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Clare Coffey on It's a Wonderful Life

"It is certainly pleasant but not unduly extraordinary to be a popular and beautiful woman who can marry a rich and popular man if she chooses. It is less ordinary to see, with Mary's perfect clarity and uncanny certainty, the life and man you want, and to choose it in the teeth of discouragement with all its disadvantages apparent, to persist single-mindedly in the face of hardship. *It's a Wonderful Life* is, in part, the story of someone becoming, kicking and screaming, against all intentions and desires, a big man. Mary sees the big man in George from the first, because she is a big woman.

"She is, as much as George, a profoundly unusual person laboring under her own personal destiny. In the world where George does not exist, she has not married not because she couldn't, but because she does not want to. There is not a Mary-sized man in town, and Mary Hatch does not do anything just because it's what might be expected of her. Her story in this counterfactual is a sad one, but it is not one of passive submission to circumstance.

"To be chosen and known and loved by such a woman is not a small thing. It is seeing Mary without him that breaks George enough to make him ask for life, as it is her just anger at him that sends him into the most desperate phase of his downward spiral. When he chases the alternate Mary through the streets, his desperate cry is not "Mary! What have they done to you?" but "Don't you know me? What's happened to us?" If Mary does not know him, if Mary does not see who he really is, he must not exist indeed."

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