

Chetan Bhagat's Heart-touching story

Everyone will give you an opinion on how to live your life. No one, no one will give you good advice on how to end it. Worse, they will tell you to continue living, without any respect for individual choice. Yes, hi, I'm Gautam Arora, and after eighteen wonderful years in Delhi, I've decided to end my life.

I sat with my best friend Neeraj and his girlfriend Anjali at Costa Coffee, DLF Metropolitan Mall in Saket. The coffee is way overpriced, but considering I had a day to live, I didn't mind getting ripped off.

"The joke isn't that funny," Neeraj said, tearing open the second sachet of brown sugar and mixing it for his girlfriend. If this girl can't mix sugar in her coffee, I wonder what she will be like after marriage.

"Do I look like I am joking? You are in medical college, and as a friend and someone two years elder to me, I am asking your advice on what is the most painless, graceful way to go. And ideally, it should be available at the friendly neighbourhood chemist," I said. I ordered a chocolate fudge cake. What are a few extra calories on your last day?

Anjali kept quiet, her iPod plugged in her ears. She had come to the mall to shop with her boyfriend rather than meet me. Neeraj said he only dated Anjali as her father had given her a car and driver, which made it easy to go around. Besides, she looked ok. She was pretty enough to invite a second stare from men, though that's hardly an achievement in Delhi where men's standards can be quite modest.

"Dude, you topped your school. How much did you score in your class XII boards again?" Neeraj said.

"Ninety two per cent," I said.

"Ninety what?" Neeraj said as he ripped out Anjali's earphones, "Anjali, the dude scored ninety two per cent in commerce! Do you know of anyone who has scored that much?"

Anjali shook her head.

"Wow, you must have studied a lot," she said.

I nodded. I had done nothing but study in the last two years.

"No time for hobbies?" she said.

I shook my head. My only hobbies were eating three meals and sleeping five hours a day. The rest of the time was with my books.

"With ninety two, you should be fine," Neeraj said.

"Not according to SRCC, not according to Stephen's and not according to Hindu, oh what the heck," I said as I opened my rucksack.

I gave him the special admissions supplement from the newspaper. I had snucked it out early morning so mom and dad wouldn't see it.

"Wow, check out Lady Sri Ram. B.Com Honours is at 95.5 per cent!" Neeraj said.

"That's a girl's college," Anjali said.

"I know," I said.

"Don't worry, he wouldn't have made it anyway. Anjali, why don't you go spend some of your father's money," Neeraj said and winked at me.

Anjali and I both gave Neeraj a dirty look. Neeraj air-kissed Anjali and gestured to her to leave.

Seriously, don't kill yourself. To us, you are still the school topper," Neeraj said after Anjali left.

"So what do I do?" I said, my voice loud, "stay back in school? This topper tag makes things worse. My parents already threw a party for our friends and relatives like I have made it big time in life. I cut a cake with the icing 'family superstar'."

"Nice," Neeraj said.

"Not nice at all. All relatives congratulated my mother. They see me as the next hotshot investment banker on Wall Street. The least they expect me to do is get into a good college in DU."

"There are still some colleges that you will get," Neeraj said as I cut him off.

"But none with the same brand value. Thus, you can't get a decent job after them. You can't get into the top MBA school."

Neeraj pushed my coffee cup towards me. I hadn't touched it. I picked it up and brought it close to my mouth but couldn't drink it.

"I made one tiny calculation error in my math paper," I said, "read one stupid unit conversion wrong. That's it. If only..."

"If only you could chill out. You are going to college, dude! Branded or not, it is always fun."

"Screw fun," I said.

"What kind of kids are they taking in anyway?" Neeraj said, "you have to be a bean-counter stickler to get ninety seven per cent. Like someone who never takes chances and revises the paper twenty times."

"I don't know, I revised it five times. That stupid calculation..."

"Gautam, relax. That paper is done. And sticklers don't do well in life. Innovative and imaginative people do."

"That's not what DU thinks. You don't understand, my father has proclaimed in his office I will join SRCC. I can't go to him with a second rung college admission. It's like his whole life image will alter. Hell, I won't be able to deal with it myself."

An SMS from Anjali on Neeraj's phone interrupted our conversation. At Kimaya, tried fab dress. Come urgently, want your opinion. Neeraj typed the reply back. Honey, it looks great. Buy it.

Neeraj grinned as he showed me his response. "I think you should go," I said. Rich dads' daughters can throw pretty nasty tantrums. Neeraj took out the money for coffee. I stopped him. "My treat," I said. Leave people happy on your last day, I thought. "Of course, I take this as your treat for cracking your boards," Neeraj said and smiled. He ruffled my hair and left. I came out of the mall and took an auto home.

I met my parents at the dinner table. "So when will the university announce the cut-offs?" my father said.

"In a few days," I said. I looked up at the dining table fan. No, I couldn't hang myself. I can't bear suffocation.

My mother cut mangoes after dinner. The knife made me think of slitting my wrists. Too painful, I thought and dropped the idea.

“So now, my office people are asking me, ‘when is our party?’,” my father said as he took a slice.

“I told you to call them to the party we did for neighbours and relatives,” my mother said.

“How will they fit with your brothers and sisters? My office people are very sophisticated,” my father said.

“My brothers are no less sophisticated. They went to Singapore last year on vacation. At least they are better than your family,” she said.

My father laughed at my mother’s sullen expression. His happiness levels had not receded since the day I received my result.

“My office people want drinks, not food. Don’t worry, I’ll do another one for them when he gets into SRCC or Stephen’s.”

My father worked in the sales division of Tata Tea. We had supplied our entire set of neighbours with free tea for the last five years. As a result, we had more well-wishers than I’d have liked.

“Even my country head called to congratulate me for Gautam. He said – nothing like Stephen’s for your brilliant son,” my father said.

“Gupta aunty came from next door. She wanted to see if you can help her daughter who is in class XI,” my mother said.

Is she pretty, I wanted to ask, but didn’t. It didn’t matter.

came to my room post dinner. I hadn’t quite zeroed down on the exact method, but thought I should start working on the suicide letter anyway. I didn’t want it to be one of the clichéd ones – I love you all and it is no one’s fault, and I’m sorry mom and dad. Yuck, just like first impressions, last impressions are important too. In fact, I didn’t want to do any silly suicide letter. When it is your last, you’d better make it important. I decided to write it to the education minister. I switched on my computer and went to the Education Department website. Half the site links were broken. There was a link called “What after class XII?” I clicked on it, it took me to a blank page with an under construction sign. I sighed as I closed the site. I opened Microsoft Word to type.

Dear Education Minister,

I hope you are doing fine and the large staff of your massive bungalow is treating you well. I won’t take much of your time.

I’ve passed out of class XII and I’ve decided to end my life. I scored ninety-two per cent in my boards, and I have a one foot high trophy from my school for scoring the highest. However, there are so many trophy holding students in this country and so few college seats, that I didn’t get into a college that will train me to the next level or open up good opportunities.

I know I have screwed up. I should have worked harder to get another three per cent. However, I do want to point out a few things to you. When my parents were young, certain colleges were considered prestigious. Now, forty years later, the same colleges are considered prestigious. What’s interesting is that no new colleges have come up

with the same brand or reputation level. Neither have the seats expanded in existing colleges fast enough to accommodate the rising number of students.

I'll give you an example. Just doing some meaningless surfing, I saw that 3.8 lakh candidates took the CBSE class XII exam in 1999, a number that has grown to 8.9 lakh in 2009. This is just one board, and if you take ICSE and all other state boards, the all India total number is over ten times that of CBSE. We probably had one crore students taking the class XII exam this year.

While not everyone can get a good college seat, I just want to talk about the so-called good students. The top 10 per cent alone of these one crore students is ten lakh children. Yes, these ten lakh students are their class toppers. In a class of fifty, they will have the top-5 ranks.

One could argue that these bright kids deserve a good college to realise their full potential. Come to think of it, it would be good for our country too if we train our bright children well to be part of the new, shining, gleaming, glistening or whatever you like to call the globalised India.

But then, it looks like you have stopped making universities. Are there ten lakh top college seats in the country? Are there even one lakh? Ever wondered what happens to the rest of us, year after year? Do we join a second rung college? A deemed university? A distance learning programme? A degree in an expensive, racist country?

Your government runs a lot of things. You run an airline that never makes money. You run hotels. You want to be involved in making basic stuff like steel and aluminum, which can easily be made by more efficient players. However, in something as important as shaping the young generation, you have stepped back. You have stopped making new universities. Why?

You have all the land you want, teachers love to get a government job, education funds are never questioned. Still, why? Why don't we have new, A-grade universities in every state capital for instance?

Oh well, sorry. I am over reacting. If only I had not done that calculation error in my math paper, I'd be fine. In fact, I am one of the lucky ones. In four years, the number of candidates will double. So then we will have a college that only has 99 per cent scorers.

My parents were a bit deluded about my abilities, and I do feel bad for them. I didn't have a girlfriend or too many friends, as people who want to get into a good college are not supposed to have a life. If only I knew that slogging for twelve years would not amount to much, I'd have had more fun.

Apart from that, do well, and say hello to the PM, who as I understand, used to teach in college.

Yours truly,

Gautam

(Poor student)

I took a printout of the letter and kept it in my pocket. I decided to do the act the next morning. I woke up as the maid switched off the fan to sweep the room. She came inside and brought a box of sweets. A fifty-year-old woman, she had served us for over ten years. "What?" I said as she gave me the box. It had kaju-barfi, from one of the more expensive shops in the city. The maid had spent a week's salary distributing sweets to anyone known to her. "My son passed class XII," she said as she started her work. "How much did he score?" I said, still rubbing my eyes. "Forty two per cent. He passed English too," she said as her face beamed with pride. "What will he do now?" I said. "I don't know. Maybe his own business, he can repair mobile phones," she said.

went to the bathroom for a shower. I realised the newspaper would have come outside. I ran out of the bathroom. I picked up the newspaper from the entrance floor. I took out the admissions supplement, crumpled it and threw it in the dustbin kept outside the house. I came back inside the house and went back into the shower.

I left the house mid-day. I took the metro to Chandni Chowk and asked my way to the industrial chemicals market. Even though I had left science after class X, I knew that certain chemicals like Copper Sulphate or Ammonium Nitrate could kill you. I bought a pack of both compounds. As I passed through the lanes of Chandni Chowk, I passed a tiny hundred square feet jalebi shop. It did brisk business. I thought my last meal had to be delicious. I went to the counter and took a quarter kilo of jalebis.

I took my plate and sat on one of the two rickety benches placed outside the shop.

A Muslim couple with a four-year-old boy came and sat on the next bench. The mother fed the boy jalebi and kissed him after each bite. It reminded me of my childhood and my parents, when they used to love me unconditionally and marks didn't exist. I saw the box of Ammonium Nitrate and tears welled up in my eyes. I couldn't eat the jalebis. I came back home. I wondered if I should use my chemicals before or after dinner. Maybe it is better after everyone has slept, I thought.

We sat at the dinner table. Dad had told mom not to cook as he'd brought Chinese takeaway for us. Mom brought the soya sauce, chilli oil and the vinegar with cut green chillies in little katoris. We ate American chapsuey on stainless steel plates. I looked at my watch, it was 8 pm. Three more hours, I thought as I let out a sigh.

"One thing Kalpana," my father said to my mother, "job candidates aren't what they used to be these days. I interviewed for new trainees today, disappointing."

"Why, what happened?" my mother said.

"Like this boy from Stephen's, very bright kid. But only when it came to his subjects."

"Really?" my mother said.

"Yeah, but I asked him a different question. I said how would you go about having a tea-shop chain like the coffee shop chains, and he went blank," my father said, an inch of noodle hanging outside his mouth. My mother removed it from his face.

"And then some kid from SRCC. He topped his college. But you should have seen his arrogance. Even before the interview starts, he says 'I hope at the end of our meeting,

you will be able to tell me why I should join Tata Tea and not another company'. Can you imagine? I am twice his age."

I could tell my father was upset from his serious tone.

"If you ask me," my father continued, "the best candidate was a boy from Bhopal. Sure, he didn't get into a top college. But he was an eighty per cent student. And he said 'I want to learn. And I want to show that you don't need a branded college to do well in life. Good people do well anywhere.' What a kid. Thank God we shortlisted him in the first place."

"Did he get the job?" I said.

"Yes, companies need good workers, not posh certificates. And we are having a meeting to discuss our short listing criteria again. The top colleges are so hard to get in, only tunnel vision people are being selected." "Then why are you asking him to join Stephen's or SRCC?" my mother said.

My father kept quiet. He spoke after a pause. "Actually, after today, I'd say don't just go by the name. Study the college, figure out their dedication, and make sure they don't create arrogant nerds. Then whatever the brand, you will be fine. The world needs good people."

I looked at my parents as they continued to talk. Excuse me, but I have a plan to execute here. And now you are confusing me, I thought. "So should I study some more colleges and make a decision after that?" I said. "Yes, of course. No need for herd-mentality. Kalpana you should have seen this boy from Bhopal."

Post-dinner, my parents watched TV in the living room while eating fruits. I retracted to my room. I sat on my desk wondering what to do next. The landline phone rang in my parent's room. I went inside and picked it up.

"Hello Gautam?" the voice on the other side said.

It was my father's colleague from work. "Hello, Yash uncle," I said. "Hi," he said, "congratulations on your boards." "Thanks uncle," I said, "dad is in the living room finishing dinner, should I call him?" "Dinner? Oh, don't disturb him. Just tell him his mobile is with me. It is safe. We were on a field trip today. He left it in my car." "Field trip? For interviews?" I said. "What interviews? No, we just went to the Chandigarh office," he said.

I wished him good night and hung up the phone. I switched on the bedside lamp in my parents' room. Confused, I sat down on my father's bed, wondering what to do next. To make space, I moved his pillow. Under the pillow lay a crumpled newspaper. I picked it up. It was the same admissions supplement I had tossed in the bin this morning. My father had circled the cut-offs table.

I left the newspaper there and came to the living room. My father was arguing with my mother over the choice of channels. I looked at my father. He smiled at me and offered me watermelon. I declined.

I came back to my room. I picked up the chemical boxes and took them to the toilet. I opened both boxes and poured the contents in the toilet commode. One press, and everything, everything flushed out.

“Gautam,” my mother knocked on the door, “I forgot to tell you. Gupta aunty came again. Can you teach her daughter?”

“Maybe,” I said as I came out of the toilet, “by the way, is she pretty?”