

ANALYSIS

“The Little Wife” (1930)



William March

(1893-1954)

William March was a very highly decorated U.S. Marine in World War I and became a Realist. This story is a *model* of Realism, the mainstream tradition in American fiction. It is commonplace Realism in the tradition of Howells and the local colorists of the late 19th century enhanced by extreme irony as in Crane and Wharton. More than those writers, March appeals to the heart and evokes deep emotion, like writers such as Cather and Tobias Wolfe. The more fiction appeals to feeling as distinct from the mind, the more its effects depend on the life experience of the reader. “The Little Wife” is likely to be moving to a reader who has ever lost a loved one, less so or not at all to one who has not.

The title is ironic because the story dramatizes how *large* in his life the “little” wife is to the husband who loves her. The diminutive *little wife* was a common term of endearment until Feminists got offended by it and started punishing men for politically incorrect speech. And because Feminists also dislike the concept of a wife, especially a housewife, this story is not included in anthologies published during the Feminist Period (1970-present). The story builds momentum by dramatizing the stages of a grieving process on a train that keeps moving toward an inevitable end, as the husband moves from denial toward resignation and all life moves toward death.

Joe is a common name in Realist fiction because culturally it has so often been used to represent the common man. Joe himself says his name is “a little common.” Joe Hinckley is so ordinary a name it evokes Everyman, or at least the common husband. It is “unusually hot” for early June, ironically the month for weddings. The heat is on Joe. He sits on the shady side of the train, just as he will avoid the truth about his wife. He is preoccupied with what time it is, with the logistics of transporting his luggage, and with the appearance of his battered old salesman’s catalogue case—even though at his hotel before he boarded the train he received a telegram informing him that his wife Bessie is “desperately sick.” He is in shock. “He felt that somebody was playing a trick on him. He felt confused and helpless.” There is nothing he can do. For awhile he sits motionless in the moving train on his way to Mobile, an ironic destination for a man immobilized.

Other passengers are contrasted to Joe. Two carefree girls in front of him are happily waving to friends. Across the aisle a woman with a goiter is physically grotesque and does not want anyone to talk to her, whereas Joe becomes emotionally grotesque when he talks too much to the girls. The telegram from his

mother-in-law informed him that Bessie had given birth to a boy but is not expected to live through the day. This gives urgency to his need to reach Mobile and intensifies his frustration and guilt. "I was out talking and telling smutty stories and that telegram was here all the time." If he had returned sooner to his hotel he could have caught an earlier train.

He overcomes his panic with denial, telling himself that the doctors are mistaken. "Everything's going to be all right." Soon, however, the porter brings him a second telegram. Holding it, his hands shake. "He wanted to put his head on the window-sill but he was afraid that people would think him sick and try to talk to him." At this point, internally, he resembles the woman with the goiter. He persuades himself that this telegram is from his company, not from his mother-in-law about Bessie, but he is afraid to open it. The reader can infer who it must be from and what has happened. The carefree young girls are watching him, laughing behind their hands, entertained by his behavior and appearance.

Joe's desperation to escape the truth is so overwhelming "He had a sudden wish to jump from the end of the train and run off into the woods, but a brakeman was there tinkering with a red lantern and Joe realized that such an act would look very strange." His impulse dramatizes his desperation and his understatement is more comical because it is unintentional. Left alone by the brakeman, he hears the train clicking along the tracks. The sentences break into segments that are separated by ellipses of roughly equal lengths to mimic the rhythm of the train clicking onward to what he dreads. "'There's no need of going so fast,' thought Joe, 'we've got all the time in the world.' He felt sick." That he is no longer in a desperate rush indicates that he knows without opening the telegram that Bessie is dead. He sees his terrified face reflected and feels grotesque like the woman with the goiter. All of us feel this way sooner or later. "He didn't want people to notice him or to talk to him."

He tears up the ominous telegram and throws the pieces off the end of the train. The pieces look to him like "a cloud of yellow butterflies dancing," a metaphor of turning horror into illusory happiness. "'I'm going home to see the little wife and everything's all right.' He laughed happily." But the yellow fragments settle down "on the hard, hot roadbed." He distracts himself by boasting to the conductor about his baby son. "He felt that he must talk about Bessie to someone."

Then he talks to the two girls, who laugh and think he is "So damned *fatherly!*" They laugh so much "Joe waited until the girls had exhausted themselves. Finally they wiped their eyes and opened vanity cases to look at themselves in their mirrors and to repowder their faces." Looking into a mirror is a stock situation in fiction that reflects the self-knowledge of a character—usually ironically—how well she sees herself on the inside as distinct from the outside. Here "vanity" combined with mirrors implies that these liberated girls are too vain and immature to see how shallow they are in contrast to Joe and Bessie. Family values make people mature and build character.

Joe lies to the girls, telling them the first telegram he got said Bessie was doing "just fine." He talks rapidly to the girls and to an old lady passenger. He rambles on for two hours. "He talked on and on, rapidly—feverishly." Whereas he shrank from people when intuiting the truth, now that he is in full denial he feels compelled to talk to people. His desperation makes him oblivious to how they are seeing him. His dissociation from reality is effectively conveyed by rendering his non-stop monologue without interruption for two pages—very long in a short story. This technique makes the lengthy exposition of his background dramatic in the present rather than an interruption of the narrative.

His detailed account of his first meeting Bessie, their courtship and their marriage, brings Bessie to life—now that she is dead—"she was sweet and nice. Bessie was the sort of girl that any man would want to marry." Joe remembers exactly how much he lost at poker the night he first saw Bessie and she won his heart. "He quoted whole paragraphs from letters that she had written to prove a particular point which he had brought up." Not many husbands could do that. Joe is a counterpart of Bessie—the man she chose to marry. The more he talks about his "little wife," the larger she becomes, and the more we see how much he loves her.

While making characters representative types—Joe and Bessie—Realists also individualize characters and counter popular stereotypes: "Mrs. Thompkins wasn't at all like the comic supplement mother-in-law."

Contrary to expectation, when he and Bessie disagreed, Mrs. Thompkins always took his side of the argument. That was unusual, wasn't it?" *Always* took his side--further evidence that Joe is a good fellow who deserves compassion. He talks so much about Bessie the girls think he must be drunk or "slightly demented." At their stop, they are "very glad to get away." Joe helps them with their luggage. After he and the train have gone one girl says, "Well, Bessie certainly has him roped and tied." The girls see his marital relationship in terms of power rather than love. They laugh at Joe.

On the train, Joe goes looking for someone else to talk to about Bessie. Reality breaks through for a moment when he recalls that "I was laughing and telling smutty stories with that buyer in Montgomery and the telegram was there all the time." His face contracted with pain. He crushed the thought from his mind." He flings the memory away like his cigarette. He is overtaken again by the "compulsive need of talking about Bessie to someone. He had a feeling that as long as he talked about her she would remain safe." So he talks to an old couple, describing his wedding in detail, then the honeymoon and "just what Bessie had thought and said." Reliving his bliss with Bessie, "Joe had lost all idea of time. He talked on and on, rapidly, excitedly." The old man suspects "Joe had a shot of cocaine in him. The old lady had folded her hands like a martyr."

The train pulls into Mobile. Joe has been so successful deluding himself that he "stepped off the train jauntily." When he encounters the woman with the goiter and wishes her well, she answers "The doctors said it wasn't no use operating on me. I waited too long." This echoes Joe waiting too long before returning to his hotel. Joe is so out of touch with reality he replies absurdly, "Well, that's fine! That sure is fine!" Ironically, his lack of comprehension or sympathy for the woman is more extreme and seems more callous than that of any passengers for him.

Joe finally gets the sympathy he needs from his mother-in-law Mrs. Thompkins when she meets him at the train station. When he looks into her red eyes swollen with grief, she becomes Reality. "A feeling of terror swept over him. He knew that he could no longer lie to himself. He could no longer keep Bessie alive by talking about her. His face was suddenly twisted with pain and his jaw trembled like a child's." Mrs. Thompkins tells him "You got to be a man." He has to be a father now.

Joe finally faces the horrible truth. He confesses to Mrs. Thompkins that he did not read her second telegram. "I wanted to keep her alive a little longer." He sat down on an empty baggage truck and hid his face in his hands." The word "empty" expresses how he feels, as does the "dirty" uniform of the railroad employee who tells him he will have to move on—without Bessie.

Michael Hollister (2013)