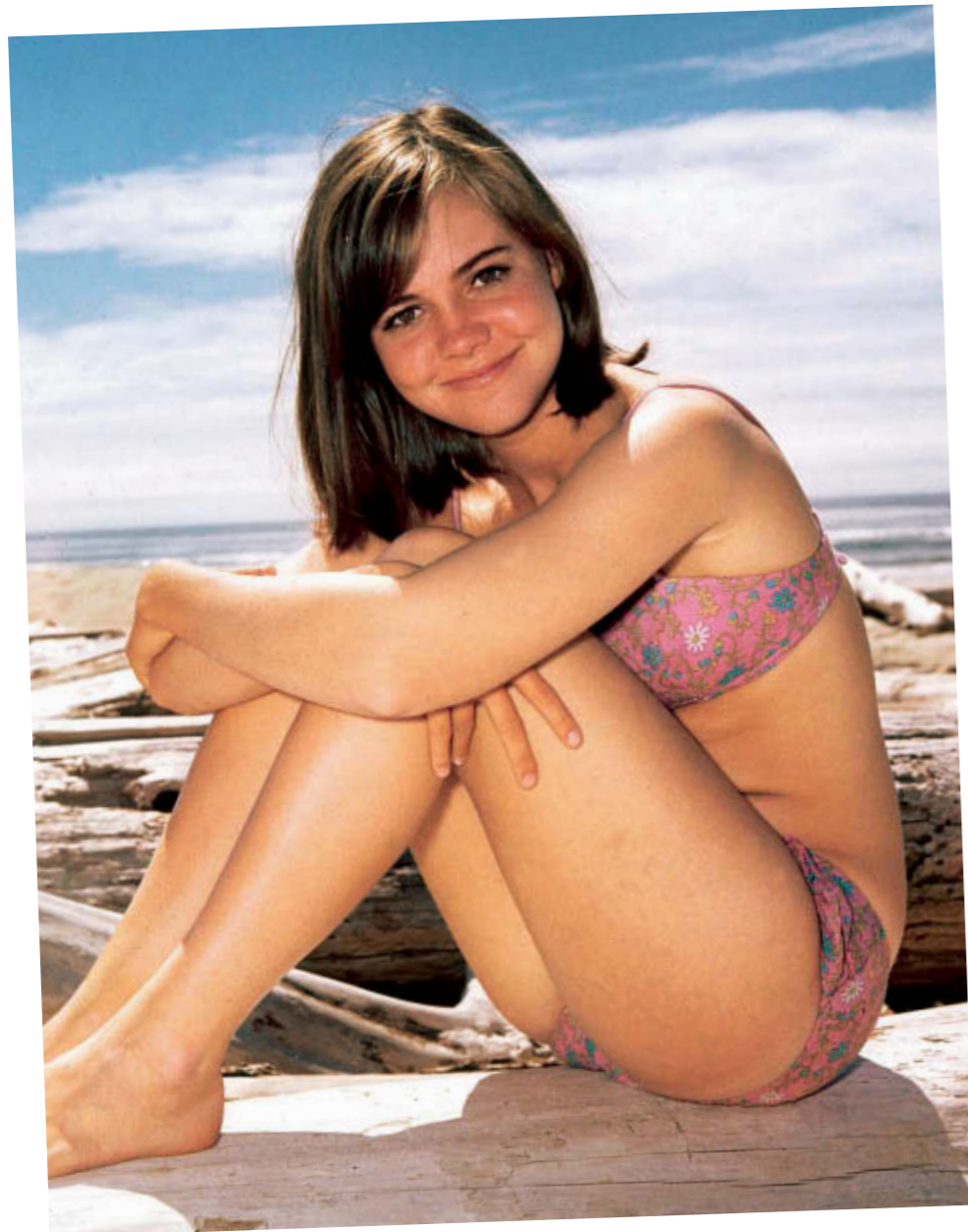
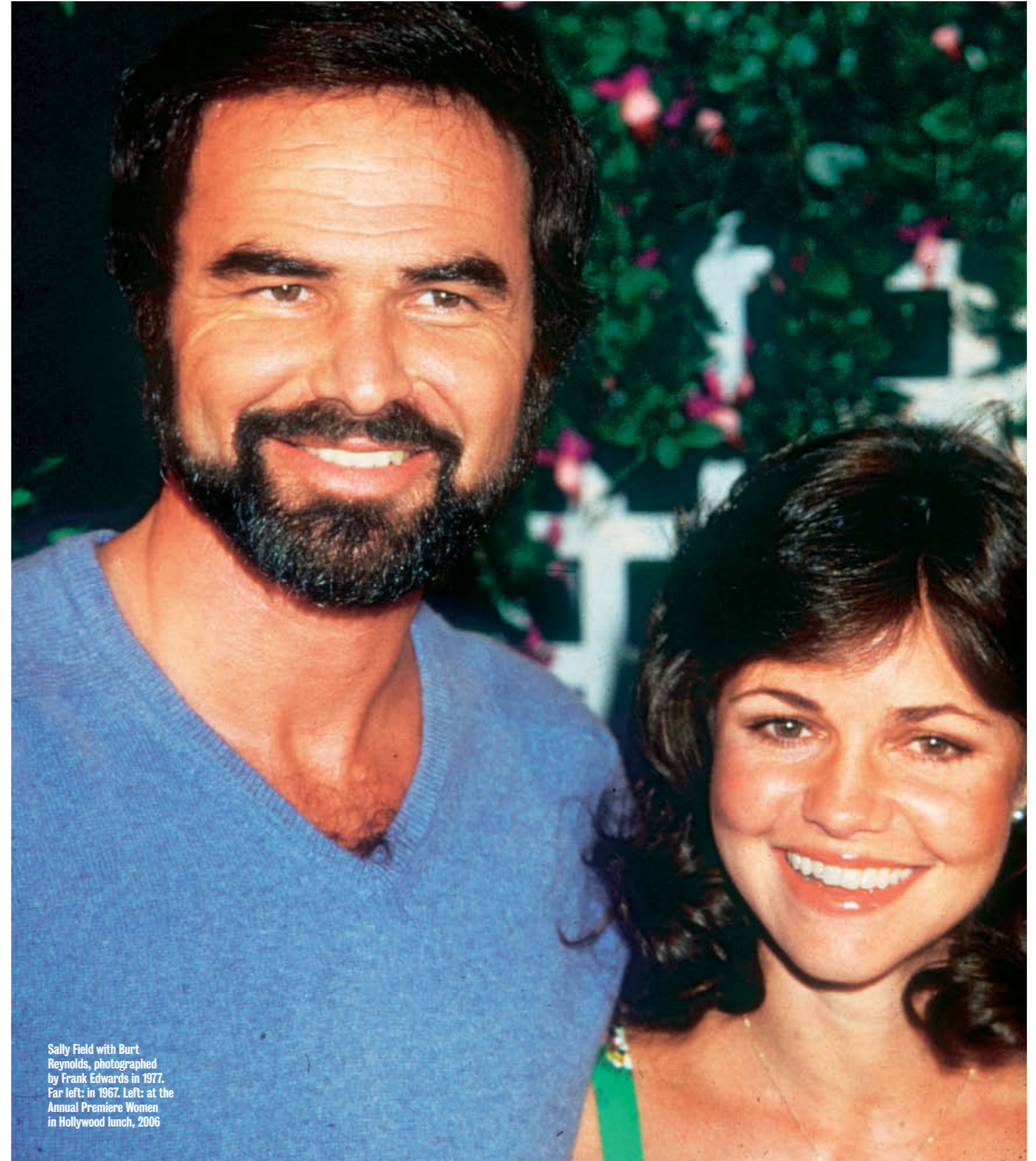


'TO BE LOVED BY BURT MEANT I HAD TO STOP BEING ME'



Oscar-winning actress **Sally Field** believes her submissive relationships with men – including Burt Reynolds – began with her abusive stepfather. She talks to Helena de Bertodano



Sally Field with Burt Reynolds, photographed by Frank Edwards in 1977. Far left: in 1967. Left: at the Annual Premiere Women in Hollywood lunch, 2006



Field with Burt Reynolds in 1979. Left: playing Gidget, 1965

When Sally Field won her first Emmy more than 40 years ago – for her performance in *Sybil* as a woman with multiple personality disorder – she didn’t even go to the ceremony. Burt Reynolds, her lover at the time, was shooting a movie and wanted her by his side. He didn’t stay up to watch the show on television with her. “I ended up sitting alone with the sound turned down so as not to disturb the man who perhaps didn’t know, or maybe didn’t care, how much it meant to me.”

As she describes it in her memoir, *In Pieces*, this was a pattern of submissive behaviour that began in childhood when she was abused by her stepfather. That experience was so destructive that it has overshadowed most of her subsequent relationships. “I was so locked in the language of my childhood,” she says today of her time with Reynolds, who died last week. “I had this very charismatic, very colourful man in my life that in some ways was replicating my childhood – not through any fault of his own, just because it was a pattern I had fallen into.” Or, as she puts it in her book, “To be loved I had to stop being me. Matter of fact, I had to stop being anyone. I was bending myself into a pleasing shape, a soothing, compliant cup of warm elixir that Burt was then lured into drinking over and over, until he became addicted to the seemingly unconditional love I was offering.”

But despite the impression of malleable

‘I TOLD MY MOTHER IT WAS NOT ONE INDISCRETION. IT WAS MY WHOLE CHILDHOOD’

sweetness, there is a sliver of steel in Field. “My anger was much more lethal than could easily be seen,” she says in reference to her disintegrating relationship with Reynolds. “Even by me.” She could have become Mrs Reynolds and sidelined her career. He asked her to marry him many times and earlier this year called her the love of his life. But by 1979, when he tried to dissuade her from going to the Cannes Film Festival for the film *Norma Rae* with the words, “You don’t expect to win anything, do you?”, she’d had enough. She went to Cannes, won best actress for the film (in which she plays the eponymous working-class heroine) and then went on to win an Oscar the following year, too. By then, she had dumped Reynolds.

It is all too easy to underestimate Sally Field. I, for one, thought interviewing her would be easy. Who wouldn’t want to spend an afternoon in the company of the woman who, among scores of memorable roles, played the unsuspecting Miranda to Robin Williams’s Mrs Doubtfire, Forrest Gump’s selfless mother, the long-suffering family matriarch in the television series *Brothers & Sisters* and a beautifully nuanced Mary Todd Lincoln to Daniel Day-Lewis’s

Abraham Lincoln. Of course, it is a mistake to confuse an actor’s roles with the person themselves. On the other hand, she did once say, “Every role I’ve ever done is really exquisitely about me.”

If anything, I had thought she might be too nice. Just before I meet her, I come across a podcast of a speech she made to the American Academy of Achievement foundation in which she instructed everyone in the audience to hold their faces in their hands to understand their own particular “uniqueness and specialness and you-ness”. And who can forget that kooky Academy Awards speech in 1985 when she won her second best actress Oscar for her role as a Depression-era widow struggling to keep the family farm in *Places in the Heart*? With a bouncy perm and a quavering voice, she shrieked ecstatically, “I can’t deny the fact that you like me. Right now, you like me.” She looked and sounded bonkers, although, being a good sport, she joined in the ensuing ridicule, parodying the speech in *Legally Blonde 2: Red, White & Blonde* and in a commercial for financial advisers Charles Schwab.

But the sweet veneer is deceptive. Arriving at her house in the Pacific Palisades, ➤

a sparkling coastal neighbourhood of Los Angeles, she thanks me effusively for coming, makes sure I have something to drink and that I'm sitting comfortably on her cream sofa in her beautiful wood-beamed living room with its sweeping views over the Santa Monica mountains. On the kitchen counter is a wire basket piled high with lemons, copper kitchenware hangs from the ceiling and a large stone fireplace dominates one side of the room. Field looks just as you would expect. Nearly 72, she glows with good health: rosy and pretty with those distinctive apple cheeks. Wearing a candy-striped shirt over a white T-shirt with weathered jeans and brown Birkenstock sandals, she clutches a water bottle containing a pink drink, which she says is water with electrolytes. "It adds a little flavour. Water is so boring. I can't take it any more." Her laughter tinkles around the room.

But when it comes to talking about her book, her guard goes up. Because I can't imagine her being anything other than delightful, it takes me a while to realise that I am being blocked at every turn. It boils down to this: she is happy to talk about the mechanics of writing the book and the process of getting it published, but she is reluctant to talk about the content. "It's in the book," becomes her mantra whenever I veer towards anything personal.

The book, written without a ghostwriter, is impressive. Candid and vivid, Field describes it as "an attempt to understand my relationship with my mother". Although Margaret Field was 89 and had cancer, she found her 2011 death hard to assimilate. "I thought I had done all the things that I was supposed to do," she says today. "I'd had those conversations that were incredibly difficult and cathartic and amazing. Yet when she was gone, there was this urgency. I felt like there was a gangrenous growth. Why couldn't I rest and feel at peace with her being gone?"

The book is critical of her mother, but ultimately loving. I ask what she thinks her mother would have made of it. "I don't know," says Field. Did she imagine a readership? "No, I wrote it completely and solely for myself ... I didn't know if I would ever have the guts to publish."

This explains her attitude. It is one thing to write such intensely personal material, quite another to verbalise it. As well as the abuse, she describes a traumatic teenage abortion and several love affairs. Her divided feelings about sending it out into the world make her an odd mixture of prickly and open, at one moment scathing and cold, at another charming and warm.

Born in Pasadena, California, Field was a toddler when her mother, an actress, left her father, an army officer, and started

With Barack Obama, Washington, 2015. Below, with her son, Sam Greisman, Los Angeles, 2013



'I LIVED IN A FOG AND THE ONLY TIME IT LIFTED WAS WHEN I WAS ON STAGE'



a relationship with the charismatic Jock Mahoney, a Hollywood stuntman and actor who played Tarzan in two feature films. Although Field describes herself as a "terribly anxious child", at first their life was fun. The newly formed family (she has an older brother and younger half-sister) moved into bigger and better houses as Mahoney's career took off. She adored her stepfather, but something wasn't quite right. He always wanted her to walk up and down his body, which gave her what she describes as a "fingernails on the blackboard" feeling. Her mother would come to her bedroom in the mornings as she went downstairs to prepare breakfast. "'Sal?' she'd say, her face puffy with sleep. 'Jocko needs you to walk on his back.' It never felt like a request, more like a summons and an honour."

She did as she was asked. "I walked on his back until he rolled over, commanding me to keep going. One foot in front of the other, up his chest I tiptoed, my nightgown hanging loose as his hands slid over my legs, then moved up. I'd turn my feet around, walking toward his stomach to be out of reach, and he'd whisper instructions, 'Lower, lower.' My steps got tinier as he muttered, 'Lower.' I walked on this much loved non-father of mine, carefully trying to avoid where he was aiming my feet, and ... part of me wasn't in the room any more."

As the sessions intensified, she found it hard to focus at school. "I understand it is a trait that teachers now look for in children who are having some troubles at home: the inability to concentrate. Your mind creates a kind of fog so you don't have to deal with the things that are coming at you. I lived in a fog and the only time it lifted was when I was on stage or had to memorise a poem in English class. I would latch on to it and be alive for a moment."

Did anyone at school spot that something was amiss? "No. It was 1960 and no one knew about any of this."

One day Mahoney enticed her into the bathroom. Sitting her on the counter, he tried to make her open her mouth to kiss him. "I don't. He sets his penis, as muscular as the rest of him, between my legs and pulls my littleness toward him ... and it. He loved me enough not to invade me. He never invaded me."

Decades later, not long before her mother died, Field finally asked Margaret – by then long divorced from Mahoney – how much she knew about what had happened. Her mother told her that Mahoney had once confessed that there had been one incident with Sally, when he'd been drunk. "'He said he'd put his thing between your legs and ... came.' Without looking away or hesitating, I flatly told her what needed to be said. 'It was not

one moment of drunken indiscretion, Mother. It was my childhood. My whole childhood.”

At first her mother didn't believe her, then asked why Sally never confided in her. “I was a child, Mother. I was a child and didn't know that it was any different than any other child's life. I was afraid.”

“I let you down and I'm so very sorry,” her mother later said. They never referred to it again.

On the surface, Field looked like she was living the life of most children's dreams. Mahoney enrolled her in an acting class on the Columbia Studios lot, which led to the role of Gidget in the TV sitcom of the same name. Playing a surfing, boy-obsessed teenager, she became America's favourite girl-next-door. On the strength of her performance, a new series was created for her, *The Flying Nun*. Field, who wanted to be taken seriously as an actress, hated the idea of it. But Mahoney told her that if she turned it down she might never work again. Reluctantly, Field took on the role. The show ran for three seasons and turned her into a national joke. By now, she had married her high-school sweetheart, Steven Craig, and they had a young son, Peter.

Finally released from *The Flying Nun* and fiercely determined to change her reputation, Field started classes with Lee Strasberg, the famed acting teacher. He quickly saw her potential, helping her to land the title role in *Sybil* in 1976, in which she delivered a tour-de-force performance as a woman with 16 different personalities. Field shifts seamlessly from one to the other, each so convincing that the role established her as one of the very best actresses of her generation, or any generation.

Field and Craig had had a second son, Eli, by this point, but the marriage had crumbled. Burt Reynolds, at the time Hollywood's biggest heart-throb, called asking her to star with him in a film called *Smokey and the Bandit*. It marked the beginning of a relationship that lasted several years. I ask if Reynolds knew about the book. “No ... It really is just my story and he is a part of that story. If I could have been different, perhaps the relationship could have been different.”

Reynolds, she writes, noticed her slowly changing. “Who is this selfish, angry person? Where's that sweet girl you used to be?” she could see him thinking. Her answer? “That sweet girl I used to be never existed.” Like most people who get close to her, he had realised that she was – to allude to the title of one of her most famous films – the quintessential steel magnolia: apparently delicate, but tough as nails.

Field says she has shown the book to Steven Craig, to whom she remains close. “We used to all go on vacations together, with his new family. I was very nervous because he's a very private person and yet I say very intimate

things about him. It's an invasion of his life and of his privacy. But he was just wonderful, so supportive.”

In the mid-Eighties, she married once again, this time a producer called Alan Greisman, with whom she had a third son, Sam, now aged 30. They divorced in 1994 and she has remained mostly single since. She once observed that she has never in her life had her heart broken. These days she sees few people outside her family circle. “I'm very much a hermit.”

Her celebrity, she says, makes life difficult. “There haven't really been any psychological studies as to what happens to a human being when they become a recognisable entity. You have to work harder to be allowed to just be a human. It's like having a limp or an extra limb.”

I ask if the way she was treated in her childhood still overshadows her relationships. “Of course. Doesn't it affect you? How you were treated in your childhood, does that

Seventies and Eighties and Nineties, you don't just become aware of it; it is a way of life. It's my entire existence.” Has she always just accepted it? “Of course. You don't know there's any choice.”

She describes an encounter with a director who asked her to come for a final audition at his home. He invited her up to his bedroom, where he told her he needed to see her breasts for a nude scene in the film, then said the job was hers. “But only after I see how you kiss.” She submitted to the kiss and later, during filming, he appeared at the door of her hotel room. She allowed him in to have sex with her, even though his wife was staying with him in the hotel suite above.

She doesn't want to discuss it further. “I can't unpack it any more than I unpacked it. As far as I was concerned, it was how men behaved, because that's all I ever saw.”

I ask if there is anything she is looking forward to, a particular role perhaps. “I don't look forward to anything,” she snaps, then

A DIRECTOR TOLD HER A JOB WAS HERS: ‘BUT ONLY AFTER I SEE HOW YOU KISS’

not steer you as an adult and you're constantly trying to rework that pattern in your life?” I realise she assumes everyone is damaged in childhood. You need considerable self-knowledge to recognise a pattern, I suggest. “Well, you have to work at it,” she says. “That's our task here as adults.”

Watching her mother and stepfather struggle financially as their careers yo-yoed impressed on her “the insecurity and vulnerability of actors”. Yet she was still drawn to it? “No, I wasn't drawn to it. I was drawn to acting. I wasn't drawn to the business.”

She is less tetchy when we move on to more general subjects, such as the current climate in Hollywood, particularly for women. “It is changing finally. When I started in television there were never any women in the crew but all of a sudden women were doing the heavy crew work and [becoming] cinematographers and grips. It was just remarkable. And then slowly, slowly they became directors and writers.”

Although not an active participant in the #MeToo movement, she applauds it. “I am so appreciative of their outrage. And [I applaud] the Time's Up movement. Equal pay for equal work. I mean, ‘Really, people? Honestly?’”

Has she ever been aware of being paid less than a male co-star? “When you're born in the Forties, raised in the Fifties, come of age in the Sixties, have your career in the

softens. “Well, I am looking forward to coming to London next year to do *All My Sons* at the Old Vic. I've never done any Arthur Miller and it's a wonderful play.”

Later this month she will be in a new Netflix series, *Maniac*, a dark comedy also starring Emma Stone and Jonah Hill. “You can look it up, because our time is up,” she says abruptly. But she allows one final question. I ask her about the title of her memoir, *In Pieces*. Does she feel that by writing the book she has put some of those pieces back together? “I can't answer that question,” she replies irritably. “I can't finish the book and then call it a finished product.” Of course not, I say. I didn't mean that. She sighs. “It's the title of the book because it's the title of the book.”

She reverts to sweet Sally as she says goodbye. “Thank you so, so much for coming,” she says. “I'm so glad you live close.” Not, I hasten to add, that she means a lifelong friendship is evolving – just that I won't have far to drive. ■

In Pieces by Sally Field is published by Simon & Schuster on September 18, priced £20

Sally Field appears at The Times and The Sunday Times Cheltenham Literature Festival on Sunday, October 14 (cheltenhamfestivals.com/literature)