

Emma Curtiss - The Cetacean Mammal

‘What I said. I want to die.’

Before he lost the use of his body, Stephen Charters was an active man; he had been a naval diver and at the time of his accident worked for the FBI, helping to recover cadavers from the depths of America’s lakes and rivers and sometimes from the sea.

Stephen came off his motorbike on Pacific Coast Highway one warm October morning and found that his life had changed completely, his world now consisting solely of what he could see, taste and hear and smell. A year was enough. He summoned his brothers: Philip, an internationally renowned researcher in the transference of human organs and Maurice, a marine biologist and dolphin expert working in Florida’s Grassy Key. They listened to him, tried to argue him out of his decision and went away to think. When they returned Maurice was trembling with suppressed excitement. Philip was calm.

‘We have a proposition,’ Maurice said, dragging a chair round so that Stephen didn’t need to move his head.

Stephen said wearily, ‘I don’t want a proposition.’

‘Hear us out.’ Maurice turned to look up at Philip who nodded. ‘We want to attempt a brain transplant.’

There was a brief silence broken by Stephen’s laughter.

‘You have got to be kidding.’

Philip rubbed his hands through what was left of his hair. ‘Listen to us. You don’t want to live, and we respect that. It’s your choice. But you could be part of something great.’ He paused. ‘We’re not talking about a dead body. We’re talking about transplanting your brain into a live dolphin.’

Somewhere outside the wail of sirens caught their attention and faded. Stephen gazed at Philip, his useless hands resting on the arms of his wheelchair, his head lolling

against the support. Maurice leaned forward to wipe a dribble of saliva from his brother's chin.

'A dolphin,' Stephen said. 'You want to put my brain in a fucking dolphin?'

'Yes,' Philip said.

'Worst case scenario?'

'It doesn't work and you die.'

'You're wrong. The worst case scenario is if it does work and I live.'

Philip leant forward, clasping his hands. 'Just think, Stephen. You'd be in the water, free. You'd be able to help with research. You'd be famous. A dolphin with the brain of a human; that would be a greater feat than being the first man on Mars. You would go down in history.'

'This is Annie, Stephen.'

Stephen looked at the girl who was going to be his guide, if all went well. She was a Californian, a dolphin specialist from UNESCO. She'd come to them through a maze of secrecy; through whispers in corridors and phone-calls in the small hours. She was thirty years old, blond, lean and tanned; the sort of woman Stephen would have attempted to sleep with once upon a time. Now he just felt disappointment. She was little more than an animal trainer; paid to work with him before the operation so that when and if he woke as a fully functioning fish, they would have communication strategies up and running.

'So,' Maurice said. 'I'll leave you two to get to know each other shall I?'

Stephen didn't say a word. Annie pulled up a chair and studied his face.

'What?' he snarled.

'Why are you doing this?'

'You're not here to ask questions. You're here to teach me to speak dolphin.'

Her smile didn't falter. 'You seriously think you're going to make it?'

He paused. He had grown unused to negativity from others since his accident. It was all about finding the bright-side. He thought he might prefer this. 'No. I think it's as likely as...' But he couldn't think what it was as likely as and didn't want to say pigs flying. 'Can we get on with it? I'm tired.'

'Sure,' she smiled. 'Let's start by exploring the means of communication you will have available to you and then see how we can develop those so that you're able to express yourself at a workable speed. Pointing and signposting are the obvious ones, but there's been a lot of research into whistles and clicks.'

'Do you have to be so fucking cheerful all the time?'

The smile faltered and a flash of spirit enlivened her blue eyes. 'I don't have to be here. Why don't you go back to your cosy little flat and have some stranger wipe your arse for the rest of your life. What do I care?'

He burst out laughing and when he finished Annie dabbed his tears without asking. He found he didn't mind. He smelled her skin and the touch of her fingers made his nose tickle so he had to ask her to scratch it. 'We can start again. I won't be rude.'

'Be as rude as you like. If it helps, I think you'll make a very good fish.'

'I won't be a fish. I'll be a cetacean mammal.'

It didn't happen quickly, and Stephen didn't want to admit it was happening at all, but he began to listen for her footsteps. A person's steps were as immediately recognisable as facial features and he knew hers like he knew those of his brothers, his masseuse, his various doctors and therapists. Annie's were quick and energetic with an edge of defensiveness and made his heart pump harder and his mouth go dry. Soon, despite their bickering, he looked forward to her coming with a wretched intensity.

Six months after they first met, Annie curled herself up beside him, folded her arms around him and pressed her lips to his. 'I love you.'

'Don't be ridiculous.' But he couldn't help the smile that broke across his face.

'Why not? It's true.'

In the morning he watched her walk naked across the room and vanish into the bathroom. He listened to her pee, shower and brush her teeth. When she came out she stood framed in the doorway, smiling at him.

'What?'

'We could stop all this,' she said. 'We could stay as we are.'

'No.'

The operation was a success in that the creature that emerged from theatre was alive. It remained to be seen if it had the cognitive function of its human donor. The body of Stephen Charters was quietly laid to rest, his vital organs distributed to various hospitals around America.

When Stephen regained consciousness he had no memory of the time before, of the decisions taken. He wasn't even sure what country he was in. All he knew was that he was submerged in seawater and restricted to such a small space that he couldn't turn. Above him, haloed by white light, faces distorted by ripples gurned and mouthed. The next time he woke, muzzy and scared, he had been moved outside. The faces were there again and he recognised his brothers. They told him to be calm, that everything had gone well. They placed their warm hands on his back and then he was lowered gently into a pool. He panicked at first, cracking his head against the side until it bled. Then he saw a shape like a

bird rise, arc and plunge into the water. It flipped round and swam towards him, blond hair floating around a mask. Annie. She made the OK sign and ran her hand along his flesh to meet his arm. He tried to hold up his own hand but although it moved he couldn't see it. He turned and twisted and caught sight of a fin.

He remembered then. He looked at her and she stared back at him and smiled. Bubbles rose from her mouth. She made a sign that he recognised. Hello. Hello. His heart became calmer, he found his rhythm, swam around her, turned figures of eight and let her hold onto his fin and dive with him and then rise. He popped his head out of the pool and bobbed. There was Philip. There was Maurice. He opened his mouth and cried out to them and the sound that came fell somewhere between a rattle and a song. His brothers held their arms out and then ran at the pool and leapt in.

That was euphoria. That was release. He was no longer a man but he could move, he could dance in the water and play. And then there was Annie. Her very presence sang to him. Memories came back slowly. They had lain in a bed together and she had kissed him. What could she be to him now? His energy drained quickly away. He had made a terrible mistake. Death would have been the better path.

Maurice noticed. 'Is it so bad, Stephen? You're a scientific miracle. You'll go down in history.'

But once the secret got out, which it inevitably would, his life...what would his life be? Feelings of claustrophobia engulfed him. If anything happened to his brothers, to Annie, what would become of him? Would he be bought by a freak show, pointed at by fat American kids? Fish waggled in front of his face by strangers' hands. Too late now.

Some days Stephen would become almost hysterical with adrenaline, darting through the water, leaping out, spinning and diving, tasting the salt, feeling the white throb of the

Florida sun. Annie's laughter followed him. He took fish from her hands, gulped it down with a surprising lack of disgust. He tested his brain, gave himself sums and asked himself questions about books he had read and films he had seen; listed members of his family back through three generations; remembered the names of old lovers and his brother's birthdays. It took a while to capture and pin down each piece of information but it was all there, waiting to be eased like whelks from their shells. He felt small moments of triumph when he located one, but when he remembered Annie's naked body he swam away from her because he couldn't bear to know that that side of his life was over.

'Stephen!' Annie called.

She stripped naked and dived into the pool. It was the middle of the night. She swam to him and kissed his cheek, ran her hands over him then dived down and up again. He loved to play. He liked to scoop her up and throw her. He liked her to ride him round the enclosure. She kissed his hard grey flesh and the end of his nose with enthusiasm. She didn't know what it did to him.

Philip and Maurice had been talking about introducing him to another dolphin, a female, so that he would have company. Stephen tried to tell them that Annie was enough, but they wanted to see how his new brothers and sisters would react to him. The first female refused to have anything to do with him at all. The second behaved aggressively. The third was playful but obviously confused.

Stephen prods the letters on Annie's board. 'No good,' he says. 'No need.'

'Ok.' She pauses. 'They're talking about getting you a new trainer.'

He rocked his grey head from side to side.

'Your brothers think I'm too close to you, Stephen. They don't like it that I have more influence with you than they do.' She swam to the side and he followed her, nudging

her, pushing his nose against her until she turned and wrapped her legs around him. They sank into the deep. Later, as dawn unfolded Annie lifted herself out of the water and walked away leaving a trail of wet footprints on the concrete path.

Annie sat on the edge of her bed tearing a tissue into shreds. She was terrified. If the baby was conceived prior to Stephen's operation, then there would be something to celebrate; if after, then the possible consequences didn't bear thinking about. Maybe, if that was the case, she would spontaneously abort. Eventually, when it seemed that wasn't going to happen she went to see Stephen. He torpedoed towards her and with a flick of his tail burst into the bright air, ecstatic.

She couldn't tell him. How could she before she knew the truth?

Maurice was the first to notice. When she refused to go to hospital he offered to do the ultrasound himself, employing the equipment they used for the dolphins. He wiped her with gel and ran the scanner over her flesh. She quivered with the cold and noticed his hands were trembling.

'Show me,' she said, and he angled the screen towards her. She made out a shape that bounced to the beat of its heart, long with a ridge running through it and a pea-shaped head.

Maurice placed his hand on her stomach. 'You'll have a termination, Annie,' he said. He spoke quietly but she detected fear. 'This could kill you.'

'No.' She shook her head. 'I'll carry him as far as I can, then have a caesarean. This is Stephen's baby. I'm not going to get rid of it.'

'This is not a game,' Maurice snapped. 'You cannot play with nature. What if it's neither one nor the other? You'll have created a freak. It would be cruel to ask something like that to live.'

'You're the guys who created the freak,' she pointed out. 'Why did you do that to him? He's so lonely.'

She jumped off the bed and slammed out of the room, walking quickly, the gel still glistening on her stomach. She went to Stephen and touched his fin against her belly, pressed her forehead to his.

'I'm having your baby.'

Stephen looked at her. It was at times like this he wished he was capable of any other facial expression than an inane smile. He rattled his throat and tried to show by his eyes that she mustn't worry, that he was happy for her, although he wasn't.

'It's ours,' she said. 'Yours and mine. It's a dolphin. Maurice says it probably won't survive. I just wanted you to know. We created something.' She started to cry. 'What am I going to do?'

Stephen slid away from her and hid himself in the shadows. This was his fault. He should have been stronger and denied Maurice and Philip their chance of glory. What a mess.

At six months, the brothers took Annie into theatre. The foetus already weighed more than the average human baby and they calculated that this window would provide mother and child's best chance of survival.

Annie called him Ralph, after her father, and fed him from a bottle. He was pale pink and his fins were webbed fingers. He had large brown eyes, heavily fringed, that reminded her of Stephen, human ears and a way of making sounds that were a cross between a cat and a baby. He sang from the back of his throat and gurgled at her. She stroked his rubbery head and felt the soft fuzz of baby hair.

Four months after Ralph's birth, Hurricane Sandra hit the Florida coast and the fences came down, torn apart and rolled back by the wind. At first Stephen remained close to Grassy Key, watching the other dolphins, the ones who were bred in captivity and who made no move to escape. Beyond him the waves were whipped up, black and white against a purple sky riven with lightening. It was terrifying, and yet this was his only chance. He left, diving deep to avoid being hurtled against the bay, swimming out into the darkness and the unknown.

He followed pods but was never accepted; he followed boats but no one spoke to him, the sailors merely laughed and shouted. From time to time he came home but he didn't let Annie see him. It was for her own good. Sometimes she stood at the edge of the enclosure, clinging to the fence, watching the horizon. So many seasons passed that he lost touch with his former self. All he had was space and loneliness.

One year he returned to find a young man standing on the wooden pier. There was something about him that made Stephen's brain sing. He yearned for the boy. He swam close and rested his head between his sandaled feet, met his piercing blue gaze and when the young man crouched and held out a hand Stephen saw a long scar at his hair line. He spoke to him, a spatter of throat creaks and clicks. He wanted to know where Annie was.

'Mum got cancer,' Ralph said.

Stephen flipped round and started to swim away, his heart hammering, he felt like he had when he first woke from the operation.

'Will you wait?' Ralph yelled. 'Please, Dad. I'll be back.'

He waited until the sun went down and he would have waited until the stars that he navigated by burnt out. But then he heard the low groan of the gates being opened and a dark shadow flashed by, whipped round and butted up against him. A long, rose-pink scar

circled the dolphin's head. He knew it was Annie even before she brought herself close to him and pressed her body along the length of his.

The water was sliced by a diver, bubbles sweeping up to the surface. Ralph struck out towards the pair, opened his mouth and a sound emerged, a song that wound like ivy around Stephen's heart.

They stayed together for hours and then as it began to grow light Ralph placed his hands on his parents' fins and nudged them out to sea. Just once they rose together out of the water, just once was enough to see two men rushing along the pier, jackets flapping, arms outstretched.

And then they were gone.