

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.