

## **26. A Place of Dreams**

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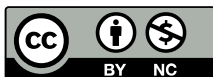
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## 26. A Place of Dreams

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The idea that romantic love should, for women, ‘supply the meaning of life’ feels troubling to me. Likewise, the assumption that women’s social value, our sense of success in life *as women*, is defined through our capacity for romance and erotic bonds, to the exclusion of all else. At the very least, this suggests that the modern world was not so modern. ‘Eve’s problems are still your problems for all your modernity’, announced the editor of *Miss Modern* in 1930. ‘You have not lost that romance and womanliness which is ever your most precious heritage’.<sup>1</sup>

It might be argued (I could argue) that ‘patriotic femininity’ – the focus on maintaining men’s morale through the provision of ‘comforts’, letters and sex-appeal – offered young women a narrow and decorative role. And yet, to so many, it didn’t *feel* confining. As evidence from Britain and around the world suggests, many women found room for manoeuvre within this ‘heightened sense of heterosexuality’.<sup>2</sup> Patriotic femininity, it seems, was not merely concerned with women serving – the nation, or men, or both – but a means of imagining themselves as potent and powerful, as independent and with agency in their lives. To varying degrees, their enthusiastic adoption of this wartime role allowed their participation in the war effort and a new-found sense of confidence and self-esteem. It enabled the throwing off of convention, the rejection of ignorance and shame, a new sense of themselves as sexual rather than merely sexualised, ushering in a revolutionary change.

Young women in the 1930s and 1940s were choosing a life that was a world apart from their mothers’ experience of worn-out bodies and domestic drudgery. They hoped that they were stepping into an enduring adventure, the fun of courtship leading to a companionate marriage. From this perspective, the post-war ascendancy of domesticity was not a conservative retreat, a return to the past, but rather, in Marilyn Lake’s

words, a 'triumph of modern femininity', as women sought 'to live as female sexual subjects and explore the possibilities of sexual pleasure'.<sup>3</sup>

But this was the '40s and by the 1950s, the old order had closed in again, ushering in a new, princess-like passivity (*smiled sweetly at Freddie*). As Hélène Cixous writes in her attack on the myths of Sleeping Beauty-like passive femininity which have pervaded Western culture, the woman's value was dependent on her allure as she was aroused to waking by the man's kiss, opening her eyes to see only him. There was 'so little room', Cixous writes, 'for her [own] desire'.<sup>4</sup>

To claim such desire, women must be less Sleeping Beauty and more the Dancing Princesses of another fairy tale, the one in which a spy, employed by their father, the king, to explain the worn-out shoes that caused him such consternation, sees the girls escape the locked palace via a trap door each night, to enter the forest and dance. 'Walking, dancing, travelling', the princesses take pleasure 'in the transgressive act of expressing bodily desire', delighting in the forbidden.<sup>5</sup>

Danish girls roaming the streets of Esbjerg, on the look-out for German men. American women straying from the confines of their family homes. Young Australians on the prowl, Yank-hunting. Bristol girls ripping down fences, besieging the camps that hold their GI lovers. Don't. Fence. Me. In.

Norah does not go so far. She does not, as Cixous suggests we should, write her way into the new.<sup>6</sup> Her girlhood diaries conceal so much, her feelings and desires often no more than half-articulated, even to herself, shut down by respectability and an accompanying shame. But in her list of crazes in 1938, her early romantic hopes for her correspondence with Jim, her *hot times* in bed with Danny and their glorious lovemaking over Daleacre, and her at first tentative then certain sway towards the romantic weekend away: they are there all the same. In these fleeting moments, a different future can be glimpsed.

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When we found her last diary – under the coffee table in the living room and not in her suitcase archive (of course) – we were anxious to know what Norah had written on the night she died. Had she had a good day? Did she feel ill? Was she in pain? Her very last entry reveals that she'd sent off for the letting agent's brochure for 18 Moira Dale. Like so many

ex-council homes, our house, sold under Right to Buy, was in the hands of a private landlord, exactly the people the early reformers had aimed to cut out. *26th November 2009: Received details of 18 Moira Dale. It's grand now.*

But it was grand back then, in 1938, 1939, throughout the 1940s and '50s and into the '60s, and she knew it. Nothing that had followed had been any better. Materially, yes, suburban bungalows are better than council houses, aren't they? The life that went with them – holidays, nice clothes, mod cons – was all good. But what is the indefinable something, the intangible thing that is lost? Maybe it is no more than nostalgia – for childhood, an era long-gone, for a geographical place left behind, but with that (equally nebulous) complicating layer of 'class travel'.

We don't understand much about the emotional dimensions of social mobility, what it does to attachment and love. All childhoods are elemental, their loss like threads of knotted wool tugging in your breast. But a working-class childhood: does it linger, as Annette Kuhn suggests it does, like 'something beneath your clothes, under your skin, in your reflexes, in your psyche, at the very core of your being'? Or in the words of Jackson and Marsden, authors of a famous study of the grammar school generation, is it 'something in the blood, in the very fibre of a man or woman: a way of growing, feeling, judging, taken out of the resources of generations gone before'?<sup>7</sup>

And does the contrast between the now and then leave a different quality of longing, a deeper shade of regret running through your veins? How you never knew quite how poor you were, or how much promise you had, or how fleeting that time of possibility would turn out to be? Life had indeed been full of promises and Danny was there as they bloomed. But had some of them turned out to be empty, in the end?

18 Moira Dale, my family's ancestral home. I thought about this house and another very like it, the council house around the corner on Garden Crescent to where Helen and Joe moved in 1951, and where my mum and I lived until I was thirteen, when I read Penelope Lively's *A House Unlocked*, a delightful account of artefacts in her grandmother's Edwardian country house and the histories they evoke. Her discussions of the range of heirlooms and imperial booty, even her chapter headings – 'The Knife Rests, The Grape Scissors and the Bon-Bon Dish' – are a laughable impossibility in writing about working-class homes (although, I'd suggest, 'Pop's Antlers' might just hold their own).<sup>8</sup>

But our houses come with their own stories. 'The Bathroom and the Four Good Bedrooms' might suffice to evoke a life without the daily struggle with the squalor of poverty. 'Marsie's Bible, the Encyclopaedias and the Rag Rugs' or 'The Lilacs, the Peach Tree and the Chicken Coop' would express my great-grandmother's faith, her resourcefulness, creativity and sense of beauty. 'The High Heels Under the Dresser' nods to the greater affluence of the 1950s, as well as a new style of femininity embraced by Norah, contrasting nicely with 'The Mangle in the Wash-House' at Garden Crescent, where my grandmother fought a battle every Monday with my grandfather's blood-stained butchering slops.

What about 'The Cupboard Over the Stairs' in Norah's box bedroom, where she stored her diaries and her letters from Jim? Or 'The Council House Front Door', which she opened to welcome Danny in, and pulled shut behind them as they headed for Daleacre, her arm through his? And the 'Spare Bedroom Overlooking the Garden', where Danny slept when he came to stay, where those glorious, snatched mornings while Marsie was out shopping were so utterly transformative?

When she died, Norah, like her brother Dennis – after forty, fifty years away – could only be buried in one place: Castle Donington cemetery, around the corner from number 18. She lies there, a few feet up from Marsie and Pop and three of her siblings – Birdy, Dennis and Nollie, Helen and Joe, and Roger, their son – their gravestones and cremation pots all looking down Hemington Hill, past the allotments and Cherry Orchard, Lady's Close and the kissing gates, and up Diseworth Lane to the airport fence, sharp right to the Nag's Head and the Hill Top cottage, long gone, and the racetrack beyond, up and down, over hill and dale, through the passage of the years.

'The archive is [...] a place of dreams', writes Carolyn Steedman, her focus the historian's dreams, her hope of rescuing people in the past, finding meaning in their lives, writing them back into being.<sup>9</sup> But it is also the place of the subject's dreams, of Norah's dreams.

The half-curated archive that is Norah's grey cardboard suitcase, with Jim's letters, his and Danny's photos and the seventy-one pocket diaries of her life, is like a magic box, the inside of which can never fully be glimpsed, the memories and emotions contained there far more expansive, joyous, ambiguous, painful, than its material dimensions appear to allow. In it, in her wartime diaries, Norah takes centre-stage – giddy, excited, so full of hope, as she waits for her life to unfold.