

The
Brain 
Finds a Leg

Martin Chatterton



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The Bit at the Beginning...

Awooooooclicktocktockclickwooooooclick!"

Infinity Override stood Titanic-style at the prow of *The Coreal*, her handwoven poncho billowing out behind her as the boat headed along the river toward postcard-perfect Farrago Bay. Beaming meaningfully at the water, she placed her hands together as if in prayer and made a noise like she'd caught her knuckle on a cheese grater.

"Awoooooo-eeeeeticktick-eeeeaaaaahwoooooo!"

The revolting screech, Captain McGlone knew from previous whale-watching trips Infinity had taken on his boat, was the sound of her singing to the humpbacks. Her voice scraped against McGlone's ears like a careless dentist's drill catching an exposed root, and his fingers curled temptingly around a nearby spanner. No, he couldn't do it, not even to Infinity. She was, after all, a paying customer, silly name or no silly name. McGlone felt that changing your name to something weird

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should be punishable by a slap in the face with a large wet fish.

He turned away from Infinity and clicked on the boat's intercom microphone.

“Good morning, everyone,” he said, his voice heavy with electronic hiss. “This is your captain speaking. I'd like everyone to put on their life vests now, please; we're coming out of the river soon and it's going to get a little bumpy. Sorry the vests don't look very attractive, folks, but the coastguards prefer me not to drown more than, say, two or three of you each trip.”

McGlone slipped *The Coreal* expertly through the narrow, treacherous channel that cut between the high rocky arms of the surrounding cliffs as the passengers, thirty-one in total, chattered excitedly and struggled into their life vests. Once in open water, the crosscurrents and waves of the ocean met the outpouring of the river and more than a few of them began to regret signing up for the whale-watching trip.

Not Infinity Override.

“It's a spiritual experience,” she said earnestly to her skinny, bearded companion, a part-time crystal healer called DJ Love who was, Captain McGlone was pleased to note, beginning to look a little green.

Twenty minutes later, *The Coreal* was long past the river mouth and out into the darker blue of true ocean. McGlone eased up on the throttle as they came to the first good whale spot of the day. He let *The Coreal* drift with the current.

DJ Love began throwing up his morning muesli (with extra yogurt, by the look of it).

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“Get it all out, brother,” said McGlone happily as he passed, slapping him on the back. “Better out than in.”

DJ Love groaned and turned his clammy face back to the water.

McGlone chuckled and lifted his binoculars. Today was looking up.



Below the boat in the perfect blue bay, about a kilometer from shore, something large and purposeful was moving toward *The Coreal*. More than fifteen meters from snout to tail, the lead humpback weighed close to forty tons. She had travelled more than four thousand miles in the past five months, in a loose pod of eight to ten whales. The whale knew all about the boat on the surface, having been in Farrago Bay for almost two weeks. There was something about the water here the whales liked.

Something different.



“Hey, Skipper!” yelled a passenger. “We actually going to see any whales on this whale-watching trip?”

“Sure, sure,” said McGlone, squinting at the water. “Guaranteed, as always.”

The pod was right where he knew it would be. And that was the problem, he thought, scratching his chin. Every year the whales moved steadily north or south, depending on the time of year, never really staying in one spot for too long. Why had this group remained?

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McGlone eased *The Coreal* closer and lifted the microphone.

“Um, folks, if you look out over the port beam—that’s the left-hand side of the ship—you’ll see some whales.”

There was, as always, a satisfying murmur of “oohs” and “aahs” as the first whale broke the surface a few hundred meters away, in full breach. It was a glorious sight. The gray and white whale rolled onto its side and smashed one giant fluke into the blue water again and again, each splash raising a chorus of wonder from the tourists.

“Can’t we get any closer?” whined a spotty kid with dreadlocks. “I thought we were gonna see them, you know, up close and personal.”

McGlone slid *The Coreal* a shade closer. A few more meters wouldn’t harm anyone. Everywhere you looked the telltale spumes of the whales erupted as they exhaled loudly. Today was a real bonanza—the whales so close the passengers could almost reach out and touch them.

“Uh, these guys are *very* close now, Skipper,” said a nervous-looking man in a yellow windbreaker. As he spoke, a big humpback crested out of the water, so near *The Coreal* that its splash sent spray flying clear across the deck.

There was a chorus of nervous laughter and, despite his instinctive disregard for anything the passengers said, McGlone found himself agreeing. The whales *were* close.

Too close.

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On the starboard side, another humpback broke free of the surface and splashed *The Coreal* heavily again. The boat rocked from side to side, and this time some of the passengers let out little yelps of alarm.

“I think it might be wise to back off a little,” said McGlone, reaching for the throttle. “Don’t want anyone getting too wet!”

He steered *The Coreal* away, allowing himself a small sigh of relief as clear water opened up between the boat and the nearest visible humpback. He was just beginning to wonder if he was getting soft, when there was a loud bump and *The Coreal* shuddered like it had hit solid rock. One or two of the tourists screamed.

Sweet Davy Jones, thought McGlone, what the hell was *that*?

Another sudden bang followed immediately from right below the bridge, and *The Coreal* shook violently from stem to stern. Almost before anyone had a chance to react, a monstrous black and gray tail rose from the water and smashed down onto the deck. Wood splintered as the railing collapsed, and two panic-stricken tourists scrambled away from the gaping hole.

Behind the boat, another humpback rolled lazily on the surface, its eye clearly visible as *The Coreal* tipped crazily forward. Infinity Override, frozen in her *Titanic* position at the prow, toppled slowly toward the water, her mouth open in surprise. A humpback calf picked her up on one massive fluke and flipped her as casually as a rubber toy, clean over *The Coreal*.

“Infinity!” squealed DJ Love as she sailed over the boat, her flowing clothes streaming out behind her.

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Infinity looked down at him helplessly as she passed, before splashing down hard into the ocean. Her poncho snagged on the gnarled fluke of a nearby humpback, which took off, Infinity in tow.

“Awooooooaaaaarrgh!” she wailed, although no one thought she was singing to the whales this time. As the whale dipped below the water, Infinity’s cries stopped with a horrible glugging sound.

There was silence for a moment and then full-scale panic broke out as *The Coreal* started to rise, stern first, out of the water.

“They’re lifting us!” screamed a fat woman in an orange dress, clinging to a lanyard. “Oh my God, they’re lifting us!”

She was right.

McGlone couldn’t believe it. He’d never seen anything like this before. No one had. Humpbacks just flat out *didn’t do this*. McGlone had heard of a few rare accidental collisions between the whales and spotter boats from time to time, but this was something on another level.

McGlone lurched toward the side of the boat and looked over. Three of the humpbacks, packed tight in together, hoisted *The Coreal* like she was made from balsa before dropping her heavily into the ocean, almost cracking the boat in two. McGlone crunched back heavily into the control panel, a large gash opening on his head. A second massive impact followed quickly from the starboard side and then another from the port.

The boat was being systematically smashed to pieces by the whales.

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With a sudden, final crack the sides of the vessel splintered and then broke. Cold water poured in and *The Coreal* began to slip below the surface fast.

“Abandon ship!” yelled McGlone, as screaming passengers leapt overboard.

The spotty tourist with the dreadlocks disappeared under the surface before rising up again, wild-eyed and spluttering. A young adult humpback picked him up by his hair and swung him from side to side in slow, lazy arcs before flicking him casually into the ocean. A few seconds later the tourist bobbed up and began swimming as fast as he could away from the whales. It seemed everyone had the same idea. The problem was doing it.

Two tourists disappeared straight into the mouth of the biggest whale right in front of McGlone. The whale spat them out again like a cat spitting out a hairball. The tourists screamed something in Japanese, hit the water, and began swimming away from the carnage. Everywhere McGlone looked it was pandemonium.

The chubby woman in orange was being tossed between two whales like a volleyball. DJ Love swam around in little circles, his head high above the water.

“Infinity!” he shouted, his voice now high-pitched and shaking with fear. “Infinity! Infinity! Where are you Infinity? Sing to them Infinity! Sing for your life! Communicate, baby, communicate!”

There was no reply. McGlone didn’t hold out much hope for poor old Infinity, whale songs or no whale songs. Suddenly DJ Love rose from the water, sitting on the back of a whale. Frozen with fear he clung onto

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the whale's blowhole as it headed straight out to the horizon. To Infinity and beyond.

McGlone had seen enough. It was every man and woman for themselves. He struck out purposefully toward the shore as *The Coreal* finally gurgled below the surface. McGlone increased his speed with grim determination, the screams of the tourists fading behind him as he fought the panic that made his breath come in ragged bursts. Arms like lead, lungs on fire. Just concentrate on each stroke. Don't think. Just *do*. Come on, man! Keep going. It might be all right. It *might*.

One hundred meters, two hundred meters.

By his reckoning he had swum almost three hundred meters and was beginning to feel he might have slipped away, when he felt the water shift underneath him. Below, the largest of the humpbacks slid past in a blur of dark shadow and controlled power.

McGlone stopped swimming, looked down at the huge black shape underneath him and knew what was coming. There was something almost poetic about it.

He looked around at the clean sweep of the bay he knew so well. Here, away from the wreckage of *The Coreal*, there was silence. It was crazy; he could see the town bobbing in and out of his vision on the rise and fall of the swell. Only that short, impossible distance away, people were going about the everyday life of Farrago Bay—drinking coffee, gossiping at The Pig, buying groceries, sunbathing—while *this* was going on out here.

McGlone was not a religious man but he lifted his eyes up to the sky.

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Directly in front of him the surface of the sea lifted in a ball, and then exploded as forty tons of humpback leapt clear of the water in an incredible display of power and energy. Like the slow-motion footage of a rocket being launched into space, a million diamond stars of foam spattered outwards and upwards as the whale reached the top of its leap. For an instant McGlone looked up, awestruck even in his final moments, at the sheer scale of the beast arcing back toward him. He almost wept at the utter majesty of it as the whale blotted out the sun.

He closed his eyes and thought of his sons, his wife, his life.

And then he thought of nothing.

Chapter 1

Two years and one day after *The Coreal* disaster, Captain McGlone's youngest son, Sheldon, was woken by a gang of vicious goblins prying open his eyelids with vinegar-coated claws and pounding a sharpened spike of white-hot metal into the top of his head. Even Sheldon, who had seen plenty of horror movies, had to admit this didn't seem likely, but he could have sworn it was *exactly* what was happening to him that Tuesday morning.

He groaned and, with the infinite care of a bomb-disposal expert in a firework factory, cracked open an eyelid. It hurt. Some time passed before Sheldon had the will to make another attempt.

"C'mon dude," he croaked, "time to show a bit of grit. You are thirteen after all. Grow *up!*"

Sheldon pushed his chest out manfully and felt a tiny swelling of bravery. He could cope with this, he *could*. What on earth had happened to reduce him to this state? A car crash? A nuclear war?

By now he was half-convinced he would open his

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eyes and see the fluorescent glare of a hospital emergency room and the face of a kindly doctor telling him a particularly tender part of his anatomy had been whipped off.

The image shook Sheldon into action.

With a superhuman effort he raised his head up from his pillow, forced his reluctant eyes open and tried to squint some meaning into his surroundings.

Oh sweet relief! Not the emergency ward after all, but the reassuring mess of his own small bedroom. Sheldon relaxed a little and struggled into a semi-upright position, one hand cradling the front of his head as last night came flooding back.

The sugar binge. Ouch.

Empty marshmallow packets drifted around the bedroom like overgrown confetti. Drifts of chocolate wrappers lay feet deep against the walls. Two super-sized Slurpee-Freez buckets (“cups” wasn’t really a big enough word) rolled lazily across the floor. They jostled for position with candy-crunch crumbs, sugar-bomb fragments, and the debris from what looked like an explosion at a chocolate factory. A half-chewed family bar of fudge lay on the floor collecting stray hair and dust balls.

Fudge! I don’t even *like* fudge, thought Sheldon. Fudge was the stuff that grannies ate, wasn’t it?

With a groan he caught sight of the remains of his mother’s gift box of assorted chocolate liqueurs. A vague memory of scarfing down fistfuls of miniature chocolate-bottles filled with vile liquids that tasted of medicine jumped into Sheldon’s mind. *That* was what

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had done the real damage. A whole box of chocolate liqueurs. Bad idea.

Sheldon binged when he was unhappy and last night he had been, no question, the unhappiest he could remember since Dad died. “Lost at sea.” That was how they’d put it when they finally called off the search parties. Three little words hiding the story: four dead and a boatload of deranged tourists washed ashore gibbering about humpback whales attacking like wolves. Two years had gone by since then and no one was any nearer understanding what had happened out there.

Sheldon lay back and tried to clear his head. It promised to be a difficult task. As the summer rain began to batter down on the corrugated-tin roof, Sheldon sighed. He sighed a lot these days.

What a life. What a stinking miserable excuse for an existence, thought Sheldon. What was the point of even getting out of bed?

Then he brightened as he thought of something. At least it wasn’t a school day.

“SHEL-DON!” wailed his mother from downstairs. “Get up, you’re late for school!”

Life sucks, thought Sheldon and pulled the covers back over his head.