

WONDERFUL LIFE

(A sparse stage. Maybe there is a bench to sit or climb on. A pre-show announcement has indicated "Christmas Eve, 1945. Bedford Falls, New York.")

Lights up on GEORGE BAILEY, standing on a bridge. It is cold and barren, the wind whips by, and the water is choppy and icy below. He is about to jump.)

GEORGE

God . . . God . . . Dear Father in Heaven, I'm not a praying man, but if you're up there and you can hear me, show me the way. I'm at the end of my rope.

(Lights down. From the darkness we hear sounds of a happy town at Christmas time.

A bell rings. Lights up.)

CLARENCE

They say that every time a bell rings, an angel gets his wings.

(He shows his back to the audience.)

Clarence Odbody, AS2. That's Angel, Second Class. There's always a lot of bells ringing, especially this time of year. None of them ringing for me... But they will be soon! I'm on Special Assignment. And if I complete my assignment, I might win my wings. Time enough too. I've been dead over 200 years...

Tricky thing about being a guardian angel. You know the overall of what you're supposed to do, but no one ever tells you how to go about it. Keep your man from tripping off a cliff? Sure, that sounds easy enough, but what do you do when the danger isn't so simple? When the man you're trying to save spends all his time saving other people? Oh, yes, indeedy, it gets tough. Certainly so for a dead Virginia clockmaker whose gears get a little gummy. At least, that's what my wife used to say...

But it isn't every day you catch a... wingable case! And I don't aim to miss my wings for lack of trying. The problem here is George Bailey. A nice man, the nicest most folks will ever meet, ready with a smile and a helping hand, but today's his unlucky day. Today's the day his world comes crashing down. Trapped, frustrated, and called to account for the actions of others. It's not a good day to be George Bailey. And he doesn't think it ever was.

(Lights shift.)

GEORGE

You know what the three most exciting sounds in the world are? Anchor chains, plane motors, and train whistles. It's the call of the wild, the reveille, the single man disappearing into the swirling mass of the world. Before you go, you're like a link on that anchor chain, being held down in the dark where it's wet and cold and you got no air. Then the sailors heave-to and haul you up and you come bursting out of the water, dripping wet and sparkling in the sun, and joining the other links in the bow of the ship as you steam off towards lands unknown.

See, that's the life I'm meant to have. Hacking through jungle brush on Borneo. Riding a camel up to see the Sphinx in Egypt. Scrambling up the hillside of the Acropolis to see Athens spread out below, filling the land like a compass rose-- boy, to crest the steps at dawn and see the sun peeking up through the Parthenon... Just like the picture in the National Geographic. Except I get to feel the wind whipping the dust past my eyes and smell the salt of the sea and hear the hubbub of the neighborhood waking up below. You don't get that in Bedford Falls...

Bedford Falls is birds tweeting and milkmen coming and waving to everyone you see on the street. It's quiet and quaint and the snow falling is pretty and white and the whole place glistens with light and good tidings and holiday cheer. Where's the adventure in that? You know everyone, everyone knows you, and you can't do something new without your mother phoning ahead to let 'em know you're coming.

I shouldn't even be here. I wasn't meant to be. I was gonna do something big and important. You know, build things. Air fields. Skyscrapers a hundred stories high. Bridges a mile long. Instead, I'm right where I started. In this same town working at a penny-ante Building & Loan, worrying about nickels and dimes and finding a way to save three cents on a length of pipe.

Now don't get me wrong. I do have the greatest wife and kids this side of the hemisphere. Mary- she's a dream, puts up with me and my moon-gazing and my kids, they're smart as a whip. Janie, Pete, Tommy, and Zuzu. Got a picture of 'em right here. Now, Zuzu, she's my little gingersnap... I'm a lucky man.

(Lights shift.)

MARY

There's no one in the world like George Bailey. I've loved him from the moment I set eyes on him. And if you had told me that George Bailey was going to stay in Bedford Falls? And that I'd be his wife? I'd say you were coconuts!

Now, George and my brother and Sam Wainwright, you know, old Hee-Haw, they've been custard thick since George first organized an expedition up to the top of Mt. Bedford. They couldn't have been more than 8 at the time. And left me at home, pigtails and pinafores. Wishing I was 4 years older, big enough to tag along...

George has always wanted to go exploring, but if you ask me, there's no place on earth like Bedford Falls. Why, when I was away at college I was so homesick for this town and my family and friends that... I just couldn't wait to get back. But if you want the real truth, what I wanted to get back to most... was George Bailey. I've known George ever since he was just a little thing. I used to visit him at Mr. Gower's drugstore all the time. That's where George worked as a boy. Chief soda jerk and errand boy! I would hop up to the ice cream counter and make believe I didn't know what I wanted just so I could stay and talk to George. He would go on and on about being a National Geographic Explorer, and about all the places he was going to travel to when he grew up. He was the cutest boy in town, and so smart. All the girls just swooned over him. Especially Violet Bick. But she swoons over every boy...

(Lights shift.)

VIOLET

I used to think I would marry George Bailey, but he was sly ole fox and got away. It never mattered what I wore, he'd always say "Hello, Violet. That's some dress you got on there." And I would say, "This old thing? Why, I only wear it when I don't care how I look." Such a sweet devil he is. But, now I'm headed out of town, to New York. There ain't much here for me anymore, not when I'm flat-broke, busted, with a few too many strings to tie up. That George gave me some seed money this morning when I went to see him at the Building & Loan. Might have been out of his own pocket. So maybe I didn't snag him, but I know he'll always have a sweet spot for me.

(Lights shift.)

MARY

Well, he ended up with me. And he's the kindest, most loving husband a woman could ask for. Never a cross word to me or our children. Supports his mother, volunteers around town, plus being in charge of the Bailey Building and Loan.

It was started by his father and his Uncle Billy, as an alternative to the regular bank. See, the bank is run by Henry Potter and good gracious, the fees it charges. It isn't quick to give out help, but the Building and Loan is. It's never made much money, but that was never the point. It was there to give people hope and a chance at a better life. A chance to move out of the slums in "Potter's Field" and have a happy home.

(Lights shift.)

POTTER

Well, I suppose you think you know everything about me. You've heard that Henry F. Potter is some "hard-skulled character" and the richest, meanest man in the county. Well, maybe that's true and maybe it isn't. But this town wouldn't still be here if it wasn't for me. And the county wouldn't either. Someone had to take control and it wasn't going to be that pantywaist Peter Bailey and his idiot brother, Billy.

Now, you don't know what it was like after the Great War. Yes, the Roaring 20's, so-called, came right after, but times weren't so good right then. And I had made an investment in the Bailey Building and Loan. And when you make an investment, you expect to see a return. You don't expect to see the Bailey brothers coddling the rabble and letting them skip by on making their mortgage payments. How else are they going to learn to be responsible citizens?

So I told that Peter Bailey that he'd better start collecting. No good ever came from giving welfare. And no good begging for more time for those know-nothings to find two nickels to rub together.

Now before you judge me for being tough, let me tell you that I didn't get any handouts. I didn't get free money from the government or an extension on when to pay my bills. I worked night and day to earn my keep and scrimped enough to save a little on the side. And if I hadn't caught the polio, I would have done more. And done it better than that other wheelchair-bound New Yorker, that profligate spendthrift socialist Franklin Delano Roosevelt!

All I'm trying to say is that I did my best with Bedford Falls. Those of us fit to govern kept the place from crumbling, while the rest of the ants took care of the digging and the hauling and the building. Jobs they were fit to do. What I didn't count on was having to tangle with that bleeding heart Bailey boy, George.

GEORGE

I wasn't even supposed to be working here. My brother, Harry, and I had it all worked out. My folks, God love 'em, did the best they could, socked away their pennies, and had enough for a comfortable life. But they couldn't afford to send us to college. So, I earned enough working at the Building & Loan to put myself through. Then when I left for school, Harry'd take my job at the Building & Loan, work there four years, and then he'd go. Works out fine for everybody. I was even gonna take a trip the summer before I started. Work on a cattle boat crossing the Atlantic. See Italy and Rome and Athens and the Parthenon like I'd always wanted. Be able to look at a picture in a magazine and say "Yeah, I've been there. Smells like jasmine. At least til the donkeys pass by." But, no, I

had to stay in Bedford Falls. Work in a shabby little office where the sun only peeks through an hour a day and the only aroma is the scent of Uncle Billy's cheap cigars...

Now, I don't begrudge Harry; it wasn't his fault. My father had a stroke, see, and passed away, so I put my trip on hold til we could get things settled at the Building & Loan. Just something that needed to be done. Especially with old man Potter trying to run us into the ground. Why, my father hadn't been dead more than a month before Potter tried to shut us down in a shareholder's meeting. Close our doors and make the whole town have to crawl to him if they wanted a loan or a place to live.

Well I wouldn't have it, not after he started cracking wise about my father. I mean, sure, the Building & Loan might not be worth the land it sits on, but neither Potter nor anybody else can say anything against the man and the way he lived his life.

After I said my piece, there was nothing doing. The shareholders wouldn't have it any other way. Said they'd vote with Potter to shut us down unless I stayed on. What could I do? Let Potter push the people a little deeper in the dust? No, sir, I had to stay. Gave Harry my college money and told him to make us proud. And he did, every day I was sticking my nose to the grindstone at the Building & Loan, Harry was keeping the Bailey banner high. Phi Beta Kappa. Second team All-American--

HARRY

Don't let him sell you a bill of goods. George is the real hero. I'm just his kid brother. Lucky enough to follow in his wake. Ole George the Explorer has always looked out for me. Took care of me when I was little; all the way back to Miller's Pond. He lost his hearing in his left ear 'cause of that close call. He's solid as an oak, George: sent me off to college, took care of the family so I could get married and take the job I wanted. Even when I was away at war I felt like he was looking out for me, silly as that sounds. Uncle Sam is seeing fit to give me a medal for a little adventure I had fighting the Jerrys, but if you ask me, there's no hesitation who the real hero is.

GEORGE

What was I supposed to do? Harry'd just graduated college! Force him and his new wife to stay in this silly little town? Give up a career just so I could learn about Plato and Aristotle and Socrates? I could never do that. My kid brother gets on the right side of a rainbow, I'm the last one to knock him down. Better that he go and have a life while I figure out what to do with mine.

I still have this suitcase, a gift from my old boss, Mr. Gower. A giant of a thing! Something not just for one night, but a thousand and one nights. Plenty of room for labels from Italy, Baghdad, Samarkand. Just sitting under my bed, collecting dust...