

‘My mother was so angry that I didn’t want to do Playboy’

Almost a year after Joan Rivers’ death, her daughter Melissa tells Helena de Bertodano about her unusual parenting style

It is almost a year since the American comedian Joan Rivers died and her daughter, Melissa, is still coming to terms with the loss. “It suddenly hit me yesterday that it was 11 months,” she says. “I still keep wanting to pick up the phone and call her.”

We are sitting in the kitchen of her beautiful Pacific Palisades home, high above the ocean. Rivers used to live here for part of every week, dividing her time between her daughter’s house and her home in New York. It was here that they filmed their reality television series, *Joan and Melissa: Joan Knows Best?*

Although she was 81, Joan’s death came out of the blue. Mother and daughter had just returned from their annual Wyoming vacation: the night before she lost consciousness, Joan had been on stage in New York. She spoke to Melissa in Los Angeles by phone after the show and discussed the routine surgery she would undergo the next day, a minor throat procedure at an outpatient clinic.

The next morning just before 7am Melissa’s phone rang. Seeing her mother’s number, she picked it up, a little annoyed she was ringing so early. “I thought: ‘God, this woman has to learn to add and subtract by three [referring to the three-hour time difference between LA and New York].’ Instead of her mother’s voice, she heard her mother’s assistant,

crying and saying that Joan had stopped breathing.

By the time Melissa and her 14-year-old son, Cooper, reached New York, Joan was in a medically induced coma. She had suffered brain damage allegedly caused by lack of oxygen during the procedure. A few days later, on September 4, her life support was switched off. It was alleged that the clinic made a number of mistakes before and during surgery, failing to respond to her deteriorating vital

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signs, including a severe drop in blood pressure and possibly administering an incorrect anaesthetic dosage. Bizarrely, it was also alleged that one of Joan’s doctors had taken a selfie with her while she was unconscious.

In January this year Melissa filed a malpractice lawsuit against the clinic and doctors. “Not only should it not have happened to my mother,” she says, angrily, “it shouldn’t happen to anybody.” The clinic and the doctors deny any wrongdoing and are defending the lawsuit.

The housekeeper pours coffee and Melissa picks at a slice of sugar-free cake. In her memoir, *The Book of Joan*, Melissa captures her mother in all her outrageousness — she has a pithy style, reminiscent of her mother’s stage voice, and found writing the book cathartic. “It forced me to sit and laugh instead of being depressed. My goal was to write a book that my mom would think was funny.”

She gives us lots of classic Rivers quips — eg: “When I told her that in one of my college textbooks she was referred to as a feminist icon, she said: ‘Oh, don’t be silly, Melissa. Feminists are just lesbians who can’t play golf.’” She also paints a touching portrait of a woman who doted on her grandson and hid money in candy boxes — a demanding but kind woman who was a stickler for etiquette, yet who would also send her daughter articles “on how to give good blow-jobs”.

Joan would obsess about finding humorous gifts for her celebrity friends, who included Prince Charles: “Last year my mother came up with the perfect gift, something she knew Charles needed but didn’t have: a 50-dollar gift certificate from [the American fashion chain] Forever 21.”

It is not a hagiography. Her mother, she writes, was “a huge pain in the ass... and I say that in the most sweet, loving, because-of-you-I’m-on-Xanax kind of way”. As the only child of Joan and her producer husband Edgar



Rosenberg, Melissa, 47, was born in New York and moved to California at the age of three. By then her mother was making her way as a comedian and television host and Melissa’s childhood was peripatetic. Melissa claims her mother had two personae. “Once the door shut, my mom was Mrs Rosenberg. She was completely different from Joan Rivers. Mrs Rosenberg ran a very formal

household. I was raised with finger bowls and French service. She was very elegant, very gracious, very considerate — but also funny as hell. The basic personality traits were the same, it was just much more exaggerated on stage. Much crasser. She said things on stage that she would never say in private life.”

Her father had a drier sense of humour. “My mom always said she felt I was closer in temperament to my father. He was calmer, but when he blew he blew.” In 1987 Melissa’s father committed suicide, shortly after the cancellation of Rivers’ talk show, of which he was executive producer. “To lose one parent very suddenly and unexpectedly is one thing, to lose two, one to suicide, one to [alleged] malpractice...” Melissa tails off, tears filling her eyes. “I think I’m in a pretty small percentile.”

Shortly after her father’s death, her mother was back on stage, cracking jokes even about his death. “I couldn’t identify the body,” she quipped: “I hadn’t looked at him for years.”

“That’s how our family deal with everything,” says Melissa. “Through humour.”

In her book she describes her mother’s constant exhortations to improve her physical appearance. Sometimes, she writes, it felt “critical and mean, but sometimes I just have to admit that the old bitch was right”.

“It was exhausting,” she says, “but that was just part of who she was.”

I ask if she would she ever embrace plastic surgery like her mother? “I’m definitely a fan of Botox and fillers,

Good genes for being funny: Joan Rivers with her daughter Melissa

and anybody who tells you they’re not is lying. I don’t want to turn into some old scary-looking person, but how far I would go, I don’t know. My mother always said, ‘It’s better to have a new you getting out of an old car than an old you getting out of a new car.’ There’s no reason to look crappy.”

A typically outrageous Rivers joke revolved around Melissa’s refusal to pose for *Playboy*. “The nerve of that bitch,” Rivers would roar to the audience. “\$500,000, and she turns it down?!? Pull down your pants and show them the p****!”

Was her mother genuinely angry? “Oh yes,” chuckles Melissa, “she was insane that I wouldn’t do it. I just said, ‘No way.’ We live in a digital world now. I don’t need my son’s buddies going, ‘Dude, I’ve seen your mom’s tits.’”

One of the biggest difficulties of being Rivers’ daughter, says Melissa, is that she has to fight much harder to prove herself. “It’s always ‘she only got that because of her mom’. You have to perform 100 times better, work 100 times harder for people to give you the credit that would be given to anyone who is anonymous.”

Although she started out as an equestrian, Melissa soon followed her parents into showbusiness. They were, she says, “supportive but not encouraging, warning me that it was a terrible, nasty business”. Melissa took roles in several TV shows including *Beverly Hills, 90210*. Later she teamed up with her mother to co-produce her mother’s web series *In Bed With Joan*.

Having been executive producer on the TV series *Fashion Police*, in which her mother would pillory the fashion choices of celebrities, Melissa is preparing to host it herself. She is also writing another book — a humorous take on parenthood provisionally titled: “I hated middle school the first time. Why am I being forced to relive it?” “I hate to say I’ve always been funny,” she says, “but I have. I have good genes for it.”

Melissa’s boyfriend, Mark Rouso, a good-looking talent agent, pops in to kiss her goodbye as he leaves for work. Melissa says that he came into her life only after her mother’s death. “Some people say: ‘It was the last gift your mother gave you.’” He was an old friend she turned to as her mother lay dying in hospital; he flew to New York when she made the decision to turn off the ventilator. “He said: ‘I never in my entire life thought I would see you defenceless and that’s not something I want to see again.’”

I ask if her mother was censorious of her previous boyfriends, including Cooper’s father, the horse trainer John Endicott, to whom she was married for four years. “Absolutely,” says Melissa. “I think I’m going to be a horrible mother-in-law too. I think the key is to mess your child up just enough: they can go out and have families and be functional people, but Mommy should still be number one.” She laughs: “That would be perfect parenting to me.”

People keep asking her what she will do to mark the anniversary of her mother’s death. “We’ll light a memorial candle at sundown and we’ll say a prayer.” She won’t let herself wallow in grief. “The last thing my mother would want me to do is sit and cry. She always used to tell me: ‘If I die tomorrow, I had a great life.’”

The Book of Joan: Tales of Mirth, Mischief and Manipulation by Melissa Rivers, is out now (Crown Archetype, £18.99)