

a good day to die

Globally, 800,000 people kill themselves every year. Our post pandemic world, with its numerous disruptions, has also forced more people to seek help for mental health issues. While much has been said about the toll on mental health, there is little understanding of why people choose to kill themselves, especially when many, like Anthony Bourdain and Kate Spade, had so much to live for.

Author Mahita Vas has battled suicidal thoughts for all her adult life. She even lost one of those battles and tried to kill herself, only to be rescued within seconds of breathing her last. It is difficult for those left behind to understand why their loved one would choose to die.

A Good Day to Die offers readers an intimate exploration of an anguished mind, weaving personal experience with academic reports.

About the Author

Mahita Vas was diagnosed with Type 1 bipolar disorder in 2005, after more than 20 years of struggling with mood swings and suicidal ideation. As a mental health advocate, she speaks candidly about mental health. She has written three other books, including a memoir on mental illness.

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INSIDE A
SUICIDAL
MIND

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For Review only

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Inside a Suicidal Mind

by

Mahita Vas

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For Debbie Fordyce & Ylita Garland

Foreword

A number of similar posts appeared on my news feed one morning in August 2020. The first line read, “There were a total of 400 reported suicides in Singapore in 2019 ...”, followed by another, “Youth suicides still a concern, with 94 cases last year ...”, and I finally stopped scrolling when this headline hit me, “Suicide remains leading cause of death for those aged 10 to 29 in Singapore ...” Horrified, I clicked to read the report.¹ The figures were released as part of a highly publicised campaign by Samaritans of Singapore to introduce a text-based service for anyone in distress and contemplating suicide. The report, presented as a fact sheet and devoid of emotion, provided a clearer picture of the numbers: a total of 400 suicides, of which 94 were youths, which included 71 who were between the ages of 20 and 29. Noticeably, the report omitted the actual figures for the suicides of the younger group, but a quick calculation showed that, of the 94 youths who killed themselves, 23 were between the ages of 10 and 19. I froze, staring at the numbers, feeling numb.

1 Samaritans of Singapore (SOS) Media Release, August 2020

The sobering effect of the report piqued my curiosity and I was keen to learn how Singapore compared with the rest of the world. According to the World Health Organisation,² globally, nearly 800,000 people kill themselves every year – one person every 40 seconds. Suicide is the leading cause of death in young people between the ages of 15 and 19. For every suicide there are many more people who attempt suicide every year. A prior suicide attempt is the single most important risk factor for suicide in the general population.

I had never bothered with suicide statistics, but reading of a ten-year-old's suicide in Singapore troubled me deeply. I searched for information – his background, his circumstances – but could not find any. In the process of looking, I learnt about another young boy who had committed suicide by jumping off the 16th floor of a building. He was only 11 years old and had been battling clinical depression. I read about how his mother coped with his sudden and unexpected death, and was in awe of a woman who, battling depression herself, had recognised the signs and sought help for her son years earlier.

I thought about the pain and anguish my late mother would have had to deal with had I been successful with my attempt 15 years ago. I thought about my husband and children, who might still be carrying the scars. I do not think anyone ever really comes to terms with a loved one wanting to, and choosing to, die.

For most people, certainly everyone I know, being alive is something they either take for granted, or treasure as a precious gift. For the faithful, it is a bountiful blessing. Being alive means soaking up experiences on any day. Like basking in the warmth

of a sunny day after days of torrential rain, or admiring the varied hues and shapes of vegetables at the market, or savouring every mouthful of a meal, whether at a hawker centre, at home or in a restaurant, or hugging someone... the little things that remind us all that life is precious, and something to value. Death is something to stave off, perhaps even to fear.

For me, being alive often feels the same as it does for most people. But, sometimes, I contemplate death not only as an option, but as salvation. Having survived a prior suicide attempt, I am considered a risk factor for suicide in the general population.

In Singapore, if you or someone you know is suicidal, please call 1800 221 4444 for help. If someone is in immediate danger, please call 999.

In other countries, please call your local emergency number.

Chapter 1

I have had a morbid fascination with death since I was in my teens. Specifically, suicide. It was not as if I needed to run away from hardship. My mind simply gravitated towards stories about death; murder and suicide were topics of great interest to my young mind. It seemed natural to me, and I never thought to question my preference. It helped that there were always enough such stories in the newspapers to keep me entertained. With every suicide report I read, I wondered what it would feel like, standing at the top of a block of flats, and jumping to my death. It did not horrify me to think of such a violent death. The local broadsheet was particularly good for international news which was not limited to politics, and sometimes reported on gruesome murders in a village in some distant land. Captivating as some of the stories were, I would feel angry if the killers were not caught, and equally happy if they were, especially if they were killed.

By the time I was in my early twenties, I had become aware of my suicidal thoughts and was increasingly keen on suicide as a subject. My job as a stewardess took me to cities which were often shut on weekends, leaving little to do except to read, watch

movies in the hotel or at the cinema. Between the books and newspapers I had read, and the movies I had watched in the eighties, there were countless instances of suicide. The reasons varied and included heartbreak, mainly women, but men too; threats from loan sharks; bullying, mostly in Japan back then; and in very few instances, despair so profound that the character needed medical intervention. All the reasons for suicide seemed normal to me. It also seemed normal when no reasons were offered for a particular suicide.

For decades, I had resisted many lifestyle choices, including exercising and managing my high-carbohydrate diet. It seemed pointless to make an effort when I could not see myself living long enough to reap the benefits. Long before I had written my first book, I had thought about writing a novel, but did not go any further than thinking up a plot. It did not make sense to me, starting on something when I was probably going to kill myself before the book was finished.

It was around that time when I started to think about choosing to die my way, and at a time I chose, as being normal. I never discussed it with anyone because people always seemed to discuss suicide like it was a terrible thing. The general belief was that suicide was a great sin and a despicable act by a selfish and thoughtless person. Such souls would surely rot in hell, they would say. Yet, all I could see was an appealing exit if and when I needed one. What I could not see, and did not even consider, was why I would even need to plan my exit. Yes, it was attractive to be able to kill myself when I wanted to, but why on earth would I even want to? I did not think to ask myself this question until much later, after I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder.

Once I started questioning my desire to die, I became more aware of how others perceived my life. I started my working life as a stewardess with Singapore Airlines, and after six years, entered the advertising industry, including five years at Ogilvy & Mather, one of the world's leading agencies, followed by five years in corporate marketing at Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts. The privilege of working at the world's finest organisations was a source of pride for me. I was fortunate, and I knew it. On top of that, I was financially secure, by virtue of being married to my husband, a pilot with Singapore Airlines. I was living a charmed life. Yet, during all that time, I had spent too many days feeling an urge to end my life.

Feeling suicidal is simply having an urge to die. That irresistible urge in mental health patients is what doctors and academics tend to attribute to simple reasons, like hopelessness and desperation. For someone like me, with a mental health issue, whether medicated or not, I can find myself wanting to die simply because, at a given time, I find myself unable to cope with a random or particular situation. The source of such hopelessness can be difficult to identify. It could be one thing, or a combination of situations.

Thinking back to the times before my diagnosis, when I had seriously considered suicide, and what had led me to attempt suicide, I do not remember feeling particularly depressed. It was usually because I felt overwhelmed and helpless, unable to change my situation. This helplessness or self-loathing was brought on by one, or a combination, of a number of factors, for example, feeling the complete loss of control over my emotions, especially after ranting like a lunatic at my children

for the slightest fault, which, in turn, left me feeling incapable of being a good parent. On such days, I would be convinced that my children deserved a better mother, and my husband needed a better wife. Interwoven with such convictions would be the belief that death had to be more attractive than life. I could never understand why I felt this way in the first place, seeing how comfortable my life was, but whenever I got this close to the edge, the feeling was always real, and the urge was always strong. It never occurred to me to question these feelings, because they did not last long – anything from about five minutes to two days.

It never took much to throw my mind into turmoil, followed immediately by fragility, when I felt like I was about to break into a million pieces. I would then crave peace and stillness, not just for that moment but forever. When the urge to die was so irresistible and so appealing, I became absolutely certain that death was the only way to escape from my mind and from myself. I would try to calm myself by reading or watching something on television, but it would be hard to focus. Occasionally, the urge lasted for more than a day, and that was when I would start planning my suicide: when I would die and how I would kill myself.

Then, within minutes, or hours, I would drop my plan, admonishing myself for over-reacting, and being dramatic. This about-turn would not necessarily be the result of a distraction; I have shut down thoughts of suicide simply from having changed my mind. Distractions have helped, though – like when a family member or friend says or does something which brings me a blast of immense joy; or when I look out of my balcony and see

two hornbills flitting from tree to tree as if playing a game; or being forced to go out to commit to a lunch appointment with a close friend. These experiences have helped plans for suicide to disappear as quickly as they came.

Being in the presence of my family and a few close friends has helped to hold me back from attempting another suicide. The thought of them having to cope with my sudden and unexpected death, especially for my husband and children, who then have to pick up the pieces of life without a wife and a mother, has been enough to make me resolve to stay alive. Until the next time, and the next, and again and again, the cycle would always repeat itself. I swing from merely thinking about suicide and sometimes planning it, to finding a reason to live.

Considering the number of times I have thought about suicide, and planned it, and worse, going as far as attempting suicide, I have spent most of my life feeling non-suicidal. Which is to say, I have spent most of my life with all the appearances of a normal person – going to school, having a job, having friends, getting married, and raising children. But on days when I felt suicidal, even for just five minutes each day, three days in a row, the feeling was intense. I have spent most of my days feeling happy enough, but I rarely feel extremely thankful or joyful about being alive. On my low days, I know that as long as I stave off my urge to die, as long as I am alive, I will not cause pain to my family.

On suicidal days, I try as much as possible to focus on the consequences of my suicide to stay alive. Sometimes my mind can only process my own desperation, shutting out all reason. It is almost impossible to think rationally, and all I can think of is

suicide. And then, I stop thinking about suicide, and decide to stay alive, telling myself to never go to that dark place again. Yet, inevitably, I do. Sometimes weeks later, sometimes months later. During the “circuit breaker” for the coronavirus pandemic, it was mere weeks in between. That’s when I saw my doctor more often, who then added anti-psychotics to my medication regime.

The idea of suicide had begun to weave into and out of my head since I was in my teens, so whenever I found myself staring down from a height, wondering what it would be like to jump, it never felt unusual. But it was only in my early 30s when I found myself drawn to the brink of death. At that time, I was an account manager at Ogilvy & Mather. It was late at night, and I was exhausted after a week of working until nearly 10 o’clock every night. I had hardly seen my twins, who were three years old at that time. I was both angry with myself and sad for them, and as I walked to the multi-storey car park – I sometimes drove to work when my husband was away flying – I thought about how much I had failed them by not being around more often. They deserved better.

I put my bag in the car, and as if drawn like a moth to a flame, I deliberately walked straight ahead to the restraining wall and looked out, wondering what it would be like to jump eight floors down onto solid tarmac below with nothing to break my fall. I leaned forward slightly to try and get a better look at the ground below. Would my cold, lifeless body create a mess? Would my bones shatter and protrude from various parts? What if someone walked past just as I was about to hit the ground? I would kill that person, which would be murder, and worse, I may survive because he would have broken my fall. No, I thought, I would

have to go somewhere without access to pedestrians. It did not occur to me that these were bad or wrong thoughts. They were merely thoughts. I felt very tired and wanted to sleep so I got into the car, turned up the music and headed home. Elmer Bernstein's *Magnificent Seven* had just started playing on the radio and, as it was used in the Marlboro commercials for a long time, it took me back to those carefree teenage days when my best friend and I were at the beach smoking and drinking when we were not supposed to. Five minutes of happy thoughts to a lively soundtrack made the drive home that much better. But those happy thoughts did not last very long.

A few days later, feeling too fatigued to even get dressed, I took two days off, my first sick leave after over a year at O&M. I slept most of the day, waking up in time to greet my kids at 3.30p.m., when they came home on the school bus. The next day, feeling too inadequate for needing sick leave just to rest and too morose to face my clients and colleagues, I drove to Toa Payoh in the early afternoon. I was familiar with Toa Payoh because I sometimes took my children to the library there. Also, Toa Payoh happened to be the closest HDB estate to my home. I parked the car near the library, walked to McDonald's and bought a strawberry sundae with extra topping. At that time, ice cream had been my comfort food of choice for more than 10 years. That day, I just felt like having an ice cream. I was not feeling particularly sad.

Holding the strawberry sundae in one hand, I crossed Toa Payoh Central. As I stood on the central divider, waiting for traffic on the other side to clear, my mind was blank, processing nothing, just watching the cars as they drove by. When I reached

the block of flats on the other side of the road, I threw my now empty plastic sundae cup into the bin and took the lift up to the top floor. I don't remember feeling anything while waiting to reach the top floor. I looked below, just as I had done several times since I was a teenager. I was not feeling profoundly sad and I certainly was not despondent. I was not running away from a troubled life. I simply had this overwhelming urge to die that day and just as simply assumed it was normal. I do not remember for how long I stood at the staircase landing before deciding not to jump. I held back because at that very moment, I did not feel like dying.

As I sat in my car before driving off, I thought about how close I had come to ending my life just minutes ago. I thought about people like me and believed many people felt the same way about dying or changing their minds when finding themselves at the edge. They probably do not talk about their experience because some things are too embarrassing or stupid to discuss openly. Some people try to kill themselves and fail, while others succeed. Newspapers and television shows are never short of stories about people who killed themselves. It never crossed my mind that it was not normal to *want* to die. Especially when I had so much to live for.

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Writing this book was agonising, but it also reminded me of how fortunate I am to be surrounded by the family and friends I have. I am indebted to them.

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About the Author

Mahita Vas was diagnosed with Type 1 bipolar disorder in 2005, after more than 20 years of struggling with mood swings and suicidal ideation. As a mental health advocate, she speaks candidly about mental health. She is also a volunteer with Transient Workers Count Too. She has written three books, including a memoir on mental illness. This is her fourth book. Mahita is married and has twin daughters in their late twenties.