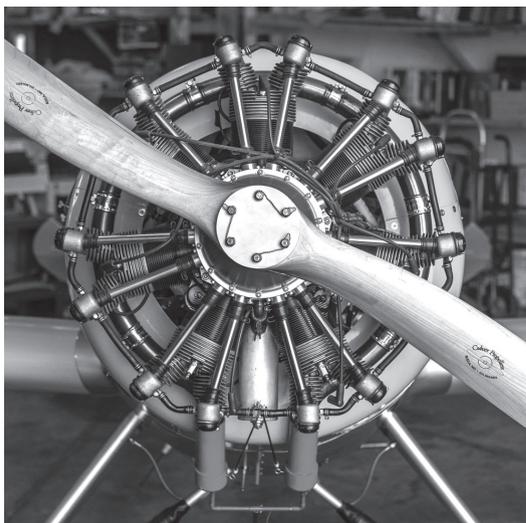


THE PARADOX BOX



S H A R O N K A Y E

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We are asleep. Our life is like a dream. But in our better hours we wake up just enough to realize that we are dreaming

– Ludwig Wittgenstein

PROLOGUE

The day I became a spy, I knew that I would not survive my mission. I felt it in the pit of my stomach—an aching hole. What I did not know was what kind of a death it would be, what my dying would *mean*. I was not yet a philosopher.

Spying and philosophy came to me in a matching set, like a pair of mittens. I am still struck by how similar the two endeavors are—investigating on the sly, noticing clues no one else notices, searching for the truth.

I was neither a spy nor a philosopher by nature. I never would have had anything to do with either business if the choice had been mine. But it was not. Like all of the most important things in life, spying and philosophy chose me. I was caught up on a wave bigger than my own life—a wave of history, pushing me along. I had to rise to the occasion, and it took every ounce of strength in my being.

CHAPTER ONE

I had been looking forward to that Saturday for a long time. October 28, 1911—the day of the big event: the campaign party for my mother.

Looking back at that day from after the Great War, it seems like a dream in sepia and gold. In fact, the whole Edwardian era was a dream custom-made for a boy like me. I was just ten years old in 1901, when the Victorian era ended with the death of Queen Victoria. Her stiff and snooty aura gave way to her son Edward's playful charm.

Some people now criticize the Edwardian era for seeming frivolous and childishly oblivious to the problems that led to the Great War. Well, maybe it was an innocent time, but that suited me well, for I was a child, and innocent, too. I came of age in an era of wonderful fun—the invention of the automobile, the telephone, the airplane, and the lightbulb. Imagine how it felt to see city streetlights lit by electricity for the first time! The world seemed to be getting better and better by the minute.

But no one saw the Great War coming, you see.

Dead bodies. Piles and piles of dead bodies. It was beyond any nightmare. The Great War, now known as World War I, lasted four long years, 1914-1918. Officials estimate that there were 40 million casualties in total, making it one of the deadliest conflicts in human history.

Well, that was the end of the innocence all right.

But that Saturday, the day of the party, was late October, 1911, before there were any signs of war. The autumn leaves were painting the countryside in hues of red, orange, and yellow. Muscular clouds marched across a royal blue sky. Pure England. I was twenty years old and an undergraduate at Cambridge University, studying maths. I took the train home to Birmingham for the weekend to attend the campaign party.

My heart leaped when I heard the first automobile pull up in front of my family's home, Lordsworth House in the suburb of Harborne. I was sitting by the open window in my room on the second floor, waiting for the socialites of Birmingham to arrive. Birmingham was already the second largest city in England, next to London. It was nicer than London, I felt—classier. It seemed to be full of wealthy, enlightened people—people ready to elect the first woman in history to City Council: my mother.

The automobile was a Rolls Royce, burgundy and black, polished to a high shine.

“The guests are arriving!” I shouted to the rest of the house as I pulled my tuxedo jacket over my skinny frame.

Our butler stood ready by the door. We were middle class, with just a few servants. Many of our guests would be from the highest sector of society. We had to convince them that our humble mother was worthy of their support.

She had already been working for the City Council for ten years, and her work was nationally known. If any woman could be elected Councilman, it would be her.

My mother is one of those women who is either all-on or all-off. Don't bother talking to her after 9:00 p.m. She sleeps like the dead for nearly ten hours every night, but then she wakes up with the energy of five men and can barely sit still long enough to eat a meal. She raised the three of us—me, my younger brother Richard, and my younger sister Hester—while writing three novels and transforming the education system in England.

My mother became interested in the education system during the pregnancy of my father's sister, Jane. About the time my brother Richard was born, Jane had twins—two boys—but she died during childbirth. One of the twins came out fine, but the other had brain damage. Jane's husband was traumatized by the whole ordeal. With his wife dead and no other children, he wanted to start over. So he packed up and left town, never to return, leaving my mother to figure out what to do with the twins.

Despite scouring governmental agencies and churches, my mother wasn't able to find anyone willing to adopt both twins. Those who wanted to adopt wanted the fortunate twin but not the unfortunate one. She soon understood why: there were terribly few resources available in England for children who needed special care. Such children typically didn't receive any education and ended up in a poorhouse or an asylum.

So my mum and some other mums lobbied to form the Special Schools Subcommittee of the Birmingham Schools Committee. In 1901, my mother was elected Chair. When she started, there were only about a hundred children in

special schools in all of England, but by the time of the party, there were nearly 1,300. She traveled to schools far and wide, rescuing children who were labeled “ineducable.”

Meanwhile, she also became involved with the International Eugenics Council, which was devoted to preventing birth defects that lead to the need for special education. Through it, she finally found a childless couple abroad to adopt the twins. Benjamin—that’s what my mother named the unfortunate twin—died shortly after the adoption, but the other twin, Alfred, grew up fine. When Alfred’s adoptive mother died, his adoptive father enrolled him in Marlborough College, the same boarding school that Richard and I attended. My mother loved Alfred like a son of her own.

All of my mother’s political work to that point had been unpaid and unofficial. It was time for her to be elected to an official position on the City Council.

There she stood in the foyer, tall and lean. She wasn’t exactly pretty—more handsome, with a kind and intelligent face. She was peering out the window at my father, who had gone out onto the lawn to greet our first guest, a senior partner at his law firm.

“Look, David,” my mother said to me. She was holding a thick sheet of paper in her hand. “Your father brought copies of the campaign poster.” The paper featured three photographs of the Unionist candidates, with my mother in the center.



“Oh.” I winced at the poster.

My mother frowned at me. “You don’t like it.”

“I do, Mother,” I countered. “I’m just surprised to see you wearing a new hat.”

“Yes,” she chuffed. “The ‘pancake hat’ is all the rage, you know. I suppose you’re not used to seeing your mother in high fashion.”

“It’s just that....” I squinted at the name at the bottom of the poster to see who was responsible for it. “The portrait of you is so much about the hat. They made your head so much smaller than the other two candidates’ in order to fit the hat.”

“Oh, David.” She rolled her eyes and muttered to herself, “Never ask one photographer to comment on another photographer’s work.”

I grinned. My parents had given me a camera the previous Christmas. I was still learning how to develop negatives. I hadn't had much success with portraits yet—anything that moved was difficult—but I enjoyed capturing still lifes and landscapes.

My mother put down the poster and put on her new pancake hat.

“You look wonderful, Mother,” I said, squeezing her elbow. “Ellen Pinsent for City Council!”

Richard and Hester came down the stairs to join us. My brother, though two years younger, was as tall as me and filled out his tuxedo much better than I did. My sister, only twelve, wore a blue striped dress with a large red crocheted flower pinned to the lapel—Unionist colors.

The slanting rays of late afternoon sun illuminated a photograph of me on the wall behind them. It was taken the previous May, when I won the Trinity College Math Prize.



I found myself wondering—not for the first time—how my gregarious father and mother had produced a mousy mathematician like me. My brother and sister would surely

take after them, while I would have to find my own way among intellectuals in the world of abstract ideas.

More cars were arriving. I went out on the front walk to stand next to my father, knowing that his vivacity would make it unnecessary for me expend much social energy. As an introvert, I had to pace myself. It was going to be a long evening, and I didn't want to run out of conversational steam too early.

Two Sunbeams and an Aston Martin drove up. Then two horses and buggies. People began streaming through the front gate into our garden.

The men all wore dark tailcoats. The only difference among them was whether they wore a top hat, a bowler, or a straw boater hat. The women were more interesting. The older ones favored corsets and bustiers, the younger ones loose chemise dresses with high waistlines. One woman wore a skirt that narrowed so much at the bottom that it was difficult for her to walk. Another woman wore pantaloons in deep purple, just like a harem dancer.

After a half-hour of greeting, I was ready for a drink. I walked around the side of the house to a table in the back full of refreshments and then stationed myself in the shade of our sycamore tree, where I could observe the interactions inconspicuously. People are not like numbers; they are unpredictable. I liked to watch them, but from a distance.

Before long, a man in an old-fashioned sack suit pushed through the back door. He poured himself a drink at the

table and then sidled up to me. “Hullo, there,” he rumbled in a deep voice with a German accent. “You must be David.”

I jumped at the sound of my name. I didn’t recognize him. How did he know me? He positioned himself next to me so that we could both look at the crowd as we spoke, rather than looking at each other’s faces.

I recovered myself. “Yes, that’s right. David Pinsent. I’m Ellen’s oldest son.”

The man nodded and reached his hand out to shake mine. “Eger Bolttog. I know your mother through the International Eugenics Council.” Bolttog’s hand was dry and puffy, like a freshly baked pastry.

“Ah, yes,” I murmured, still without recognition. Though I had heard the names of many of the key players in my mother’s world over the years, I couldn’t keep track of them. “It’s nice to meet you. Thank you for coming out tonight to support her candidacy.”

“It’s my pleasure, young man.” Bolttog patted his bulging belly as though it were an embarrassing old friend of his. “She’s the best person for the job, no doubt about it.”

I smiled and nodded, genuinely grateful for his confidence. Bolttog had white hair and a trim white beard. He looked to be in his sixties, at the end of his career, but his eyes were still sharp, like two obsidian pebbles under still mostly black eyebrows. His left eyebrow seemed to be permanently arched.

As I studied Bolttog out of the corner of my eye, my mother appeared at the side of the house leading a shriveled old man to the refreshment table. We watched her in silence for a moment.

Bolttog cleared his throat. “Of course, it’s going to take some...arranging.”

I felt the corners of my mouth drop. “Arranging?” I waited for him to elaborate.

“Not because she needs a boost—not at all.” He slid a sideways glance in my direction. “She’s already on top. Anyone who’s seen her in action knows she deserves to be elected.”

“Then what do you mean by ‘arranging’?”

Bolttog squinched his face. “I mean that we’re going to have to deal with some people who are preparing to block her way.”

“What?” I turned to face him.

He kept his voice low. “Oh, come on. We can’t ignore the bias against women in politics. There are folks out there who would go to great lengths to make sure she loses, even if she is the best candidate.”

I could feel my face heating up. Why was he telling me this? I suddenly felt that our encounter was not a casual happenstance. He had sought me out. He wanted something from me. I took a gulp of my drink.

“See here.” He boxed my arm. “I didn’t mean to upset you. On the contrary, I wanted to reassure you. Truth is, I’ve been looking out for your mother from the sidelines for a long time now.”

I nodded, trying not to be paranoid, trying to like him. Surely he was on our side. Still, what he was saying made me uneasy.

“You don’t have to worry, David. I won’t let these people—and it isn’t just men, it’s women, too—I won’t let them block your mother’s election behind closed doors.”

“Well, thank you.” I pasted on a smile, wondering if I could find a graceful way to slip away from him. “I think I should go and help bring out the next batch of—”

“I hear you’re up at Cambridge.” Bolttog edged into my path, pinning me in place.

“Yes, that’s right. Trinity College.”

Bolttog emitted a low whistle to show that he was impressed. “You know, I have a friend up there at Trinity College. I wonder if you’ve run across him. His name is Ludwig Wittgenstein.”

“Wittgenstein?” I shook my head. “Sorry, I’m in maths.”

“So is he.” Bolttog stroked his mustache. “I gather he’s working with Bertrand Russell.”

I perked up. “Bertrand Russell’s a bit of a celebrity. He and Alfred North Whitehead recently published an important book called the *Principia Mathematica*.”

Boltzog nodded, waiting for me to say more about Russell.

“I haven’t read it yet,” I confessed. “I heard they’re already working on a sequel. Is Wittgenstein involved in the research?”

Boltzog shook his head. “The truth is that he isn’t officially enrolled at Trinity—at least not yet. I guess he’s mainly checking it out right now.”

“I see.” I cast a meaningful glance toward the kitchen.

Boltzog rocked from one foot to the other without making way for me. “When do you head back to Cambridge?”

“Tomorrow. I’ve got quite a lot of work to do before Christmas.”

“I tell you what, then,” Boltzog proposed, with a little chuckle to sustain the appearance of idle chitchat. “I’ll look out for your mother on the International Council while you look out for Wittgenstein at Cambridge.”

Two beats passed while I considered what to say. *No thank you? That won’t be necessary? Get lost?* No, not my style.

“Sounds good,” I murmured. “It was nice to meet you, Mr. Boltzog. I think I should go and help bring out the next batch of hors d’oeuvres now.” I maneuvered around him and headed for the kitchen without looking back.

I didn’t know why I felt like I’d just been walloped in the gut. I didn’t know that I’d just agreed to spy on Ludwig Wittgenstein.

CHAPTER TWO

It didn't seem like spying at first. It seemed more like being a big brother. After all, my mother had often asked me to look out for my siblings over the years. She'd make requests such as, "David, I have a meeting tonight. Could you see to it that Hester practices her piano lesson?" or, "David, I'm taking Hester to her appointment. Could you make sure your brother eats a decent lunch?"

The thing with Wittgenstein seemed just like that at first. The only difference was that Wittgenstein was no relative of mine, and, as I soon found out, he was actually older than me by two years.

One week after the party, on November 1st, my mother won the election. I received the news via telegram from my father. I'd forgotten about Eger Boltog by then. Two days later, however, I received a letter from him.

*3 November 1911
Berlin, Germany*

Dear David,

It was so nice to meet you at your mother's campaign party last month. No doubt you have by now heard the great news—that she is the first woman ever to be elected to City Council. This is a watershed victory for us all!

Of course, being elected is just the first hurdle. Sadly, those few women who have achieved high-

ranking positions in politics have often been forced to step down. Don't worry—I am ever vigilant!

Meanwhile, I wanted to take you up on your kind offer to check on my friend Ludwig Wittgenstein. (I confess to you that he is more like a friend of a friend.) Why does he need checking on? Well, the truth is that, although he seems to be some kind of genius, he also suffers from melancholy or some such disorder.

Do you see now why I'm asking for your assistance? I know that you've helped your mother promote special education over the years. Few people have sympathy toward individuals with mental conditions. I was hoping that you take after your mother in this regard. Having met you, I strongly suspect that you do.

Please understand that the situation requires our utmost discretion. Mr. Wittgenstein is proud and at any rate knows nothing of our efforts to help him.

Here is the background story: Wittgenstein was born in Vienna, Austria, to one of the wealthiest families in Europe. Unfortunately, but perhaps not surprisingly, the family is also highly unstable. To give you an idea: two of Wittgenstein's older brothers committed suicide when Wittgenstein was a boy.

During his undergraduate study at the Technische Universität in Berlin, Wittgenstein showed exceptional promise. Upon graduating, he went