

"How could I speak with my hands rendered useless?"

THE PATH TO



MY VOICE

By Aislinn McArdle

To those searching for their voice...

The sounds of pursuit thundered in my ears. My feet flew over the ground, carrying me in my dash between the buttery houses, as the flaming sphere rose over the horizon and seared all it touched with radiance. The freshly-baked loaf of bread concealed inside my ragged jacket branded a scorching, guilty weight against my chest and the precious apples hidden in my pockets slowed even the wind possessing my legs. I had been too late, stayed too long. The temptation had proved too great. Now the clock was ticking faster. Now I was paying the price.

I vaulted over a fence into someone's back garden with a sickening lurch. A grin spread over my face. I hadn't been caught before, so I wouldn't be now. This was only...cutting it a little finer than usual. My breath hitched in my throat and a stitch needled sharply at my side as I bolted across the grass still sodden with morning dew. The smile grew wider as I streaked past an old man watering his chrysanthemums. He wore a dumbfounded expression as he watched me leap over the fence at the end of his lawn.

The wicked delight I felt at this was doused by the forbidden scream that escaped my lips as my legs disappeared from underneath me. I tumbled down a steep slope of packed dirt. With my body dazed and reeling, my detached mind was left to panic if there had been anyone around to hear the shriek I had uttered with my voice. My real, natural voice. My eyes roved, catching up to my thoughts. I had fallen not into another yard, but into one of the back alleyways. It was dry and dusty here; vegetation was scarce and my nose wrinkled in protest at the foul odour of waste.

I was barely able to register these features before several pairs of booted feet entered the alley and enveloped me in a tight circle. My pulse quickened; a drum throbbing in my ears. I gulped great mouthfuls of elusive air, tasting the bitterness of lost freedom.

The owner of one of the pairs of feet latched onto me from behind and hauled me upright. A striking, dark-haired woman stood before me. A polished gold, hand-shaped badge shone proudly on her impeccable uniform. I failed to prevent a whimper of terror slipping out and mentally cursed myself. It was one thing for my traitorous mouth to emit a sound while there was no one around, but to utter it in the presence of the Abolishment Enforcers themselves....

What is your name, thief? The woman signed. Her fingers laboured torturously over the words.

I glanced down at my hands which were currently pinned to my sides by the Enforcers behind me. The Commander jerked her head at him to release my arms. For how could I speak with my hands rendered useless?

I hastily articulated the letters of my name with my hands. The Commander's upper lip curled.

Ah, Quill. A writer's name. How fitting. Now, fool, see your crime and sentence for yourself, she signed contemptuously.

She beckoned to a fair-haired Enforcer stationed directly behind her and he stepped forward to seal my fate. He faced the Commander as he signed, but ensured I had a clear view of his fingers. They moved as though he was giving a report on the weather.

High Commander Renard, sir, I hereby give my official report on the history, crimes and punishment of Reagan Cecily Quill. On this occasion, she is convicted for stealing a loaf of bread and approximately half a dozen apples from the town market this morning. However, her most heinous crime occurred just minutes ago, when she used her natural voice, not just once, but twice.

The Commander's eyes flickered as her Lieutenant outlined my particularly grave piece of wrongdoing. It almost looked like hope. The next instant it was gone, however and the man continued.

I suspect she comes from a family who, before the Great Abolishment of Speech was enacted, were writers and now they are living in poverty as a result of their dead profession. Of course, no righteous, law-abiding

citizen would help them, so the girl has resorted to this nefarious behaviour and, until now, has evaded justice. As for her sentence, Commander, there is but one way to stamp out that evil which threatens to corrupt this newly-cleansed world made possible by our Dictator. I, for one, will not stand by and let it thrive.

The Commander's black eyes bored into my blue ones, glinting menacingly.

Prepare the square.

Some of the Enforcers ran off to do just that. Two of them grabbed my arms and pulled me towards my fate. They didn't have to pull hard; I didn't resist. For the ravens had swooped down upon me, clutched my head in their cruel beaks and sent me spiraling down to earth.



Bells rang in the otherwise silent square. They pealed out a sinister cry, calling all to come and witness my disgrace. People everywhere hurried from their homes to answer the compulsory bidding. Some looked excited, others curious. Most seemed merely annoyed to have been woken up early to attend something as insignificant as my funeral. Few were apprehensive or fearful. The Enforcers tied me to the post in the centre of the platform. I drank in deep breaths. They rattled through me with the cold understanding that they would be my last. As the crowd gathered, deafening shouts echoed from the far corner of the square. Shouts! There were people *shouting* in the streets.

I glanced around the square. Now the people paled and quaked in fright, as the source of the noise revealed itself. About ten people entered the square at a run, screaming at the tops of their lungs. They held large signs with strange text written upon them and bore fierce garden rakes and knives. I may not have known what they were saying or what their exact purpose was, but one thing was glass-like in its transparency. I could see it in the ruthless spark in their eyes. I could practically feel it wafting towards me on the air. The others in the vicinity obviously noted it too, for most began moving slowly backwards, while others outright fled. The Enforcers scrambled for the weapons at their waists. They leaped off the platform to subdue the criminals.

One of the voicers spotted me and came racing in my direction. A savage creature awoke in my stomach and devoured my insides. It bounded into my throat, making me gag for air. I clamped my eyes shut before I could see the knife in his outstretched hand slice through me... But instead the boy bounded behind me and cut my bonds; freeing me. I gazed at him, stunned. With a jolt, I recognised his olive-skin and hazel eyes. Ciaran. I flushed at the memory of what that name and face had once meant to me. What was he doing here? I hadn't seen him since we'd been at school together, since my family had grown too poor to send me. He yelled something at me, but when I looked at him uncomprehendingly, he sighed and made a quick, frenzied sign.

Reagan! Follow me!

Ciaran grabbed my hand and pulled me towards the square's main exit, but the Enforcers surrounded us and his comrades. They produced thick, iron chains and shackled them around our wrists and ankles. The Commander stood a little way away with her back turned and shoulders hunched. She pocketed the key to our freedom. She came to face us and sneered, though this time it wavered slightly as she signed:

Up the mountain we go.

Several hours later, we were still climbing. Or rather, the Enforcers were still climbing, dragging us behind them. The voicers – including Ciaran, who stayed close by my side – continued their racket and didn't cease

for a second. Not even when the Enforcers threatened to whip them. I concentrated on not falling over, on moving my feet one after the other. Slowly and steadily upwards. My spirit drained from me, step by step. Why did these people continue to fight when the battle was lost? Why did they care so much?

Then a roaring filled my ears and understanding broke through the fog in my head. We had almost reached the summit. Half of the trail we had been following had fallen away, so what we saw before us was narrow and treacherous. This, however, was not what had caused the change in me. It was the palatial structure which had suddenly become visible to us. I had to admire the beauty of it: gilded pillars; wide, crystal windows; mahogany double doors. I stared, awestruck, at the sight. I had never seen such luxury. But as I peered closer, I began to recognise this building for what it was. No, I had never seen this frivolity. I, a child of writers, had never been given the chance to experience something like this. All because of what I had been born. All because of the Abolishment of Speech.

I knew now why Ciaran and these other men and women kept on fighting, even though they were in chains. Knew it not just in my mind, but in my very soul, for my blood sang with it and my bones trembled. Not in fear. But in rage. A blistering heat was creeping over me, spreading its poison into my heart. But I was glad for it. I had survived cold and near-starvation, only able to survive by stealing from others. I had been told the Abolishment was a source of good; a way to create a more equal and open society. All it had done was destroy the life I might have lived and those of so many others. Why should our voices have to be silenced? It felt right to be angry about the wrongs I had experienced all my life. It felt right to stand up and do something about it. So, as we ventured cautiously out, I made a decision – perhaps the most significant I had ever made. On that perilous mountain path, I found my voice.

I did not know how to speak. That hardly mattered. Unlike the sign language I had used all my life, I could still communicate without saying anything. I could still use my natural voice. I drew in a deep breath and launched my lungs out of my mouth. Ciaran cast me a gratified look and there was a certain sparkle in his eyes which gave me the courage I needed to keep going. For the first time in a long time, I didn't feel alone. The rebels' voices, rejuvenated by my efforts, became louder than ever and the Enforcers were helpless to stop us for fear of risking a deadly step. My soul blazed with strength as the Enforcers lost control for a few, glorious moments. But then we were off the path. We still kicked and screeched, but the Enforcers yanked us onwards; into the birthplace of the law which had imprisoned our voices.

The enormous building was just as extravagant on the inside as out. A servant led us solemnly through countless corridors and up staircases. Finally, we entered a majestic throne room. There we found the Dictator awaiting us.

His legs were flung carelessly over the side of his throne and he wore a bland smile which did not meet his eyes. A young girl who must have been about my age sat beside him. Ciaran's hand brushed mine reassuringly. The Enforcers forced us to our knees on the immaculate marble tiles.

So. You believe that you can undermine my rule and bring back natural speech, do you?

The Dictator surveyed us carefully. His lips curved into a mocking smirk.

You may well ask why I did all this. Why did I throw away my own voice? Why did I also deny people the right to sing, laugh, perform...and write?

He looked at the girl beside him.

My daughter was born mute.

Shock resounded through me. I leaned involuntarily forward, aching to see more. The Dictator continued.

So, I endeavoured to give her a voice. So that she would never be an outcast. So that she could have a life worth living. Even laughing...My daughter could not make such a sound. Why should anyone else be able to?

His gaze landed on me and his face filled with the upmost loathing.

Writers. They, too, had to be silenced. For writers have ideas. Dangerous imaginations. They, above all others, could threaten my Abolishment. In writing, people can say things they can't talk about and persuade others to believe them. Writing is immortal. You, Quill, are not.

I tried to shut out the meaning of what he'd implied, but failed. I was suddenly acutely aware of each and every particle of me. Of how alive I was. The Dictator gave the order. The Enforcers nodded and walked us out of that pretty place. I was so focused on myself that I didn't even see it happen. One moment, the Enforcers were carting us away from the mansion and the next they were all sprawled on the ground. All, that is, except the Commander. Silently, she unlocked our chains. We stared at her in astonishment. She only pushed us towards the path and gestured for us to go. So we did. We ran for our lives. But we would be back. I knew that, as surely as I knew that I had found my voice.

AUTHOR'S NOTE (rationale):

I decided to write from a first person perspective because I wanted to focus on a single main character and have the audience empathise and connect with her as they follow her journey. I also wanted to showcase how my character changes over the course of the tale. I used italics to display what my characters were saying in sign language to communicate the contrast between that and 'natural speech'; to show how pale an imitation it is of a 'natural voice'. Influences on my work include other dystopian books I have read, particularly *The Great Library* series. These books showed me how laws can be put in place which seem like a good idea at the time and then how those laws and the people who abide by them can be corrupted.

The Path to My Voice is directed at young people who sometimes feel that they don't have a voice and it encourages them to have the courage to fight for that right. The piece has been crafted to appeal to these people by having the main character of a similar age to the majority of the audience and also through displaying how this character found her own voice.

I found writing a dystopian piece challenging and throughout the drafting process I had to expand my writing to include common aspects of dystopia, like the ongoing struggle at the end, deeper relationships between characters so that Reagan was not alone and the charitable façade the Dictator uses to hide his selfish reason for exterminating speech. Overall, I think this is the best piece I have ever written and I am really proud of my work.

“THE TEMPTATION HAD PROVED TO BE TOO GREAT. NOW THE CLOCK WAS TICKING FASTER. NOW I WAS PAYING THE PRICE.”

A time where speech is outlawed has been kind to some, but to people like Reagan Quill, born to writers, it has meant nothing but pain and poverty. Reagan has lived a life of theft, narrowly escaping capture.

But when rebels protest the Abolishment in the streets, she is forced to follow a path she has never considered before – one that might help her overcome the burden of injustice, or lead her into greater woe.

