

All You Can Do Is Embrace It

by Emma Clarke

A podcast story for WHEN WE GOT TO THE SEVENTH

The speaker is a woman who is 70 years old. She's talking to herself, telling herself her own story. We hear the audio as if we're inside her memories, reliving it with her. The feel is slightly surreal. We are inside her reality.

SFX: Suburban atmos. We get the feeling there's a lot of soft furnishings in the room. It feels cosy and intimate.

I'm one of life's romantics. I make no bones about it. And I won't apologise for it either. When you're born like this, there's nothing you can do about it. All you can do is embrace it, don't fight it. I'm a very emotional woman and I enjoy the company of men. And I think they like me. Well, I hope they do! I like a moonlit walk on a beach just the same as the next woman. I like foot rubs. I'm human.

So things were very difficult after George died.

He'd been ill for a while so it wasn't a shock. But nothing quite prepares you, does it? You're never quite ready to be told, to get that phone call, to see his face. Like that. Nothing can prepare you for how you'll feel.

SFX: the suburban atmos morphs into a hospital. We hear machines, ward noises.

I mean, looking at him in that bed with all those tubes poking out of him, he'd gone. I know that. He wasn't there any more. That body lying there wasn't my husband. I don't know where he'd gone, I'm not a very philosophical type of person, but he'd gone somewhere. His body was like an overcoat. Something he'd just taken off.

SFX: sound effects go. We just hear her voice

So looking at him, I didn't know where he was. I knew he'd gone obviously. I'm not stupid. I knew he was dead. But oh the...thud...of that feeling.

SFX: This bit needs to feel 'empty' and a bit hollow

The next few weeks were very difficult. You know, once people have stopped coming round and think you're alright and carrying on as normal. It was hard. I missed him. I missed the big lump of him in bed. In his chair. In the kitchen, fiddling about on the worktop with a bit of engine or vacuum cleaner. He was always mending something. He was very mechanically minded, was George. Good with his hands, you know.

SFX: Generic TV noises, iPad noises, a clock.

The days were long and the telly was boring and I got sick of the iPad the kids bought me to keep me occupied. I mean, honestly. What's a woman like me going to do with Candy Crush Saga? I'm a woman of passion. I'm not an idiot.

SFX: Supermarket

I used to try anything to get the days to feel shorter. I'd split up my shopping so I'd have an excuse to go to the supermarket more than once a week. I told everyone I'd decided to buy fresh but the real reason was because I didn't know what to do with myself.

SFX: Back to the empty, hollow feeling

I almost – almost – got depressed. I didn't want people faffing around me. I didn't want the children on at me, telling me I should join a group, play badminton or God forbid, join a choir. I mean, seriously. And I didn't want the grandchildren coming over all the time. I love them, obviously. But you don't want miserable teenagers drooped about the place when you're not feeling too chipper yourself. What you don't need when you're grieving, is a Goth hanging around.

SFX: A hint of music – something minimalist but hopeful

So I knew I had to do something. I'm very practical. Resourceful. I knew the only way out of feeling miserable was to meet people.

Meet a man.

Now this is where you're probably going to judge me. Oh, sod it. What do I care?

I signed up for a dating app. Everybody said I'd done it too quickly and that I hadn't given myself time to grieve and what about George, didn't I miss him? Of course I bloody missed him. That's why I couldn't bear to be alone any more. As I say, I'm a very giving, loving woman.

SFX: Music stops

Anyway, in my situation, three weeks felt like a very long time.

SFX: iPad noises under the following

So I sorted out a profile pic (thankyou iPad) and wrote a little, you know, thing about myself. And then put it online. I didn't expect to meet the man of my dreams but I'd be lying if I said I hadn't hoped.

SFX: Music again

Now what you might not know about dating apps is that when you're on there with all your face and your life hanging out, people make assumptions. And you get some very strange people approaching you. And oh – the pictures they send you! What I didn't bank on was men in their seventies sending me pictures of their, you know, bits. Hanging down all shrivelled like a turkey neck. Knocked me sick, it did.

I'm not deluded, I know what I look like. I'm under no illusions. And I was very honest about my age and situation. I didn't see the point in dressing it up. I even posted a no make-up selfie. Admittedly I was wearing sunglasses but I was au naturel.

But I do have standards. And flabby old men who look like they're one coughing fit away from an embolism are not my cup of tea.

SFX: Music out

I had messages off six of them.

SFX: Suburban atmos

SFX: Six notification sounds

Six! Some of them telling me about their wives (some divorced, mostly dead), their money (as if I'm a gold-digger, I don't need their money, I've got my own thank you very much) and their health problems. Oh they were boring.

But the seventh.

SFX: A single notification sound. This time it sounds more beautiful, richer somehow and special

Oh the seventh.

SFX: A 'Love theme' piece of music

He was called Alejandro and he was very polite. He complimented me on my hair and he was the perfect gentleman. Gallant, even. I mean, obviously I was attracted to his profile picture. Who wouldn't be? He was stripped to the waist and very tanned. He had a six pack. George never had a six pack. Apart from when he was buying cans of beer! But Alejandro was beautiful.

After the first six, I admit, I changed the parameters of my search and lowered the age-range I was after a bit.

Alejandro was 21. I'm 70. So you can understand why it might have raised eyebrows. I didn't think he'd be interested in me, not really, not like that, but I just played along with it seeing where it might end up. What else was I going to do? What else did I have to fill my time? Back episodes of Countdown? I don't think so. So I went for it. What did I have to lose?

SFX: Music out

SFX: Suburban atmos

Well, to cut a long story short, we hit it off. We exchanged messages and then before I knew it we were messaging each other every day.

SFX: Special notification sound

Then twice a day.

SFX: Special notification sound

Then he phoned me.

SFX: iPhone ringtone. It stops after a couple of rings.

He phoned me.

Phone has stopped.

And that's when it started.

SFX: Music - 'Love Theme'

SFX: Rural European-style atmos.

His voice was husky and young and full of dusty sunshine and sand. He was from Tunisia. His family kept goats.

SFX: Goats in the distance, their neck-bells ringing

They were a very rural family. And he had a lovely laugh. You can tell a lot about a person from their laugh and I loved his. I loved thinking I'd made him feel like that, feel happy.

He told me I had a very sexy voice and of course I thought he was pulling my leg. You have sexy voice, he said. What me? I said. And I laughed and he laughed and we were laughing together and I felt better. That was it. I felt better.

SFX: Love theme music out

SFX: Rural atmos out

SFX: Special notification sound. iPhone ringing under the next para

It got to the point where he'd ring me in the morning to see how I was feeling at the start of every day. Can you imagine what it feels like to have somebody do that for you? And he'd ring me in the evening and he'd talk to me until I had to go to sleep.

SFX: Love theme music in

He'd tell me everything and he'd ask me to tell him everything. I'm not going to tell you exactly what we talked about, nor the content of every conversation we had but put it this way, I felt fifty years younger. He made me feel things I hadn't felt for years. And things I didn't even – if I'm honest – ever feel with George. He made me do things I've never done before. It felt fantastic.

SFX: Love theme music out

SFX: Suburban atmos in

So inevitably we reached a point where the only logical next step was that we should meet. He was in Tunisia, I was here. What were we going to do? So I went out there.

SFX: Suburban atmos out

SFX: Cold-sounding room, with lots of flat, shiny surfaces

I told the family I was taking a little holiday. They wanted to know who I was going with. Told me I couldn't cope on my own. They really got on my nerves. Whining on. I'm not a child, I said. I'm a perfectly capable woman. They wanted to know what I was going to do when I got there. I told them I'd sit by the pool and read a book. I told them I'd go and look at caves, markets, museums anything to make the nosy buggers shut up.

SFX: Cold-sounding room effect out

I bought some new clothes. And, just in case, new underwear. You can't blame me, can you? And I went.

SFX: Airport sound effects and atmos

He met me at the airport. He was leaning against a wall looking at his phone and I recognised him straight away.

SFX: Love theme in

His dark hair was flopping over his eyes and he was smiling at something. He looked up and his eyes shone and he smiled and he ran towards me with his arms outstretched.

Can you imagine? Me!

The next few days were a whirlwind. I know that sounds a bit cliched but it was. He stayed with me in the hotel and we went out and walked on the beach at night and we went up a mountain and we lay on the sand and we listened to the sea and we fell in love.

There's no other way to put it. I loved him.

SFX: Love theme out

I couldn't bear the thought of leaving it like that so I did something that people said later was very stupid. I asked him to marry me.

SFX: Atmos: as if she's in a very large, cavernous room

What you've got to understand is that at my age you don't want to hang about. You've not got time to waste. You just have to crack on and hope for the best. Life's too short for regrets.

SFX: Cavernous atmos out

He said yes. He said he'd love to be my husband. He said he'd been waiting for me all his life, which admittedly hadn't been very long but when you know it's right, it's right, isn't it?

SFX: Gentle music in

Was I surprised he didn't introduce me to his family? No. He's a very private person and what we had was too delicate and fragile to be gawped at by other people. I understood it completely. I said I'd set him up in business so he could buy a little shop or something so we could live and I said I'd transfer the money after the wedding. I mean, I'm not daft.

I knew there'd be hell to pay if I didn't tell my family. Besides, I'm not a secretive woman. I wear my heart on my sleeve and I didn't want to be sneaking around, telling lies. So I rang Katherine (my eldest and the most difficult) and told her.

SFX: Gentle music out

SFX: Cold room atmos in, as if there are lots of flat, shiny surfaces

Well. Let's just say she wasn't best pleased. Next thing I know I'm getting phone calls from everybody. Simon, my son. His bitch wife, Katie. The grandchildren – who, it has to be said, were actually very supportive.

I told Simon and Katherine that I didn't want any fuss and they needn't bother themselves about being witnesses or coming to the wedding or anything because the air fare's expensive and I didn't want them tapping me up for hotel bills and whatnot. So I said 'don't come.' I pretended the phone signal dropped and hung up. I didn't want to get involved in a long conversation about it. I'd made up my mind and I was going to marry Alejandro.

SFX: Suburban atmos in

So we did what we had to do and I had to ask for permission from the ambassador to get married. That's what you have to do, you see. I had to prove that George was dead (fortunately I had a copy of his death certificate in my bag so that was that sorted), and then – can you believe this? - this bureaucrat gets to decide if you can get married or not.

SFX: Suburban atmos out

SFX: Optimistic music in

I bought Alejandro a pair of good trousers and a shirt and some shoes and we were on cloud nine. He'd kiss my hand and look at me saying 'you beautiful, you beautiful.' His English wasn't brilliant but we managed to get by. Sometimes you don't need words to communicate. Not when you're in love.

SFX: Optimistic music out

Anyway. That's when it all started to go pear-shaped.

SFX: Music with a military vibe in, suggesting bureaucracy

We got a call from the embassy saying could we come in and see them? I thought it was all very strange but OK. So along we went. It's very grand, the embassy. Lots of marble and rugs. Statues of naked people holding torches. We waited in this reception-type area until we were summoned. I felt very nervous. I didn't know why. But these places set you on edge, don't they? Officialdom.

So after a few minutes they called my name and we went in. The ambassador was there behind this big walnut desk and was the kind of woman you'd describe as 'a type.' She had chunky jewellery on and she needed a good orthodontist but that's by the by. Anyway, she wanted to know why we wanted to get married.

Because I love him, I said. And do you love her, she asked Alejandro. Can you imagine? I've never been so humiliated in my life, asking a question like that. But he nodded, bless him and took hold of my hand. What have you got in common, she wanted to know. Well, actually, we shared a lot of interests. Alejandro had introduced me to all sorts of things he was interested in so I said 'We share a love of rap music.' That shut her up. But it was true, actually. I'm very open-minded music-wise.

She wanted to know if I'd met his family. No. She wanted to know if he'd met my family. No. She wanted to know if I'd met any of his friends. No. Had he met my friends? No.

And then she smiled at me and I could have knocked her stupid buck teeth right down her smug throat.

SFX: Military-vibe music out

I'm sorry, she said, but I don't believe this marriage is genuine. You are seventy and recently bereaved. He is 21 and is unemployed. I cannot agree to allow you to marry. I do not believe it is in your best interests.

SFX: Cold-sounding room atmos in

Can you imagine? I felt as though I'd been kicked. Alejandro looked at me with his big brown eyes full of sadness and he just got up and walked out. He couldn't take it. He was so upset.

SFX: European-style city atmos fades in

After I'd given that woman a piece of my mind I went after him.

SFX: As if she's saying this outdoors (I could record it on my iPhone??)

But I couldn't find him. It's a busy city.

I tried ringing him. I tried messaging him. There was lots of traffic and dust and people and I stood there on the pavement not knowing what to do with myself.

SFX: European city atmos out

SFX: Cold-sounding room atmos in

But nothing. I think he was heart-broken. And as I know, the only way to deal with a broken heart is to move on.

Have I tried contacting him? Yes. Have I sent him money for the shop? Yes. Have I given up hope? Never. Were my family relieved? Very. I've not seen them for a while, actually. I didn't want the questions. The intrusion into my feelings. I don't want the third degree.

SFX: European city atmos out

SFX: Love theme music in

So it wasn't meant to be. But I know he's out there, my Alejandro, somewhere in the world. And what we shared, well it was beautiful.

And nobody can ever take that away from me. No law, no bureaucrat. That's mine, that love. And it always will be.

END CREDITS

