

Alex



'Pandora', Cyprus

19th July 2016

The house comes into view as I steer the car around the perilous potholes – still not filled in from ten years ago, and growing ever deeper. I bump along a little further, then pull to a halt and stare at Pandora, thinking that it's really not that pretty, unlike the glossy shots of holiday homes you see on upmarket property websites. Rather, at least from the back, it is solid, sensible and almost austere, just as I've always imagined its former inhabitant to have been. Built from pale local stone, and square as the Lego houses I constructed as a boy, it rises up out of the arid chalky land surrounding it, which is covered for as far as the eye can see with tender, burgeoning vines. I try to reconcile its reality with the virtual snapshot in my mind – taken and stored ten summers ago – and decide that memory has served me well.

After parking the car, I skirt round the sturdy walls to the front of the house and onto the terrace, which is what lifts Pandora out of the ordinary and into a spectacular

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league of its own. Crossing the terrace, I head for the balustraded wall at its edge, set just at the point before the terrain begins to tumble gently downwards: a landscape filled with yet more vines, the odd whitewashed homestead and clusters of olive trees. Far in the distance, there is a line of shimmering aquamarine separating land and sky.

I notice the sun is performing a masterclass as it sets, its yellow rays seeping into the blue and turning it to umber. Which is an interesting point, actually, as I always thought that yellow and blue made green. I look to my right, at the garden below the terrace. The pretty borders my mother had so carefully planted ten years ago have not been maintained and, starved of attention and water, have been subsumed by the arid earth and supplanted by ugly, spiky weeds – genus unknown.

But there, in the centre of the garden, with one end of the hammock my mother used to lie in still attached – its strings like old and fraying spaghetti – stands the olive tree. ‘Old’, I nicknamed it back then, due to being told by the various adults around me that it *was*. If anything, whilst all around it has died and fermented, it seems to have grown in stature and majesty, perhaps stealing the life force from its collapsing botanical neighbours, determined over the centuries to survive.

It is quite beautiful, a metaphoric triumph over adversity, with every millimetre of its gnarled trunk proudly displaying its struggle.

I wonder now why humans hate the map of their life that appears on their own bodies, when a tree like this, or a faded painting, or a near-derelict uninhabited building is lauded for its antiquity.

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Thinking of such, I turn towards the house, and am relieved to see that at least from the outside Pandora seems to have survived its recent neglect. At the main entrance, I take the iron key from my pocket and open the door. As I walk through the shadowy rooms, shrouded from the light by the closed shutters, I realise that my emotions are numb, and perhaps it's for the best. I don't dare to begin to feel, because here – perhaps more than anywhere – holds the essence of *her* . . .

Half an hour later, I've opened the shutters downstairs and removed the sheets from the furniture in the drawing room. As I stand in a mist of dust motes catching the light from the setting sun, I remember thinking how everything seemed so old in here the first time I saw it. And I wonder, as I look at the sagging chairs and the threadbare sofa, if like the olive tree, beyond a certain point old was simply old and didn't visibly age further, like grey-haired grandparents to a young child.

Of course, the one thing in this room that has changed beyond all recognition is me. We humans complete the vast majority of our physical and mental evolution during our first few years on planet Earth – baby to full-grown adult within the blink of an eye. After that, outwardly at least, we spend the rest of our lives looking more or less the same, simply becoming saggier and less attractive versions of our younger selves, as genes and gravity do their worst.

As for the emotional and intellectual side of things . . . well, I have to believe there are some bonuses to make up for the slow decline of our outer packaging. And being back here at Pandora shows me clearly that there are. As I walk back into the hall, I chuckle at the 'Alex' I used to be.

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And cringe at my former self – thirteen years old and, in retrospect, a self-absorbed right royal pain in the backside.

I open the door to the ‘Broom Cupboard’ – my affectionate term for the room I inhabited during that long, hot summer ten years ago. Reaching for the light, I realise I was not underestimating its miniature size and if anything, the space seems to have shrunk further. All six foot one of me now steps inside and I wonder if I closed the door and lay down, whether my feet would need to hang out of the tiny window, rather like Alice in her Wonderland.

I look up at the shelves on either side of this claustrophobic corridor, and see that the books I painstakingly arranged into alphabetical order are still there. Instinctively, I pull one down – Rudyard Kipling’s *Rewards and Fairies* – and leaf through it to find the famous poem the book contains. Reading through the lines of ‘If’ – the words of wisdom written from a father to a son – I find tears welling in my eyes for the adolescent boy I was then: so desperate to find a father. And then, having found him, realising I had one already.

As I return Rudyard to his place on the shelf, I spot a small hardback book beside it. I realise it’s the diary my mother gave me for Christmas a few months before I came to Pandora for the first time. Every day for seven months, I wrote in it assiduously and, knowing me back then, pompously. Like all teenagers, I believed my ideas and feelings were unique and ground-breaking; thoughts never had by another human being before me.

I shake my head sadly, and sigh like an old man at my naivety. I left the diary behind when we went home to England after that long summer at Pandora. And here it is,

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ten years on, sitting once more in the palms of my now far larger hands. A memoir of the last few months of myself as a child, before life dragged me into adulthood.

Taking the diary with me, I leave the room and go upstairs. As I wander along the dim, airless corridor, unsure in exactly which bedroom I want to plant myself during my stay here, I take a deep breath and head towards *her* room. With all the courage I possess, I open the door. Perhaps it is my imagination – after ten years of absence, I guess it must be – but I'm convinced my senses are assailed by the smell of that perfume she once wore . . .

Closing the door again firmly, not yet able to deal with the Pandora's Box of memories that would fly out of any of these bedrooms, I retreat back downstairs. I see night has fallen, and it's pitch-black outside. I check my watch, add two hours for the time difference and realise it's almost nine in the evening here – my empty stomach is growling for food.

I unpack the car and stow the supplies I picked up from the shop in the local village in the pantry, then take some bread, feta cheese and a very warm beer out onto the terrace. Sitting there in the silence, with only the odd sleepy cicada to interrupt its purity, I sip the beer, wondering if it was really a good idea to arrive two days earlier than the others. Navel-gazing is something I have a double first in, after all – to the point where someone has recently offered me a job doing it professionally. This thought, at least, makes me chuckle.

To take my mind off the situation, I open my diary and read the inscription on the first page.

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'Darling Alex, Happy Christmas! Try and keep this regularly. It might be interesting to read when you're older.

All my love, M xxx'

'Well, Mum, let's hope you're right.' I smile wanly as I skip through the pages of self-important prose and arrive at the beginning of July. And by the light of the one dim bulb that hangs above me in the pergola, I begin to read.

July 2006



Arrivals

ALEX'S DIARY

10th July 2006

My face is perfectly round. I'm sure you could draw it with a compass, and only very rarely, the edges of the circle and my face wouldn't combine. I hate it.

I also have, inside the circle, a pair of apple cheeks. When I was younger, adults used to pull at them, take my flesh between their fingers and squeeze it. They forgot that my cheeks were not like apples. Apples are inanimate. They are hard, they don't feel pain. If they're bruised, it's only on the surface.

I do have nice eyes, mind you. They change colour. My mother says that when I'm alive inside, energised, they are a vivid green. When I'm feeling stressed, they become the colour of the North Sea. Personally, I think they're grey rather a lot, but they are quite large and shaped like peach-stones, and my eyebrows, darker than my hair – which is girly-blonde and straight as straw – frame them well.

I'm currently staring into the mirror. Tears prick my eyes

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because when I'm not looking at my face, in my imagination, I can be anyone I choose. The light here in the tiny on-board toilet is harsh, shining like a halo above my head. Mirrors on planes are the worst: they make you look like a two-thousand-year-old dead person who's been freshly dug up.

Beneath my T-shirt I can see the flesh rising above my shorts. I take a handful and mould it into a passable impression of the Gobi Desert. I create dunes, with small pouches between them, from which could sprout the odd palm tree around the oasis.

I then wash my hands thoroughly.

I actually like my hands, because they don't seem to have joined the march towards Blob Land, which is where the rest of my body has currently decided to live. My mother says it's puppy fat, that the hormonal button labelled 'shoot sideways' worked at first press. Sadly, at the same time, the 'shoot upwards' button malfunctioned. And it doesn't seem to have been fixed since.

Besides, how many fat puppies have I ever seen? Most of them are sleek from the exhaustion of excitement.

Maybe I need some excitement.

The good news is this: flying gives you a feeling of weightlessness, even if you *are* fat. And there are lots of people on this plane far fatter than me, because I've looked. If I'm the Gobi, my current seat neighbour is the Sahara, all on his own. His forearms hog the armrest, skin and muscle and fat spreading like a mutating virus into my personal space. It really irritates me, that. I keep my flesh to myself, in my designated space, even if I end up with a bad muscle spasm in the process.

For some reason, whenever I'm on a plane I think about

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dying. To be fair, I think about dying wherever I am. Perhaps being dead is a bit like the weightlessness you feel here, now, inside this metal tube. My little sister asked if she was dead the last time we flew, because someone had told her Grandpa was up on a cloud. She thought she was joining him when we passed one.

Why do adults tell kids such ridiculous stories? It only leads to trouble. For myself, I never believed any of them.

My own mother gave up trying them on me years ago.

She loves me, my mother, even if I've morphed into Mr Blob in the past few months. And she promises that one day, I will have to crouch down to see my face in water-splashed mirrors such as this. I come from a family of tall men, apparently. Not that this comforts me. I've read about genes skipping generations and knowing my luck, I shall be the first fat dwarf in hundreds of years of Beaumont males.

Besides, she forgets she's ignoring the opposing DNA which helped create me . . .

It's a conversation I am determined to have during this holiday. I don't care how many times she tries to wimp out of it and conveniently changes the subject. A gooseberry bush for a father is no longer satisfactory.

I need to know.

Everyone says I'm like her. But then, they would, wouldn't they? They can hardly liken me to an unidentified sperm cell.

Actually, the fact I don't know who my father is might also add to any delusions of grandeur I already harbour. Which is very unhealthy, especially for a child like me, if I am still a child. Or have ever been, which personally I doubt.

At this very moment, as my body hurtles across central Europe, my father could be anyone I choose to imagine;

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whoever suits me at the time. For example: we may be about to crash, and the captain has only one spare parachute. I could introduce myself to him as his son and he would have to save *me*, surely?

On second thoughts, perhaps it's better if I don't know. My stem cells might originate from somewhere in the Orient and then I would have to learn Mandarin to communicate with my father, which is a mega-hard language to master.

Sometimes, I wish Mum looked more like other mothers. I mean, she's not Kate Moss or anything, because she's quite old. But it's embarrassing when my classmates and my teachers and any man that comes into our house looks at *her* in *that* way. Everyone loves her, because she is kind, and funny, and cooks and dances at the same time. And sometimes, my bit of her doesn't seem large enough and I wish I didn't have to share her the way I do.

Because I love her best.

She was unmarried when she gave birth to me. A hundred years ago, I would have been born in a poorhouse and we'd probably both have expired of TB a few months later. We'd have been buried in a pauper's grave, our skeletons lying together for eternity.

I often wonder if she is embarrassed by the living reminder of her immorality, which is me. Is that why she's sending me away to school?

I mouth *immorality* in the mirror. I like words. I collect them, like my classmates collect football cards or girls, depending on their maturity levels. I like bringing them out, slotting them into a sentence to express the thought I'm having as accurately as I can. Perhaps one day, I might like to

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play with them professionally. Let's face it, I'm never going to play for Manchester United, given my current physique.

Someone is banging on the door. I've lost track of time, as usual. I check my watch and realise I've been in here for over twenty minutes. I will now have to face a queue of angry passengers desperate to pee.

I glance in the mirror one more time – a last look at Mr Blob. Then I avert my eyes, take a deep breath and step outside as Brad Pitt.

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‘We’re lost. I’ll have to pull over.’

‘Christ, Mum! It’s pitch-black and we’re hanging off the side of a mountain! There *is* nowhere to pull over.’

‘Just stop panicking, darling. I’ll find somewhere safe.’

‘Safe? Hah! I’d have brought my crampons and ice pick if I’d known.’

‘There’s a lay-by up there.’ Helena steered the unfamiliar rental car jerkily round the hairpin bend and brought it to a halt. She glanced at her son, his fingers covering his eyes, and put a hand on his knee. ‘You can look now.’ Then she peered through the window, down into the steep valley far below, and saw the firefly lights of the coast twinkling beneath them. ‘It’s so beautiful,’ she breathed.

‘No, Mum, it is not “beautiful”. “Beautiful” is when we’re no longer lost in the hinterland of a foreign country, a few yards away from hurtling two thousand feet down a valley to our certain deaths. Haven’t they heard of crash barriers here?’

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Helena ignored him and fumbled above her head for the interior light switch. ‘Pass me that map, darling.’

Alex did so, and Helena studied it. ‘It’s upside down, Mum,’ he observed.

‘Okay, okay.’ She turned the map round. ‘Immy still asleep?’

Alex turned to look at his five-year-old sister, spread-eagled across the back seat with Lamby, her cuddly sheep, tucked safely under her arm. ‘Yup. Good thing too. This journey might scar her for life. We’ll never get her on Oblivion at Alton Towers if she sees where we are now.’

‘Right, I know what I’ve done. We need to go back down the hill—’

‘Mountain,’ corrected Alex.

‘– turn left at the sign for Kathikas and follow that road up. Here.’ Helena handed the map to Alex and put the gear-stick into what she thought was reverse. They lurched forward.

‘*MUM!* Christ!’

‘Sorry.’ Helena executed an inelegant three-point turn and steered the car back onto the main road.

‘Thought you knew where this place was,’ Alex muttered.

‘Darling, I was only a couple of years older than you the last time I came here. For your information, that’s almost twenty-four years ago. But I’m sure I’ll recognise it when we reach the village.’

‘If we ever do.’

‘Oh, stop being such a misery! Have you got no sense of adventure?’ Helena was relieved when she saw a turning signposted to Kathikas. She took it. ‘It’ll be worth it when we get there, you’ll see.’

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‘It’s not even near a beach. And I hate olives. *And* the Chandlers. Rupert’s an arseho—’

‘Alex, enough! If you can’t say anything positive, then just shut up and let me drive.’

Alex lapsed into a grumpy silence as Helena encouraged the Citroën up the steep incline, thinking what a shame it was that the plane had been delayed, landing them in Paphos just after the sun had set. By the time they’d cleared immigration and found their hire car, it had been dark. She’d been relishing the thought of making this journey up into the mountains, revisiting her vivid childhood memory and seeing it anew through the eyes of her own offspring.

But life often failed to live up to expectations, she thought, especially when it came to seminal memories. And she was aware that the summer she’d spent here at her godfather’s house when she was fifteen was sprinkled with historical fairy dust.

And however ridiculous, she needed Pandora to be as perfect as she remembered. Logically, she knew it couldn’t possibly be, that seeing it again might be akin to meeting a first love after twenty-four years: captured in the mind’s eye, glowing with the strength and beauty of youth, but in reality, greying and slowly disintegrating.

And she knew *that* was another possibility too . . .

Would he still be here?

Helena’s hands tightened on the steering wheel, and she pushed the thought firmly away.

The house, named Pandora, which had felt like a mansion back then, was bound to be smaller than she remembered. The antique furniture, shipped from England by Angus, her godfather, whilst he reigned supreme over the remnants of

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the British Army still stationed in Cyprus, had seemed exquisite, elegant, untouchable. The powder-blue damask sofas in the darkened drawing room – its shutters habitually closed to keep out the fading glare of the sun – the Georgian desk in the study where Angus sat every morning, slitting his letters open with a slim miniature sword, and the vast mahogany dining table whose smooth surface resembled a skating rink . . . all stood sentinel-like in her memory.

Pandora had been empty now for three years, since Angus had been forced back to England due to ill health. Complaining bitterly that the medical care in Cyprus was every bit as good, if not better than the National Health Service at home, even he had grudgingly admitted that the lack of a pair of reliable legs, and constant trips to a hospital forty-five minutes away did not make living up in a mountainside village particularly convenient.

He'd finally given up his fight to stay in his beloved Pandora, and had died six months ago of pneumonia and misery. An already fragile body which had spent the vast majority of its seventy-eight years in sub-tropical climes had always been unlikely to adjust to the unremitting damp greyness of a Scottish suburb.

He'd left everything to Helena, his goddaughter – including Pandora.

She had wept when she'd heard the news; tears tinged with guilt that she hadn't acted on all those recent plans she'd made to visit him more often in his care home.

The clanging of her mobile phone from the depths of her handbag broke into her thoughts.

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‘Get that, will you, darling?’ she said to Alex. ‘It’s probably Dad to see if we’ve arrived.’

Alex made the usual unsuccessful forage into his mother’s bag, fishing the mobile out a few moments after it had stopped ringing. He checked the call register. ‘It *was* Dad. Want me to call him back?’

‘No. We’ll do it when we get there.’

‘*If* we get there.’

‘Of course we will. I’m beginning to recognise this. We’re no more than ten minutes away now.’

‘Was Hari’s Tavern here when you were?’ enquired Alex as they passed a glowing neon palm tree in front of a garish restaurant, filled with slot machines and white plastic chairs.

‘No, but this is a new link road with lots of potential passing trade. There was little more than a rough track up to the village in my day.’

‘That place had Sky TV. Can we go one night?’ he asked hopefully.

‘Perhaps.’ Helena’s vision of balmy evenings spent on Pandora’s wonderful terrace overlooking the olive groves, drinking the locally produced wine and feasting on figs picked straight from the branch, had not included television or neon palm trees.

‘Mum, just how basic is this house we’re heading for? I mean, does it have electricity?’

‘Of course it does, silly.’ Helena prayed it had been switched on by the local woman who held the keys. ‘Look, we’re turning into the village now. Only a few more minutes and we’ll be there.’

‘S’pose I could cycle back down to that bar,’ muttered Alex, ‘if I could get a bike.’

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‘I cycled up to the village from the house almost every day.’

‘Was it a penny-farthing?’

‘Oh, very funny! It was a proper, old-fashioned upright bicycle with three gears and a basket on the front.’ Helena smiled as she remembered it. ‘I used to collect the bread from the bakery.’

‘Like the bike the witch rides in *The Wizard of Oz* as she cycles past Dorothy’s window?’

‘Exactly. Now, shush, I need to concentrate. We’ve come in from the other end of the street because of the new road, and I need to get my bearings.’

Ahead of her, Helena could see the lights of the village. She slowed down as the road began to narrow and the chalky gravel crunched under the tyres. Buildings began to appear, fashioned from creamy Cyprus stone, finally forming a continuous wall on either side of them.

‘Look, there’s the church, just up ahead.’ Helena indicated the building that had been the heartbeat of the small community of Kathikas. As they passed, she saw some youths hanging around a bench in the courtyard outside, their attention focused on the two dark-eyed young girls lolling idly on it. ‘This is the centre of the village.’

‘A veritable hotspot, obviously.’

‘Apparently, a couple of very good tavernas have opened up here in the past few years. And look, there’s the shop. They’ve extended it into the next house. They sell absolutely everything you could ever want.’

‘I’ll pop in to collect the latest *All American Rejects* CD, shall I?’

‘Oh Alex!’ Helena’s patience snapped. ‘I know you don’t

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want to be here, but for goodness' sake, you haven't even seen Pandora yet. At least give it a chance, for me, if not for yourself!

'Okay. Sorry, Mum, sorry.'

'The village used to be very picturesque and from what I can see, it doesn't seem to have changed that much,' Helena said with relief. 'But we can explore tomorrow.'

'We're going out of the village now, Mum,' commented Alex nervously.

'Yes. You can't see it now, but on either side of you there are acres of grapevines. The pharaohs once used to ship wine from here to Egypt because it was so good. We turn here, I'm sure we do. Hold on tight. This road is pretty bouncy.'

As the rough gravel track wound down and through the vines, Helena changed down to first gear and switched the headlights to full beam to negotiate the treacherous potholes.

'You biked up here every day?' said Alex in surprise. 'Wow! I'm amazed you didn't end up in the grapes.'

'I did sometimes, but you get to know where the worst patches are.' Helena was strangely comforted by the fact that the potholes were just as bad as she remembered them. She'd been dreading tarmac.

'Are we nearly there, Mummy?' A sleepy voice came from the back seat. 'It's very bumpy.'

'Yes, we are, darling. A few more seconds, literally.'

Yes, we are . . .

A mixture of excitement and trepidation coursed through her as they turned down a narrower track and the dark, solid silhouette of Pandora came into view. She drove the

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car through the rusting wrought-iron gates, eternally open all those years ago, and by now almost certainly incapable of movement.

She brought the car to a halt and switched off the engine.

‘We’re here.’

There was no response from her two children. Glancing round, she saw Immy had fallen asleep again. Alex sat next to her, staring straight ahead.

‘We’ll leave Immy to sleep while we find the key,’ Helena suggested as she opened the door and a blast of warm night air assaulted her. Climbing out, she stood and breathed in the half-remembered potent smell of olive, grape and dust – a world away from tarmac roads and neon palm trees. Smell really *was* the most powerful of all the senses, she thought. It evoked a particular moment, an atmosphere, with pinpoint accuracy.

She refrained from asking Alex what he thought of the house, because there was nothing *to* think yet and she couldn’t bear a negative response. They were standing in the deep blackness at the back of Pandora, its shuttered windows closed and locked up like a garrison.

‘It’s awfully dark, Mum.’

‘I’ll put the headlights back on. Angelina said she’d leave the back door open.’ Helena reached inside the car and switched on the beam. Then she walked across the gravel to the door, Alex following closely behind her. The brass handle turned easily and she pushed the door open to fumble for a light switch. Finding it, she held her breath as she pressed it. The back hall was suddenly awash with light.

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‘Thank goodness,’ she mumbled, opening another door and flicking a switch. ‘This is the kitchen.’

‘Yes, I can see that.’ Alex ambled through the large, airless room, which contained a sink unit, an ancient oven, a large wooden table and a Welsh dresser that filled an entire wall. ‘It’s pretty basic.’

‘Angus rarely came in here. His housekeeper did all the domestic stuff. I don’t think he cooked a meal in his entire life. This was very much a workstation, not the comfort zone that kitchens are these days.’

‘Where did he eat, then?’

‘Outside on the terrace, of course. Everyone does here.’ Helena turned on the tap. A dribble of water sputtered out reluctantly, then turned into a torrent.

‘There doesn’t seem to be a fridge,’ said Alex.

‘It’s in the pantry. Angus entertained here so often, and it was such a long drive to Paphos, he installed a cooling system inside the pantry itself too. And no, before you ask, there wasn’t a freezer here in those days. The door is just to your left. Go and check the fridge is still there, will you?’ Angelina did say she’d leave us some milk and bread.’

‘Sure.’

Alex wandered off and Helena, switching lights on as she went, found herself in the main hall at the front of the house. The worn stone floor, laid out in a chequerboard pattern, echoed beneath her feet. She looked up to the main staircase, the heavy curving banister built by skilled craftsmen from oak, which she remembered Angus had shipped over especially from England. Behind her stood a grandfather clock, sentry-like, but no longer ticking.

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Time has stopped here, she mused to herself as she opened the door to the drawing room.

The blue damask sofas were covered in dust-sheets. She pulled one off and sank into downy softness. The fabric, though still immaculate and unstained, felt fragile beneath her fingers, as if its substance, but not its presence, had been gently worn away. Standing up, she walked across to one of the two sets of French windows that led outside to the front of the house. She drew back the wooden shutters that protected the room from the sun, unlocked the stiff iron handle and went out onto the terrace.

Alex found her a few seconds later, leaning on the balustrade at the edge of the terrace. ‘The fridge sounds like it’s got a bad attack of asthma,’ he said, ‘but there’s milk and eggs and bread in it. And we’ve definitely got enough of this, that’s for sure.’ He waggled a huge pink salami at her. Helena didn’t answer. He leant next to her. ‘Nice view,’ he added.

‘It’s spectacular, isn’t it?’ She smiled, pleased he liked it.

‘Are those tiny lights down there the coast?’

‘Yes. In the morning, you’ll be able to see the sea beyond it. And the olive groves and vineyards falling away below us into the valley, with the mountains on either side. There’s a gorgeous olive tree in the garden over there which, legend has it, is over four hundred years old.’

‘“Old” . . . like everything seems to be here.’ Alex looked down, then to his left and right. ‘It’s very, um, by itself, this place, isn’t it? I can’t see any other houses.’

‘I thought it might have become built up round here, like it has down along the coast, but it hasn’t.’ Helena

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turned to him. ‘Give me a hug, darling.’ She put her arms around him. ‘I’m so glad we’re here.’

‘Good. I’m glad you’re glad. Would you mind if we got Immy in now? I’m worried she’ll wake up, get frightened and wander off. And I’m starving.’

‘Let’s run upstairs and find a bedroom to put her in first. Then perhaps you could give me a hand carrying her upstairs.’

Helena led Alex back across the terrace, pausing under the vine-covered pergola that provided welcome shelter from the midday sun. The long, cast-iron table, its white paint flaking, the bulk of it covered with mouldering leaves shed from the vine above it, still stood forlornly beneath it.

‘This is where we ate every lunchtime and evening. And we all had to dress properly, too. No swimsuits or wet trunks allowed at Angus’ table, no matter how hot it was,’ she added.

‘You won’t make us lot do that, will you, Mum?’

Helena ruffled her son’s thick blond hair and kissed the top of his head. ‘I shall count myself lucky if I manage to *get* all of you to the table, never mind what you’re wearing. How times have changed,’ she sighed, then held out her hand to him. ‘Come on, let’s go upstairs and explore.’

It was almost midnight by the time Helena finally sat out on the small balcony that led from Angus’ bedroom. Immy was sleeping soundly on the vast mahogany bed inside. Helena had decided she’d move her tomorrow into one of the twin rooms, once she’d discovered where all the bedding was kept. Alex was along the corridor, lying on a bare mattress. He’d locked all the shutters to protect himself

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from mosquitoes, even though the resulting heat in his room was sauna-like in its intensity. Tonight, there wasn't a whisper of wind.

Helena reached into her handbag, drew out her mobile and a battered packet of cigarettes. She put both on her lap and stared down at them. A cigarette first, she decided. She didn't want the spell to be broken just yet. She knew William, her husband, wouldn't *mean* to say anything that would jerk her back to reality, but the chances were that he would. And it wouldn't be his fault either, because it made perfect sense to tell her whether the man had been in to fix the dishwasher and ask where she had hidden the bin bags because the garbage needed to go out for the bin collection tomorrow. He'd assume she'd be glad to hear he had everything under control.

And . . . she would be. Just not *now* . . .

Helena lit the cigarette, inhaled and wondered why there was something so sensual about smoking in the heat of a Mediterranean night. She'd taken her very first puff only yards away from where she now sat. At the time, she had guiltily relished the illegality of it. Twenty-four years on, she sat feeling equally guilty, wishing it was a habit she could finally break. Then, she'd been too young to smoke: now, at almost forty, she was too old. The thought made her smile. Her youth, encapsulated between the last time she had been in this house and smoked her first cigarette, and tonight.

Then, there had been so many dreams, the prospect of adulthood laid out before her. Whom would she love? Where would she live? How far would her talent take her? Would she be happy . . . ?

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And now, most of those questions had been answered.

‘Please, let this holiday be as perfect as it can be,’ she whispered to the house, the moon and the stars. For the past few weeks she’d had a strange feeling of impending doom which, try as she might, she simply hadn’t been able to shake off. Perhaps it was the fact that she was fast approaching a milestone birthday – or simply because she’d known she was returning *here* . . .

She could already feel Pandora’s magical atmosphere closing around her, as if the house was peeling away the protective layers and stripping her down to her very soul. Just as it had done the last time.

Stubbing the half-smoked cigarette out then throwing it into the night, she picked up her mobile and dialled her home number in England. William answered on the second ring. ‘Hello, darling, it’s me,’ she said.

‘You’ve arrived safely then?’ he asked, and Helena felt instantly comforted by the sound of his voice.

‘Yes. How are things at home?’

‘Fine. Yes, fine.’

‘How’s the three-year-old trainee terrorist?’ she asked with a smile.

‘Fred’s finally subsided, thank God. He’s very cross that you’ve all gone away and left him behind with his old dad.’

‘I miss him. Sort of.’ Helena gave a low chuckle. ‘But at least with only Alex and Immy here, I’ll have a chance to get the house organised before you two arrive.’

‘Is it habitable?’

‘I think so, yes, but I’ll be able to see better in the morning. The kitchen’s very basic.’

‘Talking of kitchens, the dishwasher man came today.’

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‘Did he?’

‘Yes. It’s fixed, but we might as well have bought a new one instead for the amount it cost.’

‘Oh dear.’ Helena suppressed a smile. ‘The bin bags are in the second drawer down to the left of the sink.’

‘I was going to ask you where they were kept. The dustmen come tomorrow, as you know. Ring me in the morning?’

‘I will. Big kiss to Fred and to you. Bye, darling.’

‘Bye. Sleep well.’

Helena sat a while longer looking up at the exquisite night sky – awash with a myriad of stars that seemed to shine so much more brightly here – and felt the onset of exhaustion replacing adrenaline. She slipped quietly inside and lay down on the bed next to Immy. And, for the first time in weeks, she fell asleep immediately.

ALEX'S DIARY

11th July 2006

I hear him. Hovering somewhere above me in the dark, sharpening his teeth in preparation for his meal.

Which is me.

Do mosquitoes have teeth? They must do, because how else could they pierce the skin if they didn't? Yet, when I achieve the ultimate, and manage to squash one of the little buggers against the wall, there is no crunching sound, just a squelch of softness. No cracking of enamel, which is what I heard when I fell off the climbing frame at the age of four and broke my front tooth.

Sometimes, they have the cheek to come and whine in your ear, alert you to the fact you're about to be eaten. You lie there, arms swatting thin air, while they dance invisibly above you, probably giggling hysterically at their hapless victim.

I pull Bee from my rucksack and place him under the sheet next to me. He will be fine because he doesn't need to breathe. For the record, he is not actually a bee, he is a stuffed rabbit, a rabbit as old as I am. He is called Bee

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because he is 'B' for Bunny. That's what I named him when I was a toddler – Mum says it was one of my first words – and it's stuck.

She also said that 'someone special' gave him to me when I was born. I think she probably means my father. However sad and pathetic it is at the age of thirteen to still be sharing one's bed with an ancient toy bunny rabbit, I do not care. He – The Bee – is my talisman, my safety net and my friend. I tell him everything.

I've often thought that if someone could gather all the gazillions of cuddly child comforters together and interrogate them, they would know far more about the child they sleep with than any of the kids' parents. Simply because they actually listen without interrupting.

I cover the vulnerable parts of my body – especially my fat cheeks, which would give a mosquito breakfast, lunch and supper at one suck – as best I can with various articles of clothing.

Eventually, I fall asleep. I think, anyway. That is, I hope I'm dreaming, because I'm in a burning furnace, flames licking my body, heat melting the flesh off my bones.

I wake to see that it's still dark, then realise I can't breathe and find a pair of my underpants is covering my face – which is why it's dark and I can't breathe. I remove them, gulp in some air and see a ladder of light seeping in through the shutters.

It's morning. I am bathed in my own sweat, but it was worth it if that little bugger of an insect didn't get me.

I pull myself wetly from the mattress, tearing the sopping clothes off my body. There is a small, cloudy mirror over the

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chest of drawers and I stagger towards it to inspect my face. And see an enormous red bite-mark on my right cheek.

I swear, using words my mother would hate, wondering how it managed to manoeuvre itself beneath the underpants to get me. But all mosquitoes are part of an elite force, highly trained in the art of infiltration.

As well as the bite, the rest of my face is as red as the reddest side of a Cox's Pippin. I turn to the windows, open the shutters and blink like a mole as I step out onto the small balcony. I feel the heat of the morning sun burn me like the furnace in my dream.

When I've adjusted my vision, I see the view is amazing, just as my mother said it would be. We are very high up, perched on a mountainside, the yellow and brown and olive-green landscape below me arid and parched, like me. Far, far away, the blue sea shimmers in the sun. I then look down and focus on the small figure at the edge of the terrace below me.

My mother is using the balustrade as a barre. Her golden hair flows downwards as she bends the top half of her body back like a contortionist and I can see her ribs clearly outlined beneath her leotard. She does this ballet routine every morning. Even on Christmas Day, or after she's had a very late night and a few glasses of wine. In fact, the day she doesn't do it, I'll know something is horribly wrong with her. Other kids get Coco Pops and toast at breakfast-time, with parents who are upright. I get my mother's head peering upside down at me from between her legs, as she asks me to put the kettle on.

She tried to get me to do ballet once. That's one way in which we are definitely not alike.

The Olive Tree

I am suddenly incredibly, unbearably thirsty. And I feel dizzy. The world spins slightly and I fall back into the room and onto the mattress and close my eyes.

Perhaps I have malaria. Perhaps that mosquito has done for me and I am in the last hours of my life.

Whatever I have, I need water and my mother.