How It Started
By Helen Evrard

Could you imagine what it’s like to hear a voice in your head saying, *Everyone will be happier if you’re dead?*  What if this voice came out of the blue, and was something you’d never heard before?  What if you just knew it was not your voice, that it came from “somewhere else?”  How would you respond to this authoritative, deep, firm and masculine voice, when it seemed to compel you to listen and obey, as if you were in a trance, or taken over by an alien?  Would you do what it said?  When I first heard that voice twenty-seven years ago, I did succumb.  It was about 8:30 in the morning, and I was getting ready to go to work, but I had already had a nip or two of whiskey to steady my nerves.  I’d been doing this a lot then, and knew I was in trouble, but I was only in this job temporarily, since a new career path would happen in just a few short months.  I was killing time until I entered training, but was already convinced that I would fail miserably.  I had always seen myself as *not good enough.*  I was convinced that everyone would see right through me, and that I’d be kicked out on the street a week or two after starting.  This is why I was sipping whiskey or vodka all hours of the day or night: to shut up the other voice – mine – that was telling me I was destined to fail.  *This* is how I first discovered I had depression.

I was so convinced of the voice’s message that I left home as usual, bought a quart of vodka, and checked myself into a cheap motel room that I had passed many, many times on the way to and from work.  This motel was located on a slender lip up a rocky embankment alongside the major highway that I took every day.  It had always called to me in some way.  I knew for months that something significant would take place there, but I never thought it would be a death move.  I thought I’d meet an illicit lover there, have an assignation of some sort.  I thought it would be mysterious and somewhat risky, that I would approach the room with both excitement and dread, that I would worry about getting caught but would still be able to get away with it.  I never thought I’d go there to end my life.

When I paid for the room I just lay there, sipping the bottle of vodka while I watched whatever was on TV, trying to gather up the courage to drive down to the nearby river and walk into the gray, cold water.  But I remained paralyzed, intermittently cocooned in the cheap motel bedcovers, visiting the bathroom when needed, continuously sipping the vodka and drifting in and out of an unconscious state that I used to call sleep.  *Everyone will be happier if you’re dead.*  The voice kept coming back every time I awoke, repeating this important message, reminding me that it was time to make a move.  But there was something else keeping me from doing it, what it was, I couldn’t say.  And so it went through the long day and night.  The voice would always come back, but I would sip it away with the sting of the vodka, and would think of reaching out to my boyfriend.  But the voice had told me that he wanted me dead, too.  I was thirty-five years old.

When something like morning ensued, there were knocks on the door.  It was a cleaning person, calling out in a heavy accent, *Maid service! Maid service!*  Or something like that.  And so I crept to the door and shouted, *No, thank you!*  to this person, then went
back to bed and resumed sipping. And I saw there was so little in the bottle now, and was wondering how I could deal with this mess. And I called the front desk to say I wanted to stay, and I slept, and I sipped, as my mouth became dryer and my head began to hurt. As this second day moved slowly forward the voice began to recede. I picked up the phone and made the call to my boyfriend. I told him that I was holed up, and was struggling with the death dance. Before I could tell him the motel name, I decided to hang up.

Later on that same day, there were loud knocks on the door, and I peered out the peephole to see two cops outside; I opened the door to surrender. They were armed with court documents, but I didn’t resist. I felt greatly relieved, and knew I was going to live. I got chatty and sparky, and made small talk as they drove me to the police station. When we got there I threw up in the garbage can by the desk, all water and mucus and old, brownish-black coffee from yesterday. I let them drive me to the mental hospital, where I spent the night on a gurney in the hall because they didn’t have a bed.

This was my introduction to depression, a dramatic and brutal wake-up call. But wake up I did, and went on to take my medication, and see my doctor who was also my therapist. And I married my boyfriend, and completed my training, and visited Thailand and Malaysia, and thought the world was my oyster. After moving out of state, we had twins – a boy and a girl, the proverbial million-dollar family - and bought a home, and I truly believed that my dreams would come true. But the dreams began to crumble when he moved out abruptly, leaving our twins and me in the unfinished home we’d bought, the one where the children had gotten lead poisoning. And I cried and I cried, but continued my work, because I had opened my business, and because I loved the kids so much.

Then good things began to happen, and I watched the children grow. But as my business prospered, and they grew to adolescence, a familiar and deep unhappiness arose. The voice had faded into history, but I felt restless and unfulfilled. When I discovered my gentle son was being tortured at school, I knew I had to get away. It was time to change locations, and to do something for me. Because all of these years it had been about the kids, and about the people that I served in my business. I had fallen on the ice and had spent weeks and months in wheelchairs, immobilizers, casts, and on crutches. I had few friends and did everything myself, not realizing how destructive this would turn out to be. To give my son a better school and to give a new beginning to me, I jumped state once again and moved the three of us to a new home.

This thing called depression was still in my bones, but I thought I had everything under control. When the business that I purchased began to unravel, and the pain in my back and knee became almost unbearable, it reared its ugly head and once again took hold of my life. By this time my daughter had become unreachable, while my son was thriving and succeeding at all he tried. My business was floundering, and I was surrounded by incompetence. I had dropped a lawsuit over my misguided business deal, and was bleeding money. I sought help and was given pills, but no one knew the depth of my suffering. Two decades after my wake-up call, I had come to a new precipice. The uncertainty was terrifying, and now I had three to worry about. The money dried up and
the pain got worse, and I closed my business and lost my home. Rejection and dismissal were my constant companions, as I made the rounds to try to salvage my existence. I’m sure others thought I could make it on my own, like I always had, but they were busy with their own lives, and there was neither enough time nor words nor vitality to explain the complexity of my circumstances and the hopelessness that I felt.

Months and years ensued on this path of total destruction. It was a progressive and downhill period, punctuated by pills, more pills, and unbearable pain. There was Cymbalta and Klonopin, Ambien, Percocet and fentanyl. There were months and months of increasing Ritalin, as it got more and more difficult for me to stay awake. For a while I still had health insurance, but then it was gone. There were random acts of kindness, but mostly people left me alone. They had no idea what had happened, I seemed to slowly evaporate into thin air. I had reached out to one or two here or there, by letter or by phone, but my attempts at communication resulted in their swift and complete retreat. Everyone ran at the slightest suggestion of my loss, the complete annihilation of my life as I had built it. All the safety nets I’d had in place went the way of all flesh, and I lived in someone’s basement as I clawed through all the days.

The dark night of my soul lasted much longer than I could imagine. Two years with no health insurance, no dental care and no support. Then a trip to the National Institutes of Mental Health, to be evaluated for a study, where I learned I had severe hypothyroidism and was withdrawn from all those drugs. With stimulants and narcotics gone, there was nothing left to stand on. My days were continuous loops of alternating shame, humiliation, pain, hopelessness, self-loathing, self-blame, incredulity, and numbness. An encyclopedia of despair couldn’t contain enough words to describe how I felt. My twins were now in college, and had challenges of their own. They were functioning as orphans, without anyone to help them.

When one last attempt to resolve the legal misrepresentation I had received failed, I finally gave up. The outside voice never returned. Now it was my own telling me to give up. There was no place to go, nothing left but death. I could taste it, smell it, feel it, and I craved it. A place of non-existence was the only place for me. At that point I had stopped eating, and walked my dog in frigid temperatures without a coat. I didn’t feel or taste; it’s a wonder I didn’t go blind. If something passed my lips, it had to be scalding, or frozen, or smothered in horseradish. This was how I knew that I was actually eating.

It was January 2011, and I was saved by my dear son. He continued to stay in touch with me, to see me on his breaks; he’d tell me I’d get better, that I would make it through this mess. I was texting my psychiatrist, who had given me his cell number. When he wouldn’t respond, I asked my son to text him, and to tell him I was at the end of the rope. After a late, late night appointment, when I sat on his floor with my winter coat over my head, and he waited for me to just go back home and hide, he finally picked up the phone and arranged for my admission. I spent six horrific days in the most dreadful place on earth, and when I left I was worse, and saw no light on the horizon.
But still that strange voice stayed quiet. I texted an old friend, someone I saw once in a blue moon, someone I’d helped when she broke down many years ago. Here was the first sign of resurrection: she flew me down to Newark, picked me up and drove me to a century-old psychiatric facility for admission. It was a gloomy, chilly Friday in February, and my first breakthrough was at intake. In a hesitating fashion I told the woman my story, but as I filled in all the details I began to pick up speed. There was an energy erupting, I was so very, very angry that I’d been tossed in the trash like a crumpled candy wrapper, that I’d been ignored and interrupted, and told to be quiet. That I’d been shuffled, shifted, and shaken like burning embers in unloved hands. She listened. She believed me. She told me I could stay, and that they might start electric shock treatments. All I wanted was hope, and to believe that I’d get better. This became my second birthday, the day I saw that I would live.

It’s four years later, and I still have The Depression, which bares its fangs now by depleting me of energy. The numbness is getting better, and on most days my mood is good. I’m so very glad I’m still here, and have experienced more growth than I ever thought was possible. I learn new things every day, and received many blessings. There are true friendships and fresh endeavors, there’s a book for those who need it. There are my wonderful children, shining and grown, independent and loving, who do not blame me for my life arc. There is instant understanding of the sufferings of others. The last four years have been highlighted by the excitement of discovery. I discovered shamans and sound therapists, gongs and spiritual teachers. I found waterfalls and birch trees, red-tailed hawks, ospreys and cardinals, and swimming laps in solitary rhythm. I found radio and words, and therapists who really care. I found conversations, and variety, and a path to stay alive. I found hope, forgiveness, and challenges; I no longer feel alone. I have seen my daughter’s boyfriend, and her dog and brand new car. I have old friends who’ve rediscovered me, and we go on from where we left off.

After all these many decades, I see my own death down the line. As I wait for its arrival, I work to help and inform others. I work to tell my story, and to vanquish fear and ignorance. I’m an educated woman, and an extrovert to boot. As I see the landscape changing, I want to make my contribution. My gay son can marry now in many places, and I no longer fear for his own annihilation. He’s “out,” like me, which gives us a freedom and commitment that comes from nothing left to lose. I’m here to stay, and want others to comprehend the precious value of every human being, starting with themselves. In the words of George Eliot, *It is never too late to be what you might have been*. Nothing surprises me more than the me I’ve become today.