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JOANNA LUMLEY: ECCENTRIC, EXCITING AND EXTREMELY CLEVER

"Even when I'm sloppy I'm called a sex symbol," says Joanna Lumley regretfully, lamenting an image that takes a lot of losing. But sex symbols just don't go home to Mum and Dad with "ghastly washing". And when sex symbols go on holiday they don't take the hovercraft to Calais and rough it in French youth hostels. But Joanna Lumley does. So what made her the confident, casual, caring person she is? "My happy childhood," she says—adding her wonderful description of it to help the WOMAN Sunshine Coaches Appeal. By Louette Harding

Joanna Lumley points to a purple mark on her leg and says: "I hope you'll print that I've got a scab."

"And my hair's dirty, and my hat's falling apart."

The reptilian clergyman at the next table swivels in his seat and stares with pop-eyed fascination. He has finally lost the battle with his own sense of good manners.

It began when Joanna strode into the tea-room of the Connaught Hotel

in white knickerbockers and a panama hat. Then she spotted the grey-haired biddy in the far corner. Dressed in up-market off-the-peg, with Thatcheresque hair and neatly-pinned hat, the old lady is "stuffing food into her face like it's going out of style."

In a plummy stage whisper, Joanna delightedly reports the woman's incongruous

behaviour. But it's Joanna's own behaviour that's twitching the clergyman's head until finally he can bear it no longer.

And this is the girl who's been presented as a two-dimensional cut-out for as long as she's warranted coverage: Joanna

Lumley, the thoroughbred filly lewd old

men would like to pinch under the chin. Or elsewhere.

Joanna, naturally, loathes her image, but given her looks and her plummy accent, it was predictable.

The suggestion of skeletons in her cupboard hasn't helped. She was an unmarried mother at 20, but has never named the father. She married and divorced within a giddy period of eight months. She's been seen on the town/please turn to next page





As self-assured today as she was at two (top), Joanna spent a blissful childhood in the Far East (left, with her parents and sister, Ælene) and in England

JOANNA LUMLEY

ECCENTRIC, EXCITING

EXTREMELY CLASSY

"Even when I'm sloppy I'm called a sex symbol," says Joanna Lumley regarding a lot of losing. But sex symbols just don't go home to Mum and Dad when sex symbols go on holiday they don't take the hovercraft to Calais and return. Joanna Lumley does. So what made her the confident, casual, caring person she says—adding her wonderful description of it to help the WOMAN Sunsh

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JOANNA LUMLEY

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with former rent-a-celebrity escorts, like Patrick Lichfield and Rod Stewart.

Her career hasn't matched the *frisson* of her gossip-column life. She landed herself a place in the TV Times, but little else, with roles like Purdey in *The New Avengers* and Sapphire in *Sapphire and Steel*.

All of which means one thing to chauvinistic editors—trot Joanna Lumley out, dust her off, and get her to talk about men. "Or how I like 'my man' to dress," she suggests helpfully.

"There's nothing I can do about it," she says. "I fill a certain slot. You wouldn't write an article about Britt Ekland or Joan Collins, saying they looked anything but glamorous. I've been tainted in the same way.

"Journalists think their readers want to hear that I really am very glamorous. So, even when I'm looking sloppy, they'll describe me as a sex symbol."

She parodies the kind of article

"Resting? Darling, I Was Dead And Buried"

she's become immune to reading. "Joanna Lumley crossed her svelte legs and laughed gaily." She gestures to the black and white pullover she's chucked on her chair. "Her striped jersey was nonchalantly tossed over one shoulder."

She's smiling as she talks, that uplift of the mouth peculiar to women who are sure of themselves. It's impossible not to warm to her, and the way she wears her humour and her independence—like a trade mark.

Nothing she's attained has come easily. Even though it's yet to hit heights, her career now is 100 per cent better than during the long "rest" periods she endured before Purdey. "Resting?" she growls. "Darling, I was dead and buried." She has not been afraid to thumb her nose at social convention. She is both the product and the antithesis of her social background.

Her father was an army major, and Joanna was used to traversing the world at a time when people didn't. Born in Kashmir, India, in 1946—she announces the date without fuss—her childhood was spent shuttling back and forth between England and the Far East.

But she wasn't in the class who travelled in luxury liners with champagne buckets in the state rooms. The Lumleys travelled in troop ships—"really grim old tubs"—when they finally returned home, they settled in middle-class Kent.

Talk to her of her parents, and a lyricism replaces her forthright tone.

She stares through the open window at the perspiring autumn afternoon. Clouds are flirting with the possibility of bursting through the city's stickiness. The weather provokes memories.

"I suppose the first thing I can remember is Hong Kong. We used to go on 'boiling hot shoppings'—the streets were stifling, but one or

two of the shops had 'refrigerated air'."

She remembers "the weeks and weeks at sea, until suddenly you could smell land—the spice, the flowers—and you'd rush to the rail to watch it materialise on the horizon."

Then there were Ports Said and Suez, where gully gully men would conjure—"producing snakes from their mouths and chickens from their ears."

The gypsy life came to an end when Joanna was 11. Sent back to boarding school in England, she was yearning for the expected summons from her parents in Malaya, finding that she missed the scents, the birds, the echo of clattering Mah Jong tiles.

To her dismay, her father, finding the long separations from Joanna and her sister too rending, quit the army and returned to England.

They settled at an aunt's—on her pig farm—then moved, 23 years ago, to Romney Marsh in Kent. Joanna became a gumboots teenager, the sort of girl who'd go on rambling woodland walks and know the names of the flowers she was picking.

For years after the move, packing cases were the major item of furniture in the household. A mirror balanced on one became a dressing table.

Cobwebs went undisturbed if possible. "It really is a privilege to have spiders in your house and to observe them at close quarters. They're not dirty. My mother could name all the types of spider, and their webs, and we would watch them jiggling and dancing along the thin, translucent lines."

A bookish family, piles of novels would turn up in unexpected corners—especially in the lavatory.

It was a comfortable, close-knit existence. The rules were set out, and the young Joanna knew where she fitted in.

The laws her parents outlined were moral, but not prissy. "It was apparent you did not disobey my mother more than once, or you were

"My Childhood Was A Refuge Of Warmth"

whacked pretty soundly. You didn't tell lies for whatever reason. It wasn't done.

"We grew up in a warm, unconventional way. We weren't told off when we were filthy, we didn't have to wash our hands before meals, and if food was dropped on the floor, we picked it up and ate it. No wonder I'm as strong as an ox."

It was middle-class upbringing at its most free—in a working-class town, where cobwebs are not an educational extra, but bad management, Mrs. Lumley would never have got away with it.

But in genteel Kent there were no sniggers, and Joanna was able to live this cushioned, chaotic, cluttered, life; it shaped her values.

"I remember my childhood as a refuge of warmth. My parents are both still alive/please turn to page 22

JOANNA LUMLEY

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—God be praised!—and I see them an awful lot. To me, going home still means visiting them.

“Even as a child, I liked them so much that I wouldn’t have wanted to behave in a manner which would have appalled them. Consequently, while I was an absolute monster at school when I was about 13—cheeky and rebellious but not destructive and unkind—I wasn’t like that at home.”

Joanna is curiously unambitious for an actress—“I hate the word ambition,” she says intensely—and has avoided the ruthless manoeuvring used by some opportunists in her business. She is not malicious or deceitful.

Given those qualities, when she

moved up to London at the age of “17 or 18” to track the modelling route into acting; had her son, Jamie; and met, married and divorced writer/actor Jeremy Lloyd in less than a year, her parents continued to welcome her, along with all her “ghastly washing” at the weekends.

They adore Jamie, but she says, they haven’t discriminated in his favour because she’s unmarried. “They extend the same love and support to my married sister and her children.”

Jamie is Joanna Lumley’s reason for being. She has distilled all her wisdom in her hopes for him, bringing him up in a mirror image of her own childhood—the warm, rumbustious home, where his training shoes and half-finished models spill

from room to room; the same careful attention to the fibre of his personality.

“I’ve found that when you’re a mother, your love is completely unselfish. You care desperately that this child, so much a part of you, but without the same failings, is well and happy. It can become stifling. You can force a child into your mould.

“So I consciously decided to teach Jamie how to cope with disappointments. I think disappointment is so awful that you must safeguard yourself by becoming resilient.

“Also, I have taught him that other people are frightfully important. On the first day of school, for example, I would tell him that, while he was nervous, so were the other children. Some of them much

more so. I would remind him to look after someone else.

“It’s a way of manipulating a child—prompting him—and children are so very quick to learn, so sensitive. The words drop in and you can see them ticking over, especially with Jamie.”

Jamie is now at Harrow—“the big school, the proper school”—and Joanna misses him. “Not in the sense that we’re growing apart,” she says quickly, guarding against misinterpretation, “but I miss his physical presence. Terribly.”

Just as her parents watched over her from a calculated distance, so she protects Jamie. Without tipping him off as to what she’s up to.

She remembers a *Sunday Times* magazine contest earlier this year. She came top of a celebrity class

asked to sit the public schools' Common Entrance exam, beating several notable academics. Joanna's results came through before Jamie heard how he'd performed in the real thing. She went through agonies in case she outstripped her son.

She's very aware that she's able to use her family unashamedly for the protection and support of herself and Jamie. "That's what families are for. We forget that: I don't know why so many people don't get on with their parents. I think that parents often push too hard. They want success, not failure: they nag.

"I was quite bright at school"—she took three A levels and one S level—"and should have been groomed for university, but I didn't want to go, and wasn't pressurised.

"Now people are asking me what

Jamie is going to do when he leaves school. I don't know. He doesn't know. If Jamie wants to be a picture-framer when he grows up, I'll be delighted."

Her intensity suspends the banality of the statement. She would make a fierce adversary, this woman, a loyal friend. Jamie is lucky to have such a mother: he probably unconsciously knows that.

"Yes, I'm happy." She peers at me suspiciously, wondering why on earth I've asked. She paints a picture of her life now. In a way, it's a continuation of her childhood—friendly, very much in her control. Priorities are chosen unwaveringly, by a deeply grained instinct.

"I get itchy feet and simply can't stay in Britain all year. I love to take the children—my friends' sons

are like an extended family—and go abroad. To Italy.

"Sometimes I pop over to France on my own." Later she clarifies, in case the description sounds too jet-set: "It's a hovercraft across the Channel, and a youth hostel."

She'd also mentioned her new washing machine, bought only this year. Before, she did all her washing by hand. With a gesture, she conjures up a mental image of herself, standing by a sink, wringing out her laundry with gusto. Yes, she's her mother's daughter.

"I don't know who said it, but I live by the maxim: 'I'm the captain of my ship, and the master of my soul.' It's too easy to shuffle off our responsibilities. Too easy to go into marriage knowing that if it doesn't work you can divorce. That's

a bad example. I'm a great one to talk, aren't I?"

"But I don't regret my marriage to Jeremy. The great joy of it is that we have nothing but goodwill towards one another, and there were no children to feel torn or wretched."

She anticipates—with pleasure—growing into a true English eccentric—a whiskered old lady hoisting herself on to her horse at 80 years of age, galloping round the countryside in which she will live, terrorising everyone. "A horse was the one thing I felt cheated of when I was a child," she says, smiling. "I'm determined to get one."

She picks up her hat, checks if I want a lift, shakes my hand firmly, and leaves. She strides out, chin held high. The exit has even more impact than her entrance. ●