

A Library Story

Cara Becker

FADE IN:

EXT. BODELIAN LIBRARY - DAY

Open on SMALLWOOD, a noodley man who could be tall except he's short. He's in his mid 30's and has the bright eyed, bushy tailed look of a scholar who hasn't experienced the utter disappointment of the real world yet. He is well dressed, carries a trendy messenger bag and is standing before the entrance of the Bodleian Library, it is late afternoon.

MONTAGE:

Various scenes of Smallwood walking to the archives, some focus on only his feet, some are so far zoomed out that he is minuscule in comparison to the vast library around him. The closer he gets to the archives, the less windows there are and the darker it gets.

INT. ARCHIVES - DAY - CONTINUOUS

Smallwood arrives at the archway of the archives but before he can enter he is accosted by HODGES, a churlish man that is as old and decrepit as the books in the archives, although surprisingly spry. He is the lonely curator and protector, he is British, and his eyes are pretty much indistinguishable due to his endless suspicious squinting. He absolutely loved a condescending variation of the royal 'we.' He has been waiting for Smallwood.

HODGES:

Back again, I see.

Smallwood is slightly startled at Hodges' rapid appearance, he recovers.

SMALLWOOD:

Yes, Hodges. I have one last bit of research for my dissertation to finish up. 7 years of work and it's all coming down to one final manuscript!

HODGES:

Yes, yes. Very exciting, I'm sure.

Hodges shoves a giant tome in front of Smallwood, it's unclear what the book is from age and dust.

HODGES (CONT'D):

Protocol first, however.

Smallwood places his right hand on the tome and repeats after Hodges, only a beat behind. Clearly he knows the words already.

HODGES:

I -- state your name -- do hereby swear upon the need to honor and protect the sanctity of this literary realm.

SMALLWOOD:

I, Smallwood, do hereby swear upon the need to honor and protect the sanctity of this literary realm.

HODGES:

I -- state your name -- will do so by following the codes and restrictions laid down by the brethren of scholars before my time.

SMALLWOOD:

I, Smallwood, will do so by following the codes and restrictions laid down by the brethren of scholars before my time.

HODGES:

I -- state your name -- will ensure the safety of this artifactual domain by adhering to the following list of precepts:

SMALLWOOD:

(He begins to look around the archive aimlessly)  
I, Smallwood, will ensure the safety of this artifactual domain by adhering to the following list of precepts:

HODGES:

I will not endanger the tomes with fire.

SMALLWOOD:

I will not endanger the tomes with fire.

HODGES:

I will not endanger the tomes with unauthorized or unmediated touch.

SMALLWOOD:

(He itches his nose)  
I will not endanger the tomes with unauthorized or unmediated touch.

HODGES:

I will not endanger the tomes with external substances.

SMALLWOOD:

I will not endanger the tomes with external substances.

Smallwood has caught him up and finishes the line before Hodges can.

HODGES:

Now watch it, you! Don't overstep me! This is a sacred oath!

(He fumbles.)

Now I've lost my place.

SMALLWOOD:

(earnestly)

I believe "I will not endanger the tomes by acting callously or flippantly" is next.

HODGES:

Ah, yes. I will not endanger the tomes by acting callously or flippantly.

SMALLWOOD:

(He now waits for Hodges to finish before repeating after him)

I will not endanger the tomes by acting callously or flippantly.

HODGES:

And lastly I will consider myself a protector of this sacred archive and do so swear to behave in a manner to endorse this solemn oath.

SMALLWOOD:

I will consider myself a protector of this sacred archive and do so swear to behave in a manner to endorse this solemn oath.

Smallwood follows Hodges through the archives to a raised clerical desk that overlooks the entire room. Hodges climbs up into the desk, looking down on Smallwood as he presents him with a stack of papers. They are forms to call up the manuscript. Smallwood fills each one out and returns them to Hodges. Hodges receives the forms and stamps them with various stamps, files them away, and then disappears into a back room to retrieve the manuscript. Each of Hodges' movements are deliberate, slow, and procedural, while Smallwood's reveal a mild feeling of impatience. It's clear Smallwood is excited. When Hodges returns Smallwood receives the manuscript eagerly and rushes to a work cubicle hidden away among the book shelves before Hodges can say anything more. When Hodges is seated at his desk, only his eyes are visible over the edge.

Smallwood is unpacking a magnifying glass from his bag when a pair of white cotton gloves slams down on the manuscript before Smallwood. Hodges is over his shoulder.

HODGES:

(His arms are crossed and his smile is malicious)

Now I know we haven't forgotten protocol already.

Smallwood pulls an identical pair of gloves from his bag, shows them to Hodges and places them on. He reaches for the manuscript. Hodges yanks it off the desk before Smallwood can touch it.

HODGES:

Those, Smallwood, are unauthorized. They have yet to be approved for use by the Archivist's Panel.

Smallwood removes his gloves, puts on the identical pair and waits patiently for Hodges to place the manuscript back on the desk. Hodges does so reluctantly and returns to his own desk snootily, nose in the air.

MONTAGE:

Short vignettes of Smallwood studying the manuscript

1. Smallwood lines up three brand new, sharpened, number 2 pencils.
2. Smallwood removes a notebook from his bag and places it on the desk.
3. Smallwood examines a corner with a magnifying glass.

The solitary lamp lightbulb in Smallwood's cubicle pops and goes out. Smallwood, prepared, pulls a spare lightbulb from his backpack and begins to unscrew the broken bulb to replace it. The eek of the metal on metal alerts Hodges and his head appears over the cubicle edge immediately.

HODGES:

And what is it we're doing now?

SMALLWOOD:

(He, proudly, feels he has done something to appease Hodges)

Just replacing the lightbulb, Hodges. Don't worry. I have it handled.

Hodges yanks the replacement bulb out of Smallwood's hand. Pauses. Contemplates. Yanks the broken bulb out of Smallwood's other hand.

HODGES:

Oh no you most certainly don't.  
You are acting in violation of oath  
precept I.

SMALLWOOD:

(pauses for a second,  
confused)  
Starting a fire?

HODGES:

Exactly. I saw... sparks. You  
have acted in misconduct!

SMALLWOOD:

(earnest although with an  
underlying sense of  
frustration)  
I was trying to keep from bothering  
you. My misconduct was only an  
attempt to be self sufficient, I  
assure you.  
(beat)  
What should I do about the broken  
bulb?

HODGES:

I will have to file for  
maintenance. For now you will be  
relocated.

Hodges grabs the manuscript off Smallwood's desk and Smallwood scrambles to pick up his stuff and follow Hodges to a cubicle in the center of the room, it's within direct eyesight of Hodges' desk. Hodges places the manuscript on the desk and Smallwood reaches for his unused lightbulb.

HODGES:

Ah, ah. Confiscated.

Hodges returns to his desk, both lightbulbs in hand. He makes direct eye contact with Smallwood from his raised desk and makes an "I'm watching you" gesture.

MONTAGE:

Short vignettes of Smallwood continuing to study

1. Smallwood scribbles down some notes.

2. Smallwood continues to examine a section of the manuscript with a magnifying glass.

3. Smallwood chews the eraser off his pencil while focused on the manuscript.

Smallwood flips quickly through his notes, looking for something, not having found it he rummages through his backpack, then goes back to flipping through his notes. He pauses, thinking, and then stands. Smallwood walks along the edges of the stacks looking at the faded inscriptions on the shelves, finds what he's seeking and disappears down the aisle. Hodges hasn't missed a single movement. Smallwood stands in the aisle, running his fingers along the spines of the books on an upper shelf. He spots the book he is looking for and happily plucks it from the shelf. An ancient and warbled sounding alarm goes off immediately, echoing through the archives with a rippled, watery honk. Smallwood tilts the book and sees that it's binding has been pierced with a wire that is run to the shelf, and assumedly the alarm system. For a brief moment we see Smallwood's outrage at the destruction of the book before Hodges appears around the corner of the stack.

HODGES:

Red handed now aren't we!

SMALLWOOD:

(can't hear over the alarm)

WHAT?

Hodges rushes over to Smallwood and snatches the book from his hands to return it to the shelf. The alarm stops.

HODGES:

(yelling in Smallwood's ear  
even though he knows the alarm  
has ceased)

CAUGHT RED HANDED NOW AREN'T WE!

SMALLWOOD:

(taken aback at Hodges'  
yelling, covers his ears)

Red handed?

HODGES:

Removing library property without  
proper form request and approval.

SMALLWOOD:

(incredulous)

What?!

HODGES:

(shaking his head)

Another action of misconduct under unauthorized touch, Smallwood. It's as though we remember nothing of the oath.

SMALLWOOD:

It's a library...

(beat)

I... I assumed that the shelved books were accessible for research...

HODGES:

Now, now. It's these assumptions that are getting us into trouble.

(begins to walk away)

We mustn't touch without filling out the appropriate forms first.

Smallwood follows Hodges once again to the clerical desk, dejected but at the same time riled. His eye twitches and his lips purse a bit as Hodges hands him another large stack of papers over the desk edge. Proper forms of approval. Smallwood bitterly fills them out and shoves them back at Hodges who takes them with a smile and plops them atop a towering stack of similar forms.

HODGES:

It'll be a while for processing.

Hodges "shoo-shoos" Smallwood. Smallwood turns, slowly, and returns to his desk, seething.

MONTAGE:

Short vignettes of Smallwood continuing to study.

1. Smallwood rubs his temples.
2. Smallwood matches notes from his notebook to the manuscript.
3. Smallwood reaches for the last of the number 2 pencils, the others are chewed to bits.

Hodges is impatient at this desk, tapping his fingers, intently watching Smallwood, desperate for a misstep. But Smallwood is too focused on his work. Hodges loses patience waiting. He appears at Smallwood's cubicle, shining a pen light over the edge of the desk and into Smallwood's eyes.

SMALLWOOD:  
 (without looking up)  
 What could possibly be wrong now,  
 Hodges?

HODGES:  
 (focusing the light on  
 Smallwood's pencil)  
 Lead based pencil, Smallwood.  
 Could damage the manuscript.

SMALLWOOD:  
 (slamming the pencil down)  
 Pencils haven't been made with lead  
 in over 200 years!

HODGES:  
 (grabbing the pencil)  
 Better to be safe than sorry, now  
 isn't it?  
 (shining the pen light on  
 Smallwood's water bottle on  
 the floor)  
 And what do we have here? An  
 illicit unidentifiable liquid?  
 We'll be confiscating that as well.

Smallwood is too stricken to respond, his fury is brewing.

HODGES (CONT'D):  
 In fact, this entire desk is likely  
 tainted by these illegal  
 substances. It's best we just take  
 it all.  
 (scooping up Smallwood's  
 notebook and magnifying glass  
 in his already full arms, in  
 pure glee)  
 Must protect the library, mustn't  
 we?

SMALLWOOD:  
 (stands, aggressively)  
 You... You're not protecting the  
 library, you're... you're  
*desecrating* it!  
 (gaining steam but still  
 stammering in his anger)  
 In fact your blatant negligence of  
 the library itself in lieu of... of  
*phony* "misconduct" charges has  
 left this archive de...  
 debilitated! Do you even remember  
 (MORE)

SMALLWOOD: (cont'd)  
 what a library is for?! *Learning!*  
 LEARNING!

For a moment we think that Smallwood might actually have gotten through to Hodges. But then a wicked smile spreads across Hodges' wrinkled face.

HODGES:  
 Well, I think that outburst ends  
 our time for today. This is a  
 library after all, don't you know  
 you're supposed to be quiet?  
 (chuckling to himself)  
 Please gather your things and exit  
 the archives.

As Hodges reaches for the manuscript, we see something change in Smallwood, almost in slow motion. The anger has risen too high, his teeth are gritted, and his eye is twitching. Before Hodges can reach it Smallwood snatches up the manuscript.

Beat. Hodges looks at the manuscript, then to Smallwood. Smallwood glares at Hodges. Hodges' lip curls into a snarl, he drops everything in his arms and clamps his hands onto the other end of the manuscript in Smallwood's hands. Smallwood lets out an audible gasp, he almost falters and loosen his grip, but as he looks at his possessions discarded on the floor, the large stack of paper work on Hodges' desk, the darkened cubicle he once sat at, his face hardens into determination. Smallwood yanks the manuscript towards him, pulling Hodges forward with it. Hodges, smiling maliciously at the challenge yanks the manuscript back. We see just Smallwood's eyes, squinting, and then just Hodges' eyes, squinting. It's a very wild wild West moment. A beat passes and then their determination erupts into a back and forth game of tug-of-war interspersed with name calling.

HODGES:  
 You insolent little pup!

SMALLWOOD:  
 You crochety old man!

HODGES:  
 Oath breaker!

SMALLWOOD:  
 Old codger!

HODGES:

Brute!

SMALLWOOD:

Bully!

Each is yanking the manuscript with progressive speed and anger until... RRRRIIPPPP!

The manuscript has torn, leaving Smallwood a corner and Hodges the bulk of the sheet. We see Hodges' face light up in triumph at having obtained the majority of the manuscript. Smallwood, however, is horrified. The realization of the destruction and his child-ish behavior hits him. He is distraught and entirely disappointed in himself, this moment is him watching his seven years of work go down the drain. All that's left for him is a tiny corner of a piece of history.

Hodges' smile takes over the silence, seeping into Smallwood's wounds like salted lemon juice. Silently Hodges raises a single arm, pointing towards the door to the archives. Dejected, Smallwood walks slowly out, bag-less, research-less, and pride-less, his head bowed to his chest. He looks back once over his shoulder, Hodges is again seated at his desk. Only his eyes are visible over the edge, but it's clear he is overjoyed. The only echo in the silent room is his chuckle.

HODGES:

*Heh, heh, heh.*

EXT. - BODELIAN LIBRARY - EVENING

We watch as Smallwood walks through the same hallways he entered in, they are now all darkened and desolate. He exits. It is night, and it is raining.