Excerpt from "A Better Way of Saying," a short story by Sarah Pinsker published at Tor.com in 2021.

1915 was the year I got hired to shout the movies. The silent movies, you say now, but back then they were the only ones, so we didn't need "silent" on the front.

They weren't silent anyway, not really. Bess Morris, who lived in the room next to ours, played the piano along with the film at the Rivington, either following a cue sheet or improvising for the movies that arrived without. She was a few years older than me, my sister's friend. I was in love with Bess—a cliché, I know—and she didn't ever give me a single look, also maybe a cliché, though she was the one who had recommended me and Golde for the job when the couple who had been doing it moved to Buffalo. More precisely, she recommended Golde, and Golde said I had to do it with her, because otherwise she'd be telling love stories with some strange man. Better to tell them with her brother, even if I was only thirteen.

A lot of the audience couldn't read, you see, or else couldn't read English, so on Bess's recommendation, Yosef Lansky invited me and Golde to shout the title cards for one night on a trial basis. I'd read the men and she'd read the women. We had a megaphone to pass back and forth. Have you ever tried acting through a megaphone? That's why even if the job didn't have a name, I just remember us as the shouters. Lansky would remind us to leave the acting to the actors anyway, if we got too artistic in our interpretations. "I pays you to shout," Lansky said. So we shouted.

Our first movie, Theda Bara's *A Fool There Was,* definitely stretched the sibling relationship, with its famous "kiss me, my fool" and hellcat this and devil that. We were both surprised by the turns the film took, and we did our best with the racy material. I don't remember if Golde ever talked about this in any of her interviews, but this was where she got her start with acting. Before she became Judy Selig, she was my big sister Golde, shouting movies with her brother through a megaphone.
The other thing about shouting the title cards was it gave the audience permission to shout back. It surprised me on the first night.

"Innocence breakfasts," I read. For that first film I read the narration as well as the men's parts.

"What did he say?" asked someone from the back as the title card gave way to a scene of a little girl sitting down at a formally set table, a doll in the seat beside her. "It makes no sense. What does that mean? In Yiddish?"

"Dus maydele est frishtik," someone else responded from the room's dark fringe.

Others joined in. "He didn't say 'dus maydele.' He said something else. What did he say?"

"When he says 'innocence' he means dos meydele. Dos meydele didn't do nothing wrong." Whoever said that spoke in the Litvish dialect, though from their voices I guessed most in the room were Galitsianers like me and Golde.

“Why didn’t he say that? And what is ‘breakfasts?’ I know breakfast. You eat it. It’s not a thing you do.”

“Maybe like ‘breaks fast’?”“Babies don’t have to fast.”

I’d had enough. Into the megaphone, I said, “You can see she’s about to eat. She doesn’t know what’s going on, she’s playing like she’s grown, so it calls her innocent, like ‘imshildike maydele.’”

The scene was only thirty seconds long, and it took the whole thirty seconds to silence the crowd. I shouted the next card, the blessedly straightforward line “The next morning,” then a moment later, Lansky grabbed my arm and pulled me aside. “I pays you to shout,” he whispered. “Let them figure it out. It’ll help them learn English as good as you.”

Chastened, I let them litigate the remaining lines for themselves. My English was good because our parents had insisted. They were both educated people, worn down already by what New York had failed to offer them, but not too tired to teach us what school didn’t. They made sure Golde and I read and wrote and spoke fluent English and Yiddish, read us fairy stories in both of those languages. They said we would thank them later, and I don’t remember if we did, but I hope so. I’m sure they knew we couldn’t have done the things we did without their foundation, but that’s for another day. That first night, after I was told not to explain, we shouted our lines, and I bit my tongue.

At the end of the evening, Lansky said, “You both did well, so the job is yours if you want it. Even if your voice breaks. You just gotta not talk back.”

“He understands.” Golde gave me a look. “He won’t do it again.”

“I promise,” I said. I wanted the job.

That’s how my movie career started—such as it was—the same year as Douglas Fairbanks’s. I tell you this first to make sure you understand how by the time I found myself in the same room as Fairbanks seven years later, I had been his voice a dozen times at least.

I wasn’t even supposed to be there that day; I was a stand-in, nothing more, per my friend Lenny’s strict instructions. Doing a favor for him. I’d long since quit the Rivington by then, having hung on for only two months after Golde left for real acting—two months during which I shouted opposite a woman whose loudest voice was a whisper, and whose breath left our shared megaphone smelling like cabbage. After leaving the Riv, I sold tickets at the Grand by night, and in the day I got a few cents for calling in stories from our neighborhood to the *Evening World*: so-and-so of Broome Street getting hit by a truck or firefighters getting called to a house on Orchard or the mayor buying egg creams for everyone at Auster’s one afternoon, all of which went in the paper without my name, and without me penning a single line.

What I wanted most was to write for the movies. To write better lines than the ones I'd shouted, and to craft them from the start. To create, instead of edit. A few years before, I'd even taken the 125th Street ferry across the Hudson to Fort Lee to offer my services at the studios set up there.

"There's a job for me in writing," I told the Fox gateman with confidence, but all I got for my trouble was a walk-on as a hooligan kid; I've never even figured out what movie I appeared in. Then the studios all moved out to California, taking my screenwriting dream with them. After that disappointment, I'd started to think I wanted to write for the papers instead, but I had no idea how to make that career happen, either. Calling in stories was the closest I'd gotten so far.

So there was no way I ever would have ever been invited to the Fairbanks press event, except that Lenny Mandel and I had both been late to Yom Kippur services the morning before, and wound up in the crowd clustered outside the open windows instead of inside the shul. With no prayer books, with pavement beneath our feet, it was easy to get distracted, and the conversation turned to his dilemma.

His dilemma: the World Series was starting Wednesday—Giants versus Yanks—and it was going to be the first time they broadcast it on the radio, and the midtown hotels were full of tourists, and a whole bunch of reporters had gotten pulled out of their designated areas and sent elsewhere to observe the excitement. Then a couple of the boys traded places, and they traded with others, and Lenny had convinced someone to let him watch Bullet Joe work out his pitching arm on Tuesday, but in order to go, he still needed another reporter to take his place at this promotion for Fairbanks's *Robin Hood*.
"Let me do it," I suggested.

He shook his head. "My editor did not in fact give me permission to go watch the workout. It's gotta be someone who writes for the *World.*"

"Does it?" I sensed opportunity. "Technically I work for them, even if I don't write. And you said yourself most of the guys there will be standing in for others, and you were only going as a favor to another guy because everyone's trying to get onto baseball for this week. This'll be easy enough. Let me be you."

He wavered. "You can't even open your mouth, you understand. I know you have opinions about movies, but you can only listen. Other guys will ask questions, and you write down their questions and the answers. After, you call it in with my name. If anything goes wrong, you lie and say you're there for the *Herald.*"
Lenny didn't have a byline, either, but he'd climbed several rungs above me on the ladder of success by then. Yom Kippur felt like a good day to agree to a mutual favor: he got his baseball and I got an opportunity. A small deception, too, sure, but one that didn't harm anyone.

The next day, I walked into the Ritz-Carlton trying not to look like I belonged on a tenement beat, like I wasn't a kid out of a tenement myself, like I'd ever been in a place so grand. It didn't help that everyone in the lobby looked like a banker—there was in fact a ten-

thousand-banker convention in town, though I didn't know it at the time. I tried my best to blend in with the furniture.

I'd never been in a hotel, and I'd never ridden in an elevator. I stepped on with two other men, one of whom gave the floor number I was going to, so I hid behind them and tried to figure out if they were real newspapermen or impostors like me. Their suits were less worn than mine, but they both stood silent as we rode. The elevator was operated by a boy who couldn't have been older than I was when I started movie shouting. His uniform was impeccable, but at least two sizes too big; it made me feel better about my own fraying cuffs.

The other two men got off before me, and I followed them. The room we entered was overstuffed with people and furniture. I'd arrived ten minutes early, which meant ten minutes of silent jockeying for position. I wanted to find a wall to fade into, but paintings hung on every inch, just as every other surface was occupied, ornamented, adorned: a sword rested in an armchair, a model airplane on a trunk, feathered arrows on a table, a feast spread across another table, a collection of longbows in the corner. The other men and I positioned ourselves in a tight cluster, elbows in, notebooks out, around an empty sofa. A telephone rang insistently in the corner and we all ignored it, shifting from foot to foot as we sank into the plush carpet.

At the appointed hour, Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford emerged from their private apartments and took their seats. She wore her hair up, though she usually had it down in the movies, and she carried what I imagined was the scent of flowers that bloomed in fairy tale gardens. He had a deep tan and vibrated with energy, like stillness took an active effort. He'd shaved the pointed beard from the *Robin Hood* posters, though the moustache that remained was dashing.

The telephone rang again as he turned to sit, and for a second he forgot his smile. I felt a sudden kinship with him; not any presumption he knew my life or I knew his, but a sense we both were playing roles that depended on convincing everyone around us of how we were exactly where we belonged. Not that anyone paid a moment's attention to me, with the king and queen of the movies in the room; they were the sun we were all there to orbit.

"You look tired, Doug," a photographer called to him. Teasing, maybe; I didn't see it.

"That's from performing trapeze stunts on the luggage racks all the way across the country," Mary Pickford joked, poking her husband in his solid-looking ribs. "The trains cheered when we got off because they could finally get some rest."

"No, that was you cheering to be back in New York again. Civilization! The land of shopping and shows." As Fairbanks spoke, I realized I'd never heard his voice before; it suited him well enough.

Everyone laughed, and there were other questions, and other answers, and I did my best to do as I'd been told, to stay silent, to take notes on everything I saw and heard. I tried not to look at the food on the table; it being the day after Yom Kippur, I had woken with the particular holy hunger that follows a fast day. So much food and nobody eating it, but I didn't know the rules, so I pretended I was watching a movie, with the food no more

touchable than the stars. If Lenny had been Lansky, he would have been in my ear with "I pays you to observe. Leave the food for them."

Some reporter pointed to the longbows resting in the corner and asked if they were for show. What I understood later, but didn't realize at the time, was that whoever asked had to have known the effect of his question. Fairbanks took it as a personal affront. Why, didn't we know he had done all the film's stunts himself? He'd taken to archery as naturally as he'd taken to swordsmanship for *The Mark of Zorro* and *The Three Musketeers*. He was an excellent marksman now. In fact, he'd show us.
Which was how we wound up on the Ritz-Carlton's roof: Fairbanks and his press man and Allan Dwan, the director, the only other person who'd been introduced by name, and the whole herd of us, photographers hungering for the perfect shot, real reporters looking for the quote that would win them inches in the crowded columns, fakes like me hanging back so nobody realized our deception.

It was a perfect October day. I remember that much. The roof, the sun, the breeze, the temperature not too hot or too cold. Perfect baseball weather, too, and I wondered if Lenny was enjoying himself out at the Polo Grounds, and if the weather would stay nice for the whole week.

Fairbanks wanted to climb onto the roof's edge to re-create the crouch from the poster, but Dwan talked him out of it. He puffed out his chest and then raised the longbow and took aim at some invisible point in the city. The photographers crowded around and took aim themselves.

In the one photo I ever saw of the moment, the great actor, in his bespoke suit, with his bespoke, antique-looking bow, straddles a cornice far above the city, an expanse of sky and rooftops behind him, Manhattan Bridge in the distance. His left arm is straight and strong, his bowstring drawn and arrow nocked, a modern-day Robin Hood. There is a slight upward tilt to everything: his posture, his arrow, his bow. The photo matches my memory, though it is grainy and renders the beautiful day gray.

In Frank Case's version, the one in his memoir, his friend Doug proceeded to drop arrows on the neighboring rooftops with great accuracy, but Case also implied in his story that this happened at the hotel he managed, the Algonquin. The Algonquin had enough stories of its own. Was he even there, or was it told to him later? I wouldn't have recognized him at the time. His version is closer to true than Dwan's, though both men defanged the anecdote in their telling and took liberties with the few actual facts that can be agreed upon. Truth degrades over time.

This is where I should tell you what—who—Fairbanks's arrow pierced. You can look it up if you need to jump ahead, but a story is not an arrow's flight, and mine loops back to the Rivington. December 1915, and Golde and I had been working there since January. We had a patter down, as well as an unspoken agreement dating to the second night of *A Fool There Was* that we would both read all the romantic lines in the direction of Bess's piano rather than each other. We'd learned not to let the audience responses rattle us, to shout what we needed to shout and not editorialize.

By December, Golde knew she wanted to be an actress. She did what was expected of her—the shouting—but she varied the inflections, interpreting a character as tortured in one showing and unrepentant in another. If Lansky noticed he didn't mention it, or it didn't fall outside his expectations of us.

Actors, like my sister, have a way of keeping it interesting for show after show. I was never an actor. I found each movie entrancing in the first few showings, but after a while my mind started looking for new entertainment. If my sister's challenge was "How can I read this differently?" mine was "How would I improve this?" I started looking for scenes I'd cut, scenes I'd add, different ways of getting the same information across. All of which bled over into my own lines, because once you start looking at that sort of thing, you can't help but ask which lines you would change. "Innocence breakfasts," for starters, though I didn't begin considering how it might be improved until months after *A Fool There Was.*

The good titles stayed good. We shouted them over and over and they didn't get old. But some. The irritating lines got worse with each night. On the walk home, Golde would ask what was bothering me, and I'd recite back the ugly and awkward, and my suggestions for making them better. Telling her helped, but the bad lines bruised like pebbles I couldn't remove from my shoe. I had no option but to say them.

The rest of the story can be read online at https://www.tor.com/2021/11/10/a-better-way-of-saying/