

# Ms Collins regrets... *nothing*

Joan Collins – teen starlet, live-in lover of Warren Beatty and newly married to a man half her age – is relishing life at 68.

**J**oan Collins is coughing as she hurries, heels clicking, to answer the door to her Los Angeles apartment high in the hills. She opens it with a welcoming smile and a firm handshake and ushers me in – to her new life.

What's most impressive is not the famous green eyes rimmed with her trademark dark liner nor the impeccably lined crimson lips that match the varnish on her tapered nails. Not the effortless stylishness of the chocolate-brown leather skirt and boots she's wearing, topped by a soft chocolate and beige shirt, and an artfully arranged shawl. Not the impressive portrait of a much younger Joan, painted by trendy artist Patrick Nagel, hanging on the wall behind the overstuffed sofa strewn with comfy cushions.

No, what's most impressive is her astonishingly youthful vitality.

No doubt this dazzling radiance can be attributed to her falling in love with and marrying husband Number Five, theatrical company manager Percy Gibson, who is slim, trim, handsome and, at 36, a mere 32 years her junior.

It can't just be the glow of love that makes her look so much younger than her 68 years. Her skin is amazingly clear, yet she doesn't have anything near that horrid stretched look so many of her

contemporaries do when the plastic surgeon's scalpel has cut a bit too often and too deep.

"I was very lucky that my mother and grandmother and sister [the famous novelist Jackie] were very much into make-up, hair and clothes. They taught me about skincare and nutrition. I always had my cod liver oil; I always had my orange juice; I always had to eat my vegetables." She laughs. "Believe me, I was not allowed to have my sweets or my crisps before dinner.

"I do believe very strongly that most women I know who are over 45 look a lot better than men of the same age, but I couldn't put poison in my face," she adds with a shudder as we discuss 20-year-old models desperate for Botox injections. "A woman has to realise that she might get lines, but if you didn't, then you would just be a face-lifted doll."

When she started acting on stage in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* at 13, Joan Collins certainly was a doll. And she grew up to play Alexis Carrington Colby, the vixen everyone loved to hate on the hit TV series *Dynasty* – which epitomised the glitz, glitter, glam, shoulder pads the size of a footballer's and shameless greed and artifice of the 1980s. Over the course of her career, she's been called everything from the "Poor Man's Elizabeth Taylor" to "Britain's Best Bad Girl", as well as

nicknamed "The British Open", because of her well-publicised love affairs. She shrugs her notoriety off.

"Water off a duck," she declares. She's earthy, yet sexy. And it's clear that Ms Collins does not suffer fools gladly.

"My mother was so subservient to my father, who was a theatrical casting agent," she explains. "She loved him and he was a terrific guy, but also a real macho guy. His philosophy was that the woman is to be dominated and told what to do. When, as a young girl, I told him I wanted to be an actress, he just pooh-poohed it, telling me it was ridiculous, that my chances of having any success were minimal, and then, if I did manage to make it past 23, that was the cut-off age because no woman is desirable or interesting after the age of 23."

Guess who proved him dead wrong? By playing the cunning and devastatingly sexy Alexis when she was in her 50s, she became a role model for women all over the world.

Yet, for a woman with such a raunchy reputation, Joan is surprisingly low-key and unpretentious in person.

"This stupid cough," she apologises, excusing herself to make a cup of tea. "It's driving me crazy."

Born in 1933, Joan studied for two years at RADA (the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art) and made her film ▶

PHOTOGRAPHY BY EDDIE SANDERSON





**A youthful Joan, 68, pictured in her lavish LA apartment, has found happiness with a new husband 32 years her junior.**





debut in *Lady Godiva Rides Again* in 1951. She then made eight more highly forgettable films as a sexy, troublesome teen. She also made a huge mistake when she got married at 18 to the much older actor Maxwell Reed. "I was far too young and a virgin. I felt that guilt, that nice girl's 'if you wanted to do it, you got married'," she explains. "Eighteen-year-old girls today are far more sophisticated than I was then. I didn't even know what a man looked like from the waist down."

She soon found out and fled home just months later when Maxwell reportedly offered to sell her to an Arab for \$30,000.

"We didn't get divorced until several years later [1957]," Joan admits. "I was separated when I came to Hollywood and began living with Sidney Chaplin, Charlie's son. Well, I was told I simply couldn't live with somebody. I told them I was only 20; I didn't want to get married again. Plus, I was still married."

There was no rebuttal to that and, after Joan and Sidney parted, she was seen with some of Hollywood's brightest stars: James Dean, Harry Belafonte, Nicky Hilton, Dennis Hopper and Ryan O'Neal. She allegedly turned down Frank Sinatra, Robert Kennedy and Dean Martin, but was taken to task again when she lived with Warren Beatty in the early 1960s.

"It was still very shocking," she tells me, sipping her tea, the glorious one-of-a-kind 19th-century heart-shaped diamond ring Percy has given her sparkling on her finger. "In fact, I had an abortion with Warren, because there was no way I could have had that baby. No way. Back then, it would have been the biggest scandal. So we got engaged." That shut people up. "Luckily," she adds, smiling about the legendary Casanova that Warren Beatty once was, "we didn't get married."

For all the fame her relationships brought her, however, Joan had not yet appeared in any truly memorable films.

Back in 1955, she'd made a powerful impression in *The Girl in the Red Velvet Swing*, but her sultry looks got her no further than such minor flicks as *Rally 'Round the Flag, Boys!* (1958), in which she attempted to seduce Paul Newman. She was gorgeous and sexual, and no one seemed to know what to do with her. She screen-tested three times for the starring role in *Cleopatra* (1963), but Elizabeth Taylor landed the role.

Yet Joan was not as distressed about her career as she might have been, because her priorities had shifted. More than anything, she wanted to be a mum, so she married actor/songwriter Anthony Newley in 1963.

"I picked Tony because I thought ►



he'd be a very good father," she says candidly. "In actual fact, my son, Sasha, and daughter, Tara, have a wonderful mixture of Tony. He was right with genes, but he wasn't such a good husband."

Anthony's rampant promiscuity – and her own – brought a bitter end to that marriage in 1971. She recalls, "I enjoyed being an adulteress ... taking a certain vengeance for the fact that my husband was not being faithful."

The 1970s were not kind to Joan's career. The once-promising star appeared in dreary sci-fi flicks such as *Tales from the Crypt* (1972) and *Empire of the Ants* (1977), and then, notoriously, in two films based upon sister Jackie's steamy romps: *The Stud*, as a wealthy nymphomaniac, in 1978, and *The Bitch*, as a, well, bitch, in 1979. She carried off her nude scenes with saucy aplomb, at an age where most women wouldn't dream of disrobing before the cameras.

Joan wed businessman Ron Kass in 1972, and soon had daughter Katy. The two were unhappy, though, and jobs for Joan were not forthcoming – until the audition that changed her life. When Joan sashayed into *Dynasty* in 1982, the show became a hit and she finally found a role worthy of her provocative appeal. At the age of 50.

The press jumped all over the story and the misconception grew that Joan was hardly acting when she played the scheming Alexis. Especially when she posed nude for *Playboy* that same year.

"People still think I'm a bitch," Joan says, with another shrug and sip of tea. "Yes, I am tough in business. Sometimes I can be very hard and I've got a temper, but I am not that woman [Alexis]." She arranges her shawl. "But I loved it. Particularly because I got to write most of my own lines."

Yet, as Joan's fame grew, she suffered intense emotional turmoil. "During the entire *Dynasty* run, my personal life was in tatters. I was miserable." Katy had been hit by a car and was in a coma, and Ron was particularly non-supportive.

"Plus we had financial problems," Joan tells me. (Although she ended her *Dynasty* decade earning \$150,000 per episode, Joan earned only \$15,000 when it began – a surprisingly paltry sum by the usually gargantuan Hollywood standards.)

After divorcing Ron Kass in 1983, she admits to making another huge blunder by marrying businessman Peter Holm in 1985 – a man she refers to now only as "The Swede". A scant 13 months later, they divorced.

Once *Dynasty* ended, she continued working in television and in movies, and enjoyed long-term relationships with an



Joan and husband Number Five, Percy Gibson, 36, don't let age worry them.

is directly responsible for the happy glow now suffusing her cheeks. Telling the story of four generations of one famous family, it's a juicy romp with some pointed messages about the treatment of women over the course of this century.

"During my life, I've had so much criticism and lecturing and, 'Oh, you can't do this, oh, you shouldn't do that', which is one of the reasons why I wrote *Star Quality*. Although I was around from the 1950s on, I know a lot about how women were treated in the past. They had no say. They had no voice. They were non-entities." Her eyes flash. "Even my mother, I'm afraid, and a lot of her girlfriends and her many sisters, felt like second-class citizens."

When she writes, Joan locks herself away. "As soon as I wake up and I have my cup of coffee, I usually just throw on sweats and start writing.

**“People still think I’m a bitch. Sometimes I can be very hard ... but I am not [Alexis].”**

English businessman and an art dealer. By now, she had sworn off marriage.

She'd started writing novels, too, but even that was fraught with drama. It wounded her to the quick when, in the early 1990s, publisher Random House, which had given her a \$7.8million, two-novel contract, claimed that the novel she'd turned in was "unacceptable", and sued her to return the money. She countersued and they went to court in a widely publicised case. Joan was savaged on the witness stand and often left the courtroom in floods of tears.

Yet Joan won. Not only did the court rule that she could keep her advance, but that the publisher owed her an additional \$2.5million for her first novel.

"Do I feel vindicated?" Joan says now. "Yes, although I have to say I don't think about it very much any more. It certainly hurt my career considerably. They had the opportunity to speak first, which meant that they could say the biggest load of crap about me – and that made all the headlines. If I ever bear a grudge against anybody, it's those people because they're a tough, huge conglomerate and it was just me fighting them."

Joan's latest novel, called *Star Quality*,

I'll write by hand for as long as I can and then go through it later that day and make changes. Then I send it off to the typist, because I can't type."

Luckily, her new husband, Percy, can type. A theatrical company manager, who divorced his first wife in 1999 after a decade of marriage, he met Joan in 2000 while managing the US production of *Love Letters*. Joan had signed on to star in it with George Hamilton.

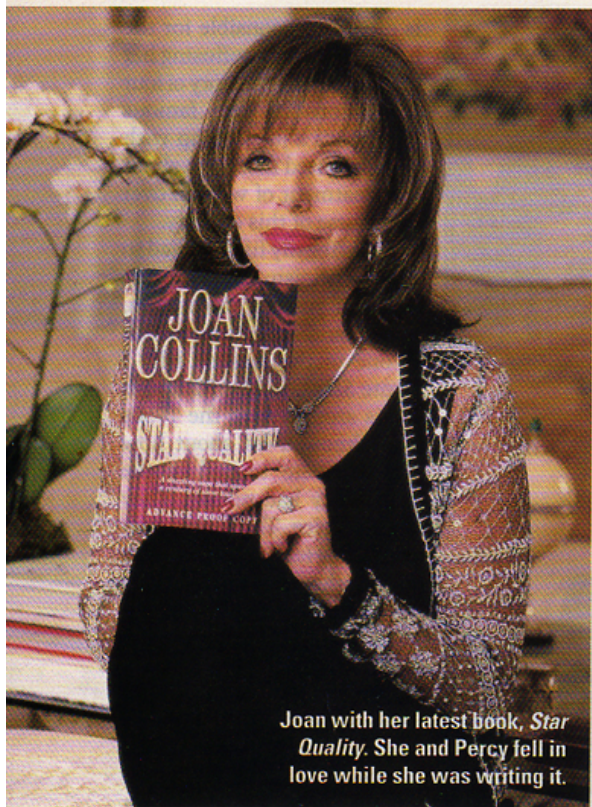
The two became close, but platonic, friends. So when Joan found herself in Los Angeles, struggling with the last section of her novel, she gave him a call. She knew she needed editorial advice. And more than that, she needed a typist!

"I was desperate and I told him so. It was going to take me so long to write and then ship it to my regular typist, who was in London. I asked him for help, and ..." She smiles coyly. "That's what happened."

"It really was serendipity. Not only is Percy a very good editor," Joan adds, "but a computer expert. We instantly found out that we worked really well together."

Percy saw Joan every day in her usual writing gear of sweats and no make-up, and he fell in love with the real Joan, not the showbiz concoction. Neither was ►





Joan with her latest book, *Star Quality*. She and Percy fell in love while she was writing it.

## “If people disapprove or are not happy about what I’ve done, I’m sorry. But this is my life.”

looking for romance; it just happened, despite their age difference.

“What happened on September 11 made us think about how ephemeral life is; how important commitment is, if you really care about each other, have this great rapport and are really into each other. In every which way, we are very compatible,” Joan says, explaining their decision to marry. “So why not? Our marriage will say to the world: ‘This is just not another young man that I’m with. This is my husband’. That was very important to me.

“I also have a theory that if love has no barriers in terms of gender or race, why should it have any barriers in terms of age?” she goes on. “In one way, women have come a long way, but on the other hand, we haven’t come far enough. You see Sean Connery, age 68, acting opposite Catherine Zeta Jones, age 28, and it’s acceptable. Put it the other way around and – wow!” Her eyes flash again.

“But I’ve found there’s a big difference between men over 45 and men under 45,” she hastens to add. “Younger men are more in touch with their feminine side. Perhaps because they grew up realising that women are equal and don’t treat us with the condescending, ‘Well done,

little woman’ attitude. I still get men in their 50s and 60s saying, ‘You did it all yourself, my dear.’ Yeah, right. It’s pathetic.”

Far more hurtful was the gossip that Joan’s three children, Tara, 39, Sacha, 37, and Katy, 29, were appalled by their mum’s latest relationship. They are, in fact, entirely supportive and absolutely delighted to see Joan so blissfully happy with Percy.

“Unfortunately, we’ve had to get the lawyers onto it. Some of the things printed have been vicious. It’s really unkind and cruel to say these things about Percy, which are in no way true. That he’s a gold-digger. Or to put words in my children’s mouths and to call me man-chasing ... The people who write such rubbish are idiots.”

She sighs and coughs delicately. “I think there’s a certain amount of jealousy as well,” she says sadly. “So many people don’t like to see anyone really happy and have to say, ‘Oh well, she’s headed for a fall’.”

What they can’t say, however, is that Joan doesn’t look great.

“I take care of my face, but I like to get a tan, so much so that I usually go around in the summer with this white face and tanned body,” she confesses. “I know that’s a terrible thing to do, but once you’ve ruined your skin in the sun, which I did from the time I was 22, it’s the only way I ever really look good.”

Joan swims to stay in shape, does 150 sit-ups a day and then arm curls with hand weights. She doesn’t eat breakfast.

“I eat coffee,” she jokes. “Lunch is usually salad or fish or vegies. Maybe a glass of wine if I’m in London – everyone looks at you like you’re an alcoholic if you dare drink in Los Angeles. Then I’ll have a cup of tea in the afternoon, maybe with a biscuit. Then at night I usually eat what I want.”

Her downfall, she confesses, is bread and potatoes, especially when she was slimming to make sure her wedding gown, designed by *Dynasty*’s Nolan Miller, would fit perfectly.

She also looked a picture on the day she received an OBE in 1997. “I got the call from the English Consul General, who said, ‘[Then British Prime Minister] Mr Major would like to know if you would like an OBE?’ And I said, ‘You bet.’ Why not? Paul McCartney was also

knighted that day, and he told me, ‘Oh love, I’m so scared. Are you scared?’ I said, ‘Yeah, I’m terrified’. Because you have to walk backwards in high heels!”

The Queen would undoubtedly agree with Joan’s assessment that people can and do change. “I am certainly a great deal different from what I was as a young girl,” she explains. “But I also think you reach a point in your life when you don’t change that much any more. I’m doing and living the same kind of life that I’ve wanted to live for the past 20 or 30 years. I love travelling; I’ve always wanted to have two or three homes. Even when I was a kid, our parents never spoiled us and we used our imaginations instead of being given endless toys.”

She admits that she’s lucky she wasn’t spoiled by her parents.

“Nor have I spoiled my own children, unless it was by travelling with them so much when they were little,” she says, beaming about them. “Sasha is an amazing painter. Tara is a hands-on mother to her daughter, Miel, three, and is working hard with all kinds of TV productions. And Katy is wonderful; she’s working with a charity for children with leukemia.”

Joan looks at her watch. Percy strolls into the living room to chat about a phone call and flashes me a quick, warm smile. He’s much better-looking in person than in photos and he and Joan have such an easy rapport with each other, it’s hard to believe they are decades apart. He leaves the room and we grin at each other. He’s a babe and, in truth, so is she.

As for her plans for the future, she gets right to the point. “At this moment, I’m an out-of-work actress, although I’ve got a lot of irons in the fire,” she tells me.

“I’ve just written an idea for a sitcom for myself. And I’m plotting my next book, which is going to be a how-to, called either *Joan’s Way* or *You’re As Young As You Look*, which has always been my attitude.

“I like to write, I like to act, I like to go to parties,” she goes on. “But I also like to stay in and eat pizza and watch a video and play poker or Scrabble. I’m not living my life for anybody other than my children and Percy.

“If people disapprove or are not happy about what I’ve done, I’m very sorry. But this is my life and I think I’ve paid my dues for whatever happiness I’ve got now. Which, thankfully, I have a lot of.”

She coughs one more time, smiles broadly, and ushers me out.

— KAREN MOLINE

An exclusive extract from Joan Collins’ latest novel, *Star Quality*, will be published in the April issue of *The Australian Women’s Weekly*.