



THE TALK OF THE TOWN

Notes and Comment

ON a recent night, a WALK sign lay on the sidewalk on Vesey Street near the World Trade Center. The post it was attached to had probably been knocked over by a truck backing up. The cable running through the post was intact, and the WALK sign was still flashing its signals in unison with its twin on the other side of Vesey Street. Unlike its mundane twin, however, this WALK sign, flashing its signals up into the night sky, was now part of a whole new intersection. The new intersection was vast and invisible. Its crosswalk lines presumably ran parallel to the World Trade Center towers for the first quarter mile or so, but the other side of the crosswalk was so far away that it could not be seen in the heavens. The people crossing Vesey Street, their minds on other things, did not notice the possibilities of the new intersection that the WALK sign had turned its face to. During the DON'T WALK cycle, crowds did not gather on this side of the new intersection to wait to start across. And on the other side were there pedestrians so far away that only hundreds of billions of years from now, when our earth had become a cold cinder, would they find out that it was O.K. to walk? What kind of pedestrians were they that could walk through space on conceptual planes? What kind of many-light-year boots would they have to wear to cross in the forty seconds of a WALK cycle? What would run over them if they didn't make it?

Wonderful

FOR reasons of their own, Christopher Little and David White firmly believe that this life, dammit, is a wonderful life. Annually, they throw a small party to celebrate that shared perception of reality. What they do at the

party is this: they have a few drinks and eat a few ham sandwiches and then they watch an old movie on television. Specifically, they watch "It's a Wonderful Life" (1946, Frank Capra, three handkerchiefs, happy ending). Every year, it is the same movie, and every year, with slight variations, the same audience comes to watch—fifteen or twenty friends who agree that Jimmy Stewart is a great guy and Donna Reed is a swell and pretty girl and Lionel Barrymore makes a convincing villain. The eighth annual "It's a Wonderful Life" party took place one night shortly after Christmas in David White's apartment, on the East Side. When we arrived, a few minutes ahead of the rest of the guests, White, who used to be a reporter for the *Times* and now spends his days finishing a novel, was busy with last-minute preparations.

"This thing always gets shown on television around Christmastime, and we pore over every word of *TV Guide* trying to find out when," he said as he sliced ham. "Once, we got stuck with a late-afternoon showing, which meant that we had to invite people to start drinking at four o'clock. Believe it or not, there were some people who weren't willing to leave work early to come to the party. We had to strike them from the invitation list. Nothing

strictly personal, of course, but they've been permanently banned. Well, it's not really a *permanent* ban. You can get back on the list if you've got a doctor's excuse or a note from your mother. This year, Channel 5 broadcast the movie on Christmas Day at *twelve-thirty*—in the middle of the day. Indecent. Naturally, we couldn't get anyone to show up for that, so we decided to hold the party tonight, even though Christmas is over. Fortunately, with great foresight we taped the movie last year on a Betamax machine for just such a situation. I think it's a pretty good tape. We edited out all the commercials, so you won't be seeing any Kitchen Magician or Crazy Eddie ads. The Betamax is over there." He pointed to a compact machine on top of a desk. "At the appropriate moment, the ground-service crew will move the television set into the most advantageous viewing spot in the room."

People began to arrive now. Christopher Little, a photographer who lives in Chelsea, was among them. He shook White's hand, nodded gravely, and said, "Wonderful life, David."

"Wonderful life, Christopher," White said sternly.

Several people in the room had seen the movie more times than they could remember. Jane Bayard, an assistant curator at the Yale University Art Gallery, did remember. "This is the seventh time for me," she said. "I've seen it more than any other movie."

"It's a violation of the rules to watch this movie out of town or during the off-season," said Little. "Hawaii in July, for instance—strictly forbidden. Technically, it's possible not to like the movie but to love this party as an institution."

"No," said Jane Bayard. "I think it's necessary to love the movie."

"For sheer raw emotional power," said a friend of hers, an architect named Patrick Curley, "I don't think you can beat the scene where Jimmy





"You take Republican Visa cards, I presume."

Stewart leans over that bridge railing, having decided not to commit suicide after all, and says, 'I want to live! I want to live!'

"Patrick was in Jerusalem during last year's party," Jane said.

"I looked all through the Jerusalem television listings," he said. "I guess the movie isn't that popular over there."

Our invitation had noted that a special guest was going to be present. As we were surveying the room looking for someone charismatic, Little said, "Trying to pick out the special guest, I see. I'm afraid that fell through. David's girlfriend, Margaret Stanback, works with a woman who used to be a friend of the next-door neighbor of the girlfriend of Jimmy Stewart's nephew. We thought the nephew would be here tonight, but he had to go to Florida. If we had held this party last week, he would have made it. We're thinking of waiting until the tenth annual celebration before we get

Uncle Jimmy and Donna Reed involved. But I'm sure they'll accept."

It was almost time for the Betamax machine to be turned on. While Patrick Curley cleaned the television screen with Windex, David White made a brief speech. "You may wonder why you've all been invited here tonight," he said. "The story begins, in at least one important respect, the same way that the story of the birth of Jesus Christ begins, and that is that it begins on a dark and wintry night. It was 1970, and three desperate college students—Christopher Little, myself, and Christopher's sister Suzanne—home on vacation with nothing better to do, spent the evening watching a movie on television. That movie was 'The Miracle of the Bells.' And when it ended, at one-thirty in the morning, we flipped the channel selector and stumbled across another movie. Christopher watched a few frames and then uttered these immortal words: 'Wait.

I've seen this movie before. It's a *great* movie.' Christopher spoke as if another miracle were at hand, and we could only have faith. And he was right. So now, even though Christmas is over and you've all unwrapped your neckties and blouses, you still need Donna Reed and Jimmy Stewart to remind you that there may not yet be peace in the Middle East, the dollar may be unstable, inflation may be rampant, but it *is* a wonderful life."

There was brief applause. Then the lights went out, the television screen brightened, the opening credits rolled, and the room filled with the sound of deeply contented sighing. About fifteen minutes into the movie, Christopher Little, who had been lying on the floor, stood up and went to mix himself a drink.

"I'll be right back," he said to no one in particular. "Tell me what happens, will you?"

Homecoming

WE were coming back to the city from sylvan outer New Jersey on a frosty Tuesday afternoon when, as our train paused at the crumbly station of the once famous Erie Railroad in Paterson, we were unexpectedly joined for the sixteen-mile run to Hoboken by a friend of long standing—E. M. Frimbo, the inexhaustible railway buff. Some months ago, we recalled, he had reached his temporary goal of travelling two and a half million miles by train. "A trip like this is no way to make it three million miles, if that's your game," we remarked as he sat down beside us.

"I know," he said. "But there's a reason. I've just come from a sort of family reunion." And, without our asking for an explanation, he launched himself into one, exactly like this:

Homecoming at year's end is always a time of bliss for us old settlers, even when the homestead may have seen better days, and today Paterson had a celebration for a distinguished citizen, born there in 1910, who had come back to stay. Our family was deep in the Industrial Revolution, back in Lancashire and Yorkshire, and was still in it when some of us came across here to a new country. You've heard of it—the Thirteen Original Colonies. Paterson was its first, or nearly its first, industrial citadel; Alexander Hamilton was involved in the founding of Paterson, in the guise of The Society for Establishing Usefull Manufactures. Then Major L'Enfant had a hand, and sometimes two, in the laying out of the town,