

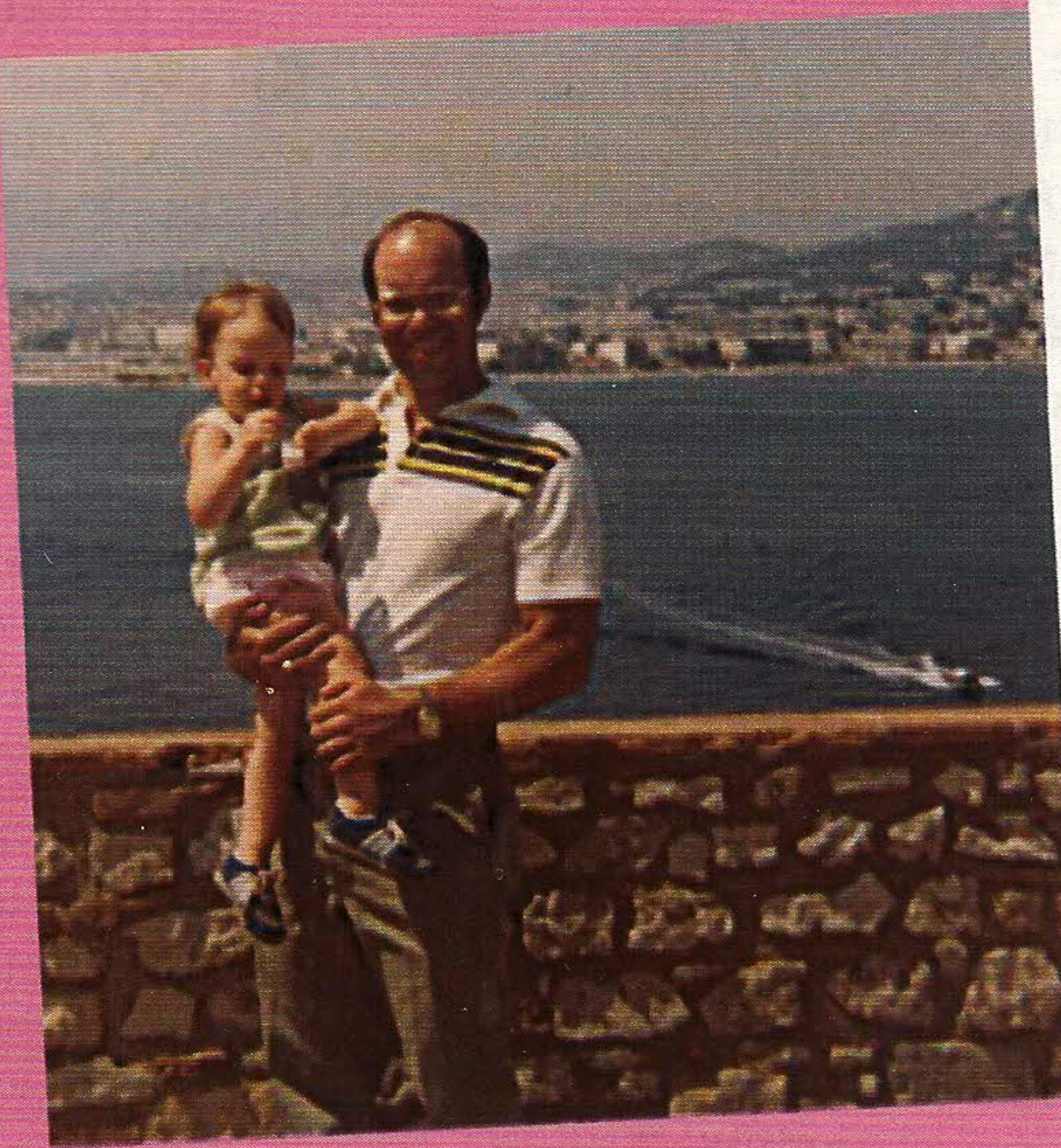
She's the sex columnist who made her name writing about her exploits. But, behind the bravado, Catherine Townsend (left) just wanted to find The One. Here she tells Grazia how, by confronting her past, she's given her relationships a future

Main photograph: Daniel Ward

went by, I began to realise that she might have a point. I told her how broken I was when my ex left, after I'd done everything possible to try to keep us together. She asked, "Can you think of another time when someone gave you adoration and attention, then walked out on you? When you felt helpless to stop them leaving?" I could – my father did just that when I was 13. Suddenly, I couldn't stop crying. It seemed that, if I wanted to give future relationships any chance of survival, I needed to do a few autopsies on the old ones. Starting with Dad, the most traumatic break-up of all. 'I'd always adored my dad, so when he left I was shattered. Dad was a man's man, everyone's best friend, the life of the party. He was also hugely successful and a workaholic. My earliest memories are of striving to be the best student possible ▶

'DID MY DAD LEAVING ME A LOVE ADDICT?'

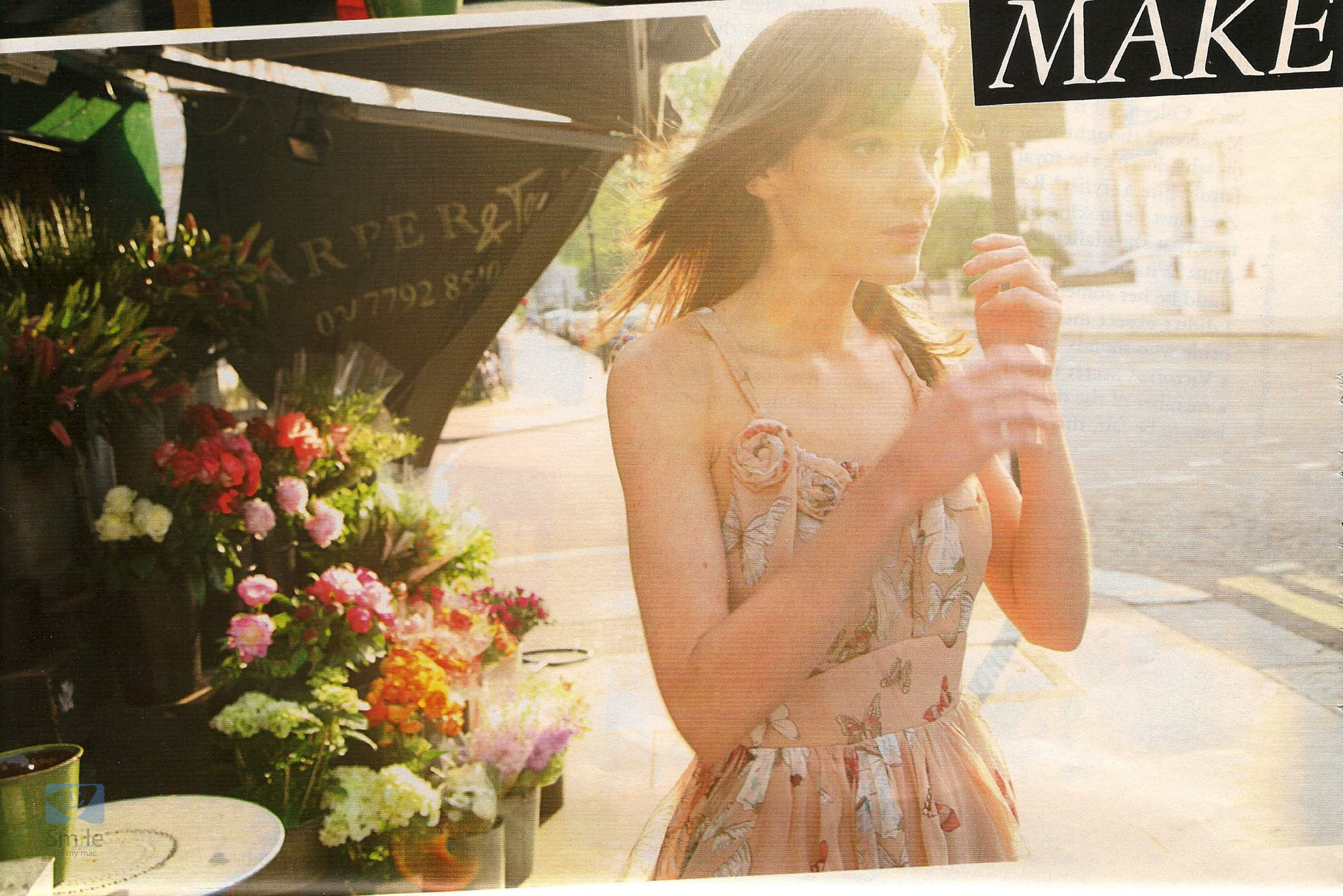
'WHEN IT COMES TO MEN, MOST PEOPLE THINK I DON'T HAVE A CARE IN THE WORLD. Since losing my virginity at 15, I've been open about my heady sex life (more than 60, fewer than 100, since you ask) and love guys. As a dating columnist for *The Independent*, I write about my exploits each week – from the scuba instructor who gave me my first orgasm to the night with a girlfriend and her male pal, which taught me that fantasy doesn't always translate into reality. But then, a while ago, I met someone who I actually felt serious about, someone I let in emotionally. When it went wrong, I was shocked at how devastated I felt. The magnitude of my depression astonished me. I downed martinis and dissected the situation with my girlfriends but, after three months, even they couldn't take any more. I had become a break-up bore. Eventually, I was feeling so low, I decided to try therapy. I knew I was in trouble when my therapist, Sarah, said, "Tell me about your relationship with your father." "Isn't the whole 'I have daddy issues' thing a bit obvious?" I asked. But, as the weeks

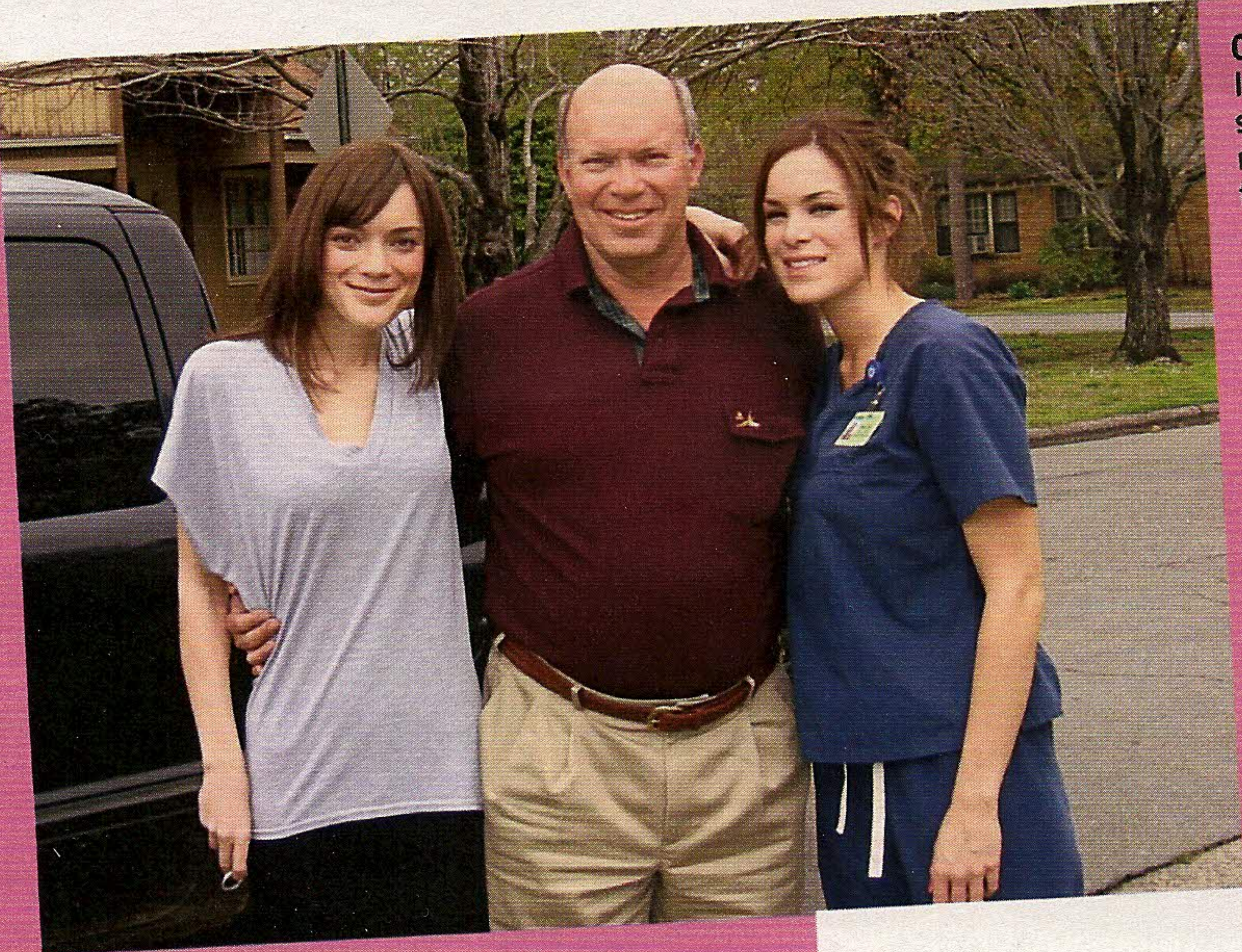


Catherine as a child with the father she adored



MAKE





Catherine (far left) and her sister are now reconciled with their dad

'I HAD TO STOP ACCEPTING RELATIONSHIPS WITH MEN WHO KEPT ME AT ARM'S LENGTH, JUST LIKE MY DAD HAD DONE'

to win awards and get his attention. The times when he focused on me were some of the happiest of my life. I once memorised a 40-page story that I knew he loved, just to recite it at a party for him. "My daughter is a genius," he told everyone. I can still feel the high that gave me to this day.

'OVER THE YEARS, THOUGH, SPENDING TIME WITH HIM BECAME MORE AND MORE LIKE WATCHING A BADLY DUBBED MOVIE: the words never quite matched the actions. I sensed his discomfort, so strived to be more and more perfect. When, one Christmas Day, he kept smiling and saying everything was fine, but kept wandering into the other room and whispering on the phone, I knew that something was up. On New Year's Eve, my childhood was severed when he packed his bags and left, and my mum then moved me and my sister halfway across the country for a new start. 'Meanwhile, my relationship with my dad deteriorated further after I found out that he had a mistress. He didn't visit as much as he should have, and I stopped coming to the phone when he called. Eventually, he stopped calling. He wasn't at the door to meet any of my boyfriends, or to take my picture when I graduated from school. I missed him at all my major life moments. 'After Dad left, I suppose I hardened my heart and resolved to never let anyone do to me what he had done to Mum. I went from a shy introvert to a wild child.

I dated a lot through my teens and twenties, and I was the one in control of the relationships. I became a commitment-phobe who chose high-drama relationships with men I knew had short shelf lives – who were much older than me, lived on another continent, or were total personality clashes. Looking back, this was textbook stuff but, until recently, it suited me fine; I was focused on my career and didn't think I had time for a "full-time" man. However, by the time I became a dating columnist, although I was still enjoying the spontaneity of short relationships, I was also looking for The One.

'The problem was, even though I felt I was finally ready for the real thing, I was drawn to men who looked great on paper, but were emotionally withdrawn. In therapy, I came to understand that while the adult side of me may have been over the divorce, my inner child was acting up. Weeks later, my therapist dropped another bomb: she thought that I could be a love addict. "For someone who is love addicted, going through a break-up feels like going through withdrawal," she said. She scrawled an address on the back of a sheet of paper and said, "When you feel ready, go to one of these meetings." I looked at where she'd written Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous, and put the sheet of paper in my bag. I wasn't sure about her diagnosis – it scared me. But I was in serious pain, and willing to keep an open mind.

'I HOVERED OUTSIDE THE LONDON CHURCH FOR 20 MINUTES BEFORE WALKING INTO MY FIRST MEETING.

Inside, the air of nervous desperation reminded me of a speed-dating event, except that a few people were crying. I took a seat in the circle of chairs among other young, attractive women. 'Like AA, SLAA has a 12-step programme, which includes admitting powerlessness over your addiction – in my case, my ex.

I checked out the 40 Questions for Self-Diagnosis and was pleased to discover that none of my sexual behaviour has ever been compulsive (I just have a healthy libido!), though I identified with some questions: "Are you unable to stop seeing a specific person, even though you know it's destructive?" Well, yeah, but don't we all? **'I CAN'T TALK ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED AT THE MEETING, AS IT'S ANONYMOUS, BUT I WAS** moved by people's stories.

When it was my turn to speak, I joked that on Valentine's Day I wondered why Hallmark hadn't done a card that read, "Congratulations, You Didn't Marry a Carbon Copy of Your Emotionally Retarded Father". It was only a joke, but that was when I had my light-bulb moment. I'd thought all this time that my greatest fear was abandonment but, actually, it was intimacy. If I wanted real intimacy, I had to stop accepting relationships with men who kept me at arm's length, just like my dad had done. I went home and cut off all contact with my ex (we were still on-off). It was the hardest thing I've ever had to do, but I knew that if anything was ever going to change, I couldn't cling to whatever crumbs of emotion a guy is willing to throw my way when he turns his BlackBerry off. 'There was still one more man to face:

I went to see my dad for the first time in years. I spoke to him from the heart, and I listened, too. He apologised for not being around more and said, "You know I've always loved you and been proud of you, right?" For someone who isn't great at articulating emotions, it was a big step forward. Now we call each other every couple of weeks and try to be honest about what is going on in our lives. Dad and I are never going to have a picture-perfect father/daughter relationship, but what we have now is real, and I treasure it. My dad is an amazing man whom I admire, and I'll probably always be attracted to successful alpha males. There's nothing wrong with that: I just have to pick the right one. 'Looked at another way, my dad's leaving was the making of me. Just because my parents had a dysfunctional marriage, doesn't mean I'll have one too. In fact, I believe my experiences will make me a better partner one day. Best of all, I now have a relationship with each of my parents. I love my dad. But I'm really, really glad I didn't marry him.' ■

Catherine's book, Breaking The Rules: Confessions Of A Bad Girl is out 29 May (Hodder Murray, £7.99)