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## **Kingsley Amis: The young devil**

by ZACHARY LEADER

One winter's morning in 1946, Hilary Bardwell, a pretty student at the Ruskin School of Art in Oxford, was drinking coffee with friends in the cafe at Elliston & Cavell's department store.

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She had been told that some male undergraduates were interested in meeting her. One was reading chemistry, another was reading PPE and the third was reading English. It was the chemist she fancied most, but the prospect of chatting about chemistry put her off and she transferred her attentions to 'the English literature one'.

At the time, he had what she recalled as 'a pretty ruthless haircut' and there was also the matter of his teeth, which were 'all over the place and yellow and snarly'. In addition, his clothes were terrible: a hairy, ginger-coloured tweed jacket and what appeared to be policeman's trousers.

As Hilary later admitted: 'I found myself wondering if perhaps chemistry should have been the choice after all. One could always read up on the subject.' Yet the 'English literature one' was lively. As soon as he came over to her table he dominated the group: 'he was the one who made everyone laugh ♦ and that was attractive.' He was also dazzlingly intelligent and knowledgeable. 'I knew from the start,' Hilary remembered, 'that this man would teach me a lot.'

The young man was Kingsley Amis and he was destined to become the finest comic novelist of his generation, as well as a poet, critic and polemicist at the heart of post-war literary culture. He was also an utterly compelling human being ♦ a man of alarming appetites and energies, the funniest man most people had ever met, or the cleverest, or the rudest.

Fiercely independent ♦ and animated throughout his life by a desire to irritate and annoy ♦ he nevertheless craved companionship and was incapable of living alone. His relationship with Hilary, or Hilly as she was known, would be central to him until his death nearly half a century later ♦ despite countless infidelities and a bitter divorce. Just as she would not be the last, Hilly was by no means the first woman to catch his eye.

Habitually frank about sex, at 23 Amis was already promiscuous and had enjoyed several flings after interrupting his degree course for wartime service in the Army. These adventures involved nurses, ATS (Auxiliary Territorial Service) girls, French girls, Belgians, and a South African with whom he had a liaison in a caravan in High Wycombe. On one occasion, while stationed in Brussels, he had got very drunk and in the same evening slept first with a prostitute and then with a waitress, contracting scabies. This episode raised 'the insoluble question' of whether he got the infection from the prostitute or the waitress, and if from the former whether he'd given it to the latter ('I hoped not').

There was also his first serious love affair, with a married woman named Elisabeth, whom he met on a military training course in Yorkshire. This relationship was most notable for the trouble it caused when it was discovered by Amis's father, William, a clerk for mustard manufacturer J. and J. Colman. Rummaging through his son's overcoat pockets looking for cigarettes, William Amis

came across French letters hidden inside a packet of Players (Kingsley had apparently left himself with a surplus 'having over-estimated his needs').

There was a forthright confrontation, and William wrote his son a stinging letter, accusing him of letting down the family ('I'd ask you to give her up if I thought you'd take the slightest notice'). Amis was furious but unrepentant, and never forgave his father for interfering. The affair with Elisabeth continued intermittently, and when he arrived back in Oxford after the war Amis was ostensibly still pining for her.

However, his letters to his best friend, the poet Philip Larkin, also mention a girl called June, whom he 'got rid of' to make way for yet another girl, Gill.

Gill, it seems, was 'irresistibly attractive' but also somewhat coy. 'Our whole relationship has been compounded of lust and worship and exasperation on my side,' Amis told Larkin, 'and just bloody cretinism on hers. She won't let me kiss her or anything.' Before long, Gill was discarded and he was in hot pursuit of Hilly Bardwell.

However, their first date was not especially romantic ♦ tomatoes on toast at Lyon's Corner House ♦ and Hilly wasn't sure about him. 'Half of him appealed to me greatly ♦ the funny, laughing, chatty, poetry-writing side,' she recalled. What did not appeal was his peevishness and impatience: 'endless complaints about what seemed to me harmless things like apparently ordinary, nice people coming through the swing-door at Elliston's restaurant.

'He'd start muttering, "Look at those fools, look at that idiot of a man," and so on. If doors got stuck, or he was held up by some elderly person getting off a bus, or the wind blew his hair all over the place, he would snarl and grimace in the most irritating fashion.' For a while she stopped seeing him, but he caught up with her in the Ashmolean Museum as she was trying to draw a Greek statue 'and demanded a statement as to whether I was giving him up for good ♦ or would I please come out with him again?' She relented ♦ 'leapt at my second chance,' as she put it ♦ and they had tea, went to several pubs and then walked back to her digs arm in arm.

'Just down an alley called Friar's Entry we had our first kiss and very nice it was too,' she recalled. To Larkin, Amis wrote that Hilly was 17 'and hence not nearly so depraved as I had hoped'.

He had perhaps deceived himself after discovering she was supplementing her allowance from her parents by working as her art college's 'head model' ♦ which he wrongly thought meant 'best model' (in the nude, presumably) rather than 'model of heads'.

But soon Amis reported to Larkin that she was 'coming on nicely. She really likes jazz. Her breasts are concave on top. And she likes me.' As for sex, he added: 'I think she will, if you see what I mean.' In fact, though she liked men and 'had had the odd kiss or so', in sexual terms Hilly was almost as innocent as she looked: 'I wasn't that interested, really.'

In other respects, she was, by her own admission, 'wild ♦ just the sort of child I'd be worried about my own children associating with'.

She had been thrown out of every school she ever went to for not working, running away and breaking rules. While gentle and unassertive in manner, she could be stubborn, wilful and even reckless. What was most striking about her was that, unlike other girls, she was-n't frightened of Amis, of his cleverness, energy and aggression.

As the relationship progressed, so did his campaign to get her into bed. 'We have been arguing for the past week about sleeping in the same bed,' he wrote to Larkin. 'First she said no, and I said she would have to say yes. Then she said yes, and I said I had forced her into it and what she meant was no. 'Then she said no, and I feel hurt and angry and disappointed, and there for the moment the matter rests. If only one could be ruthless about these things!'

Shortly after, he reported to Larkin: 'Hilly has yielded.'

By this time, Amis had been introduced to Hilly's family at their house in the country near Harwell in Oxfordshire. Her well-off father was a retired civil servant with a love of Morris dancing. He played the concertina, wore a beret, studied Welsh and Swedish and adored camping.

Amis was, to say the least, unimpressed. He likened the old man to 'a music-loving lavatory attendant'. While by everyone else's account, Leonard Bardwell was perfectly pleasant and amiable, if a little eccentric, he fed a class resentment in Amis, derived from his suburban upbringing, that the wrong people were in charge, had the money, had to be listened to and treated with respect. H

e turned Hilly's father, 'Daddy B' (his own father was Daddy A) into a joke figure, a monster of egotism ♦ informing Larkin that, by way of protest, he made a point of 'farting silently' in his host's presence. 'I shall swing for the old cockchafer,' he wrote, 'unless I put him in a book, recognisably, so that he will feel hurt.'

Which is precisely what he did, with Lucky Jim, his first and most famous novel, though Daddy B apparently never recognised himself in the character of Professor Welch. Amis also made a joke of Hilly's 'excrementally evil' brothers, one of whom, he reported to Larkin, 'has sandals and saffron trousers, no socks, and a green shirt, and plays the recorder (yes) and likes Tudor music'. Larkin's response was that 'Hilary's family sounds an awful price to pay for Hilary.'

## Impressed

By now Amis and Hilly had been a couple for more than 18 months. They went regularly to jazz club evenings 'and even danced'; they went punting and had fun. Hilly impressed him by sneaking into Oxford's Randolph Hotel to wash her hair and her smalls, and caused him some trepidation by doing the same in the bath-house at his strictly male all-college, St John's. She recognised that, when it came to romance, 'he didn't like heavy stuff. Didn't want to have long silent walks with a girl, unless it ended with one thing, you know.'

She described his behaviour as 'brilliantly selfish'. Amis was not exactly faithful to Hilly. He wrote to his first love, Elisabeth, asking if she'd be interested in seeing him again, and she said yes (though nothing seems to have come of it). He fantasised about a schoolgirl he saw in a tea-shop and came close to asking her out.

While visiting his family in Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire, he went to a dance and saw an attractive girl with a thin, sullen face, black eyes and hair and 'noticeable' breasts. 'When I stared at her,' he reported with horror to Larkin, 'she looked back, half-closing her eyes. She was 12 years old!'

Then there was a girl named Noel, a lot of whose clothes he removed in Christ Church Meadow. 'But I didn't s\*\*g her because I decided it would spoil things with Hilly. I think I am a very nice man to behave like that under extreme provocation.'

It was just after he finished his Finals in December 1947 that Hilly told him she was pregnant. An abortion seemed the only solution ♦ but in those days that inevitably meant an illegal, back-street procedure. With jokey detachment, Amis informed Larkin that a 'nasty man is going to give (Hilly) an injection of a substance derived from the interior of a cow. The man lives in Park Lane, W1, and going there will make me very frightened, and paying the bill afterwards will fill me with a variety of emotions.

'But if the injection doesn't work, then Hilly will have to submit to a surgical operation, costing £100.'

He did not write again to Larkin until the second week of January, when he confessed to having 'a lot on my mind; more than I have ever had on it in the whole of my life before'.

What followed was an extraordinary account of their dealings with the abortionist, almost like a short story. Amis and Hilly had travelled to London on a Tuesday to see 'the nasty man', who said he couldn't help but that he knew someone who could, though it would cost them 100 guineas.

In other words, Hilly would need an operation, which would have to be scheduled right away. The next day they visited a friend to see if they could borrow the 100 guineas. The friend agreed but said it would take him a week to get it out of the Post Office. A desperate Amis then phoned round other friends to see if they could help, eventually reaching an old schoolmate who, 'after a lot of joking on his side', agreed to wire the money from Paris.

Amis and Hilly then spent the following day tracking down 'the nasty man' to get details of the doctor who would operate on her. When they finally made contact, he said he could not see them until Friday at 5pm, leaving them to spend the time until then walking around London in the rain, at the cinema, then in a tea-shop, sitting 'next to a deformed man with a curious growth on his neck, who shook all the time'.

When they eventually met the doctor it turned out he was from central Europe. Amis thought him 'very agreeable and reassuring, looking like a successful and respected American film director'. He told them it was a simple operation, would take only two hours, and that Hilly could go home straight after. He would do it next Monday.

Hilly returned to her family for the weekend, leaving Amis in London staying with Frank Coles, an old friend from his Army days. It was there he had a long talk with a friend of Coles, 'a real doctor' named Hugh Price. 'Price said that, contrary to what I had earlier been led to believe, the operation would be a very serious matter. There was perhaps one chance in 20 that Hilly would have a haemorrhage afterwards and die of it.

'There was a much greater chance that she would be rendered permanently sterile, and a greater chance still that being deprived of her child would make her a) bitter and b) bitter towards me.

'He summed up his view of the measures proposed by the central European doctor as "sheer butchery" and added that he was aware, by reason of his experience as an assistant medical officer for his borough, of the existence of a band of central Europeans in the particular area and of their part in other illegal acts like murder and blackmail.'

The next morning Amis saw the central European doctor again and insisted that Hilly be admitted to a nursing home after the operation for at least a week. Reluctantly and angrily, the doctor agreed to book her into a room in a hotel in London, where he would attend to her for three days only.

After a second discussion with Hugh Price, Amis decided that these arrangements were still inadequate.

'It would be intolerable if anything nasty were to happen to Hilly, and even with the great nuisance of having a child, the upset and responsibility of starting a new home and the unwelcome constraint on my freedom, these were better than such a disaster as might happen.

'So I then thought, since I had been intending to marry Hilly at some point anyway, no time could be better than the present.'

## **Pregnancy**

Amis went down to Hilly's parents' house and told her all this. Her own attitude to the pregnancy was clear and simple. She loved Amis and wanted to marry him and to have his baby, but if he did not want the baby she was prepared to abort it.

She put no direct or spoken pressure on him. Still, Amis knew full well what she wanted.

'As I had expected, she agreed that it would be best to get married. I rang up the central European doctor and told him we wouldn't be coming.' He was keen to let Larkin know what an ordeal he had been through. 'If by any chance I've failed to evoke in you what it felt like to be me between last Tuesday and Saturday, let me add that I felt as if I had committed an outrage on a schoolgirl and then murdered her, leaving my identity card near the body, and as if I were in a dentist's chair with a dentist about to take all my teeth out without anaesthetic, a measure that might postpone my capture for a few days.'

However, he told his friend, he was now coming to accept what had happened. 'I don't want a filthy baby, but Hilly is so overjoyed by the prospect that it seems unkind not to allow it.'

'Since I'm determined to keep Hilly and she would never be happy for any length of time without a baby, having one sooner or later seems inevitable.'

'Since I enjoy living with Hilly better than I enjoy living anywhere else, it's difficult to believe that I shan't enjoy living with her all the time. It'll mean in addition that I shall be able to do as I like, eat the food I like, and stop worrying about not being able to ejaculate when I want to. Against this I shall have to find somewhere to live, and eventually spend money on a pram and furniture, and have to nurse the baby. But I can foresee myself not minding these things as much as I have minded other things in my life, and this time I shall be getting things in return.'

Though Amis insisted he had been intending to marry Hilly all along, it is impossible to tell what would have happened had she not got pregnant or if the abortion had gone ahead. He was fonder of Hilly than of any other girl and was keen to be with her, but there is no evidence that he was ready to be a husband, and he might easily have let things drift.

She, at least, was thrilled by the way events had turned out. She wrote to Larkin herself, telling him she felt dazed but 'very happy and flattered. I can't help feeling pleased about the troublesome baby ♦ if a little alarmed.'

She wasn't looking forward to telling her parents that she had to get married because a child was on the way but the prospect was 'not half so bad as it would have been having it cut out by a slimy Pole.'

When Hilly delivered her news, her parents felt betrayed as well as shocked, and refused to attend the wedding, as did Amis's father. His mother, an otherwise 'gentle creature', took matters in hand, told his father not to be a fool and persuaded Hilly's folks not to boycott the ceremony either.

It took place in the Register Office at Oxford Town Hall. Hilly recalled: 'My mother and father and I travelled grimly up by bus from Harwell. Kingsley met us straight from his digs with his parents and grimly they stood there while a rather drunk chap married us.'

'Then we went to the Randolph Hotel and had coffee, and then Kingsley went back to his digs. His parents got the bus back to Berkhamsted and I got in the bus back to Harwell with my parents. And that was it.'

The baby was born seven months later ♦ a boy, Philip, named in honour of Larkin. Amis wrote to his old friend: 'He has very fair hair, a conical head and a face like that of an ageing railway porter, who is beginning to realise his untidiness has meant that he'll never get that ticket collector's job he's been after for 20 years.'

'He seems inoffensive. I don't know what this business is supposed to make you feel. I feel just the same as before.'

In fact, the shock of fatherhood left Amis 'massively anxious' and distressed. He suffered panic attacks, night terrors and outbreaks of boils and cysts that appear to have been psychological in

origin. Things got so bad that he paid a visit 'to the loony bin at Littlemore', a psychiatric hospital in Oxford.

There, a psychiatrist told him: 'While I can't tell you that you'll never go mad, any more than I can say you'll never break a leg, you show no sign of it at the moment.'

Apparently, this was what Amis needed to hear, for he 'stayed cured for ten years', except for 'a few momentary lurches on dark nights'.

After the birth, Larkin and his girlfriend, Ruth Bowman, came to visit the Amises at their rented cottage in a village outside Oxford. Ruth did not approve of Kingsley's 'detached view of marriage and fatherhood'.

Amis and Larkin spent most of the visit closeted together 'playing jazz records, drinking and having a thoroughly and exclusively masculine good time'. Ruth felt sorry for Hilly, who seemed 'permanently tired out' yet 'accepted her new life placidly enough'.

Only once did Ruth see Hilly angry.

On a fine afternoon they set out for a walk, leaving the baby in Amis's care. The sleeping infant was put in his pram in the garden and Amis was instructed to bring him in immediately if the weather turned.

In the middle of the walk there was a sudden, heavy thunderstorm and Hilly insisted that they return home. On opening the front door the two women were hit by the sound of jazz at full volume, 'but of pram and baby there were no sign. Poor Hilly dashed outside to find a very wet baby lying in sodden blankets. Kingsley was mildly surprised at his wife's rage.'

Amis's interest in other women had abated slightly in the months leading up to the birth but was soon back to full strength. He would stare at attractive girls in the street, ostentatiously complaining when a bus obscured his view (a provocation Hilly 'felt I shouldn't rise to').

He was often away ♦ ostensibly in the Bodleian Library, researching a postgraduate thesis ♦ and was not good at hiding his extra-marital flings. Hilly found notes in his jacket pockets. He also left a notebook lying about the cottage and Hilly read it. She was bored and couldn't stop herself.

It contained explicit references not only to other women but to how he hadn't wanted a child. There was a detailed description of a pass he made at Hilly's best friend, which the friend resisted at first but finally succumbed to. There were pornographic passages.

There were also passages about Hilly ♦ now pregnant with the couple's second son, Martin ♦ including tender and tormented ones. 'Why is Hilly crying', he had written, 'as if her heart would break? I can't bear to hear somebody break her heart like this.'

## Journal

Hilly never told Amis she'd read the journal and never said anything to the best friend, but she half suspected Amis knew. 'He'd leave it around with "Private" written on it,' she recalled. 'He quite liked torturing me in a funny way.'

Though there were many good times at the cottage, and Hilly never doubted Amis's fondness for her, his philandering weakened the marriage from the start. In these early years, she remembered, 'I went very quiet and that was the only way I could handle it.'

She tried to tell herself that Amis's other girls meant nothing to him, that he never took them seriously. She saw other husbands behaving as he did, though 'none so successfully, because he was so attractive'. But his strays hurt and 'I wasn't old enough or sensible enough or wise

enough to handle them better.'

They also undermined her confidence. 'However satisfactory your sex life is with your husband, if he constantly goes off you're bound to feel a bit inadequate.'

At first, she had no interest in taking lovers of her own, working instead at being one of the boys, a man's woman. She was an affectionate and open person, good-looking, without pretension or side and instantly liked by everyone, as she has been all her life.

Her letters to Larkin, always a favourite, were playful and flirtatious, and he responded in kind. 'He always pinched my bottom,' she recalled. 'They all did ♦ absolutely above board.'

When Larkin, a keen amateur photographer, asked Amis if he thought Hilly would pose for nude photographs, Amis put his 'dirty-picture proposal' to her and obtained 'a modified assent'.

'She is prepared to do corset-and-black-stockings or holding-up-a-towel stuff, and bare bosom stuff but is a bit hesitant about being quite undraped,' he reported.

But being a good sport was not easy. When the couple moved to Swansea, where Amis had obtained a job as a university lecturer, Hilly wrote to Larkin: 'I think we shall like it here. Poor Kingsley will miss his lovely Oxford mistresses, but alas I had no masters to miss.'

With his handsome looks and flash Oxford friends, Amis made an immediate impact on his new students. According to one, his arrival was 'as if a brilliantly-hued tropical bird had come winging into our still Blitz-battered town.'

Another, Mavis Nicholson, remembered his walking into the lecture hall for the first time. He was wearing a belted camel-hair coat with the collar turned up and she turned to a girlfriend and said: 'Here comes talent.'

Nicholson and her friends soon realised that Amis was 'very lecherous' and 'more promiscuous than anybody we'd ever met'. He more or less made a pass at all attractive females, students and wives included, yet in a manner that seems rarely to have offended and did not involve force or false promises.

Jean Cleary, the wife of a research assistant ('I think he preferred his girls to be married, on the whole'), rejected one such advance. 'He was very easy about it ♦ if you said no, or push off, he wasn't bothered.'

By his own admission, Amis was now obsessed with womanising, despite having no illusions about the trouble succumbing to his desires would cause him.

In a letter to Larkin he wrote: 'That old winged boa-constrictor, sex, still has me in his coils, and is flying around with me looking for a good sh\*\*\*-marsh to drop me in.'

For all his jokes, this feeling of sexual compulsion troubled Amis deeply. When the hero of his novel, *That Uncertain Feeling*, ponders the same issues ♦ 'Why did I like women's breasts so much? I was clear why I liked them, thanks, but why did I like them so much?' ♦ he points to what Amis saw as a real problem in his life.

He informed Larkin: 'The only reason I like girls is I want to f\*\*\* them, which is adolescent, cheap, irresponsible, not worth doing, a waste of time, not much fun anyway really, a needless distraction from my real vocation, contemptible, something I shouldn't be at my age and as a married man, liable to make me a laughing-stock, narrowing, impracticable, destructive of real sexual pleasure in the end, something originating in my upbringing, neurotic.'

'All I have to do now is stop wanting to f\*\*\* girls and I shall have the thing licked.'

He was always in pursuit. There were parties at the Amises in which every woman present was invited by him to visit his greenhouse in the garden; they all knew what the invitation meant.

The writer Al Alvarez, present at one such long, drunken evening, remembered that 'the rest of us sat around trying to make conversation and pretending not to be embarrassed.

'Half an hour later our host and whichever lucky lady had gone with him sauntered back in, smoothing their clothes and hair but not quite able to conceal the wild furtive triumph in their eyes.'

Soon, Alvarez noted, that triumph would turn to gloom. 'What got to me most about the whole performance was that everyone was miserable ♦ the women who went outside with Kingsley as much as those left behind, even Kingsley himself ♦ but no one said a word.'

Amis insisted to Alvarez, and others, that his restless pursuit of sex was a means of obliterating an even more pressing obsession: the fear of death. His chagrin at his behaviour is amply testified to in his letters and reminiscences. He wrote to Larkin about one woman ♦ forever-after known as 'the rugby fancier's wife' ♦ who showed him a fixture list of the Swansea and District Rugby Football Club, pointing out all the home matches her husband would attend.

'Her meaning being,' Amis reported, 'then you can slip in and slip it in, bach. The fixture card seems to go like this A (away) HHH HHAHHHHHAHHHHHHHAHHHH HHHHHHAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH HHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH.

'Oh what a sodding fool I am. Oh what am I going to do?'

But he did have standards. Hilly hired a cleaning lady, Betty, a prostitute whose husband, a Norwegian sailor, beat her.

She was, Amis reported to Larkin, 'quite good-looking, but very dirty, and smelt a little, so when she offered me an evening out, with all drinks paid for and a s\*\*g at the end gratis, I declined.

'I persisted in my refusal even when she offered to pay our coal-bill, a matter of some £2.15s, out of her earnings. But it was one of the nicest compliments I've ever had paid me.'

The episode left him feeling 'pleased that the woman I am living with is my wife, and at present I have no intention of deserting her'. But by now, the damage was already done.

A desperate Hilly was following his lead, not just in drinking and flirting, but in sexual promiscuity and experimentation, taking lovers, sleeping with friends or the partners of friends, engaging in various couplings, including, at least once, a threesome.

Out of one of these couplings grew Amis and Hilly's belief, firm though never corroborated by tests, that their third child, Sally, was not Amis's daughter.

This belief, based on Sally's looks, was shared with close friends, and, remarkably, known by her brothers Martin and Philip in their early adolescence, though Sally herself never knew or suspected anything, nor, according to Hilly at least, did she or Amis ever say anything to the supposed father, who remained a friend.

Neither Hilly nor the boys can remember how the boys found out; Philip always assumed he'd heard it from his mother, though Hilly remembers being shocked when he turned to her and asked, after the man had left the house, 'What's Sal's Dad doing here?'

Amis treated Sally as his own child and never expressed the slightest doubt about her identity as his daughter, even in letters to his most intimate friends, even when, in later years, he recounted the calamities of Sally's adult life, particularly the alcoholism from which she died.



That no member of the family, including her brothers in their adolescence, ever said anything to her about her 'father' is remarkable, a tribute to both them and to her.

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