

How I helped my darling daughter to die

Extracted from One Last Goodbye by Kay Gilderdale,

She was a sunny little chatterbox. Then a mystery illness left Lynn unable to walk or talk – and in constant pain. Finally, she begged her mother to do the unthinkable

This is it, the moment of truth. After an hour and 45 minutes behind closed doors, the jury is about to reveal whether they think I deliberately set out to murder my beloved daughter, Lynn.

My every nerve is stretched to breaking point. I reach for the locket I have worn throughout the nine-day trial, containing a picture of Lynn and some strands of her hair.

I know how much Lynn would have hated my having to go through this. The last thing she told me before she died was that she was frightened of what might happen to me.

'Foreman of the jury, have you reached a verdict on the charges against Kay Gilderdale on which you are all agreed?' asks the usher.

'Yes,' comes the reply.

'On the charge of attempting to murder her daughter, Lynn Gilderdale, how do you find?'

I hold my breath.

It had been such an ordinary autumn afternoon when, 17 years earlier, I took the call that marked the beginning of the end for family life as we had always known it.



Ordeal: Kay was cleared of murder after helping her ill daughter commit suicide

It was the secretary at Lynn's school, asking if I would go and collect her. She'd had her TB jab that morning and wasn't feeling well.

I arrived to find Lynn, then 14, looking pale. 'I'm sorry to drag you away from work, Mum, but I feel sick and faint,' she said.

The next morning she seemed fully recovered and went off to school as usual, giggling with her friends on their way to the bus. But then the school called to say she was feeling unwell again. This time it was flu and she was ill for days with sweats, a high temperature and aching limbs.

She hadn't fully recovered from this when she got bronchitis, then tonsillitis, then glandular fever, then another chest infection. She was taking strong antibiotics for months. It was as if her entire immune system had closed down.

She was worried about what was happening to her; and why.

'What's the matter with me?' she asked one day. 'Why can't I get better? I'm missing so much school.'

In fact, Lynn never went back to school. Within a matter of weeks, our lovely girl was no longer the lively, sunny chatterbox my husband Richard and I had always known.

Before her illness, we'd always been outside together as a family — going to the beach, sailing or cycling. We had a happy life.

But along with a severe and permanent sore throat, headaches, pain in her limbs, swollen glands and constant infections, Lynn was passing out almost daily, and having fits which sometimes lasted for hours.

Richard, an officer with Sussex police, felt as helpless as I did. It was dreadful to watch our beautiful, feisty daughter losing her faculties one by one. She was so clearly ill, yet all the GP's tests came back negative. On paper, at least, there appeared to be nothing wrong with her.

Then one evening in February 1992, 12 weeks after she was first taken ill, Lynn collapsed unconscious and we called an ambulance. Her body was jerking in violent spasms and she could hardly draw breath.

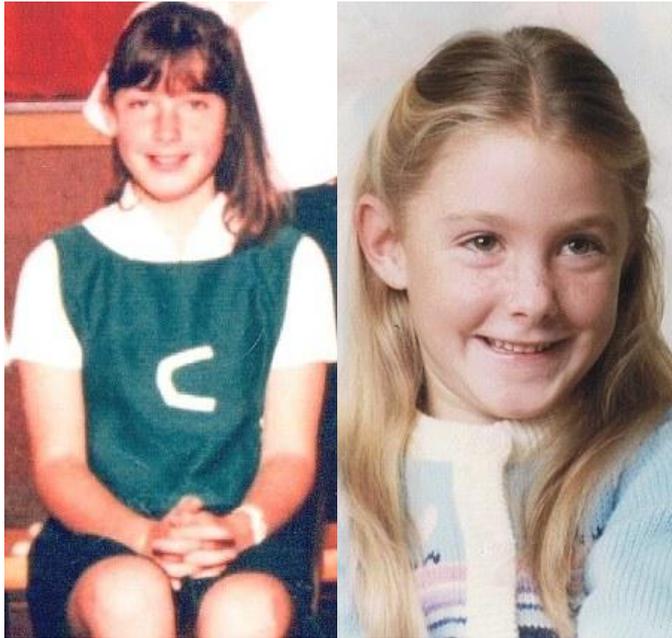
Blood tests and X-rays were carried out, and Richard and I went to the hospital in Tunbridge Wells for the results.

The doctor called us into his office. The tests had found no reason for Lynn's condition, and he started berating us for keeping Lynn off school for three months.

'It's disgraceful,' he barked. 'There is nothing wrong with her.'

It would be several more weeks before Lynn was finally diagnosed with ME — Chronic Fatigue Syndrome — by a different consultant, who was kinder if no more helpful than the first one.

'You are lucky, because you have a fashionable illness,' he told her.



'Within a matter of weeks, our lovely girl was no longer the lively, sunny chatterbox my husband Richard and I had always known'

Happy little girl: Lynn was an out-going child until she was struck down with ME

Perhaps he meant it kindly. This was the early 1990s and so-called 'Yuppie flu' was much in the news. But telling Lynn she was 'lucky' made us wince; and it rankled for ever afterwards as we watched this devastating condition tear our daughter's life apart.

Those hospital visits were the first of more than 50 in the tragically short life of my beautiful girl, who would die at the age of 31. And the psychological torment that began with that sceptical consultant continued for most of the rest of her life.

There is no test for ME, and doctors are unsure what causes it. Some, despite increasing scientific evidence, remain sceptical that the disease exists at all. But it is thought to affect 250,000 Britons, 25 per cent of them severely.

In June 1992, at a specialist ME clinic in London, where Lynn had been admitted for tests, we found her sobbing quietly in her bed. I had to lean close to hear what she was saying, because by then her voice had faded to a whisper.

'They keep telling me I'm pretending,' she said. 'One of the nurses started laughing at me and called me a silly little girl. I am not pretending. I don't want to be like this. I hate being ill.' I wanted to weep for the pain she was suffering, yet Lynn remained cheerful and resilient, loving and thoughtful.

All this despite being in hospital, or lying in a darkened room, unable to walk, talk, feed herself, use the toilet, read, or listen to music. She had to communicate by using a kind of sign language we developed between us, based on deaf and dumb signings. 'I'm sorry for ruining your life, and Daddy's,' she'd say.

My obsession with solving the mystery of ME had left little room in my life for Richard, and we had agreed to separate. Lynn thought she had ruined our lives, but she hadn't. ME had destroyed hers.

For the next 17 years, Lynn endured an unending string of hospital tests that revealed one frustrating and inconclusive result after another, and doctors who rarely offered much hope. She could not swallow and had to be fed through a tube. She had to remain horizontal because sitting up made her lose consciousness and she lay on a sheepskin rug to prevent bedsores.

Her major organs and hormone system were breaking down and, despite her daily morphine,

she was often in severe pain.

What remained constant was my devotion to my darling daughter, and her belief that one day she might be well enough to start living the life of a normal young woman.

But by her 30th birthday on September 20, 2007, even Lynn had given up. She signed to me that she wanted to talk.



'She could not swallow and had to be fed through a tube. She had to remain horizontal because sitting up made her lose consciousness'

Lost hope: Bedridden Lynn felt she could no longer go on after turning 30

'I can't go on,' she spelled out. 'I am too broken, Mum. You can't fix me any more. We have to do something.'

Lynn had been heading towards this point for some time, regularly saying she was sick of her life. Over the previous few weeks, I'd sometimes found her crying — which was unlike her. Lynn rarely indulged in self-pity.

But turning 30 was important to her. She once told me she'd said to herself that if she wasn't better by the time she reached that milestone, she didn't want to go on. Her dreams of a career, of motherhood, would be gone for ever . . .

I was asleep one night in December 2008 when something woke me. It was 1.45 am. I'd only been in bed an hour, and Lynn was buzzing on the intercom.

I ran along the corridor to her room. 'What's going on? I've only been in bed an hour,' I snapped.

Her big hazel eyes were filled with tears and she lifted up a large syringe. It was the one I'd filled up just before I went to bed, containing her 24-hour supply of morphine. It was attached to a pump which fed the painkiller slowly into her thigh and it was almost empty.

I knew instantly what had happened: she had injected the entire contents of the syringe into her bloodstream. She was crying as she signed to me: 'I can't take any more. I can't go on.'



Ill-health: Lynn, pictured with her father, Richard, spent much of her life in and out of hospital

I took her hand and held it. 'But why now?' I asked, in tears myself.

'There will never be a right time,' she signed. 'I am sorry.'

After we'd sat for a while longer, Lynn made it clear there was something she wanted me to do.

'I have taken all this morphine already, but it is not enough. Please, Mum, you must get me some more,' she told me.

In all the times I had imagined how Lynn's end might come, I never envisaged this. I thought about all the things she'd put up with in 17 years of illness: people disbelieving her, doctors sticking huge needles into her spine, her veins collapsing, contracting MRSA in hospital.

Now, she was suffering kidney and heart problems, osteoporosis, liver dysfunction, adrenal failure and an underactive thyroid. I couldn't see how she could ever lead a normal life. 'I understand how you feel,' I said, 'but I don't want you to go. Can't you stay a little while longer and wait for nature to take its course?'

We talked, but she kept urging me to help her end her life.

'You are the only one who can help me. Please,' she pleaded. I finally accepted that she could not go on and told her so.

I went to the spare bedroom where I kept the morphine, and took out six vials. I filled up the syringes then went back to connect them — but she pushed my hand away and took them from me. I sat down beside her bed.

As the morphine surged into her bloodstream, she slipped into unconsciousness. Hoping she could hear me, I said: 'I love you. Your dad loves you. Everyone loves you.'

'We understand. We don't blame you. We know what you've been through. You were so brave for so long. Rest easy now, my darling.'



'I wasn't trying to kill her — I just didn't want her to suffer'

Darling daughter: Kay couldn't see how Lynn would ever lead a normal life and understood her will to end it all

For hours afterwards I sat beside her, stroking her hair. I barely moved. I didn't eat, I didn't drink, I didn't sleep. I wanted to be with her when the end came.

At first she seemed to be sleeping peacefully, but by the afternoon she started making gurgling noises and seemed to be having trouble breathing. I couldn't understand it.

I have since learnt that people make these noises when they are dying, but at the time I didn't know what was happening and I started to panic. 'Lynn, can you hear me? Are you in pain?'

She made no response, but the gurgling went on. I didn't know what to do. I told myself Lynn had said repeatedly that she did not want to be kept alive by machines — yet she had also told me she didn't want to suffer. I didn't know what to do.

Realising Lynn hadn't had all the usual medications I gave her to keep her comfortable, I hurried to the kitchen, counted out her tablets, crushed them and diluted them. I thought the breathlessness might be distressing her and that maybe they would calm her down.

Back in the bedroom, I drew the diluted medicine into a syringe and pushed it down her feeding tube.

Then I made up another dose of morphine and attached it to the syringe driver in her thigh. I wanted her to have her normal, slow-release, constant pain control.

I must have assumed what she'd already taken was a fatal overdose; it would certainly have killed most people. I wasn't trying to kill her — I just didn't want her to suffer.

Lynn's breathing settled and that awful gurgling noise stopped.

Night fell as I sat at her bedside, and at 7.10 am on December 4, 2008 — 29 hours and 25 minutes after she had called for me — my daughter stopped breathing.

I don't know how long I lay there with Lynn. I'd had just an hour's sleep in the previous two days, but there were things I had to do. Trying not to give way to my grief, I sat up slowly and tried to concentrate. Richard, by then my ex-husband, still lived only a few miles away. 'Please come now,' I texted him.

It was still dark when I heard his car outside. 'She's gone,' I told him. When he saw her lying pale and motionless, he became distraught. He dropped to his knees and put his arms around her.

'I am so sorry, Lynn,' he sobbed. He felt that, as her parents, we had been helpless in the face of ME. We'd struggled for years, but we had failed our daughter.

Eventually he managed to compose himself. He telephoned the doctor, who came straight away. Shortly after she left, the doorbell rang again. Two policemen were standing on the doorstep ...



Beautiful smile: Even homework didn't wipe the grin off ME sufferer Lynn's lovely face

Only after we reached the police station, after my arrest, did I notice I was wearing odd shoes. One high-heeled, one low. Not that I cared. I didn't care about anything any more. After 17 years of suffering, my beloved daughter Lynn was dead and I had done the right thing in helping her die.

I knew assisted suicide was against the law, but I was ready to admit to the police what had happened over the past 48 hours. All that mattered was I'd done my best for Lynn.

I'd been into her bedroom to see her one last time before the police came to the house to arrest me. She looked so peaceful as I kissed her cheek.

At Brighton police station, I was cautioned, but by then I was in a daze. I'd had no food or sleep for 48 hours and was destroyed by the anguish of having lost my beautiful daughter. I was taken to a custody block then shown to a cell where two female police officers strip-searched me then took my shoes, socks and T-shirt, leaving me with my jeans and a cardigan.

Two nurses took blood samples and swabs and snipped off my nails in the search for signs that there had been a struggle between Lynn and me.

'We want you to know that we are all behind you here,' one of the nurses confided to me. 'We think it's terrible that you have been arrested.'

The cell contained nothing but a bare, hard bed and I was freezing cold when my solicitor arrived. 'You're shivering,' she said. 'Why have you been left in this state? It's disgusting.' She found me a jumper, some shoes and a blanket, then took me to a room where I told her what had happened.

The police wanted to interview me as soon as they could. 'Just tell them how it was,' my solicitor said. 'There's nothing to worry about.'

The questioning lasted just over an hour. I assumed I'd be allowed home then, but was told I had to stay overnight. Back in the cell, I lay on the bed thinking the room was like one of Lynn's windowless hospital rooms. Poor Lynn.



On trial: Kay Gilderdale leaves court with her son and ex-husband after being acquitted of Lynn's murder

The next day I was interviewed again and finally released on bail. But even then I wasn't allowed to go home, as the police were still searching my house. When I did go back, after a night in a hotel, it felt so strange and empty without Lynn.

Her body had been taken to a hospital in Hastings and the police had removed things from the house, such as Lynn's computer and mobile phone, my computer and phone, printers, cameras, videos, clothes and documents.

I don't know how I got through those first few weeks after Lynn's death. My ex-husband, Richard, and my family gave me support, but I missed Lynn so intensely. I missed her warmth, her kindness, her humour and her soft smile more than I could ever have imagined.

On April 16, 2009, I was charged with attempted murder. But I wasn't upset; I felt nothing. 'Whatever happens now doesn't matter,' I thought. 'The worst has already happened. Lynn is gone.'

Three days after what would have been Lynn's 32nd birthday, in September 2009, the Director of Public Prosecutions, Keir Starmer QC, published a series of guidelines defining the conditions under which he believed people involved in assisting a suicide should be prosecuted.

He had been forced into doing so after the right-to-die campaigner Debbie Purdy — whose case Lynn and I had followed closely — won a legal victory in the House of Lords. Debbie, who has multiple sclerosis, argued that it was a breach of her human rights not to know whether her husband would be prosecuted if he accompanied her to die in the Swiss clinic Dignitas.

The law lords agreed and ordered the DPP to clarify the law. He ruled that prosecutions would be less likely if the victim had a 'clear, settled and informed wish to commit suicide' and had told the suspect this and asked for help.



Suffering: This photo of Lynn was taken a year before she died

The victim should have a terminal illness, he said, or an incurable disability or degenerative condition. The suspect should be 'wholly motivated by compassion' and be a close relative or friend of the victim. A prosecution would be more likely if the victim was under 18; if they had a mental illness or learning difficulty; if their wish to commit suicide was not long-term and settled; if they did not ask personally for the suspect's help or did not have an incurable illness.

Prosecution would also be more likely if it could be shown that the suspect stood to gain from the death or had pressurised the victim into it.

Every single one of the factors against prosecution applied to me and not one of those in favour did. Surely they would drop the case against me now?

But that didn't happen. My MP said he would try to intervene with the DPP and the then Justice Secretary, Jack Straw, and my friends wrote letters of protest to the DPP — all to no avail. Eventually the trial arrived. What do you wear when you're up for attempted murder? I chose a charcoal grey trouser suit and a grey top, then draped a pink and grey scarf round my neck.

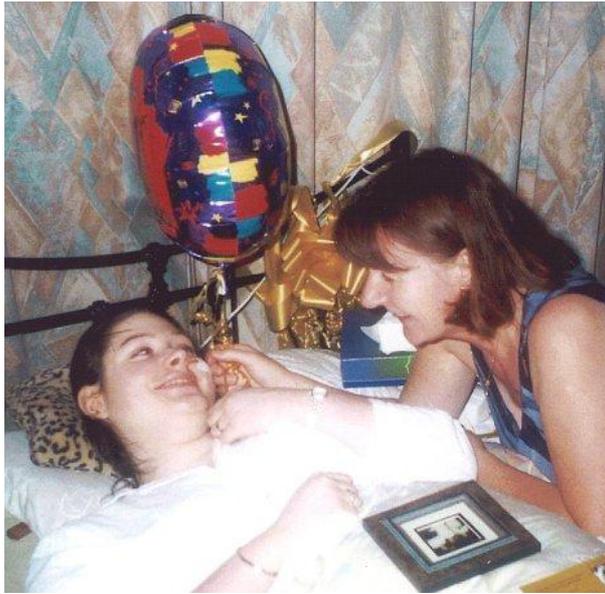
Lynn would have approved.

After the barristers from both sides had made their arguments, the judge, Mr Justice Bean, ruled that the evidence of the two police officers who came to the house and both interviews I gave at the police station were inadmissible. He was scathing about how I had been treated by the police when I was traumatised and sleep-deprived.

I was relieved that the judge seemed to be astute, reflective and fair.

When the prosecution called my ex-husband, Richard, to the stand, he described how I had 'fought every minute' to improve Lynn's life and cared for her devotedly for 17 years.

'We are never, ever going to get over it,' he said. 'It's torn every member of the family apart.'



Happy birthday: Lynn smiled for her mother, Kay, on her 21st birthday

Then came the astonishing testimony of Lynn herself. This was my daughter, speaking from her grave, telling the world how she had felt. Her words were taken from a letter she had written to friends in an online community of people with ME — a huge source of comfort to her in the final years of her life.

She didn't want me to read it at the time but, knowing that it was to be used in court, I'd prepared myself.

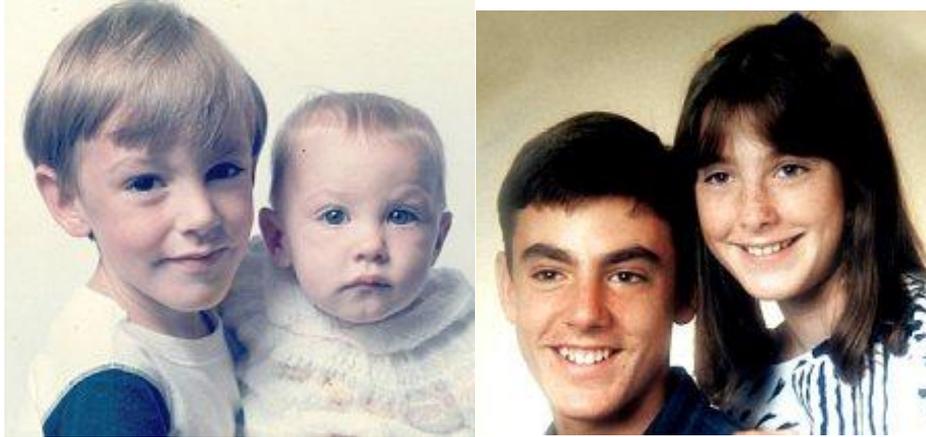
It said: 'OK guys, I have something important that I'd like to talk to you about. Something extremely private and personal that I want to share with you, my closest friends. 'After many months — years, even — of serious deliberation, I've pretty much come to a huge decision. I hope you will try to understand my reasons, even if you don't personally or morally agree with it.

'As I think some of you have known (or at least suspected) for a while, I've had enough of this miserable excuse for a "life" that I've been semi-existing in for the past 16-and-a-half years. 'I've been thinking about my long-term future more and more. Yes, I've had enough and I want to die.

'This is no whim. I've just had enough of being in pain and feeling sick every second of every day and battling through one health crisis after another. I've discussed it with my parents at great length and although they desperately don't want me to go, they can see I've had enough and understand why I can't keep hanging on for much longer.'

There was total silence in court as people listened, intently, to my daughter's words.

'Imagine you had led your life from one small room (apart from hospital stays) and from one single bed, for 16 LONG years, since you were 14 years old,' continued Lynn. 'Imagine being 31 years old and never having kissed someone properly, let alone done anything else. Imagine having the painfully thin bones of a 100-year-old woman and not being able to move without the risk of a serious fracture.



Close bond: Steve proudly holding his baby sister Lynn, and posing side-by-side when Lynn was 12

'Imagine not being able to get the spinning thoughts out of your head because you're unable to speak and are too ill/weak to converse with others in any meaningful way, except by slowly typing emails.

'Imagine having never been in a pub or club at 31 years old. Imagine never being able to fulfil the one thing you want above all else (except your returned health), the thing that should be a given right for all young women: to have your own child. Imagine wanting to die — knowing with every fibre of your being, that it's what you want — but being too ill to end your life yourself and so being imprisoned in the miserable existence which is your "life".

'I don't have to imagine any of the above. This is my reality. And I've had enough. My body and mind are broken and I want peace.

'God, I'm so desperate to end this never-ending carousel of pain and sickness and illness and suffering.'

Lynn was her own best advocate. She could not have conveyed her wishes more clearly: I was proud she had been able to speak for herself.

When the verdict came, it seemed swift. 'Foreman of the jury, have you reached a verdict on which you are all agreed?' asked the usher.

'Yes,' he said. I felt a chill down my spine. I didn't know how I could cope with prison. But whatever the verdict, I wouldn't have done anything differently.

'On the charge of attempted murder, how do you find?'

I braced myself.

'Not guilty.'

A roar of approval went up from my family and friends. Tears rolled down my face — I was so grateful.



Proud captain: Lynn, centre, was the leader of her netball team

Visions of Lynn came to me; of her running and laughing on the beach as a young girl, of her lying sick and exhausted in her shrouded room.

I saw her smiling at me now with relief that my ordeal was over.

Now she could finally go to her eternal rest and I could begin to grieve properly.

Many doctors still shy away from ME as they don't understand it. Others are only now acknowledging that it has a physical cause.

The Mail's own Dr Martin Scurr, who has been a GP for more than 30 years, wrote in this newspaper on June 7, 2010: 'At last I've been convinced that ME is real. I admit it, I was wrong. For many years I — like many of my medical colleagues — have blamed ME on psychological and behavioural causes.

'Then, last month, I attended the fifth World Conference on ME and spoke to a number of experts who believe the evidence shows the condition does have a viral origin.'

He also discussed the evidence that sufferers are born with a genetic vulnerability to the disease, which flares up when it is sparked by one or more common viruses.

Lynn felt very strongly about the lack of understanding from the medical profession and the inadequate portrayal of ME. 'Being disbelieved is almost as hard to bear as the pain,' she said.

When her body was examined by a pathologist who specialised in ME, he discovered dorsal root ganglionitis — infected nerve roots — and nodules of Nageotte, which are little tombs of dead cells, in her spinal cord. These would have caused her terrible pain and sensory nerve damage.



Captures Lynn's depth: Kay's all time favourite photo of her daughter, it was taken shortly before she fell ill

His findings were proof beyond any doubt that Lynn's ME was a neurological disease. I should have been happy that we had been shown to have been right. But how could I be happy when Lynn had to die to provide that proof? She knew the evidence was there. 'The answers are within me, Mum,' she used to say. 'It will be too late for me, but it will help others.'

My daughter was beautiful in body and soul. She was kind, loving and wise. Above all these, she was brave.

While I never stopped pleading with her to hold on to her dream of getting better, she had the enormous courage to give up on it, face the bleakest reality and embrace the ultimate freedom that can be found only in death.

She forced me to match her courage and to give up on my precious dream too, so that I could help set her spirit free from the body that betrayed her.

With her help I am battling to summon that same courage every day; the courage to resist falling into bitterness and resentment; the courage to feel glad that she is free, though her loss still hurts so much.

And the courage to believe that our last goodbye was not a goodbye at all — only farewell until we meet again.

From The Mail Online April 2011