

# My Mother's Secret - Transcript

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Home Video : I hope she grows up as beautiful as you, I really do Nonna you darling

NIKKI GEMMELL: I feel like Elayn's story is a very modern story, it's a story of our age.

My mum Elayn lived in an apartment by herself and had always had a very engaged, empowered, independent life. But in the last year of her life she was fighting chronic pain and becoming increasingly despairing, and overwhelmed by the situation.

Phone call recording: Hello , my name is Elayn Gemmell, I'm in a very bad situation, I've been in chronic pain all this year.

PAUL GEMMELL, BROTHER: Mum sat down on her favourite chair in front of the TV and ate pills like lollies and drank Baileys Irish Cream until she fell asleep.

NIKKI GEMMELL: Mum's death was horrifically lonely and bleak because she couldn't tell anyone what she was going to do for fear of implicating all of us, her family and her friends, so she did it entirely alone.

PAUL GEMMELL, BROTHER: I believed that Mum was in pain, but I didn't believe that it was severe as what she said it was.

NIKKI GEMMELL: I wish I'd had a very calm conversation with her about what she really wanted to do in terms of the end of her life. I wish I had been there for her, in a way that I just wasn't.

TITLE : "MY MOTHER'S SECRET"

NIKKI GEMMELL: My life is crazy and mad and people say to me "I don't know how you do it".

SARAH MACDONALD, FRIEND: Nikki has an intense life. She has four wonderful children who range in age from, you know, late teens to five. She writes a column every week. She's always writing another book. She is never just doing one thing.

NIKKI GEMMELL: I feel awful to say this and I hope mum didn't feel this, she came sixth in all my world, there were four little people and my husband. I feel like too often in my life, and in a lot of people around me, people my age, the older people in our lives are squeezed to the edge of our lives.

ANDREW SHOLL, HUSBAND: Elayn had become racked with pain and was needing the dependency of family, but not wanting to burden the family with her dependency.

NIKKI GEMMELL: The next morning it was the Friday morning, the police knocked on my door, I think it was about 11 o'clock, and as soon as I looked at them, I knew, I knew something awful had happened. I went "it's my mother, isn't it" and they said "yes,"

NIKKI GEMMELL: I was just a mess, just so floored and shocked and devastated. The male police officer had taken out his notebook, and he was taking notes of what I was saying. Why are they taking such careful note of what I'm saying? And it gradually dawned on me that perhaps they were seeing if I was implicated in the whole thing too.

PAUL GEMMELL, BROTHER: They took us into the room and there was mum on a stainless steel surgical style table, I held her hand and she was freezing cold and it was probably the most horrible thing I've had to do in my life.

NIKKI GEMMELL: If your parent dies they are the people that shape you and guide you and hold you through life. Suddenly you feel rudderless and alone .

NIKKI GEMMELL: I just look back and I think "oh, what a waste, what a stupid waste". All those times when we didn't talk to each other, I know now that she's gone, why did we ever bother with all that wasted energy. Mum's

father was a mining engineer so that was Mum's world, coal mining families in the Hunter Valley. Mum's beauty was the ticket out of that world

NIKKI GEMMELL: She ended up being photographed by the likes of Max DuPaine, Laurence Le Guay, these amazing photographers of the 50s and the 60s.  
And then she married a coal miner.

BOB GEMMELL, FATHER: I'm an underground coalminer. And I spotted Elayn. This fella said, "she goes to the dance of a Saturday night at the Cessnock Town Hall". Took me a while in a barn dance and all that sorta thing before I could take her in my arms and say to her, you know, "I think you should consider me". We moved from Cessnock to Wollongong, had three children there, Nikki, Paul and Mark. She was very, very clean and neat and tidy and, ah, spick and span, they were like shining bloody two bob pieces, the three of them. She went back to work, which was - I don't like the idea of a lady working when she's married, but that's me, I'm different I'm old fashioned.

NIKKI GEMMELL: Mum and Dad divorced when I was 10. She was in her late 30s, she found herself in Sydney. She was into everything, music recitals, ballet, concerts, all that kind of world, like she was trying to lift me, into another world and mold me into the woman that she thought would be a success.

PAUL GEMMELL, BROTHER: Mum's very critical of all of us. Um, you know, she loved us but she was very hard on us as well to have us, ah, appear and perform to her standards, she had high standards, it was very hard to be perfect for Mum.

NIKKI GEMMELL: Mum was the love of my life and the hate of my life, and I feel awful, awful saying that, no one could reduce me the way mum could,

PAUL GEMMELL, BROTHER: Nikki duxed every school she went to. But she studied for it, she worked for that. It wasn't too long after she left high school that she got a, a cadetship as a journalist.

Triple J video: It's a really cool bunch of people, it's the most fun I've ever had in a job. It's fun. I'm always learning something.

ANDREW SHOLL, HUSBAND: We first met when we were baby journalists together. Flash forward many, many years, I'm living in London working in politics so I said, "Why don't you hop on a plane and come to London?" I met this hunched-back little person with a backpack on and we reconnected. We lived in London for about seventeen years and, and built a life there, and then had three children in succession..

NIKKI GEMMELL: I was constantly running away from mum's world and the environment that I grew up in where I always felt different. So all during my London life I was the writer, the writer in London!

ANDREW SHOLL, HUSBAND: Writing is steeped in her blood. She's written about seven novels, six children's books. I don't know what she'd do if she didn't write

NIKKI GEMMELL: When we were together in the same environment it could be fantastic, we could be like the best of mates,

ANDREW SHOLL, HUSBAND: And then there was the call of Australia, the call to come back home. Nikki would wake up in the middle of the night desperately homesick for the, for the smell of eucalyptus. Deadly seriously.

Archival: I do feel guilty that I'm away from my family. That I'm depriving my parents of their grandchildren.

ANDREW SHOLL, HUSBAND: So we came back to Australia and, lo and behold, another child was born.

NIKKI GEMMELL: Mum made it very clear very soon after we arrived in Sydney that she wasn't going to do any of the helping, any of the ferrying, you know, if I'd come back to Australia for any help in any way in terms of a grandparent, I was looking at the wrong person. She was the gorgeous Nonna, they called her, who took the kids to plays and shows and came 'round on their birthdays. In the last few years of her life she started getting terrible terrible foot pain, and then a year before she died, she thought she'd have an operation to cure it.

PAUL GEMMELL, BROTHER: They had to break her foot and shorten a bone. From that operation on she struggled. She, she struggled to walk comfortably. That was the start of the big problems. It made Mum's life miserable. It

stopped her from going out . She loved going for a walk or going to, ah, Zumba, all those little things that she had to stop doing and it destroyed her.

NIKKI GEMMELL: She didn't want to be a bother, she knew how busy I was, she'd been a working mother herself.

PAUL GEMMELL, BROTHER : Nikki found the time to help Mum, but Mum very rarely asked for help.

NIKKI GEMMELL: I feel like there were too many times when she rang and I just said "Mum, I can't physically do it, I, I'm so sorry, I'm three suburbs away, I'm an hour away through heavy traffic". A lot of the times we did, most of the times, but it was always a juggle.

DR STEPHEN CARRAN, ELAYN'S DOCTOR: We tried, nerve-type, pain relief, we tried opiate-type pain relief. There was a couple of times where I hadn't been available and she would go and see what she called the doctor supermarket.

PAUL GEMMELL, BROTHER: What do I say. You know, she was doing the doctor shopping thing.

NIKKI GEMMELL: One day she just rang me sobbing, and she just sounded so frightened. I didn't understand chronic pain and how deeply it affects every facet of your life. And I realise now in hindsight she was in utter despair in that final week.

PAUL GEMMELL, BROTHER: Nikki rang me and I couldn't believe. She said, "Mum's gone". She said, "She's gone".

NIKKI GEMMELL: I had to go through all mum's friends in the address book and tell them all, and I wondered if they all knew, asking them, did you know she was going to do this?

JUDY YATES-WOOD, ELAYN'S FRIEND: Elayn rang me all the time and I rang her all the time, but I never, never picked up on anything at all. knew she was unwell but I didn't know how serious it was.

PAUL GEMMELL, BROTHER: Nikki wanted to go back and look for any kind of sign, clue or answer. We all needed answers.

NIKKI GEMMELL: You're going through everything to find an actual note, with words on it. Some kind of expression of love, or explanation. Mum left no note, nothing. No indication of what she was doing or why

PAUL GEMMELL, BROTHER: When the police found Mum there was a book on the coffee table next to her called "The Peaceful Pill Handbook". I imagine it's an instruction book on, on pills for euthanasia.

NIKKI GEMMELL: Amid the shock and trauma of what she did, I fell back on what I've always known to do which is to write to understand, to piece together. Was it accidental? Was it deliberate?

PAUL GEMMELL, BROTHER: The autopsy report came back saying that mum died of multi-drug toxicity. Mum told me all the time that she was going to end her own life, um, that she didn't wanna, she couldn't put up with the pain anymore. But we never believe it.

Nikki talks with Dr Stephen Carran: Thank you so much for being so lovely to Mum.  
You're welcome, it's really nice to meet you after all this time. I've heard a lot about you.

DR STEPHEN CARRAN, ELAYN'S DOCTOR: Elayn's death was a real shock. I believe that Elayn was very good at, you know, sort of, you know, covering her tracks

(Conversation between Nikki Gemmell and Dr Stephen Carran)

Dr Carran: I thought we had a really good patient/doctor relationship and so for me to, you know, discover that, you know, it was just one of the most shocking things that's happened to me in my career.

Nikki Gemmell: I understand you did suggest to Elayn to go a pain specialist or a pain clinic?

Dr Carran: Yes, I did yeah.

Nikki Gemmell: She didn't do it.

Dr Carran: I gave her a referral and she didn't do it.

Nikki Gemmell: I wonder why.

Dr Carran: Yeah, I don't know. Maybe she'd already decided before that.

Dr Carran: I'm really, really. Even to this day, I'm still gutted.

Nikki Gemmell: I'm so sorry.

Dr Carran: Yeah, I'm sorry for you. You lost your mum.

Nikki Gemmell: Thank you.

(Conversation ends)

CHRISTINE MIDDAP, EDITOR, THE WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN: Nikki's mother's suicide really sort of plunged her into this whole world of assisted dying, suicide, euthanasia, care for the elderly.

NIKKI GEMMELL VOICE OVER : My mother euthanised herself — it's difficult to say committed suicide. Were her final moments an act of empowerment or despair?

CHRISTINE MIDDAP, EDITOR, THE WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN: So Nikki wrote a column revealing for the first time publically that her mother had committed suicide. The columns generated an enormous response . I think one of the great surprises for Nikki after she published the column was a tweet by Philip Nitschke saying that she had actually sought out the help of his organisation.

NIKKI GEMMELL: His tweet was something like "Nikki, it was empowerment", and then he was using all his Exit International jargon which I had to get other people to decipher for me because I had no idea of this world at the time. It said something like "she attended forums" it was like, what forums? What does that mean? That means Exit forums, I had no idea what that meant, and so I thought, I need to speak to Philip.

NIKKI GEMMELL: Well initially I was very wary but he kind of exploded open a whole 'nother world of Elayn, that I had no idea about,

(Skype call with Philip Nitschke)

PHILIP NITSCHKE: Good morning, good evening to you. We knew her for a long time . She had been associated with Exit for some years. She was a life member, in other words, she was someone who believed in this issue. She'd come to workshops in Sydney. She was worried about talking to family and I imagine that means talking to you . Yeah she makes it specifically clear in one of the letters that talking to the family was a difficulty.

NIKKI GEMMELL: There was a time a couple of months before she killed herself that we'd been speaking about euthanasia. Every time she'd bring it up I'd just be like "but don't you wanna see the grandkids grow up?" I'd get too emotional, and I know now that was the wrong thing to do.

(Skype call with Philip Nitschke)

Nikki: It would have been a wonderfully intelligent and thoughtful conversation we could have had for several years before she died and I didn't let her have that conversation and I feel so bad about that.

Philip: Your mother made it pretty clear she did not want to go into an institution , she made that over and over , she wanted her own independence and own control.

(Skype call ends)

Elayn's voicemail to Exit International: I'm sorry if this message sounds all strange. I'm just bombed out on drugs. I am in chronic pain. I'm immobile. I'm desperate. If I could organise a home visit with Philip I'd be very grateful.

NIKKI GEMMELL: I wanted to know more about this part of Mums life and how other people felt about the issue

(Nikki talks to a member of Exit International)

MAN: my daughter and son know I have the means to do things if I want to. I don't want to go at the moment , I play tennis I sail, I walk, but my fear personally is to become incontinent to the point where you can't help yourself, where you get hosed down every day in a dish.

NIKKI: Oh I know, no.

MAN: I've seen it , If I go to the point where I feel like I couldn't look after myself

NIKKI: I worry about your family children , what are you going to do?

MAN: I think that my children know , I would tell them fairly soon, unfortunately we cant be together.

NIKKI: Why?

MAN: The legal situation is such

NIKKI: You don't want to implicate them,

MAN: I would like to have a party and say you guys go , instead I have to go to a motel and take bits and pieces and do that by myself , its not nice

NIKKI: Which is like Mum , it was such a bleak and lonely death, we as a family would have just wanted to be there to hold her hand

MAN: But you can't because you become implicated.

NIKKI GEMMELL: After I wrote the column one of the people I got contacted by was a doctor saying "Nikki, I know what you mother is going through, went through, because I have chronic pain myself, I've had it for 23 years".

HELENA, ( NOT HER REAL NAME), FRIEND: Dear Nikki, your words hit me right in the heart. I'm 61 and I've been suffering from a disabling, progressive and very painful form of arthritis for the last 23 years.

And when I read her column she was hurting so much and she had not a lot of understanding of the causes why her mother would have felt she needed to commit suicide as her only way out of pain.

NIKKI GEMMELL: And I feel like Helena's life, her story runs in tandem to Elayn's, because they're in a similar position in terms of their pain, their medical condition, their despair over their pain . She opened up to me the whole world of what it is like to live with chronic pain.

Helena shows Nikki her pain regime: 6 o'clock I start off with my evening medication.

NIKKI: Oh my goodness and when you travel you have to take all this with>

HELENA: Take em all, every time.

HELENA, FRIEND: I wanted to try to explain to Nikki how her mother felt living with severe pain and desperately trying to figure out how the hell they can manage it.

Helena shows Nikki her pain regime: I have to lie down absolutely flat. On my back on my bed , if I lie on my side my thoracic spine is very painful

HELENA, FRIEND: The amount of mental tension it takes just to keep it under control is just absolutely extreme and you, you've got to fight against it becoming the central aspect of your life all the time. And opiates are fantastic, they make you feel good and they make your pain better, it's a daily struggle against abusing them.

Helena shows Nikki her pain regime: So I unpeel one of these patches and stick it on where the pain is.

HELENA, FRIEND: Nikki's mum was trying to minimize and manage pain. It's all about managing it well, and really with any situation of severe chronic pain the patient has to get to a chronic pain clinic.

Nikki and Prof Paul Glare walk in pain clinic: This is our sensory testing lab . Right. Alan's doing a nerve conduction study on Dan. Does it hurt? No doesn't hurt at all , interesting sensation.

PROF. PAUL GLARE, PAIN SPECIALIST: I don't think euthanasia's ever justified in a patient with chronic pain. If Nikki's mother had have come here she would've been seen by a doctor, a physiotherapist and a psychologist. We make our assessments and then we combine them to come up with an integrated plan to offer her.

Nikki and Prof Paul Glare in pain clinic: There's a lot that we can offer, and most people will benefit it with aim of enabling them to function again enjoying their life getting on with life , If only my mum had done something like this , I know I know I'm sorry.

HELENA, FRIEND: I've been lucky, I've had access to pain clinics. I'm a doctor. I've kind of known what I'm doing. I've had all the right medications, and even so, after 24 years, you know, it's just too bloody much to live with.

Nikki and Helena talk at kitchen table: I almost can't work. I'm almost in a wheel chair and my pain is almost out of control. It's a time I can say Ok I've put up with this enough. I can take a good option and have what your Mum couldn't have which is hopefully a good death, the best I can have

Voice over from documentary about Dignitas: Last year 50 people ended their life with Dignitas , most of them foreigners who knew they could not die the way they wanted to in their own countries.

HELENA, FRIEND: I am a member of Dignitas, which is an organisation based in Switzerland that provides accompanied dying for people who feel that their life has become too painful. And for the last five years I've been planning how and when I'm going to end my life.

Nikki and Helena talk at kitchen table: I'm not sure whether I'm empowering myself , whether I'm being a coward, I'm doing something bad, whether I'm doing the right choice. All I know it's the only choice and your mother felt like it was the only choice but she didn't have a good choice, she only had the bad choice and that's just not fair.

HELENA, FRIEND: It was about 12 months ago, that I decided that probably it, it was time to go. So I got the kids all together and they all chose what they wanted to do and we all had fantastic, wonderful adventures and brilliant memories. I know they'll miss me and I feel dreadfully guilty for deciding to leave them. But I've done everything I can to bring them along with me on the journey.

NIKKI GEMMELL: As she's dying they're all going to be holding hands, her children and her best friend. So they're all going to be holding hands and I think, well that's the best way to die isn't it ?

Elayn's death has reconfigured me as a person. I was suddenly unsure of everything, of how I'd been with my mother, if I'd been enough of a daughter to her. And if I had just one minute with her again, just, just a minute, I would just tell her "Mum, you were magnificent, you were so magnificent and I love you so much" and I feel like I never told her that in my life. I was just never grateful enough, but then again is any child.