Into Suez

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To Emily, Grace & Robin
my beautiful three,
& remembering Frank

Gottes ist der Orient!	*God's is the East!*
Gottes ist der Occident!	*God's is the West!*
Nord- und südliches Gelände	*Northern and southern lands*
Ruht im Frieden seiner Hände.	*Rest in the peace of his hands.*

from *West-östlicher Divan,*
J. W. von Goethe, 1816

[Holding] Turkey and Egypt in the hollow of our hands, the Mediterranean is an English lake, and the Suez Canal is only another name for the Thames and the Mersey.
(from *Daily Bristol Times and Mirror*, 29/11/1875)

How many of [your correspondents] have had the 'privilege' of defending this filthy race from the onslaught of German forces at El Alamein only to be spat upon, hissed at, booed at, and in many cases even murdered?
(from *Tribune*, 14/8/1956)

I viewed the [Oslo] agreement as embodying a rare moment in history, the moment of recognition of the other. I exist, and you also exist. I have a right to live, and this is also your right. It's a hard and long road, ending in freedom and human rights of the individual, a road strewn not with roses but with struggle and patience …
There is no end to the pain felt by most people when you suddenly raise their curtain of illusions and lies.
(from Ali Salem, *A Drive to Israel: An Egyptian Meets His Neighbors*, 2001)

Into Suez

Prelude

There they were again, larking in the alley. They'd all pour out and rock with laughter or stand in their petticoats with folded arms discussing some proposition in philosophy. *Wittgenstein!* they'd cry. *Sartre!* Which might lead to more laughing or crying or passionate wrangling, for such women could afford to be extravagant, in their emotions as much as in their clothes. Ailsa would look down on them, a timid spy, sash window suspended over her neck like a guillotine, peering through the geraniums she cultivated in a window box. She saw the tops of their fashionable heads: the ginger girl with her hair in a complex system of sausages; the luscious dark girl, caramel-skinned; others sleep-mussed, one sporting the grey-blue disc of an RAF officer's peaked cap. They had dash, they had flair, they had money and university education evidently.

Emotion next door was tumultuous, titanic at all times. The girls acknowledged no middle temperature. Uniformed men poured in and out. It was impossible to say who was

in love with whom, at any given moment. Meanwhile, through the membrane that separated them, Ailsa lived like a nun in the flat built above the stables of a Victorian brewery. You could still see the loose boxes in the wall and attachments for halters. Ailsa had been amazed to come upon such an ancient, secret recess within strolling distance of Buckingham Palace, down an alley at Brewers' Green. She lived up a steep staircase in the storey that had served as the brewer's granary. The bohemians next door racketed away just beyond a wooden partition painted a hideous flaking green. Ailsa heard it all: their water-fights, their singing, their lovemaking, their rows about Sophocles. Doing her washing-up in the bathroom (for the kitchen had no water, hot or cold) or hunched over her mean wartime gas fire, Ailsa wanted to tell them she knew exactly who Sophocles was: she'd read the *Antigone* for herself in Shrewsbury Library at the age of fourteen. She was a girl hungry for knowledge, endowed with what her family, who ran the village post office at Sutton Bridge, had regarded as 'the brain of a boy'. The late child of elderly parents, Ailsa had early set her heart on university and might have got there, for the Birches had been willing to stretch their limited resources to fulfil her aspirations. But her parents had died of pneumonia within three weeks of one another. Then the war had come along, with its altered horizons.

Ailsa bumped into one of the girls at the post box. It was the dark, charismatic one with liquid eyes who seemed more hysterical than the others. She wore a dark green coat with a black velvet collar and a scatter of dandruff on her shoulders: for all her messiness, she had a foreign, exotic air. Each made to post her letter and drew back in the other's favour, smiling. 'I say, aren't you the person next

door?' asked the girl in peerless gentry English. Mona, she said. Mona Serafin. And then another arrived and said that her name was Billie and that Bobbie was on the way. Did they mostly have boys' names then, Ailsa wondered. Was that the thing nowadays? Ailsa, she said. *Gorgeous* name, Billie thought. Big Ben had sounded then and they'd agreed that the sound was reassuring rather than otherwise and that the mice at the Old Brewery didn't on the whole bother them. 'After all,' Mona or Billie had said, 'they've got lives of their own to live in their little world behind the wainscot.' Mona was *perishing*, she said. She had her own method of dealing with it, look. She opened her coat to reveal a hot water bottle slung from her shoulder and dangling across her belly.

Another time the redhead, hair as flaming as Ailsa's but more exuberant as to coiffure, knocked to ask if she'd like to come in for a party that evening. 'We'll make the most frightful racket and it'll be better for you if you're sloshed with us than having to hear it through the wall. Anyway, we all want to get to know you. We think you're so mysterious and glamorous.'

Of course Ailsa didn't go, although she was flattered at their view of her. Having invented some excuse, she was kept awake through the small hours. Anyway, she'd have been tongue-tied, out of her depth. Oxford and Cambridge types, silver spoon and all that. They all looked well-fed, to put it mildly, for they escaped the depressing rigours of the home front by eating on the hoof at cafés and grills.

One Sunday Ailsa watched the whole coven spill out into the cobbled courtyard wearing differently coloured berets, ginger, violet, red, cream and navy. Off they clattered in high heels that echoed down the alley. Berets

at jaunty angles with tails like mushroom stalks. It was one of the few occasions when she'd seen them bother to dress up. They could wear hot water bottles slung across their chests and still be ravishing and superior. She gathered that they'd quit their undergraduate studies to work at the Ministry of Defence as clerks. Two of them spoke Serbo-Croat and Bulgarian; another was fluent in modern Greek, 'a doddle compared with ancient'.

Ailsa sat in her one armchair, her few possessions neatly arranged on an orange box covered in a cloth embroidered by her auntie in Church Stretton. Was she lonely? She examined a segment of her guarded face in the mirror of her powder compact: skin translucently pale, a scattering of ginger freckles, eyes blue-green. Ailsa ought to feel lonely but the freedom was too novel; solitude offered a roving eye on the boundless possibilities at the centre of the capital. If there were times when she was haunted by a kind of background hum – of the countless deaths in the ruins, void and emptiness – the thought of dull Shropshire reconciled her to London danger. Archie Copsey had gone down on one knee just before she left and she'd said no, Archie, oh no! He would wait, her cousin had promised. All his life if necessary. Don't do that for me, she'd thought, her forehead wrinkling in concern: I might not come back, ever. To be a farmer's wife and feed chickens held no appeal. So much history all around her. Ailsa loved to mingle with the Fleet Street hacks and watch the wigs pageanting up and down at the law courts. She attended concerts at the Albert Hall with her schoolfriend Betty, alike smitten with the capital. She'd go and hear the angelus at Westminster Cathedral. Once she saw Mona Serafin there, genuflecting to the

altar. How did that sort with the socialism with which next door resonated? For they were all downright Commies, paid up too. Surely you had to make a choice between Lenin and Christ. Or was it not so simple?

But oh, the young men who came and went. Beautiful, willowy idealists, in officers' uniform or civvies, with great piles or flaps of hair, corn-coloured or conker-brown. Way beyond Ailsa's league. A pantheon of young gods – and older gods too, for owlish balding dons in hacking jackets hung about the girls, carrying a tribute of rare books instead of chocolates or flowers. But the young men, with the bloom still on their skin, instant Majors and Flight Lieutenants at the age of twenty-two, were all in transit, off to the ends of the earth to struggle, not for the Empire, but for the socialist new world, as one heard on breathless summer evenings when all the windows stood wide open. Once Ailsa saw a young man let himself out into the moonlight where, softly latching the door behind him, he sobbed aloud, face in his hands. One or all of them collectively had broken his heart.

Ailsa buttoned her tunic, tweaking at its basque; she pulled in her stomach and buckled her belt taut. She didn't have to worry about her stockings, all darned into a maze of lumps, for as a courier she wore slacks and boots. The motor bike was her version of their all-night party, yielding an exultant freedom, weaving in and out of traffic, enjoying a certain emancipation from ladylike rules and codes. Bike and rider made up a centaur, the machine an extension of Ailsa's body and will, tuned to soar at the least touch of the throttle. She took a pride in maintaining its splendid engine.

Ailsa met Joe Roberts at a dance. They walked in St

James's Park, bubbling with talk and chastely kissing; ate sticky buns in Lyons Corner House, washing them down with gallons of tea. Two weeks after meeting Joe, she was no longer Ailsa Birch but Mrs Ailsa Roberts, whose husband was an aircraft fitter from Glamorgan, stationed in the Western Desert. The blue air-letters on the door mat were her life line: she'd burst into the cold, dank flat and, if she were lucky, there would be her heart's desire. Her husband's uneven handwriting touched her, for Joe was not at ease with the pen, having left school at fourteen for the steel mill; he was a career airman who, having joined up at nineteen, felt his inferiority to his wife. She traced his journey from Libya and Egypt across the Mediterranean and up through Italy, the one precious life that drew her quivering compass needle.

She hardly registered her neighbours' absence until one evening, writing to Joe in Italy, and hearing the sickening silence that signalled that the doodlebug had reached its destination – hovering suspended above her own head, ticking with mindless purpose – Ailsa saw in a flash: she was a goner. There'd be no Joe, no babies, no great adventure. This was it. She tuned in at the same time to the silence of the lively girls next door. They'd vanished without her noticing.

Part One

Church Stretton, October 2003
The Empire Glory, June 1949

1

She had never liked her mother's bosom friend: a thoroughly bad influence on Ailsa, Nia reckoned. But she'd felt surprisingly moved when Irene died, in her mid-eighties: a full quarter of a century after Ailsa. An era ending. Now, a fortnight after the funeral, the boys phoned. Irene had held on to a box of Ailsa's, which Topher and Tim had found when they were sorting the lumber.

Nia, visiting her stepfather and half-brother on the farm at Lyth Clee, borrowed the Land Rover to go over to the Whites' house at Wenlock. Mam and Irene had been in one another's pockets. Whatever did they find to gas about? In her memory the two of them were forever winding wool by the log fire, Ailsa's big strong hands holding the skein, Irene's smaller hands a whirling blur as she wound it off into a ball. This memory went back and back to when things were clearer and more vivid, when she and Topher (also the bane of his mum's life, and this was the bond between them) would play rugby with

the ball through the sitting room or roll it for the kitten.

Later on Nia had gone right off Topher. Their two kinds of hippiedom branched in different directions – his toward dropping out and dope and the affectation of calling himself a poet; hers into political activism. Which was the more angry, Topher in his sullenness, Nia in her bitterness? The two of them went back forever. To Egypt, scene of her first memories, as vivid as they were mysterious. Looking through a wire netting grid at the desert, suffused in pink, the sun at its horizon like blood in a yolk. She recalled khaki men with rifles rushing through a grove of palm trees, barking like dogs. The strange and beautiful daily sound of the muezzin calling believers to prayer, which years later she recognised when visiting Bradford, stopping dead in her tracks. The White boys featured as vague but stubborn presences in these memories. And if Nia grew to detest Topher's droning monologues, this was the everyday contempt of a sibling.

They had in common their mothers' shuddering disapproval: Ailsa and Irene being Air Force widows who had been fighting, as Nia once put it, for Queen Victoria, the Raj and table manners. Not that Ailsa had been given to making reactionary speeches. It was the stiff quality of her silences that betrayed archaic allegiances. And actually Ailsa was too intelligent for the opinions Nia intuited: too bright, come to that, for airhead Irene. But something bound the two women tightly to one another, so that when Ailsa had remarried and moved back to Shropshire, Irene came to live nearby. Nia's Peace Movement activism had landed her in court on a couple of occasions. And Topher had been called a degenerate by his mother, he expressing surprise that she knew the word. An aura of disgrace had

hung above these children of the crumbled Empire – even before (so Nia felt) they had done much to merit it.

She'd not seen Topher for several years when he rang about the box. His fair hair had hardly greyed but much of the centre had fallen out and his face had weathered into a thousand wrinkles. He affected a thin pony tail. *Male pattern baldness*, Nia thought as he stood in the stairwell calling up to Tim, who was busy upstairs emptying the loft where the box had been stored. 'She's here, Bruv!'

'Oh, right. Down in a sec. Make the lady a brew.'

Irene had laid great stress on the importance of an Aga in any well-regulated home. The kettle was kept forever simmering on the hob. Topher made them mugs of coffee, heart-stoppingly strong stuff he drank all day, the aftermath of various addictions he'd fought and (chiefly) not fought for twenty years. He was quiet. He's been weeping, Nia thought. Why that should have surprised her, she couldn't think. Hadn't she been crying inside for Ailsa for a quarter of a century? And yet, to put it mildly, mother and daughter had not got on. All the more reason to grieve, when you'd been at daggers drawn.

Topher sat at the other side of Irene's kitchen table. She put out her hand, covered his briefly. He bit his lip and looked away. Following his gaze, she saw, with a start, that the brothers had removed the picture of their father that had enjoyed pride of place over the hearth for as long as Nia could remember. This portrait of a young man in dress uniform had loomed over the White boys' childhood, their mother referring to it as likely to be disappointed in this or that behaviour of her sons, particularly the elder. It was supposed to be a picture of heroism. Nia

remembered catching sight of Irene through the door, raising her eyes to the portrait as if in worship. It was the first time Nia had ever thought, *Poor soul.* She'd got an inkling of the fact that Irene had lived most of her life in loss. Which explained and mitigated a multitude of sins.

The two women had returned from Suez widowed, their husbands war heroes. This had happened in the run-up to the so-called Suez Crisis, the first oil war, when the British Empire had been sent whimpering with its tail between its legs. Ailsa and Irene had been flown home in 1952, the year of the Egyptian Revolution. Four years later when President Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal, Britain had hatched a mad conspiracy with France and Israel: Israel would attack Egypt over the Sinai; Britain and France would go to 'save' the canal from both Israel and Egypt, thieves disguised as policemen. The tiny island made of coal and surrounded by fish and ruled by gentlemen-fascists had been cut down to size by American pressure and its own near-bankruptcy. Nia remembered sitting by the big brown Marconi hearing, rather against her own will, the news reports, for the wireless was insufferably dull to the child. Looking back, Nia could see that Suez politicised her childhood by making her elders look fools.

Sergeants Roberts and White must have been killed by terrorists in the build-up to the fiasco. You knew not to penetrate Ailsa's forbidding silence on this theme. But Ailsa, unlike Irene, had married again – her cousin, Archie Copsey. And she'd united herself to a man so lovable that, if Ailsa had not managed to be happy with Archie, well, that was her own stupid fault. She might have learned a thing or two from him too, for the mild Archie, a Quaker, had been a conscientious objector in the war. He

worshipped the ground Ailsa walked on; in his eyes she could do no wrong. He had loved Nia as his own, taking her part even against the two boys born to Ailsa and himself. When Nia was bolshy and impossible, Archie had been a presence whose wry quietness had drawn the sting from countless quarrels and made the earth firm under her feet. She hardly remembered her own father, who was never talked of. No picture of Joe Roberts stood above the hearth or anywhere else in the house.

Irene on the other hand prattled interminably about her husband. Roy had been a saint. If only Topher could have taken after him even a little bit. She'd spoilt the younger brother, Tim, very much at Topher's expense: *Oh, darling, you're so like him.* But Tim had grown up a bit of a creep, not above stealing from his mother's handbag. He was all right these days, as far as she knew.

Now Roy White counted as a fallen warrior. Nia saw that his homely face had been turned to the wall among a stack of pictures the brothers had stripped from Irene's world.

'How are you doing, Topher?'

'Oh – you know. Hits you a bit, doesn't it? There was stuff I wanted to say to Ma and ask her – it was so sudden.'

When the blow came that took a life, it changed all the lights and shades, as Nia knew too well. Topher could have said those crucial things to Irene any day for the past four decades. But he hadn't. He'd begrudged the words that might have touched his mother's speechless heart. Topher had nourished a rankling grudge that had knitted itself into his very flesh and become part of him. Ignorant of where it came from.

‘Better for her that way,’ Nia said. ‘Going in her sleep. A heart attack can be quite a merciful thing.’

‘For *her*, maybe.’ Tears seeped from his eyes. She saw again the boy in the man. A pale-haired child crouched with bucket and spade in the sand, his bare shoulders covered in calamine lotion, crying because – and surely she had made this up – enormous hail stones were being shot at them from the sapphire blue sky. But I was never a cry-baby, Nia thought: I picked one up, big as a ping pong ball, and sucked it. She saw all this in a flash, even as she said, ‘Yes, it’s a mercy for Irene. You will feel that later, Toph, when you’re less raw. You really will.’

Tim stood in the doorway, carrying black bin bags. ‘Hi, Nia darling, good to see you. You’ve not changed one bit,’ he said insincerely. It seemed to be the only way he could speak. Yet she had a sense that sincerity was there under the surface, repressed. He was still, in middle age, a handsome-looking man, with his mother’s delicate features. He’d done a bit of acting in his time which had delighted Irene. Nia remembered being carted along by Ailsa and Irene to an open-air production of *Hamlet* in the grounds of Ludlow Castle. It had rained. She could see Irene, sitting forward in her seat under the umbrella, cowled in her gabardine, ecstatic. She’d mouthed every word of Tim’s hammed-up Guildenstern. He still trod the boards as an amateur.

Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended rang through her mind. They were three over-age Hamlets picking over the funeral baked meats.

‘I’m really sorry for your loss, Tim.’

‘Thanks, Nia love. We’re devastated. What are you doing with yourself these days?’

‘Still teaching – and some advisory stuff.’

‘You were in the news – last year, was it? Quite a celebrity. Didn’t you help change the law on something or other?’

‘Young offenders. Only through a committee report.’

‘You were always the intellectual. Your mother was so proud of you.’

‘You think so?’ It was the kind of thing people said. Especially when it wasn’t true. But she half-recognised the implicit truth of it. Ailsa had been proud of Nia behind her back. Behind her own back. Nia’s heart gave a huge throb and then stopped dead. She wanted Ailsa back now, this minute, more than anything in the world. To embrace her, in every sense.

‘And how’s the lovely Poppy?’

‘Lovely,’ she said. ‘Got it in one.’ They’d been on another march against the invasion of Iraq last week, walking hand in hand. In her own time, your child circled back to you and linked arms as an equal. It was a miracle.

‘How’s the poetry going, Toph?’ she asked.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘Yeah.’

Was that an answer? He seemed to think so. Topher nodded his head; started constructing a roll-up, pinching up the tobacco, daintily licking along the paper. His teeth were stained brown. He offered her the joint, between thumb and forefinger. She shook her head. Topher’s poetry, a wild and snarling animal in the sixties, had been tamed into a pussy cat of verbose affectation. But then, what did Nia know? She’d never seen the point of poetry.

Tim said he’d bring down the box.

He came crashing down the stairs two at a time and placed a cardboard crate on the table. They all three

looked at it. Nia's full name was printed in block capitals on each of the four sides. Once it had held Archie's new-laid free range eggs: 'Lyth Clee Farm, Best Salop Eggs'. They didn't sell eggs any more: the few chickens laid enough for the household and friends in Wenlock. Why had Ailsa stored the box with her friend rather than leaving it with Archie? There it had remained in Irene's attic gathering dust while Nia had aged to nearly her mother's final age, fifty-seven.

'Right then,' Nia said. 'Thanks for that, both of you. I'll be on my way – leave you guys to get on.'

'Don't go, Nia,' said Topher.

But she made her excuses and left, eyes smarting with Topher's smoke. She had the feeling she'd been smoked over in her crib, both parents pouring out their toxins.

Starting the engine, relieved to be on the road, Nia remembered her mother's intensely secret world. Ailsa lighting up, for instance: she could never kick the habit, though she pretended to have done so. Nia knew that Archie knew. Like a teenager, Ailsa would smoke out of the dormer window, looking over to the mountain, stubbing out the fags in an ashtray she kept in a shoe box. Did she really imagine it was a secret? Nia, prowling her mother's terrain, would count the lipstick-stained butts in the ashtray, poke at them with her finger. Always a little apart, Mami was a figure in green wellies digging in her market garden. Or crouching in the small barn with the vintage motor bikes she collected and never rode but tinkered with and polished up, humming all the while. Happy with her head in a book, she was always, as Nia put it to herself, *over there.* Her mother would take off with no notice when the spirit took her, letting herself

slyly out of the far gate where the ground began to sweep up towards the Long Mynd. Sometimes she'd let Les tag along, the younger brother who was 'no trouble' and did not disturb her reverie. Nia would see Ailsa framed in the lattice window, striding off to where the turf was emerald in the low western light, becoming a stick figure, as she began to climb the purple Mynd. Always at heart alone.

Archie would know to let Ailsa be. When Mami went on one of her wanders, he'd lay a hand on Nia's arm to detain her, diverting her attention to some project of his own, helping with the calves, cleaning Mami's tools so they'd be shiny for her. Now, driving along the bridleway to Lyth Clee, Nia saw her mother as doubly recessive, walking away into the wilderness of death.

And Nia, from her earliest days at the farm, would cycle off alone through the mighty landscape, singing at the top of her voice, on her own adventure. But this was a different matter, apparently. Going AWOL, normal for Ailsa, counted as incorrigible naughtiness in Nia.

She set the box on the floor by the dead grate at Lyth Clee; cut through the tape and string and peered in. Coming from the yard, removing his boots at the door and going to wash his hands, her stepfather asked, 'What have you got there, lovely?'

'Don't be upset, Dad,' she said. 'It's some stuff of Mam's. For some reason it was stored at Irene's.'

Wiping his hands, he peered inside; saw the neatly packed notebooks, letters in their original envelopes, an album.

'That would be Mam's journals. Always busy with her writing, bless her.'

That was all he said, level and apparently incurious.

Settling down in his usual armchair, he closed his eyes, stretching out socked feet as he had every evening for as long as she could remember. Archie at eighty was lean and spry, fit as a man two-thirds of his age. Only he had less stamina for the hours of arduous labour and lapsed into stillness at the end of the day. Of course Don took the bulk of the heavy work and all the farm business, which Archie had always found a chore. Nia looked over at him. Fairly obviously he did not want to examine the contents of the box. He preserves his inner balance, she thought; he is a spirit level.

Without opening his eyes, Archie made a loose fist of his hand and gently tapped his chest, in the region of his heart, as if knocking at a door.

*

The quiet sky buoyed Nia: she rode a thermal that came bouncing off the edge of the Mynd, circling so that she could look down on its spine at the sheer valleys deep in shadow dropping from Pole Bank. The homely irregularity of Archie's farm was spot-lit, its quilt of fields green and tawny yellow; the stand of oaks like broccoli. The red spot that winked would be Don in the tractor. Turning west, the glider sighed its way over Caer Caradoc; then towards Wenlock Edge.

That passion should be so peaceful, she could never have imagined before taking to the skies twenty years earlier. Ripped veils of cloud travelled beneath her, hiding and revealing the vast presences of the hills.

At peace, Nia thought: Ailsa too is at peace. They'd scattered her ashes on the Mynd all those years ago. Now looking down on the volcanic rock of Caer Caradoc, the

sandstone Mynd, the rich soil of the flood plain, the coral reef of Wenlock Edge, Nia thought: those atoms of Ailsa might have drifted anywhere. Or everywhere. The whole of this is my mother.

Ailsa's moment; the six hundred million years of the massif. The mind fainted at the time scale of that. When the tectonic plates buckled and the volcanoes were born, Shropshire had been south of the equator. So Ailsa belonged to the body of the round earth. Nowhere was she a foreigner.

Nia made a sweet landing. Les came down ten minutes later. More and more, sister and brother lived for this, the necessity to earn their crust being intervals in their dream. In midwinter, when the mountain was white and icebound and nearly impassable, they'd struggle up in the Land Rover if they heard the club was open. Her brother met her in the clubhouse, where they clinked their customary glasses of brown ale.

'I thought of Mam up there,' she said.

'Oh, right? What in particular?'

'Not sure. A sense of her. Do you ever feel you're walking in her footsteps?'

Les shook his head and smiled. He was a literal, practical guy who managed a small chain of sports shops and called a spade a spade.

'Do you remember the raindrop fossil she brought down from the Mynd?' Nia asked him.

'I do. Where is it now?'

'She gave it to the museum at Carding Mill, didn't she?'

'That's right. We ought to go and see it again.'

One person couldn't claim ownership of such a treasure: so Ailsa had declared, though anyone could see

the avarice in her eyes. It was a fragment of telltale rock about the size of a brick, from a sandstone layer that had weathered out on the Mynd. The rock was imprinted with the marks of a passing shower that had fallen on to dried mud. The mud dried; a new layer of mud silted down, dried fast and locked the raindrops' traces in. And one day six hundred million years later, Mrs Ailsa Copsey of Lyth Clee Farm, climbing an exposed edge, had become aware of that passing shower.

'Yes,' said Les. 'We'll definitely visit. Not today. We're out to supper.'

'Have you phoned Nicki?'

'Yes, don't worry.'

Nicole did not much like her husband's fad for gliding and he was required to phone her whenever he was safely on *terra firma* again. Nia had shown him the photos and he'd begun to read Ailsa's journals. But he'd broken off abruptly, blushing to the roots of his hair: face, throat, everything, brick red. Would not say why. It was not his history. And this woman was not, in any way he comprehended, his mam. Perhaps that was it. Nia perfectly understood why he should be shocked, though she didn't share the reaction. Not at all. The Ailsa revealed in the journals was someone as nakedly close to Nia as a second skin.

Mother and daughter were alike, that was the thing, in ways Nia had rarely suspected. She'd had a couple of the tiny black and white pictures enlarged, so sharply had they affected her. They'd been taken on the voyage out to Egypt, obviously, since mother and child had been flown back in 1952. Enlarged, the prints looked strikingly modern. They might have been taken last week, except for the blanching

round the margins that turned them into arresting ghost photos. One was a group portrait of Ailsa, the young Irene and an unknown fair-haired woman. Topher and Tim, flaxen cherubs in collar and tie, were attached to their mother's skirts, thumbs in mouths. Ailsa, the tallest member of the group, held Nia's hand in both of hers and bent her head to speak to her. It was clear that the two of them were communing with their eyes in a bliss of secret and somehow subversive conversation. Telepathy, Nia thought: she'd once lived intuitively, able to enfold or suffuse herself in Ailsa's inner space. They'd understood one another, without having to speak. Braiding their thoughts into the one plait. In the photo Nia was gazing up at her mother with an expression of melting tenderness.

The second picture showed Ailsa and another woman, of equal height but strikingly dark, wearing loose, silky trousers and a white, sleeveless blouse. She recognised her, of course: *that* woman, Mona, the pursuer of Ailsa's ghost. Arms round one another's waists, the two of them seemed about to burst out laughing at some mad private joke to do with the young man in uniform on their left. And Ailsa looked – there were no other words for it – radiantly beautiful.

'Poppy and I are off to Egypt,' she told Les. 'On a cruise.'

'I know – Dad said. Are you sure it's safe to go?'

'Why shouldn't it be?'

'Well, terrorism, for a start. Nowhere's safe in the Middle East any longer.'

'Not since Bush and B.Liar went into Iraq all guns blazing, you mean?'

Her Tory brother hated it when Nia went off on one of

her political rants. He'd been a member of the territorials in his youth, playing the cornet in the regimental band. She saw him swallow a sharp retort.

'I was thinking more of 9/11,' Les said gently. And then, to defuse things, 'Well, really I was just thinking of your health. You'll come down with something gastric and I'll have to come and fetch you home.'

'Oh, don't be so stuffy. It'll be fine.'