end. Thanked me for lovely times, made me so unhappy.*
>
> *6th: Hope's my husband will be worthy of me.*

So there she was, thirty and single, in 1955.

How did you meet a man in 1955? Norah was friendly and sociable, never loud or over-bearing. She danced, liked films, and could talk football and cricket with the best of them. She certainly looked the part. Sometimes it took a bit of effort to gather up her confidence, like when she bought her New Look coat after the war and it was a good few days before she could brave it out there in the world. But that mix of a glamorous, cultivated allure and sweet and simple girl-next-door, the classy, unshowy chic of 1950s 'fairytale fashion', suited her down to the ground. She had been compared to Deanna Durbin as a young woman; soon it would be Grace Kelly.[8]

But it was such a game. As a woman, to arrive at this sanctified marital status, this pinnacle of achievement, you had to be chosen. Jill Tweedie remembered that to appeal to men, 'you had to become the Incredible Shrinking Woman. You had to make yourself smaller than them in every way possible: small ego, small brain, small voice, small

talk'.[9] Once you had attracted the attention of your prince, you waited, modest, submissive and (seemingly) composed, until he made a move. Norah could do no more than just be there in the street when Freddie the policeman passed by on his bike, plant the idea of her in his mind; *smiled sweetly at him.*

And when you'd done everything right, you'd put yourself out there, ripe for the picking, had been much admired but were still 'on the shelf' – it was almost shameful. In Fifties Britain, a single woman was no longer seen as an independent, fun-loving 'bachelor girl', but as a spinster: fussy, frustrated, eccentric, obsessive, sour. While there were other options – career-woman, mistress, staying single – marriage and motherhood were relentlessly promoted as the only route to a fulfilled life. 'We shall never have any other lovers, because the past was so perfect', two 'not-so-young women' whose boyfriends had been killed in action wrote to *Woman's Own*. 'But is it true that unmarried women get peculiar, and may suffer in health?'[10]

I stumble across a late-Fifties letter in Norah's archive, written to Marsie from her nephew, Eric Leadbetter, now settled in Canada:

> We were pleased with the picture of the wedding group. You all look very well. I could pick out your side of the family allright. You don't look any older than last time we saw you before we left England. Frank and his bride are a handsome couple. Give our best wishes for a happy married life. Norah is a fine looking girl, I thought she would have been married by now but if she is happy as a single girl that is the main thing.

***

There is a tragic addendum to Gerry's story. In 1956, he took a job on the Rhodesian railways, leaving Derby with his wife and two children for Bulawayo and a fresh start. Three letters to Norah from late 1961 and early 1962 (saved in the blue ottoman he bought for her) are full of plans for his first trip home. 'It's been a long time my dear since I heard your voice or saw those flashing eyes', he wrote, tenderly. He wanted her to know that he was a changed man, had learned that problems must be faced up to, not shelved. He suspected she knew he had become a Christian: 'some folks are deft at reading between the

lines'. He signed off: 'Cheerio, goodbye and God bless and watch over you until March'.

But there was no watching over him, poor man.

> *24th February: Received a letter from Gerry. They are flying home on March 4th.*
>
> *4th March: G & family will be flying to Lisbon today.*
>
> *5th: Was horrified to hear on 6pm news that a plane from Laurenço Marques to Lisbon has crashed in Cameroons, all dead. Oh please God, don't let it be.*

Gerry, his wife and son – his daughter didn't travel – all perished. Whether they were among the twenty-three identifiable bodies, I don't know. I peruse Norah's collection of paper cuttings:

Fig. 32 Newspaper cuttings. Private papers of Norah Hodgkinson. Photo: A. Twells, 2025.

'Horror in the "Green Hell"' – 'Big Crash Mystery' – 'The Honeymooners' – 'Grandmother Weeps for Aircrash Baby' – '111 Die in World's Worst Single Air Disaster'. *Oh God, this is like a living death,* she wrote. *Poor, poor Gerry. Oh how I grieve for him.*

My mum is stunned. 'It's very odd', she says. 'I was nearly 21 and I spent lots of time with Norah. She kept this all to herself'.

But in that spring of 1962, Norah had other secrets. She was planning a future with Eddy.

***

When Norah next mentions Danny in 1978, twenty years into her relationship with Eddy, he is part of a different exercise – a looking back, taking stock, at a time of regret.

Norah met Eddy in the summer of 1958. Apart from a passionate encounter on holiday in Rome in 1955, there had been no men in her life since Gerry. It was a full life, nonetheless. Norah danced and swam, knitted and sewed, gardened, read novels and saw films. She joined a woodwork class at nightschool, making herself a stool, spending weeks planing the frame, sandpapering and rounding off the legs, beautifully embroidering the upholstered seat. (I have it in my bedroom. When it isn't piled with clothes, it is a lovely piece of work.) Over the next two years, she and her sister Helen made a bookcase (on my landing), a round side table (in my mum's front room), a television table (the one with the too-long legs) and then, would you believe, a wardrobe. After woodwork, she signed up for A-level French. She made visits to cousin Peggy, her husband and two boys, who now lived in Larne, and enjoyed trips to Silverstone with schoolfriend Peggy and her husband Bert and days out with Birdy on his brand new Norton motorbike – to Kenilworth, Chatsworth, Ashbourne, and to Kirby Mallory to meet his motorbiking friends.

'No helmets', my mum tuts. 'She just clambered on and off they shot. No headgear at all'.

'Blimey', Mark says. 'I bet Birdy's mates were pleased when he turned up with her'.

Fig. 33 Norah, Birdy (left) and friends, Kirby Mallory, 1958. Private papers of Norah Hodgkinson.

She took her first foreign holidays, to Switzerland in 1953, Rome and Venice two years later (*simply out of this world, the loveliest place I've ever seen*), and Yugoslavia in 1958. Doreen was her first companion, and then 'Lambie', a friend from work, but when they were late to commit, despite Marsie's protestations, Norah, so keen to see the world, was perfectly prepared to holiday alone.

Buoyed by her overseas trips, Norah joined the International Friendship League, with the aim, she once told me, of sprucing up her French.[11] At a 'Hungarian Night', she found herself chatting with Jorge, from Zagreb, and Edward, a German. *14th July: We're going for supper together on Monday night,* she wrote, after Edward drove her to her bus stop. *God! Wonder what the future holds?*

Supper: not her word, surely? Edward was from a different world. Handsome in a fair-haired, square-jawed Germanic kind of way, he was older than Norah by eleven years. He drove a car, knew all the restaurants and had a sister living in Bourdeaux. He had moved to Derby before the war, following the woman who was to be his first wife after a holiday romance in Germany, taking a job with her father, a manufacturer of

chamois leather. Her sudden death in 1956 left him alone with their young daughter. *They are so much above us:* Norah's comment, made in her diary after walking past his big Victorian house, suggests that she felt out of her depth. *Please God don't let us disappoint each other*. He was a gentle and passionate lover.

Three months into their affair, Edward said something strange. *He says he can give me his heart but nothing more,* Norah wrote in her diary. *That I mustn't let him stand in the way of finding my husband. Please God, what does it all mean?* Norah thought he must be referring to some condition about remarriage attached to his late wife's will. A week later, he spilled the beans. *Oh God. Edward is married.* He had hastily married his wife's best friend not long after her death, presumably to help him raise the child. It had failed from the start, from a disastrous wedding night.[12] *Says he loves me from the top of my head to the tip of my toes,* Norah writes. *Belonged completely to him tonight.*

After all the disapproval, adultery seemed suddenly in fashion in the late 1950s. Writing to Mass Observation, a librarian of Norah's age said that she had 'heard on the radio that 80% of people commit adultery. When I first did, I wrote to close friends crowing about it, and they wrote back saying that they too were having affairs... Coming home after weekends, by train, everyone seemed to be wearing a Mona Lisa smile...'[13] But Norah felt *lousy, awful.* She couldn't possibly go through this married man thing again. She wasn't looking for a sexual adventure, but for someone to love, for keeps. She cut him off, but Eddy was persistent, calling her office, eventually winning her round. *5th November: Lovely to be with him. I do love him, truly.*

And that was it. Lots of films, meals out, passionate sex. *Saw mein engelein*. *Did. Marvellous,* she wrote, many times. *My love and I went to see 'Whirlwind'. Dashed out and did.* And a week later: *Met my love at 5pm. Went out to Stenson and did. She was in town so had to be careful.* On a spring weekend in the Cotswolds: *Oh god it was so wonderful. Did twice!* In July 1959, they had a *lovely holiday* in Biarritz, San Sebastian, Lourdes and Bourdeaux, where she met his sister, Elisabeth, who told her she *looked like Grace Kelly!!!* She arrived home just *in time to see Marsie and the Twellies off to Colwyn Bay.*

A glamorous new life, perhaps, but not all plain-sailing. It is hard to deduce quite what was wrong, however, as after her A-level success

that summer, Norah's diaries for 1959, 1960 and half of 1961 are written in French. Lots of *Did. Marvellieux*. *Je t'adore, mon cher.* But he was also a *cruel homme*. He seems to have been angry a lot of the time: *colère, fâche, froid*. *18th May 1960: Nous sommes chez lui et il continue d'être fâché avec moi. La vie avec lui sera très très difficile.* ['We are at his house and he continues to be angry with me. Life with him will be very, very difficult.'] But she cut him slack. He had a terrible war story: wounded at Leningrad, in Egypt as a POW, starving and stranded in Germany in 1946, then to post-war Derby, where life as a former enemy alien was far from a piece of cake. *7th Sept 1962: Went to the art gallery to see exhibition of Bohemian glass. Had row, then kissed and made up at night.*

Eddy's daughter, Dinah, cooked for her dad and Norah each Tuesday evening and remembers Norah at their kitchen table, upright, elegant, her hair pulled back in a bun, smiling, but not friendly.

'She came, she sat down, she ate what was put in front of her. There was no friendly feeling. She was just *there*, polite but distant. She was almost without personality, cold. I didn't have a relationship with her at all'. After the meal, while Dinah did her homework, Norah and Eddy would watch television before he drove her home.[14]

I find this so sad and puzzling, this lack of interest in wooing her new love's teenage daughter, in being friendly to a motherless girl. Did Norah resent Dinah's presence, wanting Eddy all to herself? Did she know Dinah was close to the second wife and was frightened of giving too much away? Did she have complicated feelings about wanting children of her own? (It was around this time that Eddy told her he thought she was too old to conceive. Unmarried, she didn't pursue it.) We'll never know. But it is an uncomfortable image and makes me wonder about that vital, lively, good natured girl, how she became so lacking in warmth.

In 1966, after Marsie's final illness and then my mother's pregnancy kept Norah at Moira Dale, she and Eddy saw a solicitor, the aptly named Mr Loving. *Explained everything to us, and said that his advice is that we should live together. Says I'm a good proposition! Felt relieved somehow. Please God help us.* When Norah had first broached the subject of divorce, Eddy had told her he was *a coward and wants love and comfort from me, not more worries.* She was not impressed: *I've never heard anything so selfish in all my life*. Now she learned that the legal dissolution of a marriage required

that one party (the 'petitioner') be found to be legally 'innocent' and the other (the 'respondent') legally 'guilty' of a 'matrimonial offence'. The petition would have to come from Eddy's second wife, who had no desire to grant him an easy way out.

Wanting to *get straightened out, for keeps*, Norah cleared out Moira Dale, saying her last goodbyes to the house and garden. Concerned that her new postman should not learn that she was Miss Hodgkinson and not Mrs Cook, she arranged for her mail to be delivered to Birdy's new address. She stored her old diaries and wartime letters and photographs in a suitcase in his spare room.

The shame of 'living in sin' aside, Norah soon settled into what was, to all intents and purposes, a married life. She gardened, decorated, ran the house. In the summer of 1968, she orchestrated a move to a beautiful bungalow at Makeney, north of Derby. They ate out, saw films, enjoyed holidays in Bingen am Rhein every other year, and Ireland, Jerusalem, Crete, cruises to Athens via Tangier, to Palermo and Barcelona, in between. They bickered and fell out and the sexual passion soon dimmed, but he was *my love.* Life – a middle-aged, unwed, married life – rolled on.

Fig. 34 Norah and Eddy on a cruise, 1964. Private papers of Norah Hodgkinson.

Fig. 35 Norah and Eddy, Crete, 1971. Private papers of Norah Hodgkinson.

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So what made Norah think of Danny in 1978, twelve years after moving in with Eddy and twenty-six years after the mishap with the fired chimney in 1952? Perhaps it was a chance remembering – a radio news reader, maybe, reminding her that the date was 26th October: *Danny would be 61 today – at least!!!* (That query over his age again.)

Flicking back through her diary for that year, I find this entry at the end of July*: It's twenty years ago about today that I made the biggest long-term mistake of my life. He's unbearable and is driving me mad.* A lack of reflection, as we know, is one of the downsides of Norah's diaries. Apart from regular grumbles about Eddy's temper and a couple of references to her *predicament*, few clues exist. Her short daily entries give no sense of Norah working out her options, but the disatisfaction is palpably there.

And what was her predicament? It was simply that she had no rights. Even after the arrival of the 'no fault divorce' in 1969, with consent no longer required after five years of irretrievable breakdown, Eddy still wouldn't petition. Norah told my gran that as he was a Roman Catholic

and marriage a sacrament, he could not divorce. The upshot for her remained the same; that despite all those years of working and earning, all that home-building, if she left him, as a 'common-law wife', she would go with nothing.[15]

Three years later, in 1981, Danny settled in her thoughts once more.

> *17th March: In library looking for the Leicester addresses. Found Danny's number and address in Eastbourne. A voice from the dead.*
>
> *18th: It seems eerie to think of Danny living down there in Eastbourne and I'm up here in Derby. I wonder what he's like, it's like a voice from another world.*

Of course, you don't just find East Sussex addresses while looking at the Leicester directory. You have to search them out, go to S rather than L, lift the heavy book off the shelf, lay it flat on the table top, flick through to G, Gi – too far – Gilbraith, Gilbride – gliding your finger up the list – Gilberto, Gilbert.

That autumn, Norah and Eddy visited his daughter and her family, who now lived not far from Danny:

> *13th September: Forty years ago, Danny at Moira Dale. Today, me in Bexhill and him just down the road. I feel so sad.*

Two months later, she thought of him again:

> *18th November: Full house at yoga, really enjoyed it. Worked up gradually to a perfect cobra. A filthy wet day all day so couldn't do any gardening. While looking for information in my old diaries, re-read some of Jim's letters. He said there was never any hope for Danny and me because they were such a poor family. Had quite forgotten that. Made me feel very sad for what might have been.*

Unlikely as it seems, she hadn't dismissed Jim's far-fetched explanation in his letter of apology of 1947. Or maybe, amidst all the hurt, all of his stories, she had forgotten this detail.

> *21st November: A dull, but dry and mild day. Got the washing dry. Rang the Assembly Rooms – the 'Sounds like Christmas' concert is on Sat 19th and Tues 22nd. Rang Helen, they prefer 19th, so must try and book on Monday. I still feel sad about Danny, still feel that we must surely meet again one day, he's still part of me.*

How was he *still part of* her, so many years after he disappeared? And why now?

I'm sure that Norah would be the first to say that she didn't have a bad life. Recently retired, she gardened, walked, swam and attended weekly classes in yoga and car maintenance. She and Eddy continued to visit Germany most summers and enjoyed holidays further afield – Thailand, Mexico, Morocco. But there was little companionship, no sympathy of feeling, no intimacy, just endless days when he was *in a lousy mood* and she couldn't *do or say anything right. I do get SICK, SICK, SICK*, she wrote on 12th January 1981, and the following day,

> *13th January: He's the bloody KING OF PIGS sometimes. I'm so upset. Why can't we be happy together? Life is such a disappointment.*
>
> *11th February: Eddy took exception to something I said, so had a war of silence!*
>
> *20th March: Where the bloody hell are we going? This is no way for the so-called twilight of our lives.*

Norah's diary entries for 1981 reveal a lonely woman of fifty-six, living with a foul-tempered man and feeling like her chance for the life she'd hoped for was slipping away. Very soon, it would be too late to live in the world any other way.

It was hope, in the shape of Danny, that was *still part of me*. A hope for love and passion, or just for a more companionate life. Hope deferred maketh the heart sick, as Marsie used to say.

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It actually makes my heart ache to see Norah like this. While our visits were always awkward – Norah on edge, Eddy waiting to pounce – we didn't know that when we weren't there to provoke him, he continued to be a miserable sod.

In 1981, the year that she wrote about Danny, I 'interviewed' Eddy for an O-level history project on Russia in the Second World War.

> *24th May: Al wants to come and see Eddy about Leningrad for her O Level. She says she might stay on for A levels and will do English Lit and History. I'm really glad.*

It is a good little interview, though I say it myself. I've still got it, in a box in the loft. He talked cagily about the rise of Hitler, why so many Germans were in dire straits after WW1. He claimed to know nothing about the Holocaust. After a stint in Czechoslovakia at the start of the war, he had marched through Poland, then Latvia, Lithuania, where people lined the streets, welcoming their liberation from the Russians. He talked about the bitter cold at Leningrad in 1941, how they had arrived in summer and were never given winter uniforms, that their wives sent small Christmas trees through the post, not knowing where they were or that they were surrounded by snow-covered spruces. Norah was pleased with us. He was helpful and I was compliant (*Al seems nice and sensible now*).

It didn't last, sadly. The following year, 1982, I was banned from the house. I'd joined CND and been to Greenham Common and he was incensed. But the row was about racism. Moira Stewart was reading the news and he started shouting about 'Africans' not being civilised, having no history or culture before Europeans gave it to them, almost exploding with bile. I was a fearless sixteen-year-old, a bit of a know-all. I'd just read Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* for my Sociology A-level and had heckled at a National Front meeting in the village earlier that year. But standing up and shouting back at the man of the house... He ordered me out, told me never to return.

I still saw Norah occasionally, when she visited my mum and gran, or at family gatherings when Dennis made his annual trip up the M1 and down memory lane. We would journey between the run-down lock houses at Stenson and Aston-on-Trent, where their grand-parents discussed socialism and read Whitman, nipping over to Loughborough's tree-lined Burton Walks, home to both grammar schools (now private). When they were still fit enough, we'd trek up to Hill Top, returning down Diseworth Lane to Moira Dale, to stand outside number 18 like pilgrims congregating at a sacred place. We'd meet, and we'd talk, and we'd laugh, but Norah was always distant. When she drove off, poised and waving, Dennis would interrogate my mum and my gran: was she really happy, living with that man? They'd shrug. What did they know?

'It's all your fault, with your Nazi hunting', he'd say, his twinkling eyes somehow managing to convey a whole lot of mischief, concern for Norah and sympathy for me.

And then, all of a sudden, I saw Norah at a rash of family funerals as, in less than a decade, Frank died, then my gran, Birdy and then Dennis. And then Eddy. I was thankful to be in Spain that Easter of 1996, relieved that I didn't have to fake my respects, or stifle a laugh at the revelation of his full name – Edouard Adolf Koch – as his coffin was wheeled through the crem.

We don't know for certain why Norah stayed.

'Well she's not alone in that', my mum says. 'How many people do you know, women especially, who stay in miserable marriages? It's just too much upheaval to do anything about it. And how did she know she'd be any happier, on her own?'

Of course, it is also quite possible – in a total turnaround from 1946 – that Norah only wrote the bad stuff in her diaries. That she didn't dwell on their contented days, when she enjoyed caring for him and they rubbed along together well enough. But I doubt it.

'She'd have to have gone into a council flat', my mum continued. 'Can you imagine that? And admit to the world that the relationship had failed? Which we all knew it would'. A pause. 'Women didn't live their lives then like they do today'.

Today, most mid-life separations are instigated by women who, with their own money, can opt out of years of cleaning, caring, listening to the same old stories, and the dull, dutiful sex.

Norah had enjoyed a flirtation in the late 1970s, just before she retired, but it came to nothing. (That was one way out, of course: find another man.) Stuck with Eddy, she immersed herself in a new project, becoming a mean family historian, tracing the Hodgkinsons to a sixteenth-century Derbyshire hamlet, and the Leadbetters, to Staffordshire via the canals. Eddy was jealous, of course, but my mum remembers the defiant pleasure with which Norah brought out her notes and scrolls, reporting on field visits with other researchers, including her new-found Australian 'cousins'. Family history: it was challenging, absorbing, anchoring, the past providing warmth in the present.[16]

8th May 1995: VE Day plus fifty years. Enjoyed the various shows and observed the 2 minutes' silence. Made me feel really sad. If I had asked Kath Jones about her feelings at VE Day commemorations, I doubt that sadness would have been her dominant emotion. We can assume that her 'happy ending' – meeting Ron at the dances, their long marriage

– shaped her memories of the war itself. But Norah, abandoned by Danny and unlucky in love ever after: what was her war story, if not absence and loss? Like when elderly women cry at weddings, Norah's VE Day sadness came from the memory of hope, before life had failed to fulfil its promises, before love had let her down.

Norah's final mention of Danny came in 2009, near the end of her life, when she found herself sifting through her suitcase of diaries and letters, stored next to (? on top of? inside?) the wardrobe in her spare room. The following morning, catching her usual bus into town, she called in at the library and *checked the Eastbourne phone directory. Only two Gilberts: RA, could that be Bob? Also an Ian. Is that a grandchild? Where are Jim, Danny, Jack? Dead? Rained quite heavily once or twice.*

Danny had received passing mentions in her diaries in the 1990s and early 2000s. *Danny is (? would have been?) 80 today,* she wrote on his birthday in 1997, extending the question beyond that of his truthful age to wonder whether he was dead or alive. *26th October 2003*: *Danny would have been 86 today.*

What did it mean, to remember him this way? Was it anything more than her noting of other birthdays, deathdays – Helen, Frank, Birdy, Dennis, Pop. *7th May 2006: Today is 42 years since Marsie died, feels like a 100 lives ago.* Eddy too, of course, and Gerry (*what if..?*).

The late 1990s, after Eddy's death, were lonely and aimless years. Norah had met her grief head on, starting with holidays, making tentative trips to Durham (castles) and Kent (gardens) in the months after he died. She soon spread her wings, finding her confidence for a solo German river cruise, a week on Lake Garda, then trips to Bucharest, Budapest, St Petersburg, Prague, Vienna. She toured central Spain and Provence and the French Alps and saw Boston in the Fall. They could be hit and miss, these trips, with exhausting schedules, so-so food, too-needy fellow travellers (*Rex is beginning to get on my nerves… Roll on Sunday*). But Norah rekindled her love for adventure. Christmas 2005 saw her contemplating a SAGA world cruise.

At home, she joined a club of widows who held weekly coffee mornings, walked together and shared birthday lunches and days out. She hosted guests – her step-daughter and her neice, a week most summers – and my mum, me and the girls, her favourite step-grandaughter (handsome Italian boyfriend duly noted) all dropping in at different times. She was still an active gardener, confounding me

with her persistence in unearthing and then replanting her bulbs every autumn, digging up three tree roots at seventy-nine. She took herself off in the car on spins through ancestral Derbyshire villages and more than once, on a train to London to see a show. She kept up with family history, sharing findings with Hodgkinsons and Leadbetters all around the world, still hosting Aussies and Canadians on the heritage trail. She was always up for the new, treating herself to novel little delicacies (*Bought some kangaroo sausages for lunch – ok*) and enrolling for a course in computing (*Had an awful day with cut and paste*).

But when responsibility for all the good things that happen in your life falls to you and to you alone… And when the problems all come at once: a pulled leg muscle, a prang in the car, a battle with a cocky builder over the leaky roof valley… Norah being Norah, we didn't know how often the sense of overwhelm sent her spiralling down. Even the run-of-the-mill *do-nothing* days, the *dead-and-alive Sundays*, when her friends were cosied up with grandchildren, could leave her feeling empty and alone.

> *2nd March 2007: Went early to Sainsbury's. Bought a pot of lillies for Alison. Had lovely trout for lunch. Felt so weary in the pm so had a nap on the bed. Dreamed of Eddy and woke up realising how lonely I am and how empty my life is. Yesterday was granny and grandad's wedding anniversary (1885) and there were just a few bits of greenery in the hedges.*[17]

I didn't realise at the time how much we mattered:

> *28th October 2008: Jean and the girls arrived just after 2pm. They are two little smashers. Played hangman. Lovely having them and very lonely after they had gone. Started to read the book that Alison gave me on Georgiana.*

I've learned a thing or two about loneliness from reading Norah's diaries. How hard it can be as an elderly, childless, single woman, building relationships in which you feel like you matter, and about which, in turn, you care enough. It strikes me that Norah put down few new roots in her adult life. She'd worked full time but had little interest in a career, had no community of mothers forged via a school gate, not even a long-term staying-put in one village. I wonder how skilled she was at making friendships with women. Her life had been all about men. Finding one took long enough, then there was the process of settling down, the

years spent doing for and looking after. The shame of their secret non-marriage deterred her from getting close to anybody not in the know, and Eddy's wearying bad-temperedness curtailed an independent life.

And in the end, the years of cruises and coffee club jaunts were a brief interlude before her friends began to pass away: first Joan, in 2004, then one by one, Mary, Joyce, Maisie, Lucy. By 2007, Norah had decided to call time on her foreign holidays. In 2009, at the age of eighty-four, she'd gone back on that, joining a flood-frustrated cruise on the Seine in April. But October found her struggling to throw off what she thought was a nasty bug (but which, in retrospect, was her heart giving up) and she regretfully cancelled her planned autumn trip on the Danube from Budapest to Vienna. *I shall never go again, ever.* It was a watershed moment, her horizons drawing in like a night tide.

I MUST GET BACK TO DONINGTON, Norah wrote, after a *lovely, lovely day* with my mother, touring old haunts and admiring the new estate (*some lovely bungalows*). It was Norah's very human need for rootedness and belonging that brought Castle Donington back into the picture.[18] She had left the village for a bigger canvas on which to paint her life. It had been a gamble, and in those exciting early years with Eddy, it had worked. But ultimately, latterly, maybe for a long time, she was lonely. On that mid-summer day in 2009, Norah clearly felt that Donington offered her an umbilical cord, could be more than a nostalgic memory. My mum kept an eye out for bungalows for sale and we pictured Norah settling into the new estate, joining the church congregation, volunteering at the museum.

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Was Norah preparing for this move when she began to clear out her papers at the end of September 2009? While pleased with her ruthlessness, she would be keenly aware that throwing out old gas bills was the easy part. I imagine her, laying the grey cardboard suitcase flat on the bed, flicking the locks. It had been years since she'd clapped eyes on her diaries, but here they were, all packed neatly in rows, the coloured spines of her life, now dulled.

Tucked in a corner was the stash of Jim's letters and beneath them, a handful of photographs of him and Danny, both looking sharp and so

young in their military uniforms. These letters from Jim: why had she kept them all these years? Maybe it was pure chance. While Danny's letters were in her dressing table drawer, Jim's were in the loft at Moira Dale with the rest of her High School memorabilia, and then, retrieved from Birdy's flat on his death and shoved in her own roofspace, away from Eddy's prying eyes, they were just part of the nostalgia she felt for that time.

We might ask the same of her diaries: what had compelled her to keep them over so many years? At first, it was surely their role in easing her into the new world she was entering via grammar school and young womanhood. Soon, she saw how easily events slipped from memory, how her diary brought them back. At times, they were outlets for complaint; a confidante when life disappointed. Writing was simply a habit; how she tidied up her days.[19] Maybe at a certain point, their longevity had become self-fulfilling (she'd kept them for X number of years, why stop now?).

I imagine Norah tidying her diaries, shuffling the letters, attempting to neaten the piles, finding herself unable to resist opening one – an envelope postmarked Yarmouth, the date illegible – and unfolding the thin paper:

> Dear Norah,
>
> I received your letter while anchored at sea last night 9.30pm. At time of writing we are just finishing a job which has taken several days. We are doing a tremendous amount of sea time, so please forgive my delay in my letters. Honestly Norah I love writing to you and receiving your letters, especially like the one I had last. It would be worth coming to Derby just to collect a kiss from you. I rather fancy they are only for special people. To be candid I know I should be jealous of Danny so perhaps that is one reason I don't come and see you…

She scanned down to his cheery 'Cheerio darling' signing off: 'Your future brother-in-law, Jim'.

It was tempting to keep on reading, but she knew the afternoon would be lost if she did. She was faintly aware of her mood starting to dip, a spreading sadness. How could they still have this effect, fifty years on? Maybe she should forget the sorting and just burn the lot.

By the following morning, something had changed and Norah found herself in Derby Library, jotting down numbers from the Eastbourne

phone book. That evening, she returned to the suitcase and picked out the transparent wallet containing a snap Danny had sent from Tromsö in 1945. The photo was black and white, but the burst of Air Force blue that had brightened up the drabness of those years now burned through the decades like a tiny pulsar of light.[20] It felt like a thousand lifetimes ago and yesterday, both at once.

Danny. How proud she had felt as her sixteen-year-old self, walking out with this handsome airman. One minute she was a chubby schoolgirl with high hopes for her life, and then, well, she felt like a film star. And the odd thing was, despite that sense of being a stranger to herself, of not being quite in her own body, she knew she'd always been moving towards this point. When, all of a sudden, it arrived, it had seemed so certain, like it was meant to be. And yet, like a bluebird over water, it was gone in a flash.

Gone in a flash and yet it came back in waves. This must be why first love leaves such an impression, the way it draws out feelings you didn't know you possessed, shows you that you can love, be loved. Her time with Danny was like the foundation of her life, the template against which the rest had been measured. Its vividness had dimmed, but she recalled it more clearly than anything that had followed.[21] Every new time since had been a faint echo of those afternoons lying on his rough jacket on the hard ground on Daleacre hill, every inch of her lapping him up, the smell of him, the thrill of his hands on her body, the heat in his eyes.

What might have been. Jim had said that it was her reserve that had driven Danny away. An iceberg, he'd called her. But she hadn't been cold. She'd been pretty darn passionate, if truth be told. And imagine if she *had* given in and he'd still done his disappearing act. She had known nothing of sex then, except that which her own body told her, so much at odds with what was allowed. If word got round, that would be it, her reputation would be shot. She might even have got pregnant and the course of her whole life would have been changed. Poor Marsie: it would have finished her off, or so Norah had thought at the time. She knew better now. Marsie wouldn't have allowed talk of adoption, couldn't care less what the neighbours thought, would help to raise the child and love it just the same. There would have been no Vic, no Gerry, certainly no Eddy. But something, someone, would have come along.

Was it now that Norah slid the Gilbert phone numbers into the wallet, back-to-back with the photo? Did she wonder why she was tucking them away, creating more stuff to be sifted through on yet another day? She was supposed to be be getting shot of it all: keep or chuck! But if memory was life's load-bearer, would destroying these now take some vital pillar away?

Maybe she should just grasp the nettle and ring the numbers. But what if she made the phone call and found she hadn't held the same place in Danny's affections as he had in hers? What if he didn't even remember her? Surely that couldn't be the case. For all she knew, he could have had girlfriends near air bases all over the country. Would she ask him what had happened, where he'd gone at he end of 1945, or would she be content just to know that he had thought of her now and then, down the years?

How strange it was to know nothing at all of his life, yet hers had taken its shape from him. That sense she'd had when she was with him: that she was becoming the woman she was destined to be. But then he disappeared and she never fulfilled that promise; had yearned for her lost self ever after. And what could they do now anyway? She kept forgetting that small fact: that there was no planning now for new times, for new (old) flames.

The chances were, of course, that Danny was long dead, especially if he was older than he'd led her to believe. What would she say to the son or grandson who answered the phone? *I was a girlfriend of your* (*grand*) *father's during the war*. Would he think she was a sad case, looking up a lost love from so long ago?

And was she? Maybe she was a silly old fool. Was this something that happened with the passage of time, you stopped looking to the future, had no energy for it, and harked back to the past instead? But Norah sometimes felt like she'd had this separate life running in tandem, that he had always been with her. The paths not taken, the 'what might have beens', that sense of lost futures. It was such a hopeful time, so full of expectation. She just wanted to tie things up, neaten her memories, close the circle. It would be nice to know that she'd been loved. There was surely nothing wrong with that.

She pondered her opening gambit.

'Hello. I wonder if you can help me. I'm looking for a Mr Danny Gilbert, of Eastbourne. We knew each other a long time ago. I wonder if you might be related and could tell me anything about him. I do hope I'm not too late'.

And if Danny himself came to the phone?

'Hello Danny', she would say. 'It's Norah, Norah Hodgkinson as was, from Castle Donington. I've just stumbled across some letters from the war and I thought I'd look you up. I know it's a bit of a bolt out of the blue'.

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But Norah didn't make a call to Eastbourne that October night, or any night of the following seven weeks of her life. She would have said so in her diary if she had.

What her dreams and fancies were, we simply do not know. She might have had a vague thought about holidaying there in 2010, ringing from a phone box on the prom one sunny afternoon between day trips to castles and gardens. Or she might have abandoned the idea entirely, plumping instead for that French river cruise, the prospect of which she couldn't quite let go.

We can't know, however, because in late November 2009, Norah died. And I guess that, in the end, this is how it is; how history is. Norah, Danny and Jim were real people, with every right to keep some secrets from us. 'Secrets are there to be found', writes Arlette Farge, but 'are sometimes impossibly out of reach'.[22]

There is no timely epiphany supplied by Norah's later years, no redemptive arc, just her extraordinary, ordinary life, untidy, unstoriable, an 'anti-novel'.[23]

'Your gran always thought Norah had it easy', my mum says. 'She swanned into that school. By the time Norah passed the scholarship, what with her and Birdy working, and Dennis sending money home as well, no doubt, they could afford to send her, even with Frank at the Grammar. It set her up for life. All those lovely clothes and shoes, bungalows in Duffield, holidays all over the world...' My mum pauses, then makes up another family story on the hoof. 'This is why she left us the diaries', she says. 'She knew what we thought. She wanted us to know about those years with Eddy, that her life wasn't all sweetness and light'.

Sociologist Carol Smart talks of the families we 'live with' – our real families, which may be riddled with secrets and tensions – and the families we 'live by', the idealised families of popular culture. To reveal a family secret, Smart suggests, might be an attempt to talk honestly about family life, to acknowledge our distance from the image, to bring the ideal down a peg or two, to rid ourselves of shame. This can be insensitive, ethically dubious, when the teller is not the only one who has to live with repercussions. It can also be freeing.[24]

But Norah was not revealing our family secrets to the world. She was showing her life to us, her closest family members. My mum's explanation rings true. Leaving her diaries to me was only partly about my interest in women's history. More than that, it was Norah's final refusal to pretend.