

LAGUNA BEACH, 1953—two years before the very scary dream

preface

I WOKE UP SCREAMING. It was late—two or three in the morning. The whole house was asleep, and I could hear the sound of surf outside the open windows of the little vacation beach house we had rented. I was soaked with sweat, terrified, not sure if I was awake or dreaming. I was seven years old.

Clutching my stomach, my face a mask of pain and confusion, I stumbled into my parents' bedroom. My mom and dad rushed me into the bathroom, splashed water on my face, and did their best to calm me down.

Soon enough I was back to normal, a sleepy, exhausted kid who just wanted to go back to bed. Everything was fine.

But the next night it happened again. And the next. And the one after that. The same, terrible dream.

And here's how it went:

I'm sitting on a beach, the middle of a glorious day, and a voice speaks to me out of the clear blue sky. God's voice.

"Ted," it says.

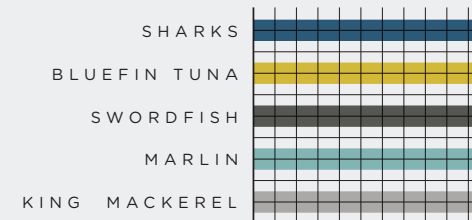
A bucket appears in the sand beside me.

And then a spoon filled with holes appears in my hand.

"You have one hour to empty the entire ocean into this bucket," says the voice, "or the world will explode. And it will be your fault."

Now, clearly this dream represents your basic, run-of-the-mill messiah complex, not uncommon among us actor types. But if you're in the mood to grant me a little poetic license, you could say this was the awakening of my concern for our world's oceans. And if so, then while I've spent the past twenty-five years actively working on the various issues facing our oceans, if you count the scary dream, my concern for the seas has actually been stirring inside me for more than a half century—for almost my entire life.

By the way, around the time I had that dream, there were this many of the "big fish"—the lions and tigers of the sea—in the ocean:



Fifty-five years later, as I'm writing this preface, only this many remain:



I grew up about as far away from the ocean as you can get—first in the hills outside Tucson, Arizona, then among the Ponderosa pines of the northern part of that state, just outside of Flagstaff.

My father was an archaeologist and later became the director of the Museum and Research Center of Northern Arizona. Our home, just an hour south of the Grand Canyon, was routinely visited by some of the world's leading scientists in the fields of geology, paleontology, anthropology, and, of course, archaeology.

My mother was very involved in our church and led a spiritual life, not just inside that Episcopal chapel but out in the foothills and forests that surrounded our home. She loved nothing more than going out for a walk. She took us—me and my sister—with her all the time, and when you went for a walk with my mother, you better not be in a hurry. Because she took in everything, she saw beauty everywhere, and she always stopped to relish it.

The more you look, the more you see. That's something my mom taught me. She was the great appreciator. My father was much more the scientist—studying things, dissecting them, taking them apart, sorting them out, putting them back together, understanding what made them tick.

And, although I wasn't aware of it at the time—I was busy playing with my friends, in the canyons and ravines around our house, just being a kid—I have no doubt that what my parents' lives stood for back then somehow sunk in, providing a foundation for the advocacy work that I do today.

I strongly believe that science and spirituality go hand in hand, and any conversation we have about the environment has to take both into account. Unless all our actions to save the oceans are based on science, we will end up doing more harm than good. And unless we acknowledge our spiritual connectedness to one another and to this planet we live on—unless we realize that almost everything each of us does has an impact on somebody else—we may never rise above our self-interests in order to gather the collective forces we need to face the environmental challenges that now surround us.



BOULDER, COLORADO—on the way to Tucson

Speaking of self-interest, I was pretty much consumed by it until my mid-thirties. It was then, around my fourth year of playing Sam Malone on the TV show *Cheers*, that I noticed being a celebrity was not very different from being a five-year-old in a room full of adults. Everyone is focused on you. All the attention and energy in the room is directed your way. I realized that if I wasn't careful, my life could easily spin out of control, and I'd run the danger of becoming the five-year-old who's stayed at the grownups' party too long. I knew that I needed to do something constructive with all that energy before it really screwed me up. I needed to focus it on something outside of myself.

That something, it turned out, became the oceans.

In 1984, my family and I moved to Santa Monica Canyon, about ten blocks from the Pacific.

One day I was walking on the beach with my two young daughters, Kate and Alexis, and we came upon a sign that said "Beach Closed, Water Polluted." Kate, who was eight at the time, was puzzled as to why—and how—a beach could be closed. Frankly, I was just as puzzled as she was. When she asked me for an answer, I didn't have one.

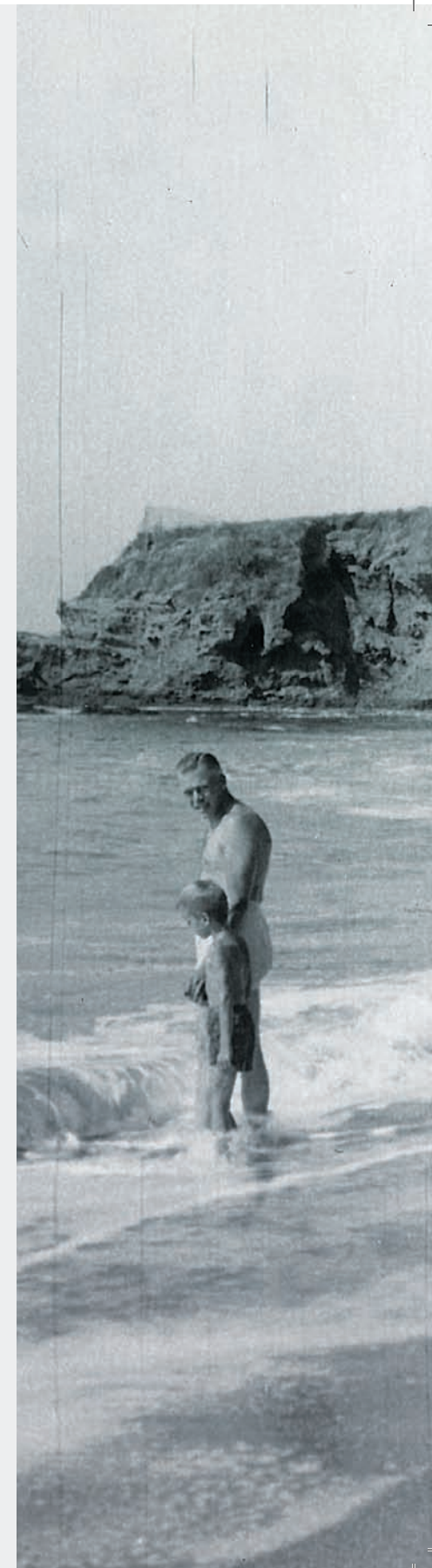
So I began looking for them. I started asking some questions myself.

Not long after that, I went to a neighborhood meeting that had been called in an attempt to stop Occidental Petroleum from drilling sixty oil wells in the waters off Will Rogers State Beach, right there beside Santa Monica and other surrounding communities.

The meeting was organized by a lawyer named Robert Sulnick, an environmental activist who'd been involved in these kinds of fights for many years. In the beginning, I was completely unaware of the complex web of forces threatening our oceans. I didn't know any more about industrial bottom trawling, habitat destruction, ocean acidification, or government fishing subsidies than Sam Malone, the affable high school dropout turned bartender, did.

But I learned fast. Bob and I joined forces, ultimately stopping those wells from being drilled, and became great friends in the process. Flushed with success, a little naïve but full of passion, we created an organization called American Oceans Campaign. Our focus was on coastal pollution and maintaining the national moratorium on offshore oil drilling. I was full of a novice's enthusiasm—eager to convert people to the cause and quick to spar with those who dared contradict me. I was quickly schooled by several conservative talk show hosts and rightfully learned my lesson. For a while, Howard Stern had a daily "Danson's Countdown to Doom." Rush Limbaugh took me to task when a rash prediction I made for the end of the oceans as we know them came and passed—and the oceans still looked pretty much the same . . . at least to the untrained eye. So here's what I learned: Stick to the science. Tell people what's going on, turn them toward the experts who *really* know what's happening, and then let the people themselves decide what to do about it. Don't make speeches just to impress the audience with how much you've learned. Because there's always so much more to know, whether you're just starting out, or you've been at it a while. That's why we need the experts, and we need to listen to them. Because they *do* know. I never let myself forget how lucky I've been to be able to meet many of these experts . . . and to be able to help get their message out.

By the way, I should say right here that I love seafood. I'm not here to tell you not to eat it. Just the opposite, in fact. I want there to be oceans full



of healthy fish so that we—and our children and grandchildren—can continue to turn to them for pleasure, for sustenance, and in many cases, for sheer survival. The oceans are a vital resource for all of humanity, and they need to last forever. Right now, there are more than a billion people on this planet who rely on the oceans as their primary source of animal protein. And it's been estimated that 200 million people make their living by fishing, directly or indirectly.

In 2001, American Oceans Campaign joined forces with several other nonprofits to form a new global marine organization called Oceana, the biggest international group in the world solely focused on ocean issues. And I have to confess, when that merger occurred, I thought, *Great! Now I've got a back door, a way out.* I was tired of asking my friends for money, frustrated trying to raise awareness about something that seemed so basic, and not sure I was really making a difference.

But it turned out I wasn't quite ready to throw in the towel. The new organization upped the ante to a whole new level, pulling together such an astounding array of great, committed, and inspiring people that I found myself happily working even more for this cause, not less. You'll meet some of these people in the pages that follow—marine biologists, fishermen, activists, politicians, even chefs and restaurateurs—along with a whole host of other people whose lives are, in one way or another, deeply tied to this cause.

The fact is—and this is the fundamental reason I've written this book—that all our lives are intertwined with and, in the end, dependent upon the health of the seas that surround us. We know that—or we should. And the health of those seas is declining, *rapidly*. The stakes for the oceans have become that high. If you like eating seafood—and who doesn't?—here's something you should know: Just a few years ago, scientists discovered that the world's fish catch peaked in 1988—just around the time I started working on ocean policy. Until that year, it had never declined. But each year since then, the number has decreased. No one ever imagined that there might be a limit to the number of fish in the sea. It was unthinkable. The oceans have always been considered an inexhaustible resource. We now know that this simply isn't true. By some definitions, one-third of the world's fisheries are currently in collapse—unable to regenerate their populations fast enough to keep pace with the rate at which they are being caught or killed. And as I mentioned earlier, recent studies show that the number of “big fish” (swordfish, marlin, bluefin tuna, king mackerel, and sharks) that inhabit the world's oceans today has dropped 90 percent since the year of my scary dream—1955.

Okay, you might think. So the number of wild fish out there is declining. Big deal. What about *farmed* fish? Well, here's another surprising fact. Farmed fish make the problem worse, for reasons that you'll learn in Chapter 7. And overfishing is only one of the ways in which our oceans are in dan-

ger. We're also contaminating our seas with trash and toxic chemicals and radically changing their pH in a process called *ocean acidification*. We all know by now about the dangers of too much carbon being released into the atmosphere, accelerating the process of global warming. But not many of us are aware that the oceans are endangered by this same process as well. For millennia, the oceans have absorbed carbon, helping to keep our air breathable and also helping to regulate the climate. But as we've burned more and more fossil fuels, the oceans have become increasingly saturated with carbon. You'll learn more about this in Chapter 2 and see how it is destroying our reefs, which are the very base of the oceans' food web. The tiny creatures that call those coral reefs home, from phytoplankton to shellfish, are destroyed along with them, disrupting the food web above them, leaving the next layer up with little to eat. And, as the top of the food web is disappearing due to the overfishing of the “big fish,” the bottom of the web is disappearing as well. The entire system is being squeezed from both ends. That's a recipe for disaster.



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With Senator Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI),
discussing offshore oil drilling

Yet another issue is energy—specifically, oil. The oceans have provided us with energy for decades in the form of oil from offshore drilling. We've always known we run a risk with any kind of oil drilling—the risk of leaks, spills, or other kinds of accidents. The 1989 *Exxon Valdez* tanker spill was the hallmark for such risks in terms of oceanic destruction—until last year, when a state-of-the-art oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico exploded, killing eleven workers and rupturing an underwater pipeline. The resulting spill was the worst oil disaster in the history of the United States, by far overshadowing the damage done by the *Exxon Valdez*—damage that Alaskans are still dealing with today, more than two decades later. No one can say how long it

will be before—or if—the fragile coastal ecosystems that border the Gulf, the Gulf itself and the sea life it sustains, along with the devastated fishing and tourism economies in the Deep South will even begin to recover. The damage is only beginning to be assessed.

Clearly, offshore drilling is a practice we need to get away from. There is a way that oceans can provide a rich source of clean, renewable energy—not from the oil that lies beneath them, but from the winds that blow above them.

I know the list above might look daunting. But the good news is that experts believe we still have the time and the means to tackle each of these problems, to solve them, and to bring back our oceans. This battle is not over, by any means. This is a fight we can win. Actually, “fight” is the wrong word. It’s going to take cooperation, people on both sides of these issues working together, to avoid the catastrophes looming ahead of us. If the conservationists and the fishing industry can find a way to work together—and I absolutely believe that they can—then everyone wins. If they don’t, everyone loses.

By making policy changes nation by nation, enforcing the laws that are already on the books, halting destructive fishing practices, and using good plain common sense to limit the amount of pollution that ends up in our oceans and in our bodies because of the fish we eat, we can turn things around.

These steps, many of them simple, will save our oceans. Again, 90 percent of the “big fish” that existed in the 1950s are now gone. As for the rest of the 30,000 known species of fish in the world’s oceans, we could conceivably “fish them out” in the next fifty years. That’s within some of our own lifetimes, certainly within the lifetimes of our children.

No more fish. It’s hard to imagine. Almost inconceivable. But it’s true. And right now we’re moving closer to that reality every day.

The purpose of this book is to help make sure that doesn’t happen. In the pages that follow, I’d like to share what I’ve learned over the course of the past twenty-some years, and to introduce you to a number of gifted, deeply intelligent people who have devoted their lives to the cause of saving our oceans.

It’s been an amazing journey for me. The more I understand, the more certain I am that it’s not too late to take action. I’m not going to pretend that it will be easy or quick. But it can—it *will*—be done. The most important thing I’ve learned from the men and women I’ve been fortunate enough to work with over all these years is to remain hopeful.

That’s what my own journey has taught me, and I have no doubt that, armed with the information contained in the pages that follow, you’ll feel the same way I do. By the time you’ve finished reading this book, you’ll not

only know what needs to be done to save our endangered oceans, but you’ll know *how* to do it, and you’ll be determined to turn what you know into action.

I still have the occasional nightmare, but by and large I am optimistic about our oceans. After two decades of talking and thinking about these issues, I can now see that the political will that is necessary to address these problems is building fast. I felt that way before last year’s Gulf disaster, and feel ever more strongly today. If there’s anything good that can possibly come out of something as horrific as that blowout, it’s that a lot of people who might not have paid attention to our oceans before are paying attention now.

And this is our message: Time is short. But with your help, we can do it. We can save our oceans. The oceans have been good to us. It’s time for us to do something for them. If we act now, we can see abundant and healthy improvement in as little as a decade.

The oceans make up 70 percent of our planet’s surface. They are a permanent gift to the future of all people—a legacy to our children, and to our children’s children.

We’ve started to turn the tide.

Now let’s finish the job.

— Ted Danson



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