

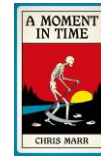
A MOMENT IN TIME

THE CONVERSATION

The setting was perfect. Their table overlooked the beach and they could hear the gentle lapping of the waves. This was Martin's favourite time of the day. He found the middle of the day too hot. (And Chichén Itzá had been ridiculously hot; Serena had felt ill on the way back to the resort.) But this time of the evening, when a cool breeze was blowing and the scent of jasmine was in the air, was lovely. Karen Hernandez, the Head of Marketing in the States, and her partner, Gabe, had gone to this restaurant the day before and seen a sea turtle and its babies – which, for once, merited the word 'awesome' – and although Martin was not prepared to spend the duration of their meal hoping to see this spectacle for himself, he and Serena had spent a good while gazing out at the palm trees and the orange and pink sunset. The food had been excellent – his main course, puerco pibil, in particular – and the Mexican waiters had been attentive yet mindful of their privacy.

This could be his last reward trip with the company. He had barely scraped enough revenue to meet his target and was now only three years away from retirement. The future lay with the younger members of the sales team, six members of which, along with their partners, had noisily congregated on the big table in the middle of the restaurant. Greg Simmons had topped the figures last year and was the most vocal out of everyone. The group had gone jet-skiing that day and were still laughing over their experiences.

In contrast, Martin and Serena had not spoken a word to each other for at least ten minutes. There was a comfort in not needing to speak, but also a danger of almost forgetting that your partner was there. Serena, Martin noted, was picking at her food, taking small and careful bites, as was her wont. Her glasses were perched crookedly on her nose. When she had come back from the opticians, he had said something complimentary about the frames, but the truth was that they made her look older. She certainly acted like an old woman at times. She had fiddled in her bag seemingly forever to check that it contained the key before leaving their hotel room. Of course, he too had his fair share of

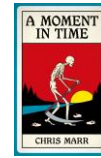


age-related problems. His knees felt stiff, particularly first thing in the mornings, and his fingers would seize up at the keyboard, if he typed for too long.

A sense of *déjà vu* assailed him. This experience, with the restaurant near to the beach, wasn't dissimilar to another experience that had taken place a long time ago. What was it? He should be able to remember. Perhaps it was something to do with the music playing in the background, an instrumental version of John Lennon's *Jealous Guy*...

That was it – he remembered now – their honeymoon in Mykonos, Greece. The restaurant then had been more open to the elements – in particular the patio with its pergola roof interweaved with hanging vines – but there had also been a beautiful sunset to conclude their stay on the island. Gosh, that holiday had been an amazing time. He was so in love with Serena, he would have done anything – literally anything – for her. Their lovemaking, which happened all the time, was bliss. In those moments, he had felt a togetherness that seemed to justify his existence and which left the rest of the world in shadow. The way he had felt was arguably *too* intense, which was probably why nature, in its wisdom, had ensured that his feelings over the following years had tapered off. It was an evolutionary trick. You were inspired by urges that ensured the continuation of the human race but, after the birth of your children, your priorities changed. He had thought for some time that his children, a boy and a girl both in their thirties now, had inadvertently dealt a critical blow to his marriage. Yet now that Sam and Abby had left the house, he had come to realize that, rather than being the problem, they had, if anything, been the glue that had held the marriage together.

On the contrary, the problem lay elsewhere. Somewhere along the line, life, in its myriad boredom, had worn him down. Promotions had passed him by and hope for the future had been replaced by cynicism. He had gone through several bouts of depression – to the extent that he had been lucky to keep his job. The worst aspect had been the feeling of guilt which, once or twice, he had thought of mentioning to Serena (and which, he imagined, would not elicit her sympathy if he tried to explain his reasons). She had formerly been his whole world and now, through no fault of her own, was only a single part. Shallow though it was to think in such terms, her looks had faded. His looks had faded too, but it was difficult for him to force feelings of passion where they didn't exist. Instead, what *did* exist was a feeling of respect. Serena was a good mother. And he could honestly say that he



wasn't interested in a relationship with anyone else. He wouldn't fall for that evolutionary trick again...

She coughed, a peculiar kind of cough that was silent, placing her hand over her mouth.

'What are you thinking?' he asked, to break the silence.

She was staring out at the view.

'Just how beautiful it is,' she answered. 'A minute ago, I was thinking about Sam and Jessica and wondering how they are settling into their new place.'

Sam was their eldest child and Jessica was his wife. Martin had always felt that Serena had a soft spot for Sam, whereas he had always felt closer to Abby, their daughter.

'I was thinking about our honeymoon,' he said.

'Really?'

'Doesn't this place remind you of the restaurant on the hill overlooking the beach?'

She looked out at the view again. 'In what way?'

'I don't know. It's just a feeling, I suppose.'

She wore a frown of concentration, evidently trying to recall the occasion in question.

'I'm surprised you can remember back that far,' she said.

'We went there twice – the second time on our last evening.'

'Mmmm,' she replied vaguely.

Perhaps there was little similarity between the two places and he had only compared them because of the music then playing, which had since changed to something else.

'Do you think Sam is happy?' he asked.

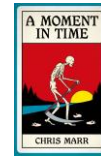
'With his job?'

'I was thinking more of his marriage.'

She shrugged almost imperceptibly, as if the subject was something that shouldn't be questioned – at least not any more.

'He made a decision. He didn't want to lose her.'

The wedding had taken place last year. They had been seeing each other for six years when Jessica had given Sam an ultimatum: unless he popped the question, she would end their relationship. Martin liked Jessica – it was impossible not to like her; she had a warm and bubbly



personality – but if he had been her father, he wouldn't have been nearly so happy about Sam's reluctance to commit himself to a life together with his daughter.

'Do you think that he loves her?'

'We've had this conversation before.'

'I know we have.' *Like every other conversation.* 'I just find it remarkable that he could be so mature in his attitude.'

'It took him a long time to get over Adriana.'

Sam had met Adriana at Cardiff University. They had always had an unstable relationship, as far as Martin had been aware, but halfway through her first year and Sam's final year she had dropped out of her course and gone back to Romania to patch things up with her ex-boyfriend. Despite his results for his first two years pointing to an upper second-class degree, Sam had collapsed in his studies and had ended up with a third.

It had been an unfortunate state of affairs, particularly in its timing, and Martin had naturally felt sorry for his son. Very few people, he presumed, went through life without experiencing the pangs of heartache, from which it might take months, or even a year or two, to recover.

'That was over ten years ago,' he said.

'He was very, very keen on her.'

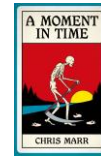
'Did he ever try to contact her again?'

'No, it was too painful for him.'

Martin's memory of Adriana, on the one occasion they had met, was of a tall girl with dark blue eyes and jet-black hair – 'raven tresses' in Sam's words – who did not smile much and, indeed, at times looked downright gloomy. Because of her accent – she struggled to speak English – and the area of the world that she came from, he had always associated her with *Dracula*, and she had certainly cast a spell over Sam.

'He told me last year that she broke his heart and that there wasn't a day that went by when he didn't think about her,' Serena added.

'Every day?' Martin queried incredulously. 'When did he tell you this? Before or after the wedding to Jessica?'



‘About a week before.’

Martin’s expression must have betrayed his thoughts.

‘I know you find him difficult to understand,’ she said. ‘And I guess it is amazing that he could hold a candle for someone for so long. But isn’t he just like you in that respect? Weren’t you head over heels in love with me?’

‘That was different.’

‘Was it? It’s the same emotion. Love can affect people very powerfully. During our conversation, he revealed a lot of stuff to me that he hadn’t talked about before.’

‘Such as?’

She took another bite of her meal. Then, aware that he was gazing at her, she looked up.

‘I promised him that I wouldn’t tell anyone.’

He continued to gaze at her.

‘You mustn’t repeat this under any circumstances,’ she said.

‘All right, I give you my word.’

[These are the first few pages of a longer story.]

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