

MEG
TILLY

Why I Left Hollywood

THE '80S MOVIE DARLING
WALKED AWAY FROM HER CAREER TO
MOVE TO A CABIN IN CANADA. NOW SHE'S BACK
ONSCREEN—BUT MAY NOT STAY FOR LONG

By **GILLIAN TELLING**

Meg Tilly isn't one to be fussed over—at 57, she usually doesn't wear makeup, let alone pose for photo shoots. It's been 18 years since the actress, who shot to stardom in *The Big Chill*, left show business and settled on a woody island near Vancouver to write novels; a peaceful life suited her fine. Now the mother of three is cautiously returning to the spotlight—playing Brad Pitt's wife in the Netflix movie *War Machine*. Still, she conspicuously lacks the wardrobe needed for a New York City PR tour. "My sister Jennifer put my outfit together because she knows I'm hopeless," she says with a laugh. "She's been wonderfully supportive throughout all of this."

Her big sister—Jennifer Tilly, 58, a fellow Hollywood veteran—helped persuade Meg to restart her acting career. "A few years ago, she gave me a bracelet that said, *It's never too late to be what you might have been*," Meg says. "My kids had left the house, and I realized I wanted to do theater, and that sent me along this path." Her career quickly got busy all over

Giving Up Stardom

"I don't regret the choice I made," says Tilly (below in 1983).



HAIR & MAKEUP: HEATHER SCHNELL/KEVIN AUCOIN AND ORIBE HAIRCARE/EXCLUSIVE ARTISTS; STYLIST: DON SUMADA; SHIRT: J. CREW; PANTS: COS; INSET: EVERETT



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Actress, Interrupted

1. The former ballerina in 1982. 2. With the stars of 1983's *The Big Chill*, including Jeff Goldblum and Kevin Kline. 3. Winning a Golden Globe for 1985's *Agnes of God*. 4. In 1989 with then-boyfriend Colin Firth. 5. On-set with Eric Stoltz for 1994's *Sleep with Me*. 6. As Brad Pitt's wife in the Netflix movie *War Machine*.



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again; in addition to playing Pitt's wife in Netflix's satire about U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, she won raves as a World War II factory worker in the Canadian TV drama *Bomb Girls*. Tilly's palpable fragility—the quality that made her a compelling ingenue—drew *War Machine* director David Michôd to her. “Everything you’re seeing in the movie is bravado until she enters,” he says. “She shifts everything to a more human place.”

That sensitivity explains Tilly's reluctant celebrity. The daughter of a Chinese-American car salesman and a schoolteacher, she was born in L.A. but raised with sisters Jennifer and Becky on bucolic Texada Island, B.C., after her parents divorced. Her childhood was far from idyllic: Tilly says she endured physical, sexual and emotional abuse at the hands of a stepfather. She found an outlet in ballet and turned to acting after an injury, breaking out in the baby boomer classic *The Big Chill* and scoring an Oscar nod as a tormented nun in *Agnes of God*. But by the 1990s she was divorced from her first husband, producer Tim Zinneman, and quit the business to focus on their children David and Emily. “When my kids were young, I could take them on-set, which worked well for a few years,” she says. “Then when we came back from shooting *Leaving Normal*, my daughter's best friend was best friends with someone else. She was devastated. To keep a career going, you have to shoot one or two movies a year. If I didn't bring them, I'd be out of their lives for six to nine months. They didn't ask to be born—I had a responsibility to be there.”



Tilly moved to a cabin in British Columbia with her kids—and the new man in her life. In 1989 she fell madly in love with up-and-coming actor Colin Firth on the Paris set of the period drama *Valmont*. For five years the pair lived with Tilly's children and their own baby, Will. Firth became a star after their breakup, and they remain close. “He's one of my best friends,” Tilly says,



Her Second Career

Tilly's novels, including *Singing Songs*, *Gemma* and *First Time*, have tackled gritty subjects—including sexual abuse, which the actress has said she's experienced. "I'm proud of standing tall in my truth," she says. "But it's really scary stuff."

For a change of pace, she wrote the new romance novel *Solace Island* under the pen name Sara Flynn. "I'm an avid romance reader," she admits. "I just love it. I always thought I had to be intellectual, but then I had children and sometimes felt overwhelmed by all the bad news out there. I wanted to write something lighthearted."



Not Quite Anonymous
"People still recognize me all the time," Tilly says. "Women tell me their husbands had the biggest crush on me from *The Big Chill*."

noting that Firth, 56, and his wife, Livia, stay with her when they're in Vancouver, where she now lives with her third husband, author Don Calame. "Colin is a wonderful man and father, not only to Will but to my other children, showing up for graduations and the births of their babies."

Along the way Tilly became a writer of novels (see sidebar) and moved back to L.A. during a seven-year second marriage to Sony chairman John Calley. She returned to Canada after marrying Calame in 2002, and finished raising Emily, now 32, David, now 30, and Will, now 26, making sure that there was a hot breakfast on the table

'It's not always great being famous. I love not being watched all the time'

every morning and warm cookies after school. "I wanted to be June Cleaver," she says. "I wonder if I did them a disservice by not showing them how to take care of themselves. But I did my best."

Now she is rediscovering the joys of her old profession. Once typecast as an ethereal nymph, she relishes playing the mature love interest of a man her own age. "I'm actually a few years older than Brad," she says of Pitt, who is 53. "At the screening, women kept coming up and telling me how much they appreciated that." The attention has helped her remember the positive attributes of fame. "The collaboration, getting to fly to far-off places and live like a local, diving into my characters" were great, she muses. "But in those days the female lead was the fire hydrant that all the men wanted to prove themselves on. You'd get hit on a lot and dealt with egos." She far prefers the quiet life of a writer. She may act again—but then again she may not. "I got many blessings from acting," she says. "But I love not being famous." ●



Family Matters
Left: With husband Calame in 2013. Right, from left: Mom Patricia, sister Becky, sister Jennifer and Meg at the 1995 Oscars.

