

## Prologue

There was no proscenium arch, no curtains or lights to create an illusion, no proper stage at all. It was just a classroom with all the chairs and their seventh-grade occupants pushed aside in disorganized clumps.

It wasn't even a real classroom. The entire school had originally been part of an army hospital built at the end of World War II, specializing in central nervous system injuries, syphilis, and psychiatry. It had once even included a small compound for prisoners of war—a building now stuffed with classrooms and students held captive until the sound of the bell. This particular room was long and narrow, each side lined with windows, which made it look exactly like a hospital ward and nothing like a junior high school drama class. But on that day, through my twelve-year-old eyes, I saw only the faint interior of a swank apartment.

I remember watching my feet as they stomped across the worn wooden floor, and for one instant the feet weren't mine anymore. Then I was back in the classroom again, wondering

## Sally Field

what to do with my hands, my armpits sweating so much I dripped. I stopped at the door (a wobbly contraption hinged to a freestanding frame made by the boys in wood shop), took hold of the handle, then turned back toward the thirteen-year-old playing my uncouth gangster boyfriend. With one clammy hand gripping the knob, and my whole body twisted around to face the actor—my arm awkwardly wrapped in front of me—I stood listening to the boy deliver his dialogue. When he had finished spraying words through his braces, I paused a beat, then yelled, “Drop dead, Harry,” and exited in an indignant huff, slamming the door behind me. That was it, my first moments as an actor, a scene from *Born Yesterday* and my pubescent version of the brassy Brooklyn bombshell Billie Dawn.

I wasn't good. I knew I wasn't. It was like Heidi, the little goat girl, had taken a stab at Hedda Gabler. But it didn't matter. A new sensation had brushed past me and for one moment, I felt free. My body moved—maybe not gracefully but all on its own—without me telling it where to go, tiny flashes when it didn't belong to me at all, and I was watching from far away with no anxious sense of time. In those cracks of light, the pressure of what people thought of me or didn't think of me, who they wanted me to be or didn't want me to be, completely stopped. A bell had rung, everything focused and sharpened. I could hear myself. Then it was gone again.

In the eighth grade—a year later—I had my first performance night in the school auditorium. For the first time I walked on a stage in front of an audience of parents and friends, there to watch, among other things, my Juliet—not the whole play, just two scenes: the potion scene and the

*In Pieces*

death scene. My mother drove me home afterward, and I clearly remember sitting in that dark car beside her. I desperately wanted to know what she thought but was afraid to ask, so I just watched her drive. Sometimes the headlights of an oncoming car would light up the whole interior, making it seem even darker after it passed. But when her face was bright with light she looked at me, and as if we were hiding from someone, she whispered, “You were magical.”

I whispered back, “I was?” Then everything was dark again and I could barely see her at all.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“Just that.” Another flash of headlights lit up the front seat and I could see her mouth edging toward a smile, the light bleaching her beautiful face white, then slowly fading to black.

