

Bermuda's diminutive 21 square miles are surrounded by 400 square miles of shallow reefs extending seven miles to the east, west and north of Bermuda.



A female humpback comes for a closer look, followed by her male escort.

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Bermuda's reefs are further north than any other reefs in the world.



A curious female humpback and male escort inspect the boat.



A humpback in the middle of its pelagic migration in the crystal-clear North Atlantic Ocean off Bermuda.

CHAPTER TWO

My first encounter — Magical Whale

That first season in 2007, trying to film whales, was disastrous. After six weeks attempting to film whales underwater, I didn't have a single minute of usable footage. Hefting the 55-pound underwater housing from our home to the car, the car to the punt, the punt into the boat and vice versa had precipitated carpal tunnel syndrome, causing pain and weakness in both wrists, which eventually required surgery. My body was bruised and worn out from back-to-back, nine-hour days standing on the swaying tower of a small single-engine motorboat. My eyes were red from searching for whales. I was wind-burned and sunburned. I had found the whales, but unlike photographing them from the boat, getting into the water to film these giants in the open ocean is much, much more difficult. Visibility underwater is not the same as it is above. To obtain useable footage the whales needed to be extraordinarily close and, because they are in their element and can swim ten times faster than I can, they had to approach me. It was up to the whale to initiate close underwater contact not the other way around.

After two months of constant effort I was frustrated, tired and empty-handed. I kept consoling myself that if it was easy to film whales underwater in the middle of the ocean, everyone would be doing it. I had known it would be an ambitious undertaking, which is why I had given myself three years to make a sixty-minute documentary for Bermuda schoolchildren. At the end of that first season, I reminded myself that I still had another two seasons to go as I kept heading out, day after day, despite the local fishermen's opinions that the migrating whales had already gone.

There were many in Bermuda who predicted that I would not have an easy time filming whales underwater. They were proving prophetic. I had no clue as to where the humpbacks were, or what they were doing around Bermuda, beyond a vague idea that they were migrating northwards. It seemed the more time I spent on the water observing the humpbacks, the more questions I had.

At the end of April, I was physically exhausted. I was also emotionally spent from the unrealized expectations I had placed on myself to make the documentary.

The season was rapidly turning into a bust.

And then I had my encounter with Magical Whale.

It was almost May 2007. I trolled once again along South Shore westwards of Devonshire Bay, where I kept the boat, and continued past Sally Tuckers, the south-west corner of the Bermuda platform. With my two volunteer crew, we crossed the 4000-foot-deep canyon separating the Bermuda platform from a seamount called Challenger Bank, 15 miles

offshore. Bermuda was now out of sight and we were effectively cast loose in the middle of the Atlantic. For a small, old, boat with no GPS and equipped with a single-engine outboard, this was a long way out into the open ocean. By midday we hadn't seen a thing. We stopped and took a lunch break.

We continued looking for whales but came instead across a pod of bottlenose dolphins. It was a mirror-calm day and I took advantage of the conditions to film the dolphins from the bowsprit of our little boat, holding the camera inches above the ocean surface as the dolphins rode the boat's bow wave. I put on my wetsuit and slid into the water with the underwater camera. And then I noticed a change in the dolphins' body language. They became agitated and their clicking sounds became louder and more frequent. I glanced below and saw an immense, dark shape immediately below me.

The ominous shadow was a whale.

The whale surfaced, looked me in the eye, and stared.

It was three feet away.

After weeks of searching for whales, this whale had found me.

Over the next two hours the fully grown adult humpback performed intricate ballet movements around me, under me and beside me. At times it almost touched me. I did not have a sense of fear, although I did feel intimidated as the huge animal repeatedly swam directly at me and then dived, its massive 13-foot-wide flukes passing within arm's reach underneath me. A deliberate sideswipe of its huge tail would have killed me. And yet this huge animal was incredibly gentle. It knew exactly where I was in relation to any part of its body. The delicate barnacle-covered tips of its long 16-foot flippers flexed – like the fingers of a human hand – as they reached out and almost stroked my face. Often it lay quietly on its back underneath me as if embracing me, its pectoral fins extending either side of me.

Several times the massive fluke of its tail flicked within inches of me. We were so close to each other that when the whale dived, the vortex of water sucked me down behind the 45-ton cetacean. Repeatedly it placed his gigantic head one-and-a-half feet directly under me and remained motionless, as if listening to my heartbeat. But it never made a sound. I could easily have reached out and patted this gargantuan animal. If it surfaced, I would roll off its back with my 66-pound camera bouncing off its head. It moved slightly and hung in the water beside me, lifting its nose out of the water so its tennis-ball-sized eye peered directly at me. I could see its dark pupil and the textured striations of the pale membrane rotating the grey-blue eye in its socket as it observed me.

Opposite: Looking into the eyes of a highly intelligent animal is a profoundly life-changing experience.

Below: A curious calf swishing its tail as it turns. I've learned to be cautious with calves who don't seem to fully grasp the size of their rapidly growing bodies.





Opposite: A calf maneuvers in shallow water to come for a closer look while her mother looks on benignly.

This was not a curious humpback calf swimming by with its indulgent mother. This was an adult male deliberately attempting to make contact.

The experience was unreal. I did not feel scared. The whale had approached me when I was already in the water. The decision was its, not mine. I was a mute bystander to what must have been a unique experience for both of us. Were it not for the fact that I had an underwater video camera documenting everything, and another video camera recording the encounter from the boat, this might have been put down to a fisherman's doubtful tale of a close encounter with a giant sea monster.

It was a powerful one-on-one experience, the whale totally focused on my presence. Several times its fins or flukes pummelled the water within inches of me, as if testing my resolve, but strangely, I still didn't feel threatened. I was intimidated, yes. But I also knew this humpback understood I wasn't a danger to it.

The only time I felt anxious was when I was about 100 feet from the boat and another whale approached. The two whales scuffled and I was caught in the middle. All I could see was white foam from the thrashing of their flukes and pectoral fins. I was sucked down in the maelstrom of water, but neither whale hit me. Eventually the other whale swam off, but not before my crew members photographed its uplifted tail revealing a black candle-like pattern on its white fluke.

When I climbed into the boat to change the memory cards in the camera the whale came alongside the boat and slapped the water beside us with its tail and pectoral fins. It trumpeted like an enraged elephant, the spray from his blowholes saturating us with vapour.

The whale was twice the length of our 22-foot vessel. Surfacing right beside us, it seemed to have the dimensions of a submarine. During the whole time I was in the boat, as if annoyed that I was no longer in the water with it, the whale continued to trumpet and wallop the water with its pectoral fins and flukes, just missing the boat by a fraction.

When I finished reloading the camera, I slipped off the stern back into the ocean. The whale swam quietly towards me until we were once again only feet apart. It continued its silent courtship, effectively seducing me with its presence.

At times Magical Whale (that's what we decided to call him some days later) wasn't so accommodating. Sometimes he seemed to test my tenacity. There were occasions when he flicked his tail at my tiny body, creating a splash and surge of water that submerged me. There were times when it launched its 45-tons along the surface, directly at me only to drop below, his massive flukes rising and then plunging vertically downwards right in front of the

camera. At other times he lunged at me only to deftly duck underneath so that the entirety of his length passed not more than a foot or so beneath me. Each time this happened his lethal 13-foot-wide tail remained motionless as it slipped harmlessly by.

And yet it could have swiped me as easily as I might swat a fly or step on an ant. And, considering how humans once slaughtered these majestic creatures to the brink of extinction, there was every reason for this whale to take retribution. Its mother and father, its brothers and sisters, its offspring, could easily have fallen victim to the whalers' harpoons before the International Whaling Commission's worldwide moratorium on whaling in 1986 ended the official massacre.

The extreme optics of the 120-degree wide-angle dome port contrasts with the above-water footage taken by one of our crew members in the boat. The underwater footage seems almost unreal, dreamlike or computer-generated, while the above-water footage is very real and alarming, giving a striking demonstration of the differences in scale between a miniscule human adult and a full-grown humpback.

When a fishing boat trailing several fishing lines started circling persistently around us, Magical Whale disappeared – this time for good. The entire encounter lasted two hours and yet it seemed like seconds. It was an intense, profound and disturbing experience.

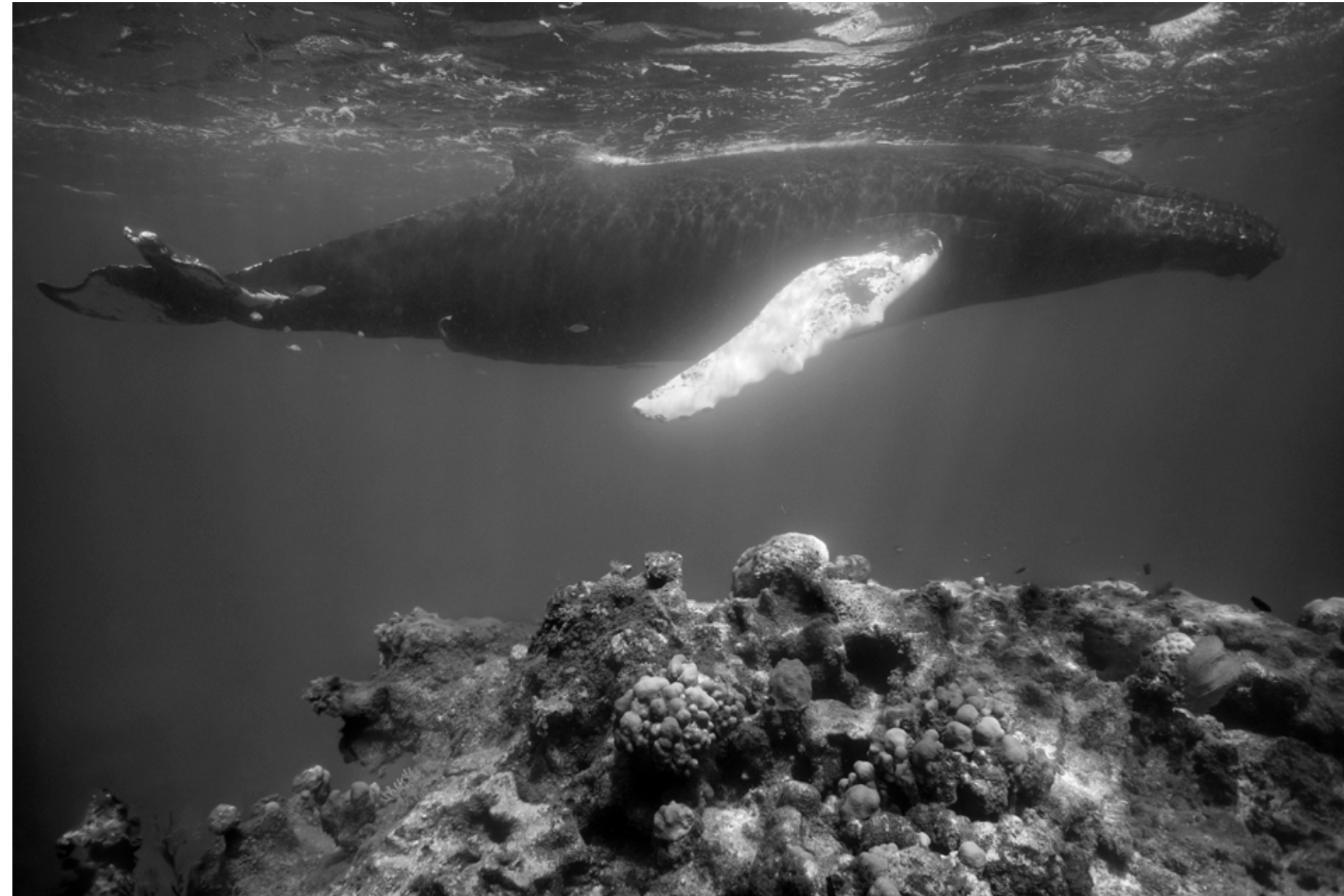
Repeatedly I kept asking myself, 'What was it thinking?' I put myself in the whale's place and wondered what it would have made of our meeting. I simply couldn't turn my mind off as I tried to make sense of the encounter. For a week afterwards, I found it impossible to sleep.

Side-by-side, eye-to-eye, staring intently into the window of the soul of a highly intelligent wild animal that dwarfed me in size was a both a humbling and powerful experience. I was at a complete loss for words to rationalize what had happened.

I couldn't fathom why Magical Whale had approached me or why he had behaved the way he did. I kept asking myself, what was going on in the brain of this animal when he stared at me so intently? What *was* he thinking when he held his nose out of the water so that our eyes were at the same level and he watched me so thoughtfully? These questions kept circulating obsessively in my head.

I inferred that the whale must have been familiar with boats. It knew I was a creature who had abandoned the safety of the boat to be in the water with him. But surely his persistent behaviour couldn't be explained by simple curiosity?

I have little doubt that the whale had tried to communicate with me. My inability to connect was entirely my own shortcoming. Like most of my species, I am so used to using



Above: A mother uses the protected shallow waters off Bermuda to rest with her calf on their long migration northward.



Right: A female humpback approaches, her forward vision provided by the bulging stalks on either side of her head.



A whale emerges from out of nowhere and is often joined by other inquisitive humpbacks.

words for communication that the primeval ability to commune without verbal language has atrophied beyond my capabilities.

To put my mind at rest, I concluded this whale was a 'friendly', a whale that makes a habit of approaching boats in its feeding grounds. It had to be as simple as that.

So profoundly affected was I by my experience with this old, unknown whale, at the end of the week, sleep deprived and exhausted, I had to take sleeping pills to help me sleep.

Studying the details of the worn trailing edge of its fluke, and the massive scar on its lower right jaw, I guessed this whale was on the older side of average. But we have no idea how old humpbacks can become because we've been killing the biggest and oldest ones for centuries.

The black and white pattern on the underside of a humpback's fluke is as unique as a human fingerprint. I sent the photos of the underside of the fluke to be identified by any individual or institution that had a catalogue of whale fluke IDs. Surprisingly, there was no match. Not only was this not a 'friendly' whale, it appeared he had never been seen, or at least never ID'ed before.

The other whale with the candle-like mark I did match. It was photographed in Labrador in 1976, over thirty years earlier, when Professor Hal Whitehead started IDing humpbacks by the unique pattern on the ventral side of their flukes.

For months after this life-changing experience, Magical Whale consumed my waking consciousness and dominated my dreams. I studied the footage and became intimate with every part of his body. Just like that day on the beach with Elsa when the whale had lunged out of *its* world into *ours*, I had slipped overboard and submerged myself in the watery realm of the whales.

Every night as I lay in bed I would think about Magical Whale as I had seen him, underwater. I found reliving the experience in this way to be a calming exercise. It gave me a sense of perspective on my life, on myself and humanity. I had been touched in more ways than one by this whale's presence. I was no longer the same person I had been before my encounter with Magical Whale.

I felt immensely privileged. Had anyone else looked into the eye of a whale for such a prolonged period? Not a calf, or a whale stranded on a beach, or a harpooned whale, but an adult whale that voluntarily approached to inspect a human, eye-to-eye.

I scrolled the internet, looking for books or footage that might be similar. I bought all the whale films I could lay my hands on. It became more and more obvious to me that not only had I had a unique encounter; the mesmerizing experience had been uniquely captured on both



Opposite: A female and her male escort execute a perfectly choreographed dive.

Below: Humpback calves are keen to play, often coming quite close to the camera.

my high-definition underwater video camera as well as the video camera on the boat.

For weeks I kept quiet about Magical Whale, finding it difficult to comprehend, let alone explain to others what I was feeling. For months I didn't dare share the intimate moments revealed by the footage. I needed somehow to get a handle on what had happened myself first. I relived that experience over and over in my mind, trying to make sense of it, trying to understand the meaning of our meeting.

It was quite a while after my encounter with Magical Whale before I could talk about the experience without becoming emotional. I knew, or rather felt, that I had been in the presence of an exceptionally intelligent being. I was, unusually, still at a loss to adequately describe how I felt. In some ways it was as if I had looked at the mirror image of myself and beyond, into the depths of my own soul. Only to those closest to me I said it was like looking into the eye of some supreme intelligence. It was, I imagined, how it would feel to look into the intelligent eyes of God.



Aerial footage of a mother and calf. The male escort's throat pleats are expanded subsequent to foraging on the upwellings on the edge of the Bermuda platform.

Opposite: Returning to Bermuda after a day looking for whales while navigating carefully through the labyrinthian maze of reefs surrounding Bermuda.

