

11. Poor Jim?

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Citation:

TWELLS, Alison (2025). 11. Poor Jim? In: A Place of Dreams: Desire, Deception and a Wartime Coming of Age. Open Book Publishers, 131-138. [Book Section]

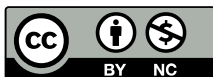
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Alison Twells, *A Place of Dreams: Desire, Deception and a Wartime Coming of Age*.
Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0461>

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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.

11. Poor Jim?

Despite his strange letters in which he pretty much conceded her to his brother, Jim had no intention of giving Norah up without a fight. In a letter of late September, he tried to put right his earlier gaff, explaining that his shyness was the real reason that he wanted to meet her privately. 'I hope to collect the kisses on the end of your letters soon', he continued. 'I am longing for your photo and hope the dimple's will not be missing. Did you enjoy Richard Tauber on the wireless? If I ever hear "Rose Marie" you are her in my thoughts'. He writes the words 'I LOVE' in kisses and 'you' in his normal hand.

By the time Jim penned his next letter, he had received Danny's unwelcome news. 'Danny seems rather struck on you and your family', he wrote curtly. 'Please read carefully, do you like Danny more than a pen-friend. If I visited you I am positive now that someone will be awfully disappointed... Please write by return all what you think of our affair'. He then switched to a more conciliatory tone: 'I like you and Danny very much and it is okay with me if Danny introduces you to me "one fine day" ... I want to make things easier for you so it is a true friendship all round'. *Jim wants to clear up the puzzle of whom I love & wants to make it easier all round & enclosed D's letter to him*, Norah wrote on October 2nd. *It's terribly sweet of him*.

Poor Jim. Norah does want to behave well, to let him down nicely, but it's as if Danny's kiss and then his letters have left her sideswiped, propelled her into a strange new world where she momentarily loses her moorings. *4th October: Received a letter from Danny. He seems to want to clear things up a little. I think I am in love with Danny but I think Jim really cares for me & he is very sweet*.

In fact, it isn't just Danny. Two weeks after their first meeting, Norah started work as a clerical officer at the LMS (London, Midland, Scotland) Coal Office in Derby. Her job was the kind of position for

which Loughborough High School had been turning out girls since the transformation of office work at the end of the previous century. By 1931, the 'white blouse revolution' saw that women accounted for 45% of the hugely expanded clerical workforce. By 1951: 58.6%. It was attractive work: clean, respectable, secure, and despite operating different scales for women and men, relatively well paid.¹

From her first day in early October to the end of 1941, Norah wrote nothing at all in her diary about her actual work. For her, a job was a job, a means to an end: nice clothes, seaside holidays, evenings at the pictures and dance hall, her bottom drawer; an interlude between school and marriage. Her focus was her chats and lunchtime dates with Connie and Jean, two older girls who had boyfriends in the forces, and the mysterious Mrs Harris, who would lose her son in Germany in 1943. Norah notes also Marsie's regular spur-of-the-moment trips into town, often inspired by the arrival of a second-post letter from Danny or Jim, their lunches at Midland Drapery usually topped off with a browse in the shops.

Most of all, Norah wrote about men:

6th October 1941: Started work at LMS. Frank was passed grade II in medical exams. Is going in RAF. Radiolocation. Posted my Danny's letter.

8th: Jean didn't go to the Institute. New soldiers arrived.

9th: Poured with rain all day. Colin Brier came on leave & said it was all around his camp that I worked at Derby.

10th: Ma came to Derby, so had lunch together at Boots. Saw Naval Officer like Danny.

11th: Missed train at dinner time by going down town, so arrived home at about 2 o'clock. Terribly disappointed because my Danny didn't write.

14th: Posted letter to Kathleen. No letter from my Danny Boy. Hundreds of WAAF on Platform 1. Made friends with boys in Night Office. Very foggy.

That's five days out of her six-day week: the new soldiers at the Park, Frank's friend Colin and the lads at his camp, a naval officer who reminded her of Danny, and Danny himself, cropping up here and elsewhere with letters received, replied to and longed for. The following week, Norah

meets the boys in the Night Office. Norman takes a shine to her: *My nice office boy gave me some more chocolate and asked for date. Turned him down.*

It seems Jim was right: Norah did have admirers. And the realisation was giddy. Sixteen years old, straight out of a girls' school, her days were suddenly alive with this new charge of energy, even among young men she'd known half her life. She was like a diver on a coral reef, slipping beneath the sea's calm surface to find this new world, intense and vibrant; a world which had been there all the time but of which she had previously had no more than an inkling. And in it, she had currency. As women were encouraged to define their social value through their capacity for romantic love, Norah was coming to know her worth.²

'Now we come to your letter, I think you have got me all wrong', Jim writes in mid-October. 'Although you may not be inclined to be serious with Danny and me, we are with you. I have loved you from the first letter but you are the one to decide [...] The reason I said my visit will be not certain, is you. I am in love with your photo so you know what position Danny and I are placed in. Please write and what is your verdict. "I love you"'.

In the absence of interest from Norah, whose diary entries are all about Danny, Jim's letters become shorter and more mundane. 'Remember I am still your mystery boy', he writes. 'I hope you approve of my photo, it is just as I am. Please write soon'. 'Dear Norah, I am still awaiting an answer to my last letter which contained a photo', he writes again. 'I hope you received it'. At the end of the month, Jim proposes a date, hoping that Norah would spend an evening with him, walking and talking. 'I hope you will reply by return, a love letter this time, or is it Danny?'

'He's trying very hard to appear casual, isn't he?' I muse to Mark, my then-partner and children's father, and a psychologist. 'Norah has dropped him for Danny, who hasn't got the balls to write to his brother. Jim's even asking her to nudge Danny into sending him a letter. I can't help but feel he is terribly hurt'.

'He's been betrayed', Mark replies, matter-of-factly.

'But by whom?' I am interested in who he thinks Jim sees as letting him down the most. His brother has gone off with his love interest after all.

'Norah, of course'.

Poor Jim, you're probably thinking. But I have an apology to make. I haven't been completely honest about Jim the sailor. Just this once, I've done that novelist's thing, choosing what to tell and when, delaying a small snippet that might have raised a question mark in your mind, as it did in mine. I've done this not to present some big reveal, but simply to show Jim as Norah saw him.

Almost from the outset of their correspondence, Jim presented himself as 'unusual'. 'Girls have never interested me', he wrote to Norah in early April 1941, 'and I have always had males for company'. Whilst he is 'the greatest of friends with most of the ship's company', he is a loner, he tells her, spending shore leave on his own.

I doubt that a virginal school girl knew in detail what naval ratings got up to on shore leave. But just in case, Jim deliberately represents himself as different from the sailor of popular stereotype. The possibility that he is gay also crosses my mind. 'My friend and I are very attached, and write regular', he wrote in one of his earliest letters. Despite the all-male shows, the beauty contests and cross dressing, life in the Navy for a secretly-gay sailor would be no walk in the park. But the final sentence in this same letter blows this lazy speculation: 'Have you a photo of yourself in school uniform', Jim asks, 'or are you shy?'

While I took particular notice of this request, Norah doesn't bat an eyelid. Her attentions are on the enclosed photograph of Nelson, Jim's best friend. *13th April: Received a rather romantic letter from Jim. Called me 'dearest dimples'. Asked for correspondent for Nelson.* So I force my reservations to one side. I am open to the possibility that I have got this wrong; that I might be projecting our contemporary fears about predatory men and grooming onto a moment in history when this exchange might have been viewed through another lens. It might simply be the case that school snaps were more readily available; that he was more likely to get one 'for keeps'. And much of what Jim writes is a little bit risqué, after all. He wants a love letter from Norah, whom he calls his 'dream lover', but he doesn't expect she'll comply ('shy'). Even when he asks her whether she shows her mother all of his letters, it is perfectly possible that he is winding her up.

When Jim makes another request for 'school snaps' a few weeks later, I am not so blasé. This is the letter where he tells Norah he has asked

Danny to try to see her: 'I would like to see you in your school outfit', he writes. 'I understand (shy). I wonder if you will send some school snaps, I will return them'. He signs off 'Yours more than imagination'. Again, Norah was unperturbed. In fact, she didn't seem to notice. *20th June: Received a letter from my sweety. He's going home. Hope he's not ill because I've got it pretty bad on him. Says Danny will try to meet me.*

It is perfectly plausible that this would pass Norah by. Before feminism, before the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, there was no clear way of talking about predatory men. Norah knew that there were dodgy men around, men who could not be trusted, who could ruin you forever, even if she was not quite sure how that happened or what it entailed.

She will have had a fair acquaintance with the language of 'moral danger', used to refer to girls who were unmarried and pregnant, who were lured into prostitution or who were just plain 'flighty' and led men on. None of these applied to her, of course.

Sixteen-year-old Norah would also know from the newspapers that in cases where terrible things happened to girls, it was assumed that they were to blame.³ She would be aware, from reticence and disapproval at school and at home, that it was best not to know too much, that sexual knowledge itself was seen as a corrupting influence, somehow dirtying and immoral.⁴

She'd hear the sexual slurs heaped on servicewomen – that the Women's Land Army had their 'Backs to the land', the ATS was the 'Groundsheet of the Army', and that men were 'Up with the lark and to bed with a Wren'. She'd no doubt note the endless discussions of their uniforms, whether they were too masculine, or too glamorous and slutty. She might have an opinion on make-up, may even have agreed with the army officer who, in a letter to service girls published in *Girls' Own Paper* in 1945, declared it 'quite out of place to smear yourselves with rouge and paint when you're on duty'. He hadn't much against 'using cosmetics in moderation, but when ATS girls in uniform appear with lips looking like over-ripe tomatoes, you ought to hear the men's remarks'.⁵

Those all-important, worth-defining *men's remarks*.

Might she hear counters to these, such as from those servicewomen who were forced to develop strategies to manage unwanted sexual attention and resorted to carrying hatpins to fend men off? Or from those

who, like the censors in the WRNS, shared knowledge gleaned from a serviceman's letters to his would-be girlfriends to show that he was a bad lot? Did purer-than-pure Joyce Grenfell go public at the time she was serving with ENSA (Entertainments National Service Association) in the Middle East and found that her uniform 'stood for "the easy to get"'? (Of course she didn't, though she 'resent[ed] it deeply'.) Did anybody in Norah's circle echo Zelma Katin, a wartime transport worker in Sheffield, who wrote of conductors positioning themselves at the foot of the tram stairs to look up the skirts of ascending women, and a (male) general public, whose 'inhibitions vanish before the sight of a uniform', emboldened by the belief that girls in public places could be 'singled out for a special blackening of character'?⁶

The sullied reputation: Norah would know well enough that it was a fine line to tread. The waters might well have been muddied by her inkling that times were changing, by the tension between the old-fashioned propriety and a popular culture full of sexual charge. To be more worldly about sex was to be modern. But whether she would have any sense of the possible meaning of Jim's schoolgirl snap request, any means of identifying an unhealthy sexual interest in a man – I'm guessing not.

Indeed, she might even believe, like Home Defence volunteer Dorothy Williams, that it was only the Germans who did bad things.

My father said that if the Germans did land, there'd be pillage, rape and he wouldn't *ever* allow us to be subjected to anything. Having said pillage and rape, he did not exactly use those words, because one did not in those days talk about rape... But I knew that it was something that he would never allow us to be submitted to. And if they ever landed he would *kill* us all rather than us ever fall into their hands. That frightened us a little bit, too. We didn't know which was going to be the worse of the two (*laughter*).⁷

And Jim: am I doing him a grave injustice? Did he want the photo simply to put name and face together, to imagine his correspondent whilst writing his letters? Or for his personal gratification – a furtive wank in his bunk, perhaps? Or maybe as part of a dare? Perhaps his mess-mates were bad lads, like those whom Dennis Maxted encountered at HMS *Collingwood*, egging each other on to extract what they could from unknowing girls?

It could be something or nothing. It is one step forward in the salaciousness quotient, that much is true. But it's not evidence of anything more untoward. Maybe the request was just an extension of the flirtation Jim was already engaged in. Perhaps for him it was all about the letters and photos; that he left the seduction to Danny, his smooth talking brother, who didn't mind putting in the work, chatting up the parents, turning on the charm.

But we don't know. At the very least, Jim's requests for schoolgirl snaps should alert us to the possibility that this might not be a straightforwardly reciprocal exchange. We would be happier, surely, if Norah had more knowledge about men and what they got up to. What we know and Norah doesn't is that it is perfectly plausible that Jim could be up to no good behind the scenes. As we've seen, it was not this request but his perceived slight to her respectability that offended her.

I will confess that after reading Jim's requests for snaps, when Norah switched her attentions to Danny that early autumn of 1941, I was mightily relieved. But included with that same letter from Jim was a small, rectangular, orange card which appears to have come from a seafront fortune-telling machine:

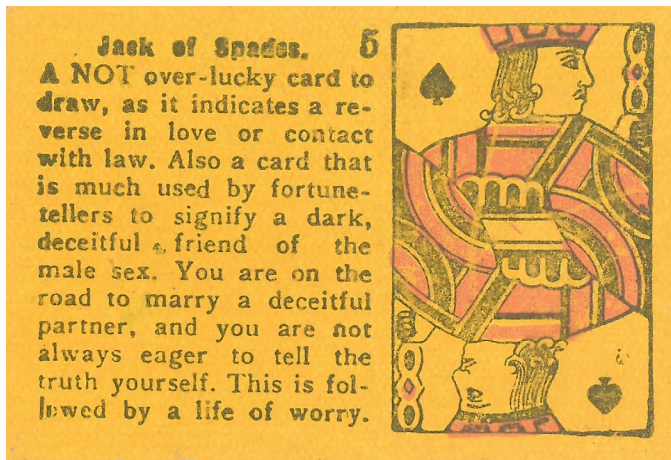


Fig. 26 Jack of Spades. Private papers of Norah Hodgkinson.
Photo: A. Twells, 2025.

A Jack of Spades, it is, it states, 'a not over-lucky card to draw, as it indicates a reverse in love or contact with the law'; a card 'much used by fortune-tellers to signify a dark, deceitful friend of the male sex. You are on the road to marry a deceitful partner, and you are not always eager to tell the truth yourself. This is followed by a life of worry'. Whose future is being predicted, however, is unclear. Does Jim fear he is being deceived, or is he trying to give Norah a warning that things with Danny aren't quite what they seem?

Again, Norah makes no note of it. Why should she? She was already head over heels. Danny was spiffing and this new romantic grown-up life was grand. And he and his brother, an airman and a sailor, protecting women and children and our way of life: why would she worry? They were our heroes after all.