

By her own hand

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Nikki Gemmell with her mother, Elayn, in 1981.

You lot are a cherished bunch. Oh, there are the haters among my readers, lining up every week with their spewy bile, their failures of the imagination to step into another's shoes. Yet there are others, so many others, who've become something of a friend over the years. But I'd never opened the door into reader-land, never stepped across the threshold and reached out a hand. Until I did.

Helena wrote to me after my mother Elayn died, by her own hand, one bleak evening. My mum euthanised herself, by herself, in front of the telly – mindful that if she involved any of her children we'd be subjected to a police investigation and possibly charged, a crime that carries huge fines and/or a jail term. It felt like such a modern story for modern times: of an elderly mother and swamped daughter trying to juggle a career and husband and school-age children all at once (I felt like I was failing at the lot of it). Of mum's bullying pain problem. Of a botched operation on bones nearing the end of their use-by date. Of a slippery slope from post-surgery painkillers to opioid addiction. Of a grandmother's desire to not "be a bother" to anyone. Of a terror of nursing homes, and a need for control.

My mother's death broke our family. I felt skinned, felled by vulnerability and a sense of failure; a danger to myself and others. Shortly after identifying Elayn in the morgue I posed the question in a reeling column: Was this very modern death empowerment or despair? Selflessness or selfishness? Letters flooded in, more than I'd ever received.

About end-of-life plans. Failures of the “squeezed middle” generation in a too-busy world. Relatives who’d quietly euthanised themselves. And about the compulsion to just have the pain stop, without thought for anyone else. Then this email arrived, from Helena: “I’m planning to go to Switzerland to take the option of assisted suicide with Dignitas International,” she wrote. “I’ve been suffering from a disabling, progressive and very painful form of arthritis for 23 years. I suspect that the major differences between your mother and me are that I’m a doctor, and I’ve enough money to access a service overseas which I believe should be available for all people who need it here in Australia.

“I made the decision to end my life at the time of my choosing after a very painful and ultimately unsuccessful operation. I told my kids this would be my last year, and planned to make it the best year for all of us. I’d love to be able to carry out my wishes here in Australia with my family around me, and as a doctor I’d be able to access the appropriate drugs. But what then? If my children were with me, they’d be subject to investigation. If I were alone, then someone would have the traumatic experience of finding my body, and the children would have to identify me. I can’t subject people to this.”

Helena offered to help me understand, to haul me out of the mess of bewilderment. So I took a deep breath and said yes to meeting a reader – stepped through that forbidden door – for the first time. Friends cautioned against it; too much death, too soon. Yet what blossomed was a deep friendship, and love, and respect for a woman who has guided me through the unhinged affront of grief while meticulously organising her very own “good death”. It was – is – a journey into death that I never took with my mother and I wish fervently, in hindsight, that I had.

Helena is still alive. She’s travelling to Switzerland very soon. Her adult children and best friend will be with her in a Dignitas room brimming with love – in her final moments, all will be holding hands. It’s a scenario rigorously planned. There’s no secrecy. She’s a doctor, fully aware of a future of felling pain. This feels like a good death. A mature death. For Helena – and, most compassionately, for those closest to her.

I marvel at my friend’s courage yet crack at the thought of losing her. Like Elayn, she’s a woman blazing with spark and joy and vividness; as if any alternative way of living were impossible. They must exist with their arresting vivacity or not at all.

If euthanasia had been legal in Australia (with laws extending beyond the terminally ill, because Elayn wasn’t), my mother would have had peace of mind; she would have been able to live her final year to the exhilarating fullest. She would have passed away in a room filled with love. And that knowledge would have released her, in her final year, to seize the joy that Helena has so carefully planned. But Elayn never had that kind of solace.

Since my mother’s fraught death I’ve gone on a huge journey of understanding. It began with a body, an unexplained death, a crime scene. Two constables rang my doorbell and informed me (with great compassion) of my mother’s death, yet also took out their notebooks, because unbeknown to me at the time they were trying to ascertain if

I was involved. One told me afterwards she saw deaths like this all the time, “but no one talks about them”.

It's a hidden, shaming epidemic. A story of now. Of old people slipping through the cracks in the cram of life's whoosh. Of dignity. Choice. Control. A clash of generations. Of slipping away because you don't want to be a bother to anyone – but by doing so you become more of a bother to everyone close than you've ever been in your life.

I did what I always do when presented with something bewildering – I wrote. To understand, to balm, to haul me out of a breakdown. A detective story beginning with a body and spooling out in real life turned into a book called *After*. It's about the complexities of mothers and daughters, estrangement and duty, responsibility and selfishness, breaking and healing, fury and love. It's published this week, and my heart is in my mouth because I've never put my name to something so evisceratingly honest. It's the story of Helena as well as Elayn, and of myself, and I do not come off well in it. I was not the best daughter a mother could have – but is any woman? *After* dives deep into the raw underbelly of womanhood, of parenthood. We all have untidy lives.

I took a deep breath and allowed ABC TV's *Australian Story* into my untidy world. Am not sure this was wise; can't call it. But if you watch it, I hope you salute the courage of Helena – brave, vivacious Helena – as much as I do. And when you're thinking about possible changes to Australia's euthanasia laws, perhaps consider my beautiful Elayn's bleak and lonely and despairingly secret death. Because it could have been so very different.

After is published by HarperCollins on March 27; *Australian Story* airs on Monday night.