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Bluntly speaking

The British actress Emily Blunt overcame a severe stutter to star with Judi Dench, Meryl Streep and, in her latest film, Tom Cruise. Now living in America – and best friends with George Clooney and Jennifer Aniston – she tells *Helena de Bertodano* about new motherhood, pubs, paparazzi and playing it mean



A few years ago Emily Blunt said that she would rather do badly paid theatre for the rest of her life than ever accept a role “as a spear carrier in a Tom Cruise movie”. On the eve of the opening of her new sci-fi action flick *Edge of Tomorrow* with, er, Tom Cruise, I remind her of this statement. “I never said that! What an awful thing to say,” she says, almost spluttering on her iced almond-milk single-shot cappuccino. I pull out the newspaper clipping (an interview in *The Telegraph* in 2005) and she roars with laughter. “That is so funny. Well, at least I’m not a spear carrier.”

If anything, in this film, Cruise is *her* spear carrier – as he himself has put it, Blunt is the one who plays the “badass”. That a Hollywood heavyweight such as Cruise could now be playing second fiddle to Blunt is an apt metaphor for her ascent to the top of the Hollywood hierarchy, both professionally and personally.

Married to the American actor and writer John Krasinski – the Martin Freeman-equivalent in the American version of *The Office* – with a new baby daughter, the 31-year-old now counts George Clooney among her closest friends. Her wedding was at Clooney’s Lake Como retreat and the week before we meet she and Krasinski were pictured dining with him and Amal Alamuddin, now his fiancée. Jennifer Aniston attended her baby shower and in January

she went on holiday to Mexico with the *Friends* star and her fiancé Justin Theroux.

"I don't *feel* I lead a glamorous life. Most of the people we're friends with are people you can just hang out with," says Blunt, when we meet at a coffee shop near her house in Ojai, California, a pretty town in a valley near Los Angeles. "You should have seen us this morning. It was... well, not chaos, but like everyone else in the morning with a small baby.

'I tend to sweep down in a ball-gown every night saying, "Tell me I look beautiful,"' she says with trademark humour

"Then again," she adds in what it soon becomes clear is her trademark Blunt humour, "I do tend to sweep down the stairs in a ball-gown every night saying, 'Tell me I look beautiful!'"

She orders a "Messy Pita salad" without the pita. "I'm trying the whole eye-rolling gluten-free thing - it makes me feel really energetic." Friendly and relaxed, she still seems and sounds very English, despite having lived in California for several years now. She comes out with statements that you would never catch an American A-lister saying, such as, "I'm going to use the bathroom before I pee myself," and lamenting the absence of "pub culture. America tries very hard to emulate it but their pubs aren't pubs: they're impostors."

Nor did she have a very American attitude towards the birth of her daughter Hazel. "Everybody was asking, 'What's your birth plan?' and I was like, 'I don't really have one, to be honest.' The nurses were like, 'Thank God' - they're used to women who come in and say, 'I want this music playing when the baby comes out, I want this candle, these flowers...'"

She waxes lyrical about Hazel, who is just six weeks old when we meet (Blunt meets me between feeds). "She is heaven;

my heart sort of explodes. I'm wondering what we were doing without her, actually. I can't really remember. John and I spend a lot of time going, 'Isn't she cute? Oh my God, look at her, she's so cute...'"

She takes her iPhone out of her bag. "I'm going to be a proud mummy - you're the first person who's been allowed to see a picture." A cherubic baby dressed in a striped blue babygro gazes intently into the camera. "She just stares into your soul..." says Blunt dreamily. "Her eyes are denim blue. She looks like a combination of my mother and John's mother."



Clockwise from above Emily Blunt in her new film, *Edge of Tomorrow*; in *My Summer of Love*, 2004; as Emily in *The Devil Wears Prada*, 2006

I ask what Krasinski is like as a father. "He's the diaper king," she says. "We're both hands-on all the time."

Edge of Tomorrow

was shot before she became pregnant - "Thank God - I fell over so many times." Based on the charmingly titled Japanese novel *All You Need Is Kill*, it is set in the future after an alien race has invaded Earth. Cruise's character is caught in a time loop of a frenetic day in battle, *Groundhog Day*-style, and is killed over and over again - often by Blunt, who plays the Special Forces warrior training him to be a soldier. "I shot Tom dead so many times," she says matter-of-factly,

insisting loyally that this is not just another Tom Cruise action movie. "He commits so hard to playing this character who is quite useless in the beginning. I just give him s--- all the time and he gets beaten up every day - by a chick."

Blunt still marvels at her success. "Sometimes it hits me like a train. The chances were so mega-slim." She never set out to become an actress. "I think this job found me. I certainly wasn't on the prowl for it. Not to sound irreverent, because I take it so seriously and I love

what I do - but it's never been everything to me. It's something I have a big love affair with but it doesn't consume me to the point where it's all I am."

Unlike many actors, Blunt doesn't harbour dreams of directing one day. "That thought frightens me. I don't want to be at the helm of something. I'm more of a daydreamer than a decisive person."

Growing up in London, the second of four children, Blunt had a terrible stutter and a teacher recommended that she try acting as a way of "removing me from me. It was the most intuitive thing, and he was right: the only way I could speak fluently was to be someone else."

Until then she had been quite lonely. "It alienates you in some ways if you have

trouble communicating. It wasn't that I got bullied horribly about it, although kids definitely had a go sometimes. It comes back if I'm tired or stressed."

Her mother, Joanna, is a teacher and former actress and her father, Oliver Blunt, is a high-profile QC. "He's always defending some kind of pond life – he's the brunt of most jokes in our family."

As a teenager, she hated her surname "because we all know what it rhymes with". She considered changing it when she became an actress. "But my English agent at the time said, 'Don't, it's so memorable.' Every male actor I work with always ends up just calling me 'Blunt'."



Blunt with her husband, the actor and writer John Krasinski, last year

Discovered by an agent while still a pupil at Hurtwood House, a private sixth-form college, Blunt first appeared on stage in 2001 in *The Royal Family* with Judi Dench, earning herself a Best Newcomer award from the *Evening Standard*. "Judi Dench was more than everything to me: I learnt an awful lot from the best. She showed me how joyous this job can be if you don't take it too seriously."

It is an attitude that helps her win roles. "I think if you walk into a room sweating with desperation people are, like, 'Whoa...'" And her versatility as an actress means she has never been pigeon-holed: "I'm not the English rose in the latest bodice-ripping drama."

Her early film success was *My Summer of Love* (2004), in which she played a teenager who deceives an impressionable girl who has fallen in love with her. The following year she starred with Bill Nighy in the British television drama *Gideon's Daughter*, winning a Golden Globe for her performance. But it was *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), in which she played the bitchy assistant to Meryl Streep's Miranda Priestly, that proved her breakthrough. Since then she has starred in multiple films, playing a magnificent Queen Victoria in *The Young Victoria* (2009), taking on *The Wolfman* (2010) with Anthony Hopkins and *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen* (2011) with Ewan McGregor.

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It was her performance in *The Adjustment Bureau* (2011) – as a dancer who captures the heart of Matt Damon's character – that caught the attention of Cruise, who sent word that he wanted to meet her. "He wanted to find the right sort of chemistry for the film because it is the most unusual, violent love story."

She really enjoyed working with him: "We laughed a lot. That's the wonderful thing about Tom: he doesn't take himself that seriously and he is very self-effacing. He couldn't care less what people think about him – that's quite refreshing."

Initially, she felt nervous about doing the film. "I was aware that it was going to be so challenging and so physically hard, and I was programmed into thinking it was going to be a bit 'boys' club', but I've never been on a film as collaborative as this – everyone was so encouraging, and I was consistently emboldened to speak up and to disagree."

She underwent intense physical training for three months: "I learnt this really lethal martial art called Krav Maga

– it's the Israeli martial art. You use your elbows, knees and teeth."

Her usual training regime went out the window when she became pregnant. "I got back on the rower this morning for the first time [since Hazel was born]. I only managed five minutes. And I managed to squeeze on my jeans for the first time today too." Around her neck is a filigree necklace with a tiny diamond letter H. "It was a gift [from Krasinski] for my little girl."

They are planning to have more children. "I'm from a big family and John is one of three so I think we definitely would [have more]." Although they still have a place in Los Angeles, they spend most of their time in Ojai. "It's such an escape. We have land and space and beautiful trees and the air is clean." And the paparazzi leave her alone. "They're outside our house every day in LA, but don't want to pay for the petrol to come here. Also we don't tend to leave the house much – so they could wait for days."

She tells a story about Krasinski's recent reaction to a photographer in Los Angeles. "They followed him to the gym and one guy was driving really dangerously, rushing red lights. So John was like, 'I'm going to take a picture of his car.' He got out and the guy was going, 'Hey John, how ya doing, man?' And then he saw John take a picture of his licence plate and he turned instantly aggressive: 'You f— c—, what's your problem, man?' John just started laughing – that's the hilarity of what they do, as soon as you turn a camera on them they are paranoid, angry and openly aggressive."

Despite all that, they have no plans to move back to England. "Our lives are here, all our friends are here." But there are other things she misses, besides the pubs. "I miss the irreverence of the British," she says. That said, judging by her husband's ability to laugh in the face of an aggressive paparazzo, it sounds as though she's found the closest thing possible to home. ●

"Edge of Tomorrow" is released on Friday