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What happens when a Hollywood star refuses to play the game

*From Eighties pin-up to suburban obscurity
– Kelly McGillis on where it all went wrong*

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Kelly McGillis glares at me as I approach the porch of her suburban home in Collingswood, New Jersey. She is sitting outside smoking a cigarette, wrapped in a knee-length cardigan with a handkerchief pressed to her nose. “Why are you here now?” she asks curtly. I tell her that I received a

message from her agent to come earlier because she had to prepare for an event in New York. “That was cancelled. I’m sick.” She sighs. “I suppose you might as well come in. The sooner we start, the sooner you can go.”

Neither in looks nor demeanor does she bear much resemblance to the *Top Gun* goddess who played Tom Cruise’s flight instructor in the highest grossing film of 1986. The role transformed McGillis into a household name, the teenager’s pin-up of choice in the mid-Eighties. Now 53, she has short, defiantly grey hair and zero charisma, at least at first. “I don’t normally look like this,” she says, referring to her make-up, applied in preparation for the photoshoot for this article. “I don’t dye my hair and I don’t wear make-up. What is so devastatingly wrong with looking the way you are meant to look?”

“You go on inside,” she adds. “I’m going to stay out here and finish my cigarette.”

So I walk alone into her house, a small two-storey Twenties “kit house”, as McGillis calls it mockingly. Inside, it is minimally decorated – the walls are painted in tasteful shades of sage and beige, a black leather couch dominates the sitting room and a sleepy white cat half-raises its head to look at me. There is almost nothing personal at all, just one small photograph on the mantel above the brick fireplace – a picture of McGillis with Melanie Leis, her girlfriend of ten years. In September 2010, the two women exchanged vows: “We married but they call it a civil union here,” explains McGillis later.

McGillis – who has been married twice before to men and has two daughters – finishes her cigarette and comes inside. “I have to eat.” She goes to the fridge and takes out a plastic container of lamb stew and sits at the kitchen table eating it straight from the tub, washing it down with slugs of Diet Pepsi. The message seems to be: this is not Hollywood and I don’t really care what you think of me.

She says she woke up sick two days ago with some sort of flu. “I just want to go back to bed,” she says bluntly.

It is fair to say that McGillis is not your cookie-cutter actress. Although she has a film to promote (*Stake Land*, in which she plays a vampire-slaying nun), she has no interest in talking about it. In fact, she says, she found the movie unwatchable and walked out after five minutes. “I don’t think I’ve ever watched a horror movie in my life.” So why did she do it? “I needed the work.”

McGillis appears to be on something of a mission to prove her contempt for all things Hollywood. “As you can see, I don’t live in a big-ass house with a big neon sign over it saying ‘I’m famous’; I don’t drive a fancy-ass car; I live a very low-key life. I’m out picking up dogs*** in my backyard just like my next-door neighbour. People go, ‘You clean your own house?’ Errr, yes, I clean my own house, thank you very much. I rake my own leaves. I do my own laundry. And I’ve perfected the art of loungewear as streetwear – I even go to the store in my pyjamas.”

After the Eighties, when McGillis also starred in *Witness* and *The Accused*, she more or less dropped off the Hollywood radar. But those movies remain such hits that her name is far from forgotten. Her perspective? “Then why don’t I have a job, dammit?”

McGillis may be brusque, but she is also refreshingly open. No subject seems to be off

great because we were always high together; but how can you have a healthy relationship with someone if you’re loaded all the time?”

“I was still living with Fred, although we hadn’t slept together for a very long time,” adds McGillis, shooing the cat off the table. “We were both seeing other people. If I were more mature and healthy, I would have done it very differently, but I wasn’t very well and I certainly wasn’t thinking about my children. I was completely self-absorbed. Ultimately my children suffered a great deal because of it.” She sighs again. “But I can’t take that back.”

She and Leis parted ways. “We ended up breaking up for a couple of years. When we got back together, it was really slow. She wrote to me and I said, ‘Yes, I’d be willing to see if I can have a friendship with you.’ Then it was, ‘Would you like to date?’ I said, ‘I’ll get back to you on that.’ I thought about it for a while and then said, ‘Yes, I think we could date.’”



From left: Kelly McGillis with Tom Cruise in *Top Gun*; alongside Harrison Ford in *Witness*; as Jodie Foster’s lawyer in *The Accused*; with her civil partner, Melanie Leis, in September last year

limits – the breakdown of her marriage, her sexuality, her addictions, her fractured acting career. “My life was a frigging train wreck,” she says, describing how drugs and alcohol took over for most of the Nineties. “In the last five years of my addiction, all I cared about was getting high: my marriage was a ruin, my kids hated me, I was seeing Mel, all I wanted to do was drink. So I did.”

McGillis met Leis 12 years ago in Key West, where she was living with her second husband, Fred Tillman, and daughters Kelsey and Sonora, now aged 20 and 17. Mel was working as a bartender at Kelly’s Caribbean Bar, Grill & Brewery, owned by McGillis and her husband. McGillis, who’d had same-sex relationships before, says she and Mel hit it off immediately, although both were so out of it that the relationship soon went off the rails. “We just slammed into one another and said, ‘Let’s have a relationship’ – it was very immature and unrealistic and a mess. On the one hand, it was

McGillis, who only came out publicly as a lesbian last year, says that it took her a long time to come to terms with her sexuality. “I had a lot of shame issues attached to my sexuality. A lot. If Mel touched me in public, I would just freak out and go, ‘Don’t do that: stay 20 feet away from me.’ It was also a burden on my children – it got to the point where Sonora wouldn’t allow Mel and me to come to her football matches together because she was so embarrassed. People say, ‘Why didn’t you come out earlier?’ I just thought it would be incredibly selfish to put my kids through that misery because of something that I needed to do for me.”

The eldest of three daughters, McGillis grew up in Newport Beach, California. “It was a very middle-class, normal American childhood.” But as she approached adolescence, she started to mix with a more streetwise crowd. “I was taller than all the kids my age, I looked older. I thought I was very mature... I was rebellious – I think I’m still rebellious.”

She started drinking while at school. “My alcoholism was a coping mechanism for a lot of things that happened in my life. When I was 12 I was gang-raped – I never told anybody because I had been drinking and

I didn’t even remember it until I was in therapy and sober many years later. In some ways I think drink saved my life, because if I didn’t have that coping mechanism, I would have probably offed myself at 14 or 15. In high school, I also started doing pot and LSD. Later on, my drugs of choice were cocaine and sleeping pills, because after you do a whole bunch of cocaine, you have to go to sleep.”

Nevertheless, she was together enough to land a place studying drama at Juilliard in New York, and by 1983 she was playing opposite Tom Conti in *Reuben, Reuben*. By then she had divorced her first husband, Boyd Black, a fellow student, and was in a relationship with a woman. Living together in New York, they were subjected to a brutal rape when two men burst into their apartment one day. “I convinced myself that it was because I was gay that I was being punished by God. That’s the story I created for myself.”

McGillis continued to land roles in movies but was devastated when she was dropped from *Bachelor Party*. “They told me they were firing me because I wasn’t pretty. But if that hadn’t happened, I wouldn’t have been available to do *Witness* – so I trust the universe has some kind of plan for me.”

‘My marriage was a ruin, my kids hated me. All I cared about was getting high’



Playing an Amish widow in *Witness*, McGillis was nominated for a Golden Globe award. Next up was *Top Gun*. “I don’t know why they picked me for that. I totally felt wrong from the get-go. The character in *Witness* was far more my acting style than *Top Gun*. I have never seen myself as a *femme fatale* kind of chick. I look at that movie and I think I look uncomfortable throughout. I kept getting notes about my height [she is 5ft 10in to Cruise’s 5ft 7in] and I spent the whole movie trying to shrink. Tom didn’t have a problem with my height, but Paramount did.”

In *The Accused*, she played a lawyer prosecuting the perpetrators of a gang rape, with Jodie Foster playing the victim, Sarah. McGillis was offered the role of Sarah herself, but says she felt her own experiences made it impossible to take on. “There was stuff that I wasn’t ready to look at – I don’t feel I should use my job as my therapy couch.”

More movies followed, as well as a handful of stage roles, but nothing especially memorable. By the mid-Nineties, her drinking was completely out of hand. “Eventually I drank every day, and eventually I drank 24 hours a day. I’ve got to tell you, it’s tough waking up at eight in the morning and drinking vodka. But after a couple of drinks you’re thinking, ‘Gosh, I don’t have a problem. I’m fine, it’s all you lot who are crazy.’”

By then acting wasn’t even an option. “There was no way I could possibly work. Then finally I got carted off to rehab. Thank God.” Did it work first time? “Yes,” she says. “Touch wood.”

For the past nine years, McGillis has been sober. “At first I thought, ‘Holy c***, I’m going to be so bored.’ But I am busier now and have more fun than I ever had before. I drank because I wanted to feel happy and

to fit in. But I feel that sober. If I only knew that before. I failed dismally as a parent when I was drinking, but I was a very good parent once I sobered up.

“The only thing I still do is smoke and I’m really struggling with quitting that. It’s frigging hard.”

McGillis moved to Collingswood, a suburb of Philadelphia, two years ago after her younger daughter moved to California, where she lives with an aunt. “She was having her teenage thing with alcohol and I laid down the law and said, ‘Look, honey, I love you to pieces but my number one value is sobriety and if you can’t adhere to my values then you have to find another place to live.’ So being 15, she said, ‘Fine, I’ll move to California.’ I said, ‘Fine, but if you go you won’t be able to come back here because I am going to downsize and try to go back to work full-time.’ So she went and then, of course, she changed her mind and decided she wanted to come back. I said, ‘No.’ She knew it was a consequence of a choice she had made. It’s an incredible lesson. If I had suffered some of the consequences of choices that I made early on in my life, maybe things would have turned out a little differently for me.”

McGillis says her daughters encapsulate two aspects of her own personality: “One of

them is a left-of-centre hippy child who doesn’t care what she looks like. The other is very aware of how beautiful she is and uses it as a tool to get what she wants.”

Her older daughter, Kelsey, lives in Florida and has nine-month-old twins. So you’re a grandmother? McGillis winces. “I hate that word.” Age, it turns out, is a sore point. “How many older women do you see acting?” Meryl Streep, I suggest, Helen Mirren? “OK, that’s two...” she says, challenging me to come up with more. Glenn Close, Susan Sarandon... “Glenn Close makes three. I wouldn’t say that Susan Sarandon is very visible. So that’s three, well, three and a half. The reality is this is a young woman’s industry.”

Yet McGillis refuses to play the Hollywood game of pursuing perpetual youth. “I once had a boob job but I took them out because it felt like a frigging lie. People would say, ‘You have nice tits’, and I’d be like, ‘F***, they’re not mine.’ I did try Botox but let me tell you, trying to do Shakespeare without being able to move your face is the most frustrating thing in the land. What’s wrong with me as I am? I’m convinced the industry is going to need 70-year-olds that look 70.”

For the moment, though, McGillis is finding it hard to land any meaningful work in the movie industry, and is tempted to do something completely different. “I love acting with all my heart and soul but I’d be happy to work in a bakery or pump gas. Yet how odd would it be if I’m filling up someone’s tank and they recognise me – there’s a certain amount of needed humility but also humiliation in that. I don’t mind pumping gas, but it would be nice if I didn’t have to be held up to public ridicule at the same time.”

For the moment, McGillis sticks to a strict routine. She wakes at 6am every day “to pray and meditate”, then walks her corgi, Buddha, and does yoga and knitting. She visits local prisons and halfway houses to help other women with drug and alcohol-abuse problems: “I feel I’m called to do that.”

She wishes people would stop wondering what has happened to her. “It makes me feel like a piece of meat – as if my sole job is to stay in the public eye.” She softens momentarily. “On the other hand, it’s nice that people think of me.”

By now, McGillis has thawed so much that she seems surprised when – after three hours – I say that it is probably time for me to leave. Despite being unwell, she insists on driving me to the station in her black Mini Cooper. “Frankly I feel a little bit trapped,” she says as she navigates the traffic. “Every time I think about doing something new, I meet another person who goes, ‘Aren’t you that girl from *Top Gun*?’ The answer is no – I am *not* that girl from *Top Gun* or that girl from *Witness* or that girl from *The Accused*. I’m just me.” ■

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