



life studies

A man who knows the depths of the ocean and a man who knows the heights of power, and the things they picked up along the way.

SON OF A SON OF A SAILOR

Fabien Cousteau stares out to sea aboard the *Sam Gray*. Trovata military button-down. Incotex pants.

Sittings Editor:
Justin Arroyo.

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abien Cousteau is smiling. The sky is perfectly clear, the wind is still, and the ocean is almost flat. The ten-foot swells that kept the Cousteau dive team grounded all week have melted away completely. We drop anchor just off the Farallones, a barren chain of craggy lumps that jut above the Pacific, 26 miles west of San Francisco. Each fall, when the harbor seals come to molt, these waters grow thick with great white sharks.

Cousteau is here to shoot a program for PBS about the National Marine Sanctuary System (the Gulf of the Farallones is one of fourteen federal underwater preserves), and while he's spent the last half hour assuring me that the giant predators are shyer than you'd think, the nervous banter on deck tells another story. Cousteau zips his dry suit over jeans and a fleece pullover, checks and rechecks his air tanks and regulator, slips on a pair of long, dartlike fins, and, ready to dive, turns to his crewmates and asks, "Okay, who's got the tuna heads?" A goateed crewman

Photographed by Julian Dufort

laughs, "They're in your pants!" Two more chum jokes and five splashes later, Cousteau and crew are in the water.

Don Santee, who has worked with the Cousteau family since Fabien's grandfather Jacques was just beginning to reveal the wonders of the undersea world to television viewers around the globe in the 1960s, squints intently after the divers and orders those of us left on deck to keep an eye out for fins. "All you need," says Santee, the expedition leader for this dive, "is one retarded shark that doesn't know it's not the right season."

There are no sharks today, but he is right to be wary: Troubles have been circling the Cousteau clan for years. It's been almost a decade since Captain Cousteau died at 87, and the family has been torn by all-too-public rifts, court battles, and revelations that the patriarch was not the saintly figure we all wanted to think he was. "When my grandfather died, he pretty much left the ship without a helmsman," Fabien says discreetly. Until recently, it was easy to believe that the Cousteau legacy would go the way of the *Calypso*, which has been left to quietly rot in the French port of La Rochelle while the family fights over its title.

But things are beginning to turn around. Today's shoot is part of a six-part series, *Jean-Michel Cousteau: Ocean Adventures*, that Fabien's father, Jean-Michel, is making for PBS and that features Fabien in the role of field producer, doing a little bit of everything—diving, interviewing, and schlepping a lot of gear. Fabien's own show, *Shark: Mind of a Demon*, aired this past summer on CBS. "It feels like a whole new beginning," he says.

Cousteau, now 38, learned to scuba dive on his fourth birthday in the pool of his family's Los Angeles home. While other kids went on vacations, the Cousteaus went on expeditions—to Papua New Guinea when Fabien was seven, then to the Amazon, the St. Lawrence, the Mediterranean, the Sea of Cortés. "It's a blur," he says of his seagoing childhood, "but a beautiful blur." When he finished college at Boston University, where he majored in environmental economics, he did his best to ignore the call of the ocean and pursued a business career on land. But, looking back on his years working for textile-design firms, he says, "I felt like I was slipping into a coma."

Cousteau eventually found his way back into the water, producing an

MSNBC documentary about shark attacks. Not long after it aired in 2002, *People* named him the world's sexiest explorer. ("We just ride him like a Brahma bull for that," hoots Gary Holland, the dive crew's soundman.) In 2003, Cousteau teamed up with an engineer to design a one-man submarine shaped like a great white shark. The idea was to fool real sharks into thinking he was one of them, or at least "to

be able to observe them in a manner that was less obtrusive than a diver in a cage." (Cousteau dubbed the craft *Troy*; his crew less optimistically called it *Sushi*.) Scientific curiosity aside, the sub helped fulfill a fantasy he had nursed since childhood: "When I was a kid, it's not like I wanted to build a sharklike submarine—I wanted to be a shark."

With Cousteau at the helm (or more accurately, lying flat on his stomach with his fists on the controls), *Troy* has proven to be, in his words, a "viable observation platform." Even so, it has had its share of bugs. Asked to name them, he laughs, "Can I just tell you what worked? That would be a lot quicker."

for all its excitement, the life Cousteau has embraced does have its drawbacks. It's hard to keep any kind of meaningful relationship afloat when you're not only out on the road, but underwater. "In the last nine months, I've been home maybe a total of four or five weeks. I have a dog that doesn't even recognize me anymore."

When this shoot is done, Cousteau will head home to New York. But even there he'll have his hands full. He'll finish editing *Shark: Mind of a Demon*, which stems from the *Troy* project, and writing a book to accompany its DVD release. He's signed on to direct a proposed marine-education center on New York's Governors Island and, on top of that, he's working on a children's book that sounds vaguely autobiographical: It's about a young merman born into a royal family whose parents "are always off doing their kingly and queenly things."

Like most of Cousteau's work, it will carry a serious ecological message: The oceans are in trouble. In the last 50 years, Cousteau says, "We have lost over 90 percent of the pelagic fish"—a group that includes tuna, marlin, and some sharks—"in our oceans." Within his lifetime, he's seen reefs once bursting with life transformed into colorless ruins. "We're all responsible for the degradation of this planet," Cousteau says, drying off as we sail back toward the Golden Gate. "So we're all responsible for its rehabilitation." —BEN EHRENREICH

FROM THE DEEP

The seaman emerges from the waters of Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary, off the coast of Georgia.



THE OCEANOGRAPHER

Fabien Cousteau would be just another land-lubber without his custom-fit flippers, Tintin comics, and shark-shaped submersible.



SEA TREASURES

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Ocean Futures team custom two-piece Force Fins for aquatic propulsion; the Tintin comic that inspired Cousteau's shark sub, *Troy*; a model of the submersible; Cousteau's dog, Heidi; the homemade, leather-bound journal Cousteau carried in Nepal; a Smurf in diving gear; a wall-mounted weather station; a Seafood Watch card for healthy eating and healthy oceans; a Kirby Morgan SuperMask with rebreather pod, Cousteau's "life-support system" underwater.

Photographed by Richard Pierce.

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