



A Place of Dreams

Desire, Deception and a Wartime Coming of Age

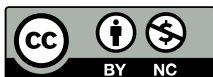
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19. Our Night of Love

Had Marsie decided against any great fanfare to celebrate Danny's return that Tuesday night in November 1945? It is surely inevitable that Norah's mother faced an internal battle as she tried to tally the well-mannered young man of his visits and letters with her sense that there was something not quite right. She couldn't ignore the fact that Danny didn't always come when he said he would; that he let Norah down. And that disappearance... She knew he'd been injured, in hospital, that terrible things could have happened to him. It was true that there were soldiers and airmen who had been out of touch for months, even years. But even so...

I imagine Norah interrupting her mother's thoughts, clattering down the stairs and flying through the front room to appear at the kitchen door, flushed and smiling, more bright-eyed than Milly had seen her in months. How did she look? Marsie wouldn't need to force a smile as she complimented her daughter – wearing her newly made-up red skirt and red and white polka dot blouse, maybe, the colour so striking against her dark hair. I picture her, Norah, clasping her hands together in a bid to contain her excitement, spinning round and skipping through the front room and back upstairs. Oh how Milly hoped he would turn up! She couldn't bear to see her lovely girl disappointed again.

In the absence of evidence, I can only imagine my great-grandmother's fears. At first, welcoming Danny into her home, she had been guided by basic humanity – he was another mother's son – and her faith, that a stranger might be an 'angel unawares'. But now, as much as she wanted to trust – 'Wait on the Lord: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart' – the word that was going through her mind was not 'wait' but 'watch'. Watch out for deceivers. Watch out for the wolf in sheep's clothing. See that no-one does her wrong or leads her astray.

You heard such shocking stories. There was a girl from Ripley who'd had quads by an American airman, married of course. And just around the corner in Castle Donington, there was a girl of Norah's age who'd had a baby boy to a Canadian pilot and then discovered he had a wife at home. That poor little boy. But how did you stop a girl like Norah, so headstrong and full of ardour?

This is the scene as I imagine it. Milly rests her spoon in the bowl and, wiping her hands on her apron, makes her way through to the front room to stand in front of Birdy who, just in from work, is reading the paper in his father's wooden chair.

'Richard love, I need to ask you something'.

He looks up and smiles eagerly.

'Will you stay up tonight, keep an eye on Norah?' He raises an eyebrow, looks ready to speak, but she forces a bit more authority into her voice, competing now with the kettle which is building up to a shrill whistle in the adjoining kitchen. 'I just don't want her down here alone with him'. And then more gently, 'Will you do that, love?'

Birdy nods, half-smiling.

21st November. Had lovely time in bed with my love. Stayed in all day. Dynamos beat Arsenal 4.3. Terribly foggy. Birdy stayed downstairs so couldn't have our night of love.

Birdy, on sentry-duty, succeeded in preventing Norah's 'giving in', but not the lovers' snatched hour in the morning between his departure for work and Marsie's return from the Co-op. *22nd: Had smashing, hectic time in bed with Danny. Went to Hemington to ring up about trains. My love had to return on the 2.40 train. Had tooth filled. I'm lonely without my love.*

'Hectic' seems a strange choice of word to describe an erotic encounter. I am relieved to see the preceding word is 'smashing', but I wonder about it, all the same. Was Danny more insistent than Norah was comfortable with? Had it started out beautifully, tenderly, but become a bit of a battle to hold him off?

23rd November. Returned to work. Rang my love but he sounded a bit mad, he didn't get in until 11am.

24th: Posted letter to my love, please God let him love me again and please let him come next weekend.

26th: No letter from my love. Please God let him still be loving me.

27th: Still no letter, so rang Danny from the [Sailors and Soldiers'] Club, but the man said 'he is not on the station tonight'. Please God let him have written for tomorrow.

28th: Posted letter to my Danny. I'm getting fed up, and I'm not going to write again until I hear from him.

29th: Received letter from my love. He is going to try and come at the weekend.

1st December. Received three letters from Frank, he should have reached Bombay last Saturday. Danny did not come and mum was very mad and wants me to pack him up. Please God make him good.

Norah wrote to Danny three times the following week and continued praying to God. *No letter from Danny* appears daily in her diary, alongside faint little notes in pencil, written months earlier, predictions based on who knows what. *D & me engaged* is the only one I can clearly read.

And that was it. No engagement. No glorious family Christmas with her love.

'So what happened to him?' I ask my mum on the phone.

'I've absolutely no idea. That was it. He didn't visit again'. She sounds weary. She has been diarying all afternoon.

'Poor Norah'. I feel so sorry for her. 'All that waiting. All that expectation'.

We fall silent for a few seconds. Norah had indeed spent the entire war thinking he'd come back and marry her. My mum suggests that Norah was too keen, had scared him off. Or he maybe had more than one girl on the go, and the other one won out, in the end.

'She was a silly girl though', my mum replies. 'He didn't get in touch for months on end and she thought he was coming back. Marsie clearly knew something was amiss. She and Norah even rowed about it and I can't imagine Marsie rowing with anybody'.

'But men did disappear for months on end', I say defensively. 'There was a war on'.

'The odd thing is', my mum continues, 'apart from when she burned his letters, Norah never mentioned Danny in her diary again. Not that I've seen, anyway, and I'm up to 1955. I don't think he's going to make a re-appearance now'.

And that was it. Norah never heard from Danny again. Not directly, anyway.

This is where Norah's diary lets us down. In those lonely, disappointed days after Danny's last visit, she clearly felt far more than is conveyed by the words that appear on the page. It is not that the daily windows are too small; she's squeezed emotion into those spaces before. Here, her minimal wordage is a choice. From all-consuming waiting and worrying, from daily prayers for Danny's safety, she turns to an almost total silence. It is as if she is practising for a New Year's resolution. She *will* get a grip of herself. She *will* stop wasting her life waiting for Danny. She *won't* use those little squares to confess her heartbreak. Into the new year, her blue Railway Clerical Workers' Union diary for 1946 becomes a means of self-discipline, to keep thoughts of Danny at bay.

'Every woman who has ever kept a diary knows that women write in diaries because things are not going right', writes Mary Helen Washington.¹ But not Norah. Norah wrote her early diaries because things *were* going right. Because there she was at grammar school, on her ascent. She wrote not to be published, or to be read by others, not to rebel nor to practice for a life as a writer, not to document the war, a journey or any other significant event, but in the simple belief that her ordinary life, her *life on the up*, was worth it. She captured her days, for future reference, for her future self. But now, after Danny's last visit and disappearance: silence.

No doubt in her angrier moments, Norah felt he wasn't even worth twenty words a day. Maybe she felt foolish too. Marsie had an inkling a long time ago that all was not well. And then there were her brothers and Helen, her school friends and the folk at work: had they seen through the excuses she'd made? She had worn her heart on her sleeve when maybe it had been clear to them all that Danny was leading her a merry dance. She will have noted a comment made by her brother Frank, in a letter sent just as he departed for India with the Royal Engineers: 'Is Danny with you all? Surely he should have had leave by now'. He had let her down too many times. She had allowed him to take her for a besotted fool.

I find myself comparing Norah's silence about her wartime experience with Annie Ernaux's account of her formative sexual encounter documented in her memoir, *A Girl's Story*. In the summer of 1958, aged eighteen and working as a *monitrice* in a *colonie de vacances* in a town in northern France, Ernaux became infatuated with H., a fellow *moniteur*, who reminded her of Marlon Brando and whom she termed 'the Archangel', and in whose bed she spent two nights before he rejected her. She then hooked up with a series of other boys, her 'promiscuity' becoming the subject of bullying and mockery by her peers. Much later in life, Ernaux remembers 'a tissue of chaotic feelings, sensations, motivations, and desires as well as a distinct anaesthetization, an (emotional) vacating of the self...' Like Norah, she had an 'absolute ignorance and anticipation of what is considered the most unknown and wondrous thing in life – the secret of secrets'. Both girls were ill-equipped, had recourse to no interpretation beyond romantic fantasy (of H. as Ernaux's lover, of Danny's certain return).²

Should we see Norah's silence as evidence of trauma? (I have my mum on my shoulder again: 'For God's sake', she mutters. 'What is it with your generation? Everybody in the world gets their heart broken'.) An 'ordinary trauma' perhaps?³ At the very least, it is (what Ernaux describes as) an 'inassimilable experience', which she links to her subsequent eating disorder, the cessation of her periods and to her later development as a writer, even if the legacy of shame means it was many years before she could confront the experience head on. Turning a traumatic event into a story might be a way to confront it, to get a handle on it, to control it, enforce a distance between the event and oneself; a way of forgiving oneself.

But Norah's diary is mute. She couldn't write of her abandonment by Danny. While we wouldn't expect her to tell the story in her pocket diary, her silence is surely significant. The traumatic ending to Norah's sexual awakening 'disturbs the emerging "I" ... and renders the subject voiceless, at least for a time'.⁴

The January silence is momentarily detonated by the arrival of more news from Frank in Bombay: 'I hope Danny is out of the RAF now', he writes, and no doubt 'feeling a bit strange after seven years in blue'. He hopes they enjoyed their Christmas dinner – 'with champagne. I hope

it wasn't too strong. You didn't say whether Danny was staying at CD or not'.

Ah. So Norah had bought a bottle of bubbly with which to celebrate Danny's safe return and, she will have hoped, their engagement.

'I'll write to Frank', Marsie may have said gently, adding a PS to her next letter: 'It looks like it is all off with Danny. He visited just after you left, but we haven't heard from him since early last month. Norah is bearing up'.

But we can only assume that Norah was bearing up, as her diary gives nothing away. How often did she have to summon her resolve, to put him out of her mind again, to try her utmost to banish those nights pricked with sadness and regret? What were her feelings on the day in mid-January when she received *two letters I sent to Danny at Folkingham, marked 'unknown'*?

There will have been other reminders, of course. All those nosy questions from neighbours and colleagues. Was she still courting? Had her nice young man got his demob yet? Engagements and wedding announcements were coming thick and fast in 1946. Even her walks over Daleacre and down to the River Trent brought him to mind, as winter turned into spring.

And what if this was it, if how she had felt about Danny when she was with him was her one and only chance? Did she worry that no-one else would kindle such passion, that she'd never feel that way again? How could she settle for any other life? And even if she felt up to looking for someone new, how would she ever meet him? Any man worth having was spoken for now.

'She's missed the boat'', my mum says.

'That's ridiculous', I say. 'She's twenty years old'. I am wary of my mother's belief that Norah's affair with Danny shaped the rest of her life. But waiting so long for him to return meant that Norah had arrived late on the dating scene.

'It's 1946', she replies. 'Everybody was engaged by the time they were Norah's age. And then in the Fifties, it was even younger. That was your sole aim in life'. She pauses. 'Mind you, it certainly explains Eddy. She was desperate not to be left on the shelf when she met him'.

Norah mentions Danny once more that year, at Christmas, when Frank was home from Egypt and they were all together again. *25th December 1946: Had turkey for dinner, and Danny's champagne.*