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## They've bumped off my Ferrari

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It was 1977 when Joanna Lumley, aka "Purdey", blew into the old Kentish village where her mother had retired and where I was at school. She was a shock of pink hair and London glamour dashing about to save the world in her canary yellow MGB. To me, a dumb-struck nine-year-old, she seemed the coolest creature to cavort the cosmos.

And how little has changed in nearly three decades. Of course she looks older, though far from ready to collect the bus pass she receives next May. But Lumley's allure always lay in her voice: she was the first cut-glass English actress who sounded minxier than a French maid.

And this has not changed: she has only said "How do you do" and I find myself bowing. There is something unmistakably regal about Lumley. So it is no surprise to learn of her favourite conveyance.

"I had a Rolls-Royce," she says dreamily. "She was a lovely old girl, built in 1949. I bought her for £ 550 long before the Avengers. I hadn't any money but it was irresistible. I only had it for two years and it was hopeless, always breaking down. Things came off it but it was fantastic, just ravishing, to have that old girl. Whenever I stopped or it boiled over, always somebody came to help. People adored it."

Hmm, with the young Lumley on the hard shoulder one suspects those gallant knights might have wanted to fire up more than just her spark plugs. "I don't know," she smiles, still with that apparent head-girl innocence. "Men just swarmed over the bonnet."

Lumley remained dangerously attracted to automotive exotica, once owning a Triumph Stag -notoriously unreliable -and until recently a **Ferrari**. This was ideal for bombing down the M2 to her cottage in the beautifully remote Kentish village of Goodnestone, but after she moved to London -fearing her old house was haunted -the red beast was denied the exercise it craved.

"They built so many speed bumps that I literally couldn't drive around where I live. They are monsters. A **Ferrari** isn't really a car for London, you've got to take it out on the road, and in bright red it was ridiculous." And not quite the thing, one imagines, for pootling along to the environmental meetings that she vocally supports. Lumley laughs. "She kept the blanket on most of the time. I know, I do my bit, but that was very bad. The only good thing was I didn't take her out often and sold her after two years."

Finally there are signs Lumley is growing more conventional in her car tastes: "I've a Smart car for London and then we've got a Lexus for driving long distances."

This is for travelling to Scotland, where Lumley and Stephen Barlow, her conductor husband, have a holiday home.

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"I'm not so keen on cars now, they seem duller,"

she says. "When I started driving you had to do your oil and tyres and nowadays I don't seem to do anything except put in petrol."

On screen, Lumley's passion for exotic cars continues to be indulged. In *Sensitive Skin*, her most recent television series, she bullies her husband into buying a wildly impractical but deeply cool old Rolls-Royce Silver Shadow.

The *New Avengers* always featured great cars, notably Steed's vintage Bentley and later a souped-up Jaguar. "It was very glam, it had a buzzy feeling to it," she recalls, adding that the minimalist style of the series resulted in a distinct lack of other cars.

"When we drove there was no other car, when we walked into buildings there were no passers-by, we never had extras. That was all part of the style, which gave it a slightly odd quality. There was something fabulous about it."

Patrick Macnee (Steed) and Gareth Hunt (Gambit) remain close friends. She enjoyed a curious sexual tension with both co-stars. "Oh, Purdey was a cold fish, I quite liked that. She was scornful if anyone made a play for her. Patrick was very like Steed, tremendously elegant, though if anything rather more lavishly dressed; he was brainy and sweet, a darling man well into his eighties now."

To play Purdey she went into "flat-out" military training: "We had to get our heart rate below 54, which takes real stamina.

You had to learn how not to hurt the stunt men in fight sequences. The worst was when you had to run or climb a building and they demanded three takes. But learning how to throw cars about with handbrake turns, take guns apart and reassemble them, it was just great."

Soon after she starred in the forgettable *Sapphire and Steel*, when "for the first time I stopped getting bank statements written in red", but arguably it was not until 1992 that she became a national treasure for her portrayal of Patsy, the permanently pissed PR hanger-on in *Absolutely Fabulous*.

"Not many actors are considered to have good-eggedness," she says, resting that elegant head on an even more elegant hand. "It tends to be when you appear as yourself. My heroes are people like David Attenborough, who has become not just a good egg but a wizard egg."

For one who has led such a bohemian life, there is still a hint of late-night feasts in the dorm about Lumley, who retains a deep attachment to an older idea of England.

She says of her arrival in the mother country aged eight after a colonial upbringing in Kashmir and what is now Malaysia: "It seemed such a plump, soft country with hedgerows full of roses and delicate flowers." And it is a country that has been good to her. Looking back on her life she smiles and says: "It's all been great fun."

And so has meeting her -for once a childhood heroine doesn't disappoint.

#### FROM PURDEY TO PATSY

Joanna Lumley began her acting career as a Bond girl in *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* before being cast as Purdey in *The New Avengers* in 1976. She is best known for her portrayal of the chain-smoking Patsy Stone in *Absolutely Fabulous*

#### ON HER CD CHANGER

I like *The Rainbow Bear*, composed and conducted by Stephen Barlow (her husband, below) and performed by the

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English Northern Philharmonia; and Laurie Johnson -who wrote the theme tunes for The Avengers, The New Avengers and The Professionals

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