

The Voice

By Ron Simmons

My first experience hearing the Voice was at the age of 13 when I was planning my suicide; not contemplating but planning my suicide. I had been contemplating for months. I was tired of being the sissy on the block; tired of the name calling; tired of being teased in the day by boys who would kiss me secretly at night. I knew what they were saying was true. I liked boys rather than girls. Something about a boy stirred feelings in me that I couldn't describe. I wanted their touch, their embrace.

For years I thought it the result of an encounter I had had with my cousin, Charlie. I was five years old and he was seven. His family had been evicted so he was staying with us and sharing my bed, a twin bed. My older sister slept in the other.

One night he said "You wanna do what the grownups do?"

"What do they do?" I asked, having no idea what he was talking about. So, he showed me. He hugged me and kissed me, and we slept in each other's arms. Since I didn't have any brothers, I assumed that that was what boys did with each other. It didn't feel wrong. That was the beginning and it is a night I will never forget. I haven't seen him since then.

I had my first boyfriend, Larry, in the second grade; he was a cute light-skinned kid with curly, sandy hair. We were in the same class and became best friends. During the summer we would play outdoors like most eight-year-olds. But indoors, we played house – serious house. We would tie a blanket over the twin beds and the tent became our home. I would welcome him from a hard day at work with a kiss and prepare dinner, just like my parents did. I remember having a child for him, putting my sister's doll under my shirt, pretending I was pregnant. We didn't know about sex, just hugging and kissing and playing house.

After Larry, I fooled around with other boys. We would ride our bicycles, play tag, and grab each other's dicks under water in the neighborhood swimming pool. Everything was fine until they reached puberty and starting chasing girls, and I realized that I didn't want to. I wanted things to remain the same, but my friends didn't. I learned that the things I wanted to do were bad. Only sissies and faggots did that. Then the name-calling started.

We lived in a fourteen-story housing project in Brooklyn with more than a hundred families. I couldn't avoid the other kids and their teasing. So, I withdrew and read books all day which just made matters worse because I became the nerdy outsider with no friends. Other than going to school, I stayed indoors, and my mother never knew why I hated running errands to the store.

Eventually I decided to kill myself. I didn't want my parents to freak out, so I told them of my plan. They freaked out and took me to the family doctor. I remember hoping that the visit to the doctor would fix things and make me like

girls. The big day came, and my father took me to the doctor's office. When we were alone, the doctor asked me what the problem was.

"I like guys," I told him.

"Don't do that," he said. "You'll get in trouble." The visit was over.

The next day I resumed planning my suicide. I thought of different ways to kill myself. Jumping off a fourteen-story building seemed too painful. There were no guns in the house to shoot myself. I didn't know enough about drugs to overdose. Maybe walking into speeding traffic could do it? That's when the Voice spoke to me. It was the first time I heard a voice in my head that was not my own.

"Don't do it," It said. "Wait until you get older. Things will be different."

So I decided to wait another thirteen years until I was twenty-six, and if things weren't better, I would kill myself then. In the mind of a child, such logic seemed quite rational.

In the sixth grade, my mother insisted that I be bused to a "good" junior high school in a white neighborhood. There I met new friends who didn't know my secret. Staying indoors and reading books paid off academically. I did well in high school and received a scholarship to go away to college, the State University of New York at Albany. In my freshman year, I met a new friend, ironically named Larry, who took me to my first gay bar. Knowing I was not the only boy who liked guys made things different. By the time I turned twenty-six, contemplating suicide was a forgotten memory. I was having too much fun dancing at the Better Days and cruising piers in Manhattan on Christopher Street.

The second time I heard the Voice was fourteen years after I had graduated. I had moved to Washington, DC, to pursue a doctorate at Howard University. I finished the course work in 1983 and started writing the dissertation. By then everyone knew of this new disease, the "gay cancer," that was eventually called "AIDS." First my white gay friends then my black gay friends began dying. Fear was everywhere. Doctors were afraid to touch you. Nurses were afraid to feed you. On television, the image of someone with AIDS was a skeleton in a hospital bed connected to tubes and machines, suffering a slow, lingering death. When scientists discovered the disease was sexually transmitted, I remembered cruising the piers, the parks, and the bath houses; participating in orgies with no condoms.

I probably have this disease, I thought to myself. When the HIV test first came out – before any treatments were available – I called the local gay clinic and asked if I should take it. The response was: "What would you do if you were positive? And what would you do if you were negative?" I told them I would do the same thing either way: safer sex. "Then why get tested?" was the reply. So I didn't, but I still worried about my future.

At that time, people with AIDS only have six months to live. Why was I getting a doctorate? I should get a job, buy a car, and enjoy my life while I still can. The indecision between completing the doctorate and enjoying the remainder

of my life led to procrastination, and after three years I had only written three chapters of the dissertation.

One night when riding my bike, I was hit by a car. I never saw it coming. One moment I was on my bicycle, the next moment I was waking up in a hospital bed surrounded by white walls, white sheets, and a white doctor. He told me I was lucky to be alive and that the last case like mine was in a coma for six months. The car had hit me from the side and my body cracked its windshield. I had lain unconscious on the hood until an ambulance brought me to the hospital. I had a broken collarbone, cuts and bruises. It was like waking from a dream in pain.

"How's your head?" the doctor asked.

"Frankly my head is the only thing that doesn't hurt," I replied.

"That's strange," he said, "You must have hit it because you were knocked unconscious." Then he left.

I was alone and tried to comprehend what had happened. One minute I was on my bike and in the snap of the fingers I was in the hospital. Why did the doctor say I had to have hit my head when my head had no bruises? That's when the Voice again spoke to me.

"I have work for you to do," It said, "and you need a Ph.D. to do it. And don't worry about a slow, lingering death because if I want you, I will take you like that." (Snap.)

I heeded the message and finished the dissertation in six months. The University hired me as an assistant professor, and I taught there for another five years. I enjoyed teaching and empowering young black minds, but I knew that that was not the work I was destined to do. I never forgot what the Voice told me, and I wondered what my mission was? What work did the Voice want me to do?

In 1990, I came down with shingles and my doctor suggested it may be the result of a weak immune system, so I got tested. I was diagnosed as HIV-positive, and a friend told me about this black organization that was starting a support group for gay men living with HIV/AIDS. The organization was called Us Helping Us, People Into Living. The first meeting would be Saturday, March 2 at 3 pm, my birthday.

"That Saturday is my birthday," I told him. "I don't want to spend it at a meeting."

Two weeks later, I saw a flyer about the support group and ignored it. I was going to enjoy my birthday.

March 2, I was lying in bed and thinking about how I was going to celebrate the big day. The phone rang. It was another friend, Gary, calling to ask if I had heard about the support group starting that day.

"Yes," I told him, "but today is my birthday and I want to do something special." After he hung up, I continued lying in bed and looked up at the ceiling.

"O.K. God," I said. "It's obvious that you want me to attend this meeting. I will go to the meeting."

I attended the meeting and it was life changing. There were twenty-two HIV-positive black gay men in the group, and for the next 12 weeks the facilitators, Rainey Cheeks and Prem Deben, taught us holistic traditional methods to live with HIV. No one else was saying you could live with this disease. I became more involved in the organization. A few of us were trained to facilitate support groups in our homes. Rainey and I became close friends. We would do forty-two-day liquid fasts together and telephone each other sometimes several times a day. In the spring of 1992, Rainey asked me if I would volunteer to be the executive director of Us Helping Us.

"No," I told him, surprised that he would think I would. "I am Dr. Simmons, an assistant professor at Howard University. You have no money. Why would I give that up?"

Rainey said, "I'll pray on it."

"You can pray all you want," I thought to myself. "The answer is still no."

Two months later, my chairman called me into her office and told me that the University was not going to renew my contract. After twelve years at Howard, I would be unemployed in thirty days. I was devastated and needed a shoulder to cry on, so I called Rainey.

"That's horrible," he said. Then he paused. "Maybe now you can be the executive director of Us Helping Us."

I held the phone away from my ear and looked at it in disbelief. This is a set up, I thought to myself. Eventually, I agreed to volunteer as the executive director until my unemployment insurance ran out. Then I would have to seek a paying job.

In the years since that time, Us Helping Us grew from a support group of HIV-positive black gay men meeting in their living rooms to one of the largest gay-identified black AIDS service organizations in the country. Writing a dissertation helps you to write successful grant proposals. In 2001, Us Helping Us purchased a building for our new headquarters and service facility, becoming the first black gay AIDS organization in the nation to do so.

Looking back on the thoughts of suicide, the bike accident, that fateful birthday, and losing my job at Howard, I am convinced this is the work I was destined for. And there may be more work to do. I'm just waiting for the Voice and fate to guide me.

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