

THE VOICE

by Gregory Benford

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I don't believe it." Qent said sternly.

Klair tugged him down the musty old corridor. "Come on, turn off your Voice. Mine is—I showed you."

"Stuff on walls, whoever heard of—"

"There's another one further along."

Down the narrow, dimly lit hallway they went, to a recessed portion of the permwall. "See—another sign."

"This? Some old mark. What's a 'sign' anyway?"

"This one says—" she shaped the letters to herself carefully—"PASSAGE DENIED."

Qent thumbed on his Voice impatiently. He blinked. "That's ... what the Voice says."

"See?"

"You've been here before and the Voice told you."

"I let you pick the corridor, remember? A fair trial."

"You cheated."

"No! I can read it." Read. The very sound of the word made her pulse thump.

Qent paused a second and she knew he was consulting the Voice again. "And 'read' means to untangle things, I see. This 'sign' tells you PASSAGE DENIED? How?"

"See those?—they're letters. I know each one—there are twenty-six, it takes a lot of work—and together they shape words."

"Nonsense," Qent said primly. "Your mouth shapes words."

"I have another way. My way."

He shook his head and she had to take him on to another sign and repeat the performance. He grimaced when the Voice told him that indeed, the markings meant ALDENTEN SECTOR. "A trick. Your Voice is on. You just rigged your touchpad—"

"Here, take my insert!" She thrust it into his hand and made him walk to the next emblem. "MANUFAC DIST, that way."

"I know an arrow when I see it," he said sarcastically. "But the rest of it—what's DIST mean?"

She had hoped he wouldn't ask that. "Maybe it means a place."

"Like a neighborhood?"

"Could be—in fact, yes, 'district.' If there wasn't room to write it all out, they'd shorten a word."

"And who were 'they'? Some magicians?"

"The ancients, I guess."

He was working his way around to being convinced, she could see. "They left wall marks? What for, when the Voice—"

"Maybe they came before the Voice."

"But what possible use—"

"I learned all this from those old papers I uncovered in the Historical Section. They were called 'Bills of Lading' but there were enough words—"

"How do you know you can 'read' something? I mean, without checking with the Voice?"

"I know. The letters group together, you see—MANUFAC is just 'man' and this upturned letter is the sound 'you,' and—"

"You're going too fast." He grimaced, obviously not liking this at all. He was a biology specialist and tolerated her interest in antiquity, but finally he said, "Okay, show me again. Not that I really believe this, but..."

They spent the next few days in the oldest precinct of the Historical Sector, searching out corridors that the Imperium had not gotten around to Voicing. Klair read him signs and he started picking up the method. Progress was slow; reading was hard. Letters, words, then working up to grasping how sentences and then paragraphs had their logic and rhythms, their clues about how to extract meaning.

Still, it wasn't as though he were some Deedee, after all. After a while she recalled from her Educational Specialty training that Deedees were actually officially called the Developmentally Delayed. So if someone had once taken just the first letters of both words, that was how they had gotten their name.

Everything went well between them and they got to like having their Voices off while they strolled through the antiquated hallways, making sense of the signs.

The Voice was always available if they needed it. Linkchips embedded near both ears could pick up the pervasive waves of CompCentral. They only had basic link, no frills but constant access. Like everybody, they had used the Voice more as time went on; it was so easy.

But reading gave them a touch of the past and some silence. It was a relief, really.

They had kept their Voices nearly always on. It was easy to get used to the Voice's silky advertisements that floated just within hearing. You could pay the subscriber service for the Voice and have no ads, but none of their friends did: it was far too expensive. And anyway, the ads told you a lot about people. There was a really interesting one for sperm and egg donors to the gay/les bank, a Meritocracy program to help preserve the Gay gene. It had zoomer sonics and life histories and everything. You could amp it and hear a whole half-hour show if you wanted. For free, too. But most weren't anywhere near that good, so they were glad to be rid of them.

Reading, though, grew on them. There were advantages to reading old signs that the Voice didn't bother to translate. They showed off to a few friends but nobody believed they could really read the curious markings. It had to be some trick, for sure. Klair and Qent just smiled knowingly and dropped the subject.

Not that it was all good. At an old intersection Qent honored the GO signal by reading it, rather than listening to his Voice. The signal was off synch and he nearly got flattened by a roller car.

They debated whether to tell anyone in authority. After all, maybe nobody knew this.

"Ummm, no," Qent said. "Look at it this way—carrion eaters rule the world, in

their way. Because nobody cares. Nobody wants what they like."

"So we'd be fools to make other people like reading?"

"Demand rises, supplies fall. Suppose everybody wanted those old books you found?"

She had to admit it was a sobering possibility. The carrion-eater analogy came out of his biology training, and he couldn't resist adding, "It's a smart strategy. When times are tough on everybody, the buzzards just get more to eat."

The thought was so disgusting she decided to forget about the whole question.

They came to like strolling the byways of the Megapolis, ferreting out the antiquated secrets of the signs. Lovers often find their own rituals, and this was a particularly delectable one.

Outside one vaultway there were clearly marked instructions on how to spin a dial and get in. They had to work on it for quite a while but finally they made it work. The door swung open on primitive hinges and they walked into a musty set of rooms. Exploring them proved boring; just stacks of locked compartments, all without signs. Until a guard came in with a drawn zapper.

"How'd you kids get in here?"

"It was open, sir," Qent said. He had always been quick and Klair supposed his answer was technically correct. She had opened the door.

"How the hell—? Well, get out. Out!"

He was confused and worried and hardly gave them more than a brief search. Qent asked to see the zapper, imitating a dumbo kid, and the guard brushed them off, still puzzled.

Until the vault she had not realized that her hard-won trick was anything more than a delicious secret. Klair was a scholarly type and enjoyed her hours of scanning over the decaying sheets she found in the Historical Sector's archives.

The fat ones she learned were called "books" and there was even an entry in the Compendium about them. The Voice recited the entry to her in its soft tones, the ones she had chosen for her daily work. She used a more ornate voice for social matters and a crisp, precise one for directions. In normal life that was all anyone needed, a set of pleasing Voice agents.

There was hardly any delay when she requested the book entry and the Voice told a marvelous tale. There were many kinds of books, including one called "novel." This meant new the Voice said. But the one novel Klair found in the dank, dark Antiquities Vault was obviously old, not new at all. Such confusions were inevitable in research, she realized.

Books were known also as buchs in some ancient sources, it said, in the confusing era when there were competing Voices. Not really even Voices, either, but whole different speech-methods, before Standard was discovered.

All that happened in the Narrow Age, as antiquarians termed it. A time of constrained modes, hopelessly linear and slow. People then were divided by their access to information. Thank goodness such divisive forces were now banished.

They now lived in the Emergent Age, of course. The Voice had emerged from the evolution of old style Intelligent Agents, on computers. Those would perform fetch-'em tasks. Gradually, people let their Agents do more and more. Agent merging led to more creativity, coming from the overlap of many voices, many threads in a society where all was open and clear to all, available through the Voice.

"What sop!" Qent said to this, and she sort of agreed. The Narrow Age sounded fascinating, with its books and reading. The tingling thrill of being able to hold a

year's worth of Voice talk in your hand, opening it to anywhere you chose, picking out lore at will—it captivated her.

Of course, she knew the Voice was superior. Instantly it could skip to any subject or even word you liked in any record. It would explain in private, sounding just like an enormously smart person speaking to you alone, in your head. Everybody had one and could access it with an internal signal.

She looked up the Voice itself in one of the old books. The words were hard to follow and she began to wish for some way to find out what they meant. Sounding them out was hard because, even when she knew the word, the mapping from letters to sounds followed irregular rules. "What's the point of that?" Qent asked often, but he kept at it with her.

The books said that the Voice had started as an aid to people called "illiterates"—and Klair was startled to find, consulting the Voice, that everybody was one. Except her and Qent, now.

Once, lots and lots of people could read. But as the Voice got easier to use, a certain cachet attached to using only the Voice. Independence from linear "print-slavery" became fashionable, then universal. After all, the Voice could pipe the data you needed on fast-flow, a kind of compressed speech that was as fast (or in fact, by that time, faster) as people could read.

Most people got their information by eye, anyway. In a restaurant, they ordered chicken by touching the drumstick icon, or fish by the fishstick icon. And of course most of their time they spent at entertainments, which had to be visual, tactile, smell-rich—sports, 3Ds, senses, a-morphs, realos.

She found it quite delicious to have an obscure, secret talent that none of her friends even guessed. She was going to have a party and show them all, but then she saw the big letters in the Boulevard of Aspiration, and things got complicated.

Qent said, "I make it to be—

SAVVY THIS? MEAT 13:20 @ Y."

Skeptically he eyed the poorly printed letters written in livid red on a blue wall.

"Somebody did that by hand," Klair marveled.

"Writing by yourself? How?"

"I hadn't thought anybody could. I mean, machines make letters, don't they?"

"You're the one who read all those historical books. Printing machines gave way to Voice machines, you said."

Klair traced a hand over the misshapen letters. "It's like making a drawing, only you try to imitate a machine, see? Think of letters as little art objects."

"This isn't an art exhibit."

"No, it's a message. But maybe I can ..."

By luck she had in her side-sack her latest cherished discovery, a fat book called "Dictionary." It had many more words in it than the Voice, approximating and vernacular. Big words that nobody used any more, hadn't used for so long even the Voice didn't know them. It even told her that "@" meant "at," but not why.

"Here," she pointed forcefully at the tiny little entry. "Meat is the flesh of an animal."

"Animals do that. I heard that people used to."

"Primitive!" she said scornfully.

"It may mean that in there, but it sounds like 'meet.'"

"Somebody made an error? Confusing the sound with another word?"

"Somebody wants people who can read the sign to meet them."

"Other readers."

"Where?" He frowned.

"It says 'Y.' That's not a word."

"Maybe it's an abbreviation, like that "MANUFAC DIST?"

"No, too short."

He snapped his fingers. "Remember where the Avenue of Aspiration branches? You can look down on it from the balcony of the Renew building. From above, it looks like that letter."

"Let's be there, then."

They showed up, but nobody else did. Instead, at the Y another crude hand-lettered sign said

MEAT CORRIDOR 63,
13:30 TOMORROW, BLOCK 129

They went home and turned off their Voices and talked. Most couples silenced the Voice only during sex. This was merely polite, even though of course no other person could be sure it was off nowadays, what with the new neuroactivated models.

They went home and sped-read some ancient texts. There was a thick book titled *The Lust of the Mahicans* that Qent had seen on senso. She read it—her speed was a lot higher than his—but it wasn't anything like the senso he had seen. There was no sex in it at all. Just stares of infinite longing and heavy breathing and pounding pulses and stuff like that. Still, she found it oddly stirring. Reading was funny that way.

They could not get their minds off the sign. Qent was out of sorts, irked that others had mastered their discovery. He grouched about it vaguely and found excuses to change the subject.

Klair didn't see it possessively. After all, the higher moral good was to share. Reading was wickedly single-ist. Was that why she liked it so much? A reader was isolated, listening to a voice no one else could take part in. That led to differences and divisions, friction and clashes.

Still, the rapture of reading—of listening to silent sounds from ages past—was too, well, perhaps the right word was titillating.

She was excited by the prospect of other readers. Inevitably, they went to the site.

The man who slouched beside a rampway was not impressive. Medium height, his crimson codpiece was three years out of date. His hair was stringy and festooned with comically tattered microbirds. He said nothing, simply handed them a sheet. Miserably printed sentences covered both sides. The first paragraph was enough for Klair.

THE SECRET ASSEMBLY OF READERS MUST UNITE! WE HAVE A TALENT THE MASSES CANNOT UNDERSTAND. THEY WILL FEAR US IF THEY KNOW. A BROTHERHOOD AND SISTERHOOD OF READERS IS THE ONLY SOLUTION TO OUR ISOLATION. ARISE!

"What cliché sop!" She thrust the sheet back at him.

"True, though."

Qent said sharply, "Just tell us what you—"

"You never know when the Voice is on," the man said mysteriously.

Klair said, "And your printing is awful."

"Better than yours," he said shrewdly.

"That's not the point," Qent said. "We demand to know—"

"Come on. And shut up, huh?"

* * *

They were in a wildness preserve before the man spoke. "I'm Marq. No Voice pickups here, at least according to the flow charts."

"You're an engineer?" Klair asked, admiring the oaks.

"I'm a philosopher. I make my money engineering."

"How long have you been reading?"

"Years. Started with some old manuals I found. Figured it out from scratch."

"So did we." Qent said. "It's hard, not being able to ask for help from the Voice."

Marq nodded. "I did. Dumb, huh?"

"What happened?"

"Some Spectors came by. Just casual talk, y'know, but I knew what they were after."

"Evidence?" she asked uneasily.

"When I asked the Voice there was a pause, just a little one. A priority shift, I know how to spot them. So I broke off and took the books I had to a hiding place. When I got back there were the Spectors, cool as you like, just kind of looking around my room."

"You didn't tell them ... ?" she asked.

"You got to give them something. I had a copy of this thing about books that I couldn't understand, Centigrade 233. Kept it buried under a pseud-bush bed. They were getting funny on me so I took it out and gave it to them."

She blinked, startled. "What did they do? Arrest you?"

Marq gave her a crooked grin. "Reading's not illegal, y'know. Just anti, that's all. So they let me off with six weeks of grouping."

"Wow, do I hate those," Qent said.

Marq shrugged. "I did the time. They poked at me and I had to pretend to see the light and all. They kept the book."

"You're brave," Klair said.

"Just stupid. I should never have asked the Voice."

Qent said earnestly, "You'd think the Voice would encourage us to learn. I mean, it'd be useful in emergencies. Say the Voice goes down, we could read the info we'd need."

Marq nodded. "I figure the Voice reads. It just doesn't want competition."

She said, "The Voice is a machine."

"So?" Marq shrugged again. "Who knows how smart it is?"

"It's a service," Qent said. "That's all."

"Notice how it won't store what we say?" Marq smiled shrewdly.

Qent nodded. "It says it's trying to improve our memories."

"Reading was invented to replace memory," Klair said. "I read it in a history book."

"So it must be true?" Marq shrugged derisively, a gesture that was beginning to irk Klair a lot.

She hated politics and this was starting to sound like that. "How many books have you got?"

"Lots. I found a tunnel into a vault. I can go there anytime."

Qent and Klair gasped at his audacity as he described how for years he had burrowed into sealed-off chambers, many rich in decaying documents and bound volumes. He spoke of exotica they had never seen, tomes which were nothing but names in the Dictionary: Encyclopedias, Thesauruses, Atlases, Alamancs. He had read whole volumes of the fabled Britannica!

Would he trade? Lend? "Of course," Marq said warmly.

Their friendship began that way, a bit edgy and cautious at the margins, but dominated by the skill and secret lore they shared. Three years of clandestine reading followed before Marq disappeared.

* * *

He wasn't at any of their usual meeting places. After all this time, they still did not know where he lived, or where his hoard of books might be. Marq was secretive. They searched the sprawling corridors of the complexes, but were afraid to ask the Voice for any info on him.

The Majority Games were on then so the streets were more crowded than usual. Most people were out all the time, excited and eager and happy to be in the great mobs that thronged the squares. The Games took up everybody's time—except, of course, the three hours of work everyone had to put in, no exceptions, every laborday. Klair and Qent broke up to cover more ground and spent a full week on the search. Many times Klair blamed herself for not pressing Marq about where he lived, but the man was obsessively secretive. "Suppose they grab you, make you tell about me?" he had always countered.

Now she wondered what the Specters would do if they uncovered a lode of books like Marq's. Send him to Advanced Treatment? Or was there something even worse?

She came home after a day of dogged searching and Qent was not there. He did not appear that evening. When she awoke the next morning she burst into tears. He was gone that day and the one after.

On her way back from work, a routine counseling job, she resolved to go to the Spector. She halfheartedly watched the crowds, hoping to see Marq or Qent, and that was how she noticed that three men and a woman were moving parallel to her as she crossed the Plaza of Promise. They were all looking some other way but they formed four points of the compass around her with practiced precision.

She walked faster and they did too. They looked stern and remorseless and she could not lose them in the warrens of streets and corridors near the two-room apartment she shared with Qent. They had waited five years to get one with a tiny balcony. Even then it was just two levels up from the muddy floor of the air shaft. But if you hooked your head over to the side you could see some sky that way.

Klair kept moving in an aimless pattern and they followed. Of course she did not want to go to the apartment, where she would be trapped. But she was tired and she could not think of anything else to do.

They knocked a few minutes after she collapsed on the bed. She had hoped they might hold off for a while. She was resigned. When she spun the door open the person she least expected to see was Marq.

"You won't believe what's going on," he said, brushing past her.

"What? Where have you—"

"The Meritocrats want us."

"For what?"

"Reading!"

"But the Voice—"

"Keeps people out of touch and happy. Great idea—but it turns out you can't run everything with just the Voice." He blinked, the merest hesitation. "Somebody's got to be able to access info at a higher level. That was our gut feeling, remember—that reading was different."

"Well, yes, but the Specters—"

"They keep people damped down, is all." A slight pause. "Anybody who's got the savvy to see the signs, the grit to learn to piece together words on their own, to process it all— those are the people the Merits want. Us!"

Klair blinked. This was too much to encompass. "But why did they take you away, and Qent—"

"Had to be sure." He gave his old familiar shrug. "Wanted to test our skills, make sure we weren't just posing. People might catch on, only pretend to read, y'know?"

"I... see." There was something about Marq that wasn't right. He had never had these pauses before . . . because he wasn't listening to the Voice then?

She backed away from him. "That's marvelous news. When will Qent be back?"

"Oh, soon, soon." He advanced and she backed out onto the balcony.

"So what job will you do? I mean, with reading in it?"

They were outside. She backed into the railing. The usual distant clatter and chat of the air shaft gave her a momentary sense of security. Nothing could happen here, could it?

"Oh, plenty. Looking up old stuff, comparing, y'know." He waved his hands vaguely.

It wasn't much of a drop from here. Over the railing, legs set right...

"It's good work, really."

Could she could get away if she jumped? Marq wasn't the athletic type and she knew that if she landed right on the mud below she wouldn't twist an ankle or anything. She had on sensible shoes. She could elude him. If she landed right.

She gave him a quick, searching look. Had he come here alone? No, probably there were Sectors outside her door, just waiting for him to talk her into surrendering. Stall for time, yes.

"How bad is it?"

He grinned. "You won't mind. They just access that part of your mind for three hours a day. Then they install a shutdown on that cerebral sector."

"Shutdown? I—"

"So you don't need to read any more. Just during work, is all. You get all you need that way. Then you're free!"

She thought it through. Jump, get away. Couldn't use the Voice for help because they could undoubtedly track her if she had her receiver on. Could she get by just reading the old signs?

Suppose she could. Then what? Find some friends she could trust. Stay underground? How? Living off what?

"It's much better. Qent will be back soon and—"

"Hold it. Don't move."

She looked down the air shaft. Was the jump worth it?

You spool out of the illusion and snap—back into the tight cocoon. The automatic sensory leads retract, giving your skin momentary pinprick goodbye kisses. Once more you feel the cool clasping surfaces of the cocoon. Now you turn and ask, "Hey, where's the rest?"

Myrph shrugs her shoulders, still busy undoing her leads. "That's all there was, I told you."

"Maybe it's just damaged?"

"No, that's the end of the cube. There must be another cube to finish the story, but this was the only one I found back in that closet."

"But how does it end? What's she do?" You lean toward her, hoping maybe she's

just teasing.

"I dunno. What would you do? Jump?"

You blink, not ready for the question. "Uh, this reading thing. What is it, really?"

Myrph frowns. "It felt like a kind of your own silent voice inside your head."

"Is it real? I mean, does reading exist?"

"Never heard of it."

"So this isn't an historical at all, right? It's a fantasy."

"Must be. I've never seen those things on walls."

"Signs, she called them." You think back. "They would have worn away a long time ago, anyway."

"I guess. Felt kinda strange, didn't it, being able to find out things without the Voice?"

You bite your lip, thinking. Already the illusion of being that woman is slipping away, hard to fix in memory. She did have a kind of power all on her own with that reading thing. You liked that. "I wonder what she did?"

"Hey, it's just a story."

"What would you do?"

"I don't have to decide. It's just a story."

"But why tell it then?"

Myrph says irritably, "It's just an old illusion, missing a cube."

"Maybe there was only one."

"Look, I want illusions to take me away, not stress me out."

You remember the power of it. "Can I have it, then?"

"The cube? Sure."

Myrph tosses it over. It is curiously heavy, translucent and chipped with rounded corners. You cup it in your hand and like the weight of it.

That is how it starts. You know already that you will go and look for the signs in the corridors and that for good or ill something new has come into your world and will now never leave it.

-end-

About the author:

Gregory Benford is one of the chief spokesmen of hard SF of the last twenty years, articulate and contentious, and he has produced some of the best fiction of recent decades about scientists working, and about the riveting and astonishing concepts of cosmology and the nature of the universe, for example, *Timescape*, or *Great Sky River*. For several years he has also been a science columnist for *Fantasy & Science Fiction* (he is currently preparing a collection of his columns). His novel *Foundation's Fear*, continuing Isaac Asimov's Foundation series, was published in 1997. His new novel, *Cosm*, is out this year in hardcover. He has had a story in each of the two previous *Year's Best* volumes in this series, each one quite different from the others in tone and approach. This story appeared in *SF Age*, and in a very different version in the original anthology *Future Histories*. It starts out in Isaac Asimov territory and wanders somehow into Ray Bradbury country without losing its punch or its science.