

IT'S A HORRIBLE LIFE

by
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What really happened to George Bailey Christmas Eve in 1945

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George Bailey stood at the railing of the Bedford River Bridge, gazing at the rough water below. Falling snow drifted silently out of the night sky and clung to his thinning hair. Despite the cold he was not wearing an overcoat; his muffler had been lost somewhere between Martini's Bar and the bridge. Tucked within the inside pocket of his suit jacket was the life insurance policy that hours earlier he'd offered as collateral for a loan from old man Potter. But with only five hundred dollars equity built up in the policy the wheelchair-bound tycoon was not about to lend him eight thousand.

George could hardly blame him. Potter hadn't become the richest man in the county by loaning money to fools. That was George's role in the community, one he'd been coerced into assuming upon his father's death, when the survival of the Bailey Building and Loan hinged on George's acceptance of his late father's post. He'd never forgotten the sly manipulation of his Uncle Billy, whose incompetence made it necessary for George to take over.

"You go ahead to college, George," Billy had said. "I can always get another job. I'm only fifty-five."

Those subtly veiled words had sealed George's fate. The college money he'd worked so hard to save went to his younger brother Harry, while George took up residence in his late father's cramped office.

It was only a deep rooted masochism that had carried George to Potter's, and it had not been disappointed. "You're worth more dead than alive, George." That's what the old man had said. And so George, drunk as he could get on Martini's watered-down hooch, had stumbled to the bridge to hurl himself over the side. But soon as he glimpsed the frigid whitecaps below George realized that suicide would nullify the terms of the policy. With that went any thoughts of jumping. Better to take one's chances in court. Besides, how much worse could jail be than Bedford Falls?

And jail was right where George was headed. Now that there appeared no way around it he was surprised at how easy it was to accept, how calm he felt inside. Free, almost. To not be depended on anymore, to be concerned with only his own welfare, his own survival – if that wasn't freedom, he didn't know what was.

Earlier in the day, however, jail had seemed a fate to be avoided at all costs. That was why he had tried to sucker Uncle Billy into believing it was he and not George who had

been the cause of the eight thousand dollar discrepancy.

Years of alcohol abuse had reduced Uncle Billy to something akin to a village idiot, a blubbering fool with utterly no short term memory, though he could recall a good meal eaten three decades before. George figured if he could get Billy to believe he'd lost the money, the authorities would swallow it too. He had conjured the scheme during a visit from Violet Bick, who had stopped by George's office – as she did every couple of weeks – to put the touch on him.

“Come on, George. I'm moving to New York.”

“Why the big rush to get out of town, Vi? You give Potter a dose?”

She ignored the remark. “I just need a little something to get me started. You know, they charge for meals there same as they do in Bedford Falls.”

“So I've heard.”

George waited. It was a game they played. Violet knew he would give her the money, but she'd have to earn it. She moved closer, so that the tips of her breasts brushed up against his stomach. George looked down into her face, remembering how full and juicy her features had been back in high school. Now her skin was dry and pale, her eyes bloodshot. She's as worn out as an old chair, George thought. But an old chair can still be pretty comfortable.

“Come on, Georgey Porgey. You can extend a little credit.” Her hand found his crotch. “For me. Can't you?”

She dropped to her knees. George closed his eyes and thought bitterly of his wife Mary as Violet worked on him. The only time Mary got on her knees was to scrub the floor. How her beauty had fooled him. He'd called her the prettiest girl in Bedford Falls, and she was -- or at least she had been. All Mary had ever wanted was to be George's wife. But being his lover was something else entirely. On their wedding night, George knew before he'd even penetrated her that he'd made a grievous mistake. He'd never had a virgin, and forever afterward would never want one again. All efforts to teach her, to prod her to more adventurous acts, went in vain. Oral sex -- either performed on her or by her -- was strictly out of the question. “I don't want you there,” she would say, referring to her mouth or her own genitalia. “It's dirty.” Exactly, George would think. But she never got it. And so he never got it. At least not from Mary. Violet was another matter.

Just outside the door, in the main office, the bank examiner was going over the books. George knew what he would find. The Bailey Building and Loan had always operated in the red, but eight thousand dollars was a shortfall that could not be ignored. “What have you been doing, George?” Potter had asked slyly when George had gone to him to borrow the money to cover it. “Playing the stock market with the bank's money?” George was amazed at how Potter never missed a trick, because that was exactly what

he had been doing. His dream had been to make a killing in the market -- enough to be able to leave Mary and the kids without guilt -- and finally escape this hell on earth called Bedford Falls. But George proved no more adept at selecting stocks than he had been at choosing a wife, and the more desperately he tried to catch up, the further behind he fell. So now the bank examiner would pick up the phone. Subpoenas would be issued. Police would arrive. So would reporters. And just that quickly Violet Bick would become a more respectable citizen in the community than George Bailey. *Vi may be a whore*, they'd say on the porches and at the dinner tables, *but at least she ain't no thief*.

Violet consummated her duties and rose briskly. "Let me have your handkerchief, Georgey Porgey."

He gave it to her. She wiped her chin with it, then offered it back. "You keep it, Vi," George responded as if it were a sentimental gesture, but she knew better.

"I'll need more than a handkerchief if I'm gonna make it in New York, George."

He gave her what money he had, then opened the door for her to leave. She paused next to him so that the others in the main office -- the bank examiner, Uncle Billy, Cousin Eustace and their secretary Cousin Tilly -- could see her bid him farewell.

"I'm glad I know you, George Bailey," she uttered in a sickly sweet voice, and now it was George's turn to know better as she stood on tiptoe to kiss him chastely on the cheek. George could feel Tilly's gaze burning as she watched this pathetic charade, for she had noticed the dust and lint clinging to the knees of Violet's stockings. However, it was not moral outrage fueling Tilly's anger, but female jealousy. Despite their blood relation Tilly had been trying to bed her boss for years, but she was a dog, and even George had to draw the line somewhere.

Violet demurely wiped a bit of lipstick from George's face with his come-stained handkerchief, then stuffed it back into the front pocket of his suit jacket. With a swish of her hips she was gone.

"George?" It was Uncle Billy. "This is a pickle, George. This is a pickle..."

"What is it, Uncle Billy?"

"Well, George, the bank examiner, he...uh, well...you see..."

"There's a discrepancy, Mr. Bailey," the bank examiner interjected firmly.

George affected a stymied expression. "A discrepancy? How much?"

"Eight thousand dollars, approximately."

George waved the suggestion away. "Oh, no, you must not be counting that last deposit. Uncle Billy probably forgot to enter it. He's always forgetting things, aren't you, Uncle Billy?"

Billy stuttered. Glanced down at the strings he kept tied around his fingers to help prod his memory, a practice that had never proved effective. "Yes, I...heh, heh...deposit...I don't seem to...uh..."

"Come on, Uncle Billy, you must remember the eight thousand dollars I gave you last night. You were supposed to deposit it at the bank this morning." Billy's face drained of what little color it possessed, the burst veins of his nose standing out like the lines of a road map against his chalk white skin. "You did go to the bank this morning, didn't you, Uncle Billy?"

"I think...did I?" Billy stammered as he appeared to lose his balance.

It was working perfectly. The bank examiner was taking it all in. And Billy was well on his way to believing he had somehow misplaced the money. George knew Billy. In a few moments the old drunk would break down, cry. Curse himself for a fool. Beg for forgiveness. Thus George would be absolved, seen as a victim of his good intentions. He had kept Billy on when anybody else would have given him the boot for the incompetent lush he was. Billy would be hauled away to jail or the sanitarium, it didn't matter which. And afterwards, when they encountered George around town, the locals would place their hands upon his shoulder, nod sympathetically and then continue on their way, thinking: Poor George. He had done what he could for old Billy, and look what it got him...

That's how it might have gone if Billy hadn't had the insensitivity to suffer a stroke just as George was beginning to think his scheme might actually succeed. The older man's stuttering became a gurgling, and a foam of white spittle issued from his trembling lips.

"Uncle Billy!" George exclaimed as he took hold of him. "What's wrong?" Billy's eyes turned up white and his head arched backwards. He slipped from George's grasp and fell to the floor, his skull cracking sharply against the hardwood. He swallowed his tongue and began to gag. No one knew what to do. George knelt beside him, shook him. As pale as Billy's countenance had been before, that was how much color now flowed back into it, the dark veins disappearing as the bloated flesh turned blue, then purple. Eustace jammed his fingers into Billy's mouth, tried to pry the tongue from out of his throat, and got bitten for his efforts. He nursed his bleeding hand as Billy went slack.

"Uncle Billy! Uncle Billy!" George cried, then lowered his forehead to Billy's chest and sobbed. He was weeping for himself. He'd been so close to pulling it off. Maybe he still could.

Lifting his face George violently clutched at the lapels of Billy's jacket. "Where's that money?" he screamed into the lifeless features. "You stupid, silly old fool! Where's that money? Don't you know what this means? It means bankruptcy, scandal and disgrace! One of us is going to jail. Well, it's not gonna be me!"

George turned, tried to read the bank examiner's reaction. The man's expression was as unyielding as the brick facade of a prison. It was then George realized his plot to frame Billy would never have worked; that he would have been dragged down along with his fool of an uncle. Even if he managed to avoid prosecution, the Building and Loan could not survive the stigma the incident would create. Just as it would not survive now.

George was gone from the office before the ambulance arrived, leaving in such haste – and so disoriented by the grim turn the afternoon had taken – he forgot his overcoat. He didn't bother going home. He knew what he would find there: Mary at the stove, her face beaded with perspiration, standing over a pot and stirring compulsively as the sweat accumulated at the tip of her nose, the drop growing heavy and then plunking into the soup. The repetition of this ritual night after night disgusted George no end. It got so he could barely force down a mouthful of dinner, no matter how tasty the dishes were his wife had prepared. This was how he had remained rail thin through years of marriage while the waistlines of childhood friends had grown customarily expansive. George's lack of corpulence irritated Mary profoundly, for it suggested she was a bad homemaker, a bland cook, and neither was true. Mary loved good food – her broad rump and double chin could attest to that. It was a consolation to George that she had grown fat. Her frigidity no longer frustrated him, since the beauty he'd thrown away the last of his freedom to possess no longer existed. The births of four children and years of bacon and biscuits had seen to that.

The children would be in the living room, raising a ruckus. He tried to conjure their faces but couldn't. They belonged to Mary. He had no connection to them, not like he'd had with Zuzu. He tried to feel bad about it, but with so much to feel bad about it was simply beyond his capacity to do so. The noise of them would be hammering in his ears the moment he opened the front door, and then he would be deluged with an endless stream of questions. As if he had any answers. And if he went upstairs, sooner or later he would have to pass by Zuzu's room. He couldn't face that, not tonight. The very thought of it gave him a chill.

So he did not go home. He went to Potter's. As a young man George had wondered at how far he could rise in the world. Now, buried in middle age, he was more fascinated to learn how low he could sink. He knew Potter would never lend him the money; that the old miser would sneer at his request, deride him for his beggary, and finally revel in his ruin. Maybe that was what George was counting on as a way to pay for what had happened to Billy. Though in retrospect he couldn't help feeling he had done the old drunk a favor. Certainly in the years since his wife's death, Billy had had little to live for.

As for Potter, he listened to George's tale of woe as if truly concerned, then pounced like a beast ravenous for the kill. "Why don't you go to that rabble you're always talking about for help, George? You know why you don't? Because they'd run you out of town on a rail!"

He was right about that. George had always believed it had been Potter's endless machinations to destroy the Bailey Building and Loan that had driven his father Peter to an early grave. But now he knew what his father had learned too late, and what Potter had known all along: that people in your debt will always hate you, and the kinder you are about it, the more intense their resentment will grow; and while they may smile in your face as they thank you, in their dark hearts they will always be hoping and praying for your destruction. Potter had accepted this and acted accordingly. Peter had not, and, wanting only to be liked, had died for his efforts. Now George was succumbing in his own way. Watching the triumphant cripple pick up the phone to swear out a warrant for his larcenous competitor's arrest, George felt a respect and admiration for Potter stronger than any he'd ever had for his late father. He wanted to embrace him, but instead he rose from his chair and slipped quietly from the office.

"Go ahead, run!" Potter called out to George's departing figure. "You can't hide in a small town like this."

George had no intentions of hiding. He went to Martini's for a drink.

Martini's gaunt features flashed uneasily when he spied George at the door, then he worked his mouth into an uncomfortable smile. "George Bailey, my good friend," he offered with a thick Italian accent. "Why you here on Christmas Eve? Why you no home with you family?"

Looking past him, George saw the cause of Martini's discomfort. Old Man Welsh was seated at the end of the bar, thoroughly stewed and barely conscious. His head did not turn to notice George, whose expression betrayed no emotion.

"Please, Mista Bailey," Martini pleaded, "we no want no trouble tonight."

"Who wants trouble, Martini? All I want is a drink."

George sat down at the bar. Nick, the bartender, placed a glass on the counter and poured. George feigned reaching for his wallet. Martini made a big show of stopping him.

"Please, Mista Bailey, your money no good here. Without you I no even have this place."

This was true. Potter's bank would never have loaned Martini the money to open his bar. But George knew these Italian immigrants. Give them a place of their own and they'll work like dogs. Despite Martini's meager collateral George had lent him the money, and had not been given cause to regret it. Now he could see the nervousness behind Martini's good will, the fear. George was no friend of Martini's -- he was merely the guy who could pull the plug, so better be nice to him. Staring into Martini's phony smile, George felt an almost irresistible desire to drive his fist against the tobacco stained teeth.

Instead, he picked up his glass. “What shall we toast, Martini? A merry Christmas and a happy new year? Our hopes for the future? Or should we offer a tribute to the past? Friends and family long gone from us?”

“Please, Mista Bailey,” Martini uttered bleakly.

“What d’ya say, Welsh? Shall we toast my daughter Zuzu?”

Welsh turned, uncomprehending. Narrowed his eyes. Tried to fathom through his inebriated haze who it was calling his name.

“Come on, George. That won’t do no good,” Nick said as he placed his hand on George’s arm.

“Get your hand off me, wop. You’ll leave a grease stain on my sleeve.”

Nick slowly withdrew his hand as George turned his attention back to Welsh. “You gonna toast my daughter, Welsh?” he asked, rising from his stool. Martini tried to block his way, but George pushed him aside. “You remember Zuzu, don’t you, Welsh? How that dumb, fat, schoolteacher wife of yours let her walk home from school with her coat open? You remember that? How she caught pneumonia and died? How she took weeks to die? Her little body just...shriveling up?”

Welsh shrunk backward, his lips quivering. It was possible he didn’t remember, he had been so far gone on the sauce for so long. Leaning back further as George advanced, the stool he was balanced on toppled over. He gaped up at George from the sawdust covered floor like someone witnessing an apparition from a nightmare come to life.

“I’m glad your wife went crazy with guilt,” George said finally, past the point of wanting to actually strike him. “Glad she died in that institution. I’ll be glad when you die, too.” He raised his glass. “Here’s health. Well, not yours, anyway.” George drank. His eyes filled with tears as he gazed into the empty glass.

Then he turned and hurled it at Martini, who felt it whiz past his ear, heard it crash against the far wall.

“That bilge is half water!” George shouted. “Gimme the real stuff. I know you dago bastards have it hidden under the bar.”

Nick’s jaw set firmly. “Look, Bailey –”

“Look, nothing,” George spat back in response. “Martini doesn’t own this place, the Building and Loan owns it. I own it. You want me to foreclose on your greaseball asses?”

Martini’s voice was steady, resigned. “It’s okay, Nick. You give my friend Mista Bailey a drink.”

Nick placed a fresh bottle and a glass on the counter while Martini helped Welsh up and gently led him to the door. The few patrons who had been drinking when George entered now quickly emptied their glasses and left. In the dead silence that permeated the bar following their departure, George uncorked the bottle Nick had produced and poured himself a stiff one. It was stronger than the first drink, but still tasted watered down. I'll just have to drink more, he thought.

George was halfway through the bottle when the phone rang. Nick took the call. Turned his back to George for a few moments. Said a few words. Hung up and turned to face George, a slight smile playing on his lips.

"What the hell you grinnin' at?" George muttered. "Fuggin' garlic eater..."

"That was your wife, George. Calling to ask if we'd seen ya. Said there's police been to your house lookin' for you. Said they used words like crook and embezzler."

George's eyes flashed guiltily as he reached for the bottle.

"Here, let me get that for you, George." Nick grabbed the bottle the neck.

The next thing George knew he was on his back spitting out blood and broken glass. His vision swirled as he was picked up and hurled out into the snow. He heard Martini shouting behind him, but couldn't understand what he was saying. Though he kept losing gaps of time, George somehow made it back to his car; even managed to start it and drive off. But before he had traveled very far he lost another gap of time and woke up with the front end of his Ford plowed into the broad trunk of a chestnut tree. He tasted blood in his mouth and assumed he must have struck his jaw on the steering wheel. Then he remembered Nick and the bottle. His heart was pounding and his bladder felt ready to burst.

"Now look what you did!" The homeowner whose tree George had struck was inspecting the gash ripped out of the bark by the Ford's fender. "My grandfather planted this tree!"

George climbed out of the car, stood before the tree, opened his pants and urinated against it.

The homeowner looked on incensed, but also a little afraid. "What are you? Drunk or crazy?"

"Both," George replied as he finished his business and staggered off toward the Bedford River Bridge, the homeowner shouting after him in vain.

Now George leaned over the slick railing, sobering up more quickly than he cared to, his bloody lip caking solid. He would not jump. The night was too cold and he was too tired. All he wanted now was to be in bed, even if it was a bed in a jail cell. Long as it was a bed.

“Don’t do it, George.”

George turned to see a squat little man in a buttoned overcoat, with a round cherry of a nose and the ever present grin of a simpleton. The brim of his hat was turned upward, and his eyes looked out at George with deep concern from under a pair of bushy white brows.

“Do what?” George asked him.

“Why, jump, of course.”

“I wasn’t gonna jump.”

The little stranger smiled and shook his head. “Come now, George, I’m serious about this. You really mustn’t jump.”

George found the benign creak of the stranger’s voice powerfully irritating. “Hey, I said I wasn’t gonna jump. Or do I have to slip you my left for a convincer?”

“Oh, George, you shouldn’t talk like that. Violence toward your fellow man is one of the most terrible sins.”

“Save the Sunday school sermon. And just where do you come off calling me George?”

“It’s your name, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, but I don’t know you from Adam’s off ox.”

“No, but I know you.”

“Yeah? Well, just how do you know me if I don’t know you?”

“Because I’m your guardian angel, George.”

“Oh, good Christ!” George said, looking away. “I am drunk.” He shook his head in an effort to clear it, but the stranger was still standing before him. “Okay. If you are an angel, how come you haven’t got any wings?”

This saddened the stranger. “I haven’t won my wings yet. But if I do a good job...” he said, his face brightening. “You see, I’ve watched you grow up from a little boy. And I’ve come here to stop you from jumping off this bridge.”

“Look, bub, I told you, I have no intentions of jumping. But if you don’t beat it, I just might throw you over.”

The stranger clicked his tongue disapprovingly. "As if killing yourself would solve anything."

"You're right," George snapped. "It would probably have been better if I'd never been born."

"Oh, George, you mustn't say that!" Stopping as if struck by a thought, the stranger rubbed his chin and looked skyward. "Say...what do you think, Joseph?"

George regarded the stranger with deepening concern. Whereas before he considered him a harmless old nut, now George began to grow worried for his own physical safety. What if the guy was an out and out head case, just this close to snapping completely? George clenched his fists, ready to strike out at the slightest provocation.

"Yes, yes," the stranger muttered. "That's it, then." He pointed emphatically at George, who jumped back at the sudden motion. "You've got your wish."

A chill wind swept across the bridge. George shivered and wrapped his arms about himself. "What wish?"

"You've never been born."

George sighed impatiently. "Look, bub, I'm in no mood for this. I'm in a lot of trouble, you understand? I took a bottle in the jaw, my lip's bleeding --"

"Your lip's not bleeding, George."

"What are you, blind? Can't you see it? I took a shot right here." George touched his lip where the bottle had struck. There was no bleeding, no caked blood. Even the swelling was gone. "What the heck?" George stared at the stranger, unnerved. "You're screwy," he said, taking a few steps backward. "I'm getting away from you." He felt his way along the cold, wet rail while keeping his eyes on the disturbingly placid stranger. "Follow me and I'll put your lights out, you hear me?" Then he turned and ran back to where he had left his car.

Only it wasn't there. George stood staring at the spot beside the tree where it had been, wondering who would steal such a broken down jalopy.

Just then, the homeowner who had chastised George earlier for scarring his tree arrived carrying an armful of Christmas presents.

"Say, what happened to my car?" George asked him.

"What car?"

"My car. It was right here. Remember? I hit your tree, tore a big piece out of it."

The homeowner scowled as he inspected the tree. Finding the trunk intact, he cast an annoyed glance at George. "You had me worried. That's the oldest tree in Pottersville."

"What are you talking about, Pottersville?"

"Pottersville! Don't you think I know where I live? Damn drunken louts. You better get off my property before I call the police." The homeowner stomped angrily to his front door. Turning to see George still standing beside the tree, he shouted: "Get off my property or I'll blow your damn head off!" Then he entered the house, slamming the door shut behind him.

"You see, George?" It was the bushy-browed stranger. "You have no car."

George's heart jumped at the sound of his voice. "Of course I've got a car!" he shouted in response. "I left it right here. Somebody must have stolen it. Or maybe it was towed."

The stranger begged to differ. "You have no car because you've never been born."

"Look, you --!"

A loud blast shook the air. The bark of the tree near George's head exploded; his face was stung by the splintered pieces.

The homeowner stood on his front porch clutching a shotgun, one of its two barrels smoking. "I've warned you town drunks to stay off my property!" he bellowed, then aimed to fire a second time.

Running before the homeowner finished his sentence, George heard the report of the second shot behind him, anticipated the sledgehammer blow of the hot pellets slamming into his back. Feeling nothing, he kept running, his adrenaline-charged legs churning beneath him till his lungs gave out and he lay gasping in the snow in front of Martini's place.

After a time, George rolled over and looked up into the starless sky. "I passed out in the snow," he told himself. "I passed out and dreamed all this stuff about the bridge and the tree and...everything."

"No, you didn't, George." It was the stranger. Again. George's eyes shifted to take him in.

"Now, look, you...!" Suddenly it seemed pointless to argue. "What's your name, little fellow?"

"Clarence. Clarence Oddbody. Angel, second class."

“Figures I’d get one second class,” George said. “Well, Clarence, whether I dreamed it or not, I need a drink. So what I’m gonna do is go inside and get one.” George rose and dusted the clinging snow from his wrinkled suit. “And seeing as how I can’t seem to shake you, you’re welcome to join me.” George approached the entrance to Martini’s.

Clarence stuttered nervously. “Uh, uh, George -- I don’t think that’s such a good idea. I mean, right now.”

“You think Martini’s still sore about that wop and dago stuff?”

“Not exactly.” Clarence gestured toward the window.

George studied Clarence suspiciously, then stepped close to the sweating pane and peeked inside.

Nick was lying face down on the floor, the back of his head a bloody mess. Near the bar counter, Martini’s arms were being pinned behind him by one dark haired man while another stood before him, shouting into his frightened expression.

George didn’t bother looking to see if Clarence was beside him; he just spoke, expecting it. “What the hell’s going on? Who are those guys, and what are they doing to Martini?”

“I told you, George. You’ve never been born.”

“What the hell has that got to do with it?”

“You weren’t there to lend Martini the money to open his own place. He had to -- what’s the expression? Go on the street for the money. Well, you know how it is with the black hand. They’re not as understanding as you when someone falls behind on his payments.”

“Martini never misses a payment,” George protested.

“These gentlemen charge a somewhat higher interest rate than you do, George. Makes it a bit hard to keep up.”

Inside, the shouting man appeared to lose patience with Martini’s excuses. Reaching inside his suit jacket, he pulled out a revolver and fired two shots into Martini’s chest. Both Martini and the man holding him collapsed on the floor. In the heat of his anger, it had not occurred to the shouting man that the bullets might pass through Martini’s slender frame and wound the man holding him. The shouting man’s dying partner cursed him for his stupidity, then rolled over and grew very still, his last breath hissing through his lips like air from a punctured tire. The shouting man stood in numb silence; then, exploding, kicked Martini’s lifeless body once, and again.

“Like I said, George, you weren’t there to lend him the money, so...”

George bristled under Clarence's reproachful gaze. It seemed to him his entire life had been consumed by guilt and responsibility, and he was in no frame of mind to accept any more. "Don't try and lay this on me," George snapped. "Way I see it, a man should pay his debts."

Inside, the shouting man was emptying his gun into Martini's prostrate form. The body twitched and jumped with each muzzle flash.

"All right, you," George said, turning on Clarence. "What's going on here? You a hypnotist or something?"

"Of course not."

"Then why am I seeing all these screwy things?"

"I keep telling you. You've never been born."

"Well, then, who am I?"

"You're no one, George."

"Are you nuts or something? I'm George Bailey!" George reached for his wallet, but found it missing.

"You have no identification," Clarence stated calmly. Ignoring him, George reached for his insurance policy; it too was missing. "No papers of any kind, no cards," Clarence continued matter-of-factly, then saw George's hand going to the front pocket of his suit. "It's not there, George."

"What's not there?" George said, his voice icy.

"Your come-stained handkerchief. It's not there."

"But that's clothing, for Christ sake!"

Clarence shook his head in the manner of a patient schoolteacher correcting a dense student. "It's monogrammed with your initials, George. Now, how could someone who's never existed own a monogrammed handkerchief?"

George pulled the pocket inside out. Empty. He stared at Clarence. "I'm having a nightmare," George declared, though he wasn't sure he believed it. "I got some bad liquor, and it's making me see things. Well, it's over now, you hear me? It's over, and I'm awake, and I'm going home to get arrested." George marched off in the direction of Main Street.

"But, George, you have no home."

“Oh, fuck off!” George exclaimed over his shoulder as he continued on his way.

“At this rate,” Clarence mumbled, “I’ll never get my wings.”

The two men walked in silence. A few times George turned to look behind him, expecting Clarence to be gone, the drunken nightmare he was suffering through to be over. But the strange little fellow was still right there, his short legs working to keep up with George’s long strides.

At the entrance to Main Street, George did a double-take at the sign which all his life had read *Welcome to Bedford Falls*. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. It was no illusion.

It now read *Welcome to Pottersville*.

“What’d you do?” George demanded. “Change the sign?”

“You’ve been given a great gift, George. The chance to see what the world would be like without you.”

“All right, mutt. I’ll play along. I gotta wake up sometime.”

“Go on, George. See what would have happened to Bedford Falls without the Bailey Building and Loan. See what kind of town Potter would have built.”

Heading down Main Street, George soon realized it was not only the sign that was different. What had been a dreary and boring stretch of malt shops, nickel emporiums and small time businesses was now alive with music and neon light. There were dance halls and burlesque shows, and the sidewalks were crowded with people laughing and having a grand time. George was especially overwhelmed by the wealth of beautiful women, many of them paired off with slick looking dandies, but numerous others bearing the unmistakable look of availability.

“Wow,” George uttered. “This nightmare is getting better.”

Clarence’s bountiful eyebrows furrowed. This was not the reaction he’d been expecting. “You may think these people are having a good time – even they may think they’re having a good time. But this is a thoroughfare of iniquity, George.”

“I like it,” George said, snapping his fingers in time with the jazzy music. “It’s not New York, but it’ll do.”

Clarence’s face grew pink with rage. “How do you like this?” he said, directing George’s gaze to a woman lying slumped against some garbage pails, her body swathed in layers of old clothes and God knows how much dirt, with unwashed hair the consistency of dry straw. She drooled unabashedly as people passed by without looking, ignoring her outstretched hand.

It was Violet Bick.

“What happened to her?” George asked.

“You know how it was between you and her. You were always there to help her out. Keep her from skidding too far.”

“Listen, pal, I may know how it was between me and her, but I’m not sure you do. Violet was a goddamn whore. I was just a customer. And there were plenty of others. She never gave a damn about me.” A thought occurred to George. “You know, I think you’re making this up as you go along. How do I know this is what really would have happened if I hadn’t been around? You could just be guessing.” Clarence looked away sheepishly. “But, you know, while we’re on the subject of women, I’ll bite. What happened to Mary?”

Clarence shifted anxiously. Mary’s fate was one he apparently did not need to guess about. “Oh, you don’t want to see that...”

George grabbed Clarence roughly. “Why wouldn’t I want to see it, you little scam artist? Afraid I couldn’t take it? Or maybe you couldn’t.” George shook him. “Where is she? Where is that fat, frigid cow?”

“She married Sam Wainwright!” Clarence shouted.

Suddenly, George found Clarence and himself perched on a tree branch outside a lighted second floor window. Even in the dark he could see the house and grounds were splendid, and reeked of money.

“You wanted to see,” Clarence sputtered vindictively. “Well, go ahead. Look.”

Peering in through the window, George saw a man and woman making love. He recognized Sam’s hairy rump immediately, having seen it countless times in the boys’ locker room at school. The woman took him longer. It was Mary, all right -- middle-aged, yes, but in this incarnation still shapely, still attractive. She moaned loudly in response to Sam’s thrusts, screamed even.

George stared in disbelief. “What the hell? She was never like that with me. What gives?”

“Well, you remember Sam’s nickname,” Clarence responded.

“Of course I do. Hee-haw Sam Wainwright. Everybody called him that because -- well, because --”

“Because he was hung like a mule, George.”

“Oh, God.”

“You see, George? It wasn’t Mary who was deficient all these years...”

George gazed bitterly as Mary grabbed Sam’s buttocks and arched herself upward to take the fullness of his length. “That bitch!” he spat out furiously.

The epithet had only just passed through his lips when George realized he and Clarence were back at the bridge, where their evening together had started. Clarence appeared angry with himself.

“Damn you, George. That’s not what I wanted to show you.”

“I’ll bet it wasn’t.”

“Even still, don’t you understand what you’ve meant to this town, and these people? Why, I haven’t even mentioned how you saved your younger brother Harry from drowning when you were kids.”

“Yeah, sure, I saved him – so he could grow up and take my college money, and do all the things I dreamed of doing but never could. Good old Harry,” George said, his voice dripping with venom. “Let me tell you, the way I see it, Cain got a raw deal.”

“What about Mister Gower, your old boss at the drugstore? Remember how you stopped him from accidentally poisoning that sick child with the wrong prescription?”

“That stupid old lush would’ve went to jail for twenty years if not for me. Know what I got for it? Know what he gave me for a big thank you? A second-hand suitcase. Second-hand! Goddamn cheapskate. Far as I’m concerned he can rot in the slam.”

“George, you mustn’t say things like that. You’ve really had a wonderful life.”

“I haven’t had a wonderful life,” George proclaimed with disgust. “I’ve had a horrible life. Everybody else has had a wonderful life – at my expense!”

“Not Mary, George,” Clarence offered sadly.

“That makes me and her even, then.” George looked at Clarence and snorted contemptuously. “Christ, some guardian angel you turned out to be. Like I wasn’t depressed enough. You had to come along and show me just how rotten my life has really been. Well, let’s get it over with.”

“Get what over with?”

“You know – change everything back so I can experience the rest of my miserable existence.”

“No, George, you don’t understand. You’ve got to *want* to live again.”

“What do you mean?”

Clarence’s face had gone as pale as Uncle Billy’s before the stroke. “I can’t change everything back. You’ve got to want it. That’s how it works.”

“You mean...I don’t have to go back?”

Clarence trembled visibly, and not from the cold. “Oh, dear...”

“I *don’t* have to go back, do I?” George laughed out loud. “I don’t have to go back. Well, hee-haw!”

“No, no, George – you must go back. I’ll be in terrible trouble if you don’t.”

“Why should I? I hate my job and I hate this town. I’ve got a fat wife who sweats in my food, a drafty house, no money and no future. Soon as I go home they’re gonna toss me in jail.”

“Yes, but your kids -- if you don’t go back, they’ll never be born. Why, it’s the same as killing them. Oh, George, you must think of your children.”

“I can’t stand ‘em!” George shouted, causing Clarence to cover his mouth in horror. “Mary’s the one who wanted all them damn kids, just to keep me pinned down. I can’t stand the sight of them.”

“You’re a liar,” Clarence responded fiercely, pointing an accusing finger at George. “You loved your first. You loved Zuzu.”

“And look what I got for it!”

Clarence winced; he had no answer for this.

“Well, that’s it,” George said. “No more. I’ve finally got a choice, and I’m not going to mess it up.”

“Oh, George,” Clarence uttered breathlessly. “What are you going to do?”

“Clarence, I know what I’m gonna do today, and tomorrow, and the next day. I’m shaking off the dust of this crummy little town and I’m gonna see the world!”

“But what about my wings?” Clarence cried, his voice rising to an angry whine. “I’ve been trying for two hundred years!” He began pounding his fists against George’s chest. “Damn you, George Bailey! You’ve got to help me get my wings!”

“Fuck your wings!” George said, grabbing Clarence by the shoulders. “You better pray for some fins, that’s what you need.” With that, George hurled the annoying little man over the rail and into the freezing river.

“Joseph!” Clarence’s voice rang out from below. “Oh, Joseph! Jo – glub – gurgle –”

George stood alone on the bridge, his heart drumming inside his chest. Was it true? Was he really free? Or had it been a dream after all? With Clarence gone he could no longer be certain. And the longer he pondered the question, the less certain he became. Then it was like he could feel a crack inside him splitting open, and all the despair he had ever managed to beat back or deny – every last drop of fear and frustration – all of it came flooding through, submerging him in its blackness. The dream had given him a taste of hope where there had been none, had taunted him with it, and now he was so sick with himself all he could do was bury his face in his hands and cry, weep as he had wept for Zuzu and never since. He could jump now. It would be easy – would be a relief.

“Hey, you!”

In his misery, George had not heard the police cruiser pull up behind him. The voice belonged to an officer named Burt. Like so many people in Bedford Falls, George had known him all their lives. Turning to face him, George found himself squinting into Burt’s flashlight.

“For Christ sake, Burt, get that light out of my face.”

“What the hell you doin’ out here, Mister? And how the hell do you know my name?”

George swallowed hard. “Burt...don’t you know me?”

“You kidding? I never saw you before in my life.”

George felt the crack inside him closing, the blackness receding. But he had to be sure. “What about my lip? Is my lip bleeding?”

“No, but it might be in a second.”

George felt for the wound Nick had inflicted earlier with the bottle, but it wasn’t there. He laughed excitedly. “My lip’s not bleeding, Burt! My lip’s not bleeding!” His mind jumped again. “My dirty handkerchief.” His hand went inside the pocket. “It’s not there. Well, what d’ya know about that, Burt? Merry Christmas!”

Burt stared in bewilderment as George ran off, shouting “Merry Christmas!” at the top of his voice. He thought about hauling the lunatic in, but it was Christmas Eve and the guy was running in the opposite direction from town. Burt waited till the coatless figure was swallowed up by the darkness and the falling snow, then climbed into his cruiser and drove back into Pottersville.

The End