Herself, Recognized

by Samuel Smith

I heard the news in the book club thread. Marianne Hellstrom, champion gossip, knew things about our book club even before Jeremy, the book club director, heard them.

Marianne shared the news that the new director of city libraries, Jeremy's boss, would be attending our next book club event, in one week.

I should say, the members-only book club thread, the thread for unofficial news. Jeremy posted the same information in the official thread, with fewer exclamation points, two days later.

On the night, a full complement of readers were in the branch meeting room. The seven of us scrupulously avoided discussing the book. Book Club Rule Seven: all comments on the book must be made to all members. An excellent rule that allows all whispering to be shushed.

I was seated next to Emily Bickford. As always, Emily's topic was her Bill, the only living husband associated with our members. Emily thought that assenting once to an importunate man was somehow an accomplishment, one that set her apart from the rest of us. We, though, knew the greater accomplishment to be repeatedly saying 'No,' —or failing that, outliving one's accepted proposal and never saying 'Yes' again.

Emily was fretting. "I know Bill. At least I think I do. He's devoted to me, always has been. And yet, he comes home for supper and every night it's, 'Louisa Jenkins this, Louisa Jenkins that.' He never says, but I know she's a pretty, unmarried thing. Well, what should I think?"

I wished to reassure her that no woman other than herself could possibly be attracted to Bill. I feared that would not have the desired emollient effect. The contrary assertion, also true, that Bill was immune to the charms of any woman, also seemed imprudent. I opted to acknowledge her anxiety in a series of murmurs.

Cometh the hour, cometh the man. Jeremy entered with the new director. I had naturally googled 'Rockingham Napier,' but his photographs did not do him justice. His dark, elegant appearance was frankly glamorous, in both the alluring and dangerous senses. All the hens in our coop ruffled their feathers. I found myself perversely hoping for an absurd voice.

I was disappointed. "I'm Rockingham Napier," he said. His voice was as smooth and rich as a cello. "Call me Rocky, please." I took some solace in his nickname.

It had been so long since a new person had joined our group that Jeremy had quite forgotten the niceties of introduction. He also appeared undone by the presence of such a new eminence.

I spoke up. "We usually introduce ourselves and state our interests. I'm Alma Tenniel. I'm fond of unhappy endings."

The other women defined themselves, and then Napier spoke. "In a sense, I'm the father who loves all his children equally. But I confess a special fondness for devotees like yourselves, who love not only to read but also to share their enthusiasm with others. I can't wait to hear your thoughts on *Herself, Recognized*."

As so often, that month's book was the tale of a likable woman who overcame challenges. At my turn, I noted the unsurprisingness of it all, that the death of her child would free her from an unhappy marriage, only to lead her to another man, conveniently a widower with two tots needing a woman's love.

Mary-Alice Cather predictably tried to steer the conversation to her only topics—her ex-husband's failings and her daughter's impending-for-three-years-now marriage. Jeremy made a quip about Mary-Alice and the protagonist, then ruined his witticism, as always, by explaining his own cleverness to us. Napier, mercifully, wrenched the discussion back to the novel, reminding everyone of my contrary opinion and asking what others thought it meant. It was a thoughtful gesture, to no avail. The rest of the discussion centered on the likability or not of various characters, how brave the heroine was, and what might happen in her life after the novel ended.

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At the meeting's close, Rocky sidled up to me. Would I like to share a coffee? Yes I would.

Rather than walk to the nearest café, which was haunted by library patrons and staff, he led us several blocks away, peppering me with questions about myself. Background, education, intellectual pursuits. Best novel recently read. It was all I could do to keep up, and left me little opportunity to volley questions back. At the café he asked me what I wanted—cappuccino, skim milk—and ordered the same for himself. He directed me to sit, which was fortunate. I found myself slightly woozy from his charm. He brought over our drinks. Once seated, he launched in again.

"I have to say how impressed I was at your contrarian views. It takes courage to speak alone against a group."

"It was six women of a certain age; scarcely the Three Hundred at Thermopylae."

"The Three Hundred had each other; you stood alone."

"I always feel that Jeremy will stand with me on such occasions. And today I had another on my side. Surely myself and two librarians are the equal of six matrons."

"Only one librarian, I'm afraid."

"What?"

"To be a Librarian you must have a degree in library science; I am a Librarian; Jeremy is a staff member." The capitalization was audible.

Rose is a rose is a rose, I thought, and immediately after, *That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet*. I hesitated: Was Rocky a modernist or a Shakespearean? I lost my chance to cite either as Rocky segued into another question. Where did I see the book group going?

"I don't think of book groups going anywhere," I replied. "They seem to me the most static of entities. Like the phases of the moon, they recur unchanged each month."

"Every twenty-eight days," he said. His handsomeness was immutable, but his charm was slipping away. He persisted, "Isn't there a danger of stagnation in doing the same thing over and over again?"

"On the contrary," I replied "I find that the repetition of life's simple pleasures is in itself a satisfaction. Beginning a novel, finishing a novel, and then discussing it. Why change? And even those tasks that might seem tedious—the washing of dishes, the weeding of gardens—by their repetition can become a pleasure."

"I fear," he responded, "that there is no room in your routines for romance, for the discovery of new worlds."

I smiled. "Sadly, romance has not featured in my life. I cannot imagine the same is true for you, Rocky."

"Romances, certainly, and marriage once. But never the sharing of life's simple pleasures." He fell silent and looked down at his cup.

I feared moroseness might be coming on. "But you digress," I prompted.

"I digress." He looked back up, his energy restored—if not his charm. "Your spirited critique of *Herself, Recognized* jibed with my own discontents about modern fiction. So much of modern writing seems, seems quotidian. Where are the *Lolita*s, the *Clockwork Orange*s, the *Crime and Punishment*s?"

"You feel there are too few criminal protagonists in the modern book group novel?"

"What? Ah, coincidence, I assure you. Still, *Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.*"

Another wicked protagonist. I was uncertain of the direction of our discussion. I smiled and waited.

Rocky shifted in his chair. "I have grand plans for this institution. As a start, I wish to take the book club in a new direction. I want to make it a vehicle for the contemplation of great works. I see you, Alma, as the driver of this vehicle. Not an hour ago you were bemoaning the state of modern middlebrow fiction. Come with me!"

"A young woman and her people expelled from Arcadia by the forces of capitalistic exploitation. A life spent like Kerouac, criss-crossing America in a search for meaning, and a post-modernist jape of an ending, with her long-lost lover dying in her arms. Is that what you want?

"Yes, that's it exactly."

"*Evangeline*"?

"What?"

"Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. *Evangeline."*

"Good God, not Longfellow. Oh Alma, won't you come with me? Can this endless round of good women hard done by possibly satisfy you?"

I took a moment to compose myself. I wished to wound him as little as possible. Men take such blows poorly.

"Perhaps it is my failing," I said. "Perhaps it is the failing of all my kind. Certainly, the decision for books is ultimately yours as the Director of Libraries.

"For myself, I cannot advocate a change that would so distress the women who have been the backbone of the club."

"I see." He drained the last of his coffee, briskly wiped his mouth, and decisively tossed the napkin on the table. He rose abruptly and his knee caught the table. The cups bounced noisily, but my cup stayed upright, its contents mostly still inside.

The charm returned. "It has been a true delight to spend this time with you, Alma. We must do it again." Rocky left.

I dabbed the splashes of coffee with my napkin. Was Rocky's reference to Milton appropriate? I chose to be gracious and accept it.