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## **My life with the unfaithful old devil Kingsley Amis**

By SARAH SANDS

*Hilly Amis divorced the libidinous Kingsley - then shared an infamous 'menage a trois' with him and her second husband. Here, in a rare interview, she reveals the pain she suffered...and her fears for their novelist son Martin:*

The late comic novelist Kingsley Amis was once asked if he regretted walking out on his wife, Hilly, the mother of his three children. He replied: 'Only all the f\*\*\*ing time.'

The sweet-natured, spirited girl whom he met at 17 was his wife for 15 years, before Kingsley left her for the novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard. Then Jane (as she was called) in turn walked out, claiming that Kingsley was impossible to live with.

An extraordinary deal was brokered by Kingsley and Hilly's sons, the novelist Martin and Philip. Hilly returned to Kingsley, but this time as his housekeeper.

She brought with her, her husband Alistair, Lord Kilmarnock and their own young son, James. Hilly kept house and nursed her former husband for another 15 years until his death in 1995. "So you see, I came in at the beginning and the end," she says.

It was the middle that formed an ugly crater in the life of the family. The divorce between Kingsley and Hilly destroyed his sense of pride, plunged Hilly into years of depression and left the children wretched and damaged. Of course, no divorce is pleasant ♦ but this one was catastrophic.

When Martin Amis divorced his wife a generation later, also leaving behind two boys, Hilly says that she relived the misery: "If anyone talks to me about divorce, I say it is the worst thing that can happen, it is horrendous, don't do it."

Martin Amis is now happily remarried but he writes that he churns over the past more rather than less as he grows older. His brother, Philip, who was angry and troubled for many years, is divorced and remarried.

Their sister, Sally, drank herself to death six years ago. Hilly says that she thinks of Sally every day, with sorrow and dread. Eight years ago, Hilly and 'Ali' Kilmarnock moved permanently to their pretty farmhouse just outside Ronda in Southern Spain. It is isolated and unignosted. Hilly is 78 years old now and breathless from a heart condition.

She is small and plump with grey bobbed hair. Her smile, warm and full of fun, could be that of a 17-year-old.

The poet Philip Larkin said of Hilly that she was one of the most beautiful women he had ever met, without being in the least pretty. She herself thinks she looks like Lester Piggott.

She says that she rises late ♦ after 11am ♦ because she can never get enough sleep. She muses that she may still be sleeping off the Kingsley years, first as wife and mother then as nursemaid: "I was just exhausted, I couldn't stay awake ♦ just trying to please everyone."

She gives a weary chuckle. "Kingsley would loathe me now. He would see the funny side, though. If we were driving along and he saw a cripple or an old person, he would say: 'Go on, run the bugger down.' He would be running me over now."

A forthcoming biography of Kingsley Amis by a friend of the family, Zachary Leader, paints him as a man of contradictions. He could be sharp, nasty, bigoted. But his views and observations were partly to shock or for comic effect. "He was both nice and awful," says Hilly.

Although she was very young and inexperienced when she met Kingsley, a gentle, Bedales-educated girl from a liberal family, Hilly never felt intimidated.

"I wasn't easily swayed by what Kingsley said, I learned very early on to ignore all these outrageous things he kept saying about people.

"I can see that my parents were bores to Kingsley. He thought they were a joke with their Morris dancing and playing musical instruments. But I always thought they were great, it was nice to be a child of theirs."

Kingsley Amis had a far more complicated relationship with his parents. He felt trapped by their bourgeois respectability. He was also an only child, obsessively fussed over by his mother.

"When Kingsley was 24, and had already been in the Army, his mother tried to stop him going on a camping holiday in France in case he got stung or picked up germs," smiles Hilly.

They met when Kingsley was at Oxford University and Hilly was studying art at Ruskin College. He was in love with her but unfaithful from the start.

"He wanted to conquer every woman he clapped eyes on," she says gruffly. "I didn't know what I was letting myself in for."

Kingsley was captivated by women but also expressed contempt for them. While he was pursuing Hilly, he wrote to his friend Philip Larkin: "Women appear to me as basically dull but as basically pathetic too.

His portraits of women in his novels became increasingly cruel, until his late novel *Stanley And The Women* provoked a feminist fury. I ask Hilly whether his low opinion of women was one of his jokes or sincerely held.

"Oh, I don't think he liked them," she says, evenly. He thought they were trying and silly. He just wanted to say: 'Oh shut up' to them. He was much happier with his mates. But he knew that women were necessary, not sexually, but in order to do things for him."

Kingsley wrote boastfully to Larkin about wearing down Hilly's sexual resistance but was thrown when she became pregnant.

"I don't want this filthy baby," he told her although he also spoke cheerfully of buying a pram. He found an abortionist but then cancelled when he found out what it entailed; he was frightened that Hilly might die as a result.

She says: 'He knew that I was longing to have a child, it was in my nature. I was all set up for an abortion but I had a feeling that I wouldn't do it.' (Later, after three children, Kingsley did make Hilly have an abortion when she fell pregnant for the fourth time.)

The couple married and their first son was named Philip (after Larkin). Soon after the birth, Kingsley began sleeping with other women, including friends of Hilly's. She, meanwhile had another son, Martin.

Still in her early 20s, exhausted by two small children, she did her best to show that she was not "dull and pathetic". Their fortunes looked up when Hilly spent an inheritance from her mother on a house in Swansea, where Kingsley wrote his comic masterpiece *Lucky Jim*.

Friends say that some of the best repartee in it was taken from Hilly.

It was during this period that the couple entertained wildly. Many of the women in their social group were also Kingsley's conquests. The forthcoming biography records an anecdote from their friend, the writer Al Alvarez.

There had been a drunken dinner during which Kingsley had disappeared, one by one, with every woman present.

"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 who were left behind, even Kingsley himself ♦ but nobody said a word," said Alvarez.

More miserable than anyone was Hilly who, in turn, began to sleep with other men. "I asked Kingsley to stop, then I learned to live with it and then I did what women finally do, that is to start looking around themselves to boost their self-esteem."

Hilly became pregnant again, with their daughter Sally. Intriguingly, the new biography of Amis raises the question of whether he was the father. I ask Hilly, who looks vexed: "Well we didn't know ♦ we didn't have a test. I would rather this didn't come out."

Whatever the truth, Kingsley accepted the baby unquestioningly as his own. Sadly, happiness eluded Sally as she grew up. But Hilly refuses to accept that she was a doomed character.

"It wasn't until she was 15 and started drinking that she changed. All the children went through a rebellion in their teenage years."

The rebellions were sparked by Amis's announcement that he was leaving the family to set up with the writer Elizabeth Jane Howard, whom he had met in 1962.

As for Hilly, she had fallen in love with the political journalist Henry Fairlie, and thought of leaving Kingsley: "It was against all my principles. Henry was married with three children; I always swore I wouldn't do that to anyone but I fell for him, as many other women did."

What stopped the affair was a calm warning letter from Amis to Fairlie. He wrote: "A second marriage founded on the unhappiness of other people must take its stand much more than a first marriage on love, sexual, romantic, exclusive, continuous love."

But his moral perceptions were on shaky ground, considering his affair with Jane.

"Did Kingsley realise the pain he caused? ♦ Hilly asks herself.

"I think he was head over heels in love with Jane, and she wanted him very badly. She wanted his child. He was more ruthless than me. And he was at that age when he bloody well wanted to get out of things."

The only public reason Amis gave for leaving his wife was that she would never buy china tea. Hilly took the children to Majorca, to a house without heating. They had no car and couldn't speak Spanish.

"I knew the children were having a horrible time. I hated what happened to them. I remember us trudging up the track to see the postman, hoping there would be a card from Kingsley, and there

never was.

"Those poor children. I could see how they were wretched. It is very difficult bringing up children without a father."]

Hilly and the children returned to London and her depression deepened. In June 1964, she was found drunk and drugged with an overdose of sleeping pills.

Later, Martin and Philip moved in with Kingsley and Jane while Sally stayed with Hilly. Philip always quarrelled harshly with Jane but Martin admitted later that he owed his step-mother a debt.

She imposed order, provided clean sheets, took an interest in his education, made him work and got him into Oxford University.

But Jane found, as Hilly had done, that it was exhausting enough looking after Kingsley, let alone his resentful and unruly children.

By now, Kingsley had become more difficult and suddenly lost all interest in sex. He undermined Jane's self-esteem and represented her unflatteringly in his novels.

In 1980, she finally walked out on him. Hilly says she has never discussed Kingsley with Jane or had any contact since his death.

"If I saw her, I am sure we would be civilised ♦ but we have nothing in common."

Meanwhile, Hilly embarked on a short-lived marriage with a Cambridge Classics professor called Shackleton Bailey. "He was ghastly, though he was well-respected in the classical world. He was a nightmare to live with. Even Kingsley at his worst was nothing like as bad."

When Hilly met Ali Kilmarnock, Shackleton Bailey refused to divorce her. As a result, her son by Ali was illegitimate and thus unable to inherit his father's title.

Hilly found Ali attentive and romantic in a way that Kingsley had never been, but the couple had no money. The decision to move in with Kingsley was an economic one.

Ali Kilmarnock had a meeting to set things straight with Kingsley before they moved in. "I told Kingsley, in a chappish way, that this was not going to be a menage a trois," he says. "It was pragmatic. We were sort of butler and housekeeper."

Hilly knew Kingsley well enough to be alert to his bad behaviour. He may have made jokes to his friends about being served drinks "by a peer of the realm" but he did not do so in front of Hilly. Kingsley had lost all sex drive but still, deep down, wanted his wife back.

"I had the upper hand in a sense, because I knew he didn't want me to leave," says Hilly. "I didn't love him but I was fond of him. It was a sort of delayed loyalty really, looking after the poor old sod."

"It was like a relation. A very tiresome one but at best there was a sense of affection just for knowing him so long."

Amis became more quarrelsome and irritable towards the end of his life. In his final months he turned to his daughter, Sally, for companionship.

"She was his slave, she would do jobs for him, do his shopping. She would do anything," says Hilly. Sally was with Kingsley when he died, which seemed to unhinge her finally and fatally. Drunk and depressed, she fell ill and died in 2000.

Hilly says she often dreams of her. I ask if Sally is peaceful in the dreams and Hilly replies, never.

"She is usually saying something awful. She is drunk and disorderly. Her death was a relief in a way, she worried me so much.

"I dreaded her phone calls. I was always waiting for the next awful crash, when she would lie and get into trouble and do stupid things, picking people up from pubs. How she didn't get murdered, I don't know."

The other sadness of Hilly's later life was the divorce of Martin and his wife, Antonia.

"She was very sweet, very nice, a lovely looking girl. I hardly know Martin's sons. But he is a wonderful father, far more interested in his children than Kingsley was."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, what Hilly appreciates most about her life now is the peace. The Kilmarnocks keep an old alsatian for company plus thousands of books.

Martin and his second wife, Isabel, and their two daughters visit once a year. Hilly has noticed that Martin is looking increasingly like his father.

Martin said recently that he feels life matters more than writing but Hilly believes that writing is a *raison d'etre* for father and son. "They are not happy unless they are writing. Work is what they have to do."

Hilly is relieved that Martin has seen off all the women who used to flock round him "that way would have led to disaster" and that he is more easy-going and adventurous than his father.

She has not read his latest book, *House Of Meetings*, but wishes he would return to "proper novels". She is looking forward to his visit in a couple of weeks' time and to getting news from his literary circle.

In the meantime, she plans to rest and read and not dream too much, until "I am carried out of this place feet first".

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