Oriana Fallaci

September 1993

NAME: *Oriana Fallaci.*
PLACE OF BIRTH: *Florence, Italy.*
NEWS ORGANISATION: *l'Europeo.*
ADDRESS YOUR BODY SHOULD BE SENT TO IF YOU ARE KILLED IN ACTION: *The White House.*

IT WAS JUST THE STANDARD questionnaire that every foreign correspondent covering the Vietnam War was required to fill in before boarding a US military plane or helicopter, but this last answer so appealed to Oriana Fallaci's colleagues that some of them adopted it as their own. When Fallaci heard about that, she changed the address from the White House to the Italian embassy in Saigon, much to the horror of the Italian ambassador, who told her he didn't want her corpse dumped at his door.

More than 20 years later, this anecdote still says much about her: first, that she was the sort of woman who would brave the frontline; second, that she would want her death to be a political statement; and third, that she hated being part of a fashion, even one she had started herself.

As a journalist, Oriana Fallaci was internationally renowned for her impassioned, polemical approach. That she became almost as big a celebrity in Europe and the US as the identities she interviewed was testament not just to her skills as a writer and interrogator, but to her radical individualism and imposing personality.

Starting her career in the 1940s at the age of 16, she quickly graduated to interviewing stars like Ingrid Bergman, Federico Fellini, Sammy Davis Jnr, Sean Connery and Alfred Hitchcock.

Although she can barely bring herself to discuss these interviews today, they were extraordinary by prevailing standards because of their frankness and stridency.

She then turned her gaze on the world's great power-brokers, and it was these encounters, many of which were to be immortalised in her book *Interview with History*, that established her reputation as one of the 20th century's foremost chroniclers.

The late Shah of Iran shared his religious visions with her; the President of South Vietnam, Nguyen Van Thieu, his tears; Bobby Kennedy, his nascent ambition to become president; Lech Walesa, his desperate fatigue and unhappiness; North Vietnamese armed forces commander-in-chief General Vo Nguyen Giap, his diplomatic and military game plan for defeating the Americans. Former Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir and Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi offered her their abiding friendship.

Some of her subjects came to regret their brush with Fallaci. Former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger so let his guard down with her that in his memoirs he recalled the encounter as 'without doubt the single most disastrous conversation I ever had with any member of the press'. It was also, probably, the most honest.

Others sought her out. Pakistan's leader, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was so envious of her friendship with his great rival, Indira Gandhi, that he showered Fallaci with invitations to interview him until she finally agreed.

And at least one fell in love with her, and she with him. Alexandros Panagoulis was a poet and leader of the Greek Resistance whom she interviewed in 1973 following his release from prison. He had been locked away for six years for the attempted assassination of the Greek junta leader George Papadopoulos, during which time he had been systematically tortured and subjected to mock executions. Three years after winning his freedom, he died in mysterious circumstances. The story of his life and their tumultuous affair was to form the basis of *A Man*, Fallaci's critically acclaimed international best-seller.

During the 1960s, '70s and '80s, Fallaci covered just about every major international event. She was there for the uprising in Prague, the famine in Biafra, the insurrections in Central America, the wars between India and Pakistan, and the Arabs and Israelis. And, of course, for eight years she was in Vietnam, where, according to one of her colleagues, she distinguished herself as 'the soldier's soldier', often heading to the front alone and before any other reporter. Somehow, miraculously, she managed to stay alive.

In Mexico City in 1968, when covering a student-led demonstration against the Olympic Games, she was taken for a communist agitator by the military and shot three times, twice in the back. Left bleeding for

hours, her body was eventually dumped in a van and taken to a hospital morgue. Regaining consciousness, she began shouting, 'Fascists, murderers, fascists,' until a priest, hearing the noise, came and peered down at her, asking: 'Are you a Catholic?' Her reply was vintage Fallaci: 'Go and shit on your mother.'

IN CASE IT ISN'T ALREADY obvious, I have to say that Oriana Fallaci has been something of a hero to me for most of my career—perhaps, paradoxically, because she was everything I was taught not to be in the school of balanced, objective reporting. Her stories never left you in the slightest doubt about what *she* thought.

'On every professional experience,' she once wrote, 'I leave shreds of my heart and soul.' And she did. She was so partisan, so hot-headed, so, well . . . Italian, that it took your breath away. She said to Alfred Hitchcock, for example: 'With all your cordial humour, your nice round face, your nice innocent paunch, you are the most wicked, cruel man I have ever met.'

But the fiery heart was backed by a sharp mind and thorough research, and all combined to make her interviews compelling reading—part historical snapshot, part journalistic scoop, part adventure story.

In her professional as in her private life, fearlessness has been the leitmotif. Even as a child she was expected to show courage. At age 11 she was working for her father as a courier in the Italian Resistance, guiding escaped POWs and downed pilots through Florence's underground escape routes or ingeniously disguising grenades in string bags full of vegetables and smuggling them through enemy lines. Once, when she cried during a particularly ferocious Allied bombing, her father slapped her across the face, saying: 'A girl does not cry.' She has said, 'This slap was like a kiss.' The kiss of life.

Her father, Edoardo Fallaci, a wood craftsman by trade, was a libertarian and social democrat, and a leader of the local Resistance against Mussolini's Fascists until he was arrested, sentenced to death (the order of execution was eventually stayed) and repeatedly tortured. His daughter asked him once if it were true that he had laughed while he was being tortured. His brusque reply was: 'So what, it's like crying, isn't it?'

Fallaci's mother, Tosca, was no less defiant. The day after her husband's arrest she marched into the office of the feared Major Mario Carita, head of the Fascists in Florence, and hurled abuse at him. 'My husband is going to be executed tomorrow, but you are going to die very soon too,' she told him.

'I mean, when you have two parents like that, you don't even dream to be a weak person. Right?' Fallaci has said. 'And when you have fear you hide it.'

Sometimes in unusual ways. In southern Lebanon she once astonished Israeli soldiers by refusing to sit inside the tank as they edged towards battle with the Syrians. Instead, she perched on the edge of the hatch.

'I know how you die in a tank,' Fallaci said. 'It's the most horrid death. It takes four or five minutes to burn and you cook like an omelette . . . so I stayed outside because if I was caught inside I would have cooked slowly. I gained the admiration of everybody for what was an act of fear. But courage and fear are so associated.'

ADMIRATION AND FEAR ARE ASSOCIATED, too, as I discovered when I tried to line up an interview with the world's most famous journalist. Over the course of four months, 20 faxes went back and forth between Fallaci's private secretary and me, two of them dealing in part with my misspelling of Siena. I had spelt the city with two 'n's and this had apparently 'scandalised' Fallaci.

When I corrected the error in my next fax, her secretary's reply included the following: 'Ms Fallaci thanks you very much for your fax and congratulates you on its accuracy.'

Some stringent conditions were set. The interview was granted on the understanding that she would not talk about her private life; that she would talk only about her books, in particular *Inshallah*, her new 599-page morality tale set in the Middle East (she says that harking back to her former career as a journalist is, for her, like 'returning to a divorced husband'); and that the profile would be similar to one particular story I had sent her. The most positive one.

After imposing conditions on me that she would almost certainly never have accepted herself as a journalist, a date was finally set for a meeting at her apartment in Florence. It should also be added—because it reveals something of the famous person complex—that Fallaci would not give me her phone number, address (until the last minute) or an exact meeting time ('soon after lunchtime, but no later than 2 pm'). She would call me at my hotel the day before the interview to give me a time and directions.

Forty seconds after I checked into my room the telephone rang. A deep, smoky, accented voice at the other end said: 'This is Oriana Fallaci. I have remained in Florence because of you. It was very, very difficult to fix things.'

Thank you, I replied.

'How was your trip?'

Fine thanks.

'Good. Now, number one—have you read *Inshallah*?'

Yes.

'All of it?'

Yes.

'Good. Number two, I never talk about my private life. Do you understand?'

Yes.

'Good. Number three—I am against giving long interviews. The longer the interview, the more you are edited, and when I give an answer I don't want to be edited. I want to be quoted in context. Do you understand?'

Yes.

'Good. Here are the directions . . .'

Oriana Fallaci's apartment can be approached from the Ponte Vecchio, the famous old bridge of Florence that crosses the Arno River at its narrowest point. Until about 500 years ago it was a stinking strip of hogbutchers' shops, but it is now where the city's most eminent goldsmiths present their wares to a never-ending stream of local and foreign tourists.

For Fallaci the bridge is a great personal landmark. It is the bridge her father helped save from being blown up in 1944 by the retreating Nazis. It was to be the only bridge in Florence that remained standing after World War II.

Fallaci has refused to have photos taken for this story because she has breast cancer—'This is not my face,' she says of the ravages she feels the disease has wrought—so, when I enter her apartment, I am surprised by her aristocratic beauty. She stands ramrod straight and is tiny, almost frail looking—which I know is one of nature's more cunning deceptions—and she offers me her hand with a thin, ironic smile. I nervously present her with a tin of Penelope Sach petal tea. She examines it quizzically with her glasses propped on the end of her nose and suddenly declares with dramatic emphasis: 'Now that is an intelligent gift . . . A very intelligent gift.'

This is the first indication I have had that the interview I have been chasing for four months might last longer than five minutes. In fact, it lasts nearly 12 hours, over three meetings.

Far from finding a woman willing to talk only about her latest book and the art of writing, I find one willing to expand on almost everything. She is like a human hurricane blowing furiously in all directions. I just happen to be caught up in its gusts. At times she is defensive, hectoring, petulant, intimidating and childish. At other times she is refreshingly candid, deeply personal, warm, emotional and vivacious. One moment

she appears almost motherly in her concern for me; the next, as if she has declared war.

At one point I turn to check that my new tape recorder is functioning, only to learn to my horror that almost half of one side of my tape has been erased. Fallaci immediately grabs the machine and starts trying to fix it, gently scolding me for using a new recorder rather than the old one (which I have also brought with me), and telling me I can borrow hers if all else fails.

At another point I ask her why she thinks she was able to disarm so many people during the course of her career. Was it because she had offered something of herself? Her terrifying response makes me see the ambiguity of my question. She has construed, I think, a sexual meaning never intended. (Only later do I discover that she once likened a good interview to coitus.)

'What should I have offered for Christ's sake?' she says with rage, her finger pointing at me. 'What should I have offered these people?'

Well, I'm suggesting . . .

'No, no, no!' she says, now standing up, her voice filling the room like a thunderbolt. 'What could I offer to the people I interviewed? In your opinion?'

Are you asking a rhetorical question or do you want . . .?

'Yeah, you said, "Is there something you offered them?" What do you expect me to offer?'

I'm asking what it is that you think makes . . .

'No! No! No! I Want You To Clear This Incredible Question. You said, "Is it something that you offered to them?" To what were you referring? Offer what?'

Offer something . . .

'What?'

Of yourself, some experience, something that makes them feel as though they are dealing with a human, someone they can relate to . . .

At last she has understood what I meant. She sits down, putting the daggers away—for the moment. Eventually she says: 'Everybody knew who was Oriana Fallaci. Those who wanted to give it [the interview] to me were very respectful, I must say. They were a little surprised when they saw me arrive in flesh and bones because they expected me to be a big woman. I entered and eight times out of 10 they would say, "Is it you?" . . . because I am so small. They expected to see a Viking. And I said, "Yes, it's all here, I'm sorry."

'Some adored me before [I arrived]. Like Golda Meir. She said to everybody that I was a genius . . . And the same happened with Indira Gandhi. She was happy to see me.

'But let's take the case of a person of another culture [like] Deng Xiaoping. Deng [knew] about me because my interviews were regularly stolen by the Peking daily newspapers . . . But when we met, it was a love story at first sight. He amused me and I amused him. He kept saying, "She is intelligent, she is intelligent, she is smart." He did like the way we did interviews. You know, I made them talk like you're doing with me. I make people talk. I don't interrupt them too often. The questions are well-chosen. Not prepared before. The question comes from the answers very often.'

Later, at dinner, Fallaci elaborates on her meeting with China's most powerful figure. 'The room was full of people [from] the government who were witness to the interview and Deng and I were sitting in red chairs and he said, "You know, Miss Fallaci, you are sitting where Nixon was sitting and I am sitting where Mao Zedong was sitting."

'And I said: "Good, you have finally purified the dumb chairs." The stupid government officials looked at me in terror . . . but Deng reacted with a big laugh. Then I said [to him], "I love you, I love you," and I got up to kiss him . . . and he laughed again, but the government officials jumped up as if I was a kamikaze person with a bomb.'

They were, of course, horrified that a Western female journalist would kiss their great leader, but Deng understood. He turned to them and said, 'She says it in the American way.'

IN HER OWN COUNTRY, ORIANA Fallaci is a phenomenon—a phenomenon which, she believes, not immodestly, should be studied. Why is it, she asks, that on the day *Inshallah* went on sale in Milan in 1990, the police were required to control a huge crowd in the centre of the city? Why is it that in the first year of publication, there were 45 reprints and 700,000 copies sold when she had not had a book published for 11 years?

'I will die trying to understand my phenomenon,' she says . . . '[Because] it is evident this is a phenomenon. A diva. Stardom. But this does not last forever. A book sells because of the book . . . *Inshallah* is a great novel—great because it takes time to be understood and accepted. I am not humble about *Inshallah* . . . It needs to be read twice to be understood. They said *Anna Karenina* was shit. They said *The Great Gatsby* would only last a summer . . .'

Fallaci is understandably sensitive about the reviews her book has received. While some of them have been worshipful, one even likening the work to a mini *Iliad*, others have been vicious. '*Inshallah* commits almost every sin that a novel can,' said one Canadian magazine.

Fallaci spent six years working on the project and she believes it may have cost her her life. 'I started feeling badly when I was writing *Inshallah* [in New York],' she says, taking a deep drag on one of her Virginia Slims filter tips. 'I remember one night I didn't sleep and [I thought] "That's cancer coming," because in my family everybody dies of cancer.'

Fallaci's father, mother and sister Neera all died from cancer, and her only remaining natural sister, Paola (she also has an adopted sister), now has cancer too. All of them, she says, faced it—or are facing it—with 'tremendous courage and dignity'.

'"It's coming," I thought. "It's coming," and reason said to me, "Go and see a doctor." And I immediately thought, "If I go, they tell me it's cancer and the book is fucked. I can't, I don't do it." And I finished the book and there was the excitement and the pain of when a book is published . . . and I forgot about it. Then the Gulf War burst. In another moment I wouldn't have gone [to the Gulf]. I am sick and tired of wars. Wars are always the same . . .

'But this war was connected to what I had been working on for six years. So . . . I had to go . . . And I was several days in what I call the Black Cloud [caused by the fires in the oil fields]. My sister [Paola] says this is a poetic interpretation . . . I was with the marines in the desert and I was going from Kuwait City . . . and one of the black clouds was very low that morning. The tail of the cloud came down like a parachute and, all of a sudden, we found ourselves in the Platonic idea of darkness. In the darkest night you can see something. We could see nothing. And the driver of the truck was so afraid of losing the track and going into the desert which was full of minefields that he stopped.

'And we were in this nightmare for one and a half hours and when we finally got out of it we were as black as your slacks—the tongue, the hair, everything. I was with four marines and we were all vomiting [at this point Fallaci actually pretends to vomit and a huge dry-retching sound erupts from her mouth] . . . like that,' she says. 'Terrible . . . I got back to Dhahran where I don't know how I wrote that article, and I started being sick from then on. Pains in the chest, terrible headaches . . . And when they took off the tumour I said, "How old is it?" And they said, "You can never know when it started—it may have started four or five years ago." But its actual age was one year and two or three months. Which is the story of Kuwait.'

Surgery was delayed further, she says, by the fact that when she returned to New York she received the French translation of *Inshallah*. 'It was such a disaster that I stopped it and I said, "This translation is not going to appear. I'm coming to Paris, I'm going to re-do it myself." And with

these terrible pains I did the whole French translation in two and a half months.

'Towards the end of that translation I said, "I've got to see the English translation." So I give a look at the English translation and it is a thousand times—and I know English much better than French—it's a thousand times worse than the French.

'So I remember that I finished the French translation on March 15 [1991] and on March 19 I was in New York already in my study starting again with the English translation ... By the middle of April the pain became so intolerable that I couldn't move this arm [she grabs under her left arm, near where she has had surgery]. I couldn't use this hand to turn the dictionary. I never wanted to touch myself because I was superstitious. "If I touch it, I find it." And one day I did, and He was there. Oh God, He was there.'

As she speaks, she lets out a guttural cry and begins to rock back and forth in her seat. At first I am not sure whether this is a re-enactment or the real thing until she stops, looks up, and says: 'The dilemma was big. Should I go to the doctor and say, "Look what I have here," and the doctor would certainly say, "Tomorrow morning we've got surgery," or should I shut up and finish the English translation? I chose the second solution.'

No wonder, then, that Fallaci describes this book as her 'most precious child'. Later, sitting in her favourite restaurant in the hills above Florence, in a magnificent old colonnaded building where she used to come with her father or her lover Panagoulis, she elaborates on this theme.

'I am absolutely certain that when we die nothing remains,' she says, 'but I am absolutely sure that ... you can live forever through your child. And I am missing that. I lost them [the pregnancies], so the books in a way are my children. They are my only way of survival after my death.'

Her voice is suffused with such an immense sadness that it is enough to make me forgive her completely for her outburst minutes earlier. I had asked if she had any interest in interviewing Yeltsin or Clinton. 'Haven't you heard anything I have said for the last 10 hours?' she shouted, to my astonishment and, I think, that of everybody else in the restaurant.

'Do you think I would waste a second of my short life to do interviews? I HAVE CANCER, AND YOU WANT ME TO SPEND TIME WITH CLINTON AND YELTSIN!'

Therein lies one of Fallaci's many contradictions. Certainly she has made it very clear that she wants nothing further to do with journalism, but at the same time she laments the number of world events she missed because of the time spent writing *Inshallah*—the collapse of the Berlin Wall, Tienanmen Square, the coup in Russia ...

But she is an author now, and she is willing to go to extremes in the service of her art. 'Listen,' she says during our first meeting, lighting one of the many cigarettes she'll smoke during our interviews. 'Writing is a despicable thing to do. It's an unbearable thing. I hate writing. It's such a masochism that I become a masochist.

'I hate to write, I tell you why. First of all, it's unnatural. It's the position. You sit down there for hours and hours and hours and days and days and days and weeks and months and years. You sit there at the table. You don't walk. Your body doesn't make any exercise any more—only the hands and the mind and the brain. In my case, which is the case of many other people, I smoke much more so I poison myself even more.'

At one stage Fallaci was said to have had such difficulty breathing that her doctor prescribed oxygen for her. Rather than take a break from writing, however, she ordered the tanks and respirator delivered to her house in New York. Ignoring warnings that she could set off a possibly fatal explosion, she continued to write and smoke with the tubes from the tank wrapped around her neck.

'You don't see the seasons that change,' she continues through the smoky haze. 'I have not been aware that there has been the spring, then the summer, then the autumn, then the winter. For more than five years I was not aware when it was raining or when it was the sun.

'And finally there is the relationship with others . . . It becomes impossible because you have no time for others. You have no time for yourself because your life becomes the story and the creatures that you create.'

There was only one time in the nearly six years it took to write *Inshallah* that Fallaci interrupted her work for a non-fictional relationship. It was for her father. This 'exquisite and difficult man'—as Fallaci described him at his funeral soon after—was dying from the one thing he feared most, cancer, although he didn't know it.

'There is a beautiful book of Pearl Buck's which describes the death of the father of her husband,' says Fallaci. 'He becomes older and older and smaller and smaller, lighter and lighter, and that's what my father did.

'He had the proportions of a child. He practically didn't move any more, so I had to take him to the bathroom. And I took him in my arms like a child "Come, come, Father." I carried him to the bathroom and he couldn't hold his head erect any more . . . And he put his head here [on my shoulder] with the gesture and also the trust of a child . . .

'One day I got him to the bathroom and he said, "You know, all this is damn annoying," and I said: "Why? Hey, Father, you are forgetting that I am born from that [pointing to an imaginary penis]. If somebody

has the right to take you to the bathroom it is me. I came from there, remember." And he laughed.'

The light has begun to fade in her apartment and the church bells of Florence have taken up their eternal melody again. The living room with its old musty books, antique clocks and hunting pistols is now thick with smoke and perfume and the bottle of sweet Sicilian wine is almost drunk. Fallaci's face looks as though it is about to crumble from pain. 'My father . . . he knew he was dying,' she says in a hoarse whisper. 'He was looking at me with . . . I don't know how to describe those eyes. Not fear. Rage. Or dismay. Impotence? And I knew I had to say something to him to help him die. And I did.

'I said: "Father! Bravo. Bravo, Father. How damn courageous you are. You have always been such a gutsy man. And how gutsy are you now. God I admire you." He looked at me. His look changed and it became the look of happiness. Gratitude and happiness. And then he died . . . He died in my arms like my mother and also Neera.'

All three? 'All three of them. Terrible! Terrible! Terrible! . . . But since it is the tragedy of tragedies—the most dramatic thing—I wanted to be near my mother and my father and my sister the moment it took place. To encourage them . . . to hold their hand.'

And before I can even get my question out, she says, without even a note of self-pity: 'I know I will die alone. They're gone [my family], so who is going to hold my hand? It's okay, it's okay. I'm ready. I'm going to hold my own hand.'

ORIANA FALLACI'S CAREER WAS A turning point in Italian—and some might say international—journalism. Not only did she demonstrate, long before it became the fashion it is today, how the press could hold up to public scrutiny the ethics of those in high office, she also proved, particularly in Europe, that women could cover traditional male areas as successfully as men. And from this, Fallaci says, women around the world derived an enormous, vicarious pleasure. 'Women adore me,' she says. 'Seventy per cent of the letters I get are from women and they all start in the same way: "You don't know me but I love you." Why? It is clear I am a kind of revenge for them, a kind of heroine because I did things like going to war which were not permitted to most women.'

Some hardline feminists, however, have always regarded Fallaci with suspicion, even though 30 years ago she was writing books such as *The Unsafe Sex*, a howl of protest about the treatment of women in the Third World; and, in the early '70s, *Letter to a Child Never Born*, a brooding confession about marriage, miscarriage and abortion in the context of the

choice women face between private fulfilment and public achievement.

'I never belonged to the feminist movement,' she says. 'Men were always my friends. I like men. I like to stay with men. I have had only two or three women friends in my life. They were Ingrid Bergman—dead from cancer; Anna Magnani—dead from cancer; and Maria Callas—she died from a heart attack.

'The friendship started because they wanted friendship, not me. They were career women. Women alone. They'd done everything alone, so they felt near to me. But apart from these exceptions which took place late in my life, my friends were always men, and women never digested this. They never digested the fact that I always refused to see men as antagonists, or to play their victim . . .

'So when I say, "Do you know he's broken my balls," they [feminists] get very infuriated. They say, "That is a male chauvinist attitude because you associate courage with masculinity." I say: "No, but I got balls, you cannot see them. They're inside, but I got them."'

Although it might read now like a movie script, Oriana Fallaci believes the life she has lived is the only possible life she could have lived. Ask her if it has been a happy life and she says, 'Happiness is a lady I never really met.'

Her happiest moments, she says, were during war when she found to her astonishment she was still alive after a heavy bombardment or a particularly perilous journey. She also experienced 'some moments of happiness' at the beginning of certain love affairs, but the magic vanished almost as quickly as it arrived. Romantic love is a form of slavery, she says.

The other day she also felt overjoyed when the doctors told her the cancer had not spread to her lungs. 'I was very, very happy,' she says emphatically. 'I was so happy I kept walking.'

Fallaci insists she never sought fame, and the fact that she still gets adoring letters from places as far afield as China, Serbia and Vietnam and still can't walk down a street in Italy without being fawned over is as astonishing to her now as it was 20 years ago when her mother was given a discount at the florist because of her daughter.

'I never gave a damn about a successful life,' she says. 'I wanted an adventurous life, an interesting life, a life in which I would write . . . That's why I wanted to write the war novel [*Inshallah*], because as a child I saw the adventurous side of war . . . so a kind of nostalgia remained in me.

'Success is something that deprives you of freedom and the most important thing for me is freedom. If you deprive me of freedom I'm dead—and success deprives you of freedom. People get interested in your private life, who you sleep with, with whom you don't sleep, if you have lost a child, if you have not . . . I cannot bear that. I don't want it.'

Fallaci makes no secret now of her withering contempt for journalists. It began, she recalls, in 1956 at a wedding at the town hall in Florence between the Swedish actress Anita Ekberg and the English actor Anthony Steel. Just as they were coming out of the town hall an Italian reporter asked Ekberg when were they going to get divorced. Fallaci flew into a fury.

'Pow. I gave him such a slap,' she says, her voice still quivering from the memory. 'Stronso [turd],' I called him, 'disgraziato [wretch], miserabile [miserable person] . . . and that's how the legend of Fallaci began.'

THAT HER 'DIVORCE' FROM JOURNALISM took so long was because she was too busy covering wars—in particular, Vietnam. Today, however, she feels beleaguered by her own reputation as the warrior-journalist or the martyr figure dedicated to avenging injustice. Both are fantasies concocted by a profession which, she believes, has now become virtually unaccountable.

'How is it that the poor policemen risk their lives very often; the poor politician risks his reputation; the poor soldiers, they are sent to Somalia, to Beirut and sometimes they die? And journalists? Nothing happens to them and yet they have self-elected as judges and executors.'

Remind her that in her heyday it was she who very often appeared like judge and executioner—it was actually called the Fallaci treatment because of her take-no-prisoners approach—and she is quick to counter that she never betrayed a confidence, always quoted faithfully, never had her stories refuted by those she'd interviewed, and often forged lasting friendships with her subjects.

'I never attacked weak people,' she says. 'I never attacked the writer. I never attacked a singer. I never attacked an actor. I never attacked a politician because he was a politician. These people [journalists] attack everybody. Everybody. They think that they are the new policemen of the earth.'

Fallaci forgets—or chooses to ignore—that she told writer Norman Mailer he was 'a vain little starlet', French actress Jeanne Moreau that she had a 'bitter mouth' and an 'ugly' face, and that she was so sarcastic to director Federico Fellini that he called her a 'rude little bitch'. Instead, she remonstrates with me for raising 'all the old clichés' of yesteryear.

She is a different person today—a 'very decent' and a 'very sweet' person, she says, and one who never put professional advancement ahead of the people she loved most.

To prove the point, she recalls how in 1975 in Vietnam she received word that her mother was ill and wanted her to return home. The

dilemma was agonising. Should she wait for the Vietcong to march into Saigon, something she had been hankering to see for eight years, or should she return to Italy in case her mother died? She decided to return to Italy.

'And when I came back,' Fallaci says, 'she was rather well and, oh God, do you know I was so angry at her. It was terrible, terrible, terrible, terrible, terrible, terrible . . .

'I never forgave her for that. It's very embarrassing for me to say I never forgave her—but I never forgave her because she had not died.' She died the following year.

Now Fallaci confronts cancer—'my enemy'—with what she hopes is the same courage her mother, father and sister showed when they were dying.

'It's the mainspring of life, courage . . . and courage has many faces,' she writes in *Inshallah*. 'The face of generosity, of vanity, of curiosity, of necessity, of pride, of innocence, of recklessness, of hatred, of joy, of desperation, of rage, and also of fear. But there exists one kind of courage that has nothing in common with those: the blind, deaf, boundless, suicidal courage that comes from love.'

I have now glimpsed some of the many faces of Oriana Fallaci—at one extreme the ebullient Tuscan storyteller, at the other, the spitfire with the explosive temper. And she can change from one to the other in a breath.

'By the way, when were you born?' I ask her as we are saying goodbye. (I know she is either 62 or 63.)

'None of your fucking business,' she snaps back, like a bear with a sore head. And then with a queenly wave and a bewitching smile she adds: 'Ciao, darling.'

Postscript

Oriana Fallaci was a difficult person before the interview, during the interview and after the interview. After publication our office received a lawyer's letter accusing me of having misquoted her in relation to her comments regarding her mother. Fallaci insisted she'd never said: 'I never forgave her because she had not died.' We sent Fallaci a copy of our taped interview, as well as a transcript to verify that the quote was accurate. The matter was never pursued.

Fallaci still bides her time between Florence and New York and is said to be working on a book about growing up in Italy under the Fascists. Her battle with cancer continues.