Farewell to All That

David M. Faris

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Tomorrow an 18-wheeler will pull up to my Cedar Park apartment and whisk everything that I own to Chicago. The thought of leaving Philadelphia fills me with a catatonic dread, like Klonopin mixed with high-altitude turbulence. My reaction so far has been to start snapping pictures of everything I see, as if I might somehow preserve the city forever in a Facebook album.

My parents raised me in South Jersey, but I grew up here.

When I was a kid, Philly was The City, glimpsed in day trips to South Street, devouring tabbouli at Alyan’s with my parents and scouring the Book Trader for bargain sci-fi novels and cast-off CDs. Driving in from South Jersey to grab some of those empty bleacher seats for $5 at the Vet, my stomach would drop down an elevator shaft if I took a single wrong turn on the way home, worried about reliving my own personal Judgment Night after watching Pat Combs and Ricky Otero rack up another loss. The streets seemed narrow, sinister. Liberty One and Two loomed, recently-constructed and gleaming with menace, in the distance. Philly was the steam vent my Dad used to warn us we’d end up sleeping on if we didn’t study harder.

It wasn’t until after college, when I moved here to attend graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania, did I really get to know the city in any way deeper than a one-night stand.

I arrived in Philadelphia for the first time as an adult, after a year in post-collegiate exile in exurban North Jersey, the sun glinting off the skyline, I-76 stretching before me like an invitation. Weeks before 9/11. I didn’t know who I was then, didn’t know what I wanted or what the future would hold. But I remember very clearly feeling elated.

When I moved to a sublet at 40th and Locust I felt trepidation, far from the wide-open avenues and ranch housing of my hometown in Audubon, across the river, 10 miles away and a lifetime apart. On my first night in West Philly, my friend Michael took a friend and I on a walking tour around the neighborhood, ending at the old Track n’ Turf, where we drank cheap lager and chatted with the ageless bartender. I rose late to attend Arabic classes that summer, and in the evenings I returned home to rent Ingmar Bergman movies from the now-defunct Video Library, to drink citywide specials at the hipster-anarchist dive bar Fiume or to hang with the locals and their Dalmations at Kellianne’s. Before long I was completely at home in the rickety Victorians, the dreadlocked anomie, the beer-swilling moxie of West Philly.

Philly won me over with food. Thanks to the vagaries of Quaker knicker-bunching, it’s incredibly hard to get a liquor license here. (It’s also hard just to get your hands on booze, leading to nonsensical paradoxes like the inability to buy anything less than 24 beers at a distributor). Like all such regulations, there were unintended consequences – the flowering of the most vibrant BYO scene of any major American city. Our final revenge on antediluvian prudery is that we probably do more drinking in our restaurants than any other city in America.

I’m pretty sure I’ve fallen in love over watermelon margaritas at Lolita, grilled fish at Dmitri’s, buttered skate at Bistro 7, sweetbreads at Marigold. In the words of The Hold Steady, Philly is golden with barlight and beer, nowhere more so than the rust-tinted atmosphere of the Tritone, the proudly dystopian filth of Locust Bar, and the surly working class bravado of McGlinchey’s.

Philly is the place where I had my heart broken not once, not twice, but three times, most recently while sucking down beer with the alcohol content of wine at Varga Bar, the kind of place that serves you $9 chili dogs. It’s the West Philly speakeasy I disappeared into after breaking off my engagement, or Las Vegas Lounge, on a night when I finally realized a woman I loved would never be mine. There are worse places to have your heart broken, and to find someone to heal it.

It’s where I spent election day 2004 going door-to-door in Kensington for Kerry, and watched the heartbreaking returns roll in at the Cherry Street Tavern. When they called Ohio for Bush, I slapped twenty dollars on the table and walked silently away from a table of dispirited friends, to West Philly over the Market Street Bridge in the crushing, empty silence. The skyscrapers shrouded in defeat, the streets hushed with disappointment. Only in Philadelphia, though, could I face four more years of George W. Bush.

Some things that I loved are already gone. The last time I saw the old South Street Bridge was on a brilliant November afternoon, a friend and I gliding back on our bikes after following the Phillies championship parade from Market to Tasker, cutting in and out from 15th street to join, once more and then once more again, the delirious throng parting periodically like a drawbridge for bikers and pedestrians. I see the bridge rising again like a sleepy teenager, its slow assembly like stop-motion photography viewed from I-76.The Video Library is another business reduced to an empty shell by Netflix. As Eilen Jewell sings, “the only constant in this whole life is that nothing ever stays the same.”

And not just things, either, but people, the graduate student confidantes who moved on to New Brunswick and upstate New York, Oklahoma and Washington, DC. To exist in your 20s is to reconcile yourself to constantly-shifting social networks, a rotating cast of friends, neighbors and lovers that shifts shapes as routinely as Philly replaces them.  In America we have this fantasy that we can move anywhere, and our writers compile lists of the greatest places to live, as if you can just pick up and move as easily as switching seats at a ballgame. But everyone you lose leaves you with something beautiful and also takes something away. After a while you begin to feel the latter outweighs the former.  After a while you long for permanence. Or at least to be able to keep your cats.

Gone too is the graduate unionizing campaign that helped me fall madly in love with Philly to begin with, most of its organizers scattered to the academic winds. Trudging through doors on a cold February night, full of perhaps mildly misplaced idealism. Holding parties every weekend in search of those beautiful, signed blue authorization cards, spilling out onto sidewalks and porches and gardens and roofdecks, always talking, grilling, sipping, hooking up. Marching in circles at the corner of 37th and Walnut, on strike, leveling threats we never quite made good on.

And some things remain. One of them is the war without end that I protested along with thousands of people in February 2003, marching down Broad Street, our voices raised against the rather predictable disaster that ensued. J-Roll was playing shortstop the day I got here, and he still is.  The Gray’s Ferry bike lane still has so many potholes on the bridge that it is suicidal to try biking down it. They’ll still give you free cold-cut samples while you stand in line at Koch’s.  The drag show must go on at Bob & Barbara’s.

Philly is also those places people like me don’t see enough of, the ramshackle Southwest neighborhoods I canvassed for Obama, the Kensington neighborhood underneath the El, the Northeast bookshop where I talked to a group from the Socialist Worker’s Party. I wasn’t a socialist worker but they had a great selection of books no one ever reads anymore. Philly’s bourgeois cocoon, it must be said, is surrounded on all sides by quite desperate poverty, joblessness, and despair. This kind of contradiction is certainly not unique to Philadelphia, but it is easy to avoid if you don’t think about them.

Philadelphia gave me madness and sadness, the depths of sorrow and the heights of joy, never more boisterous than the early November night when I and a thousand others from my community danced, high-fived, and embraced Barack Obama’s victory over John McCain, the bars of Baltimore Avenue hosting an impromptu, bong-drum, beer-fueled celebration of renewal. Barbara Ehrenreich once asked “Where is the constituency for collective joy itself?” But on that night, as a friend remarked, “I’ve never in my life seen such ecstasy.”

Philadelphia is like the middle child of the Northeast Corridor, but worse – for a time it was the first-born, the capital, and then gradually lost its prestige, its standing and its economy to other places, the industry moving south and overseas, the capital plucked away and deposited on a swampy river 150 miles to the south, eventually even its sports teams consigned to nearly three decades of futility, its fans implausibly cast as the worst in the country.

Its contradictions can be maddening, its bureaucracy like the North Sea in December. After having my car stolen from Cedar Avenue in  2007, I traveled to Northeast Philly – past any conceivable public transit connection, signed the piece of paper that had been thrust at me, and was then told my car was stored all the way on the other side of the city, somewhere on that desolate stretch of Passyunk on the wrong side of the Schuykill. This was a week before I left for a year in Cairo, and I had never wanted to leave Philly so bad. And before I had even taken my seat on the plane to Egypt, I wanted to come back.

The 9 year theft tally: two car windows, a car stereo, a car, two bikes, three bike wheels, one copy of Luna’s *Close Cover Before Striking*, and yeah you kind of get tired of having your shit stolen. But when I think about the thousands of people who were murdered here during that timespan, I think maybe I got off kind of easy.

But Philly also has things its richer sister cities to the North and South will never have. Cheap housing.  One of my  favorite things to do to visitors from New York is to tell them how much my apartment costs. Normal people with grown-up jobs bike to work here and don’t think there’s anything funny about it. People who don’t really seem to care about much of anything but have big, warm, slobbering hearts.  The sprawling, kaleidoscope murals patched over the evidence of decay. The unkempt wonders of Fairmount Park.  Lots of pit bulls. Philly, for better or worse, is the kind of place certain types of people can go to be not terribly serious for a few years.

Sometimes people ask me what Philly is like. It has such a bad reputation, they say. And I want to say Philly is every step into the street to see if the trolley is coming, every First Friday on every summer evening,  every knee-busting move to every third-floor apartment, every 2 a.m. bike ride on every hushed avenue ,  every Clark Park flea market, every sweaty dance at the 700 Club, every box of Crab Fries at every Phillies game, every potluck crammed with the vegetable-studded quinoa of every drifting dreamer, every poker game laced with overeducated banter, every slurred come-on at every corner bar, every encore from the terrace at the TLA. It’s every bundle of chard bought from every Amish farmer, every pot pie sold at every intersection by every dressed-up ideologue, every delicacy simmered in every reduction, every roar from every bar after every touchdown.

Philly is an answer to Peggy Lee asking “Is that all there is?”

Tomorrow the skyline will appear to me once again, my heart heavier than a radioactive isotope. I’ll peer through the windshield on the Schuykill, and I’ll hear the roar of the expressway, and the music will shake the seats of the car. The city will recede behind me instead of rising before me, and Philadelphia and all it contains, all it pours forth and all it takes away, will be gone.

My parents raised me in South Jersey, but when people ask me where I’m from, even if I never come back here, even if the wind, as Jeff Tweedy croons, never blows me back via Chicago, I’ll always say Philadelphia, city of grit, city of turmoil, city of love and regret, city of tall dreams and short tempers, the greatest city I ever loved for the first time, and the greatest city I ever lost