



## Grand Old Party

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### [Elaine Terranova](#)

It's my city, where I was born, and have always lived. We walk in the center part, Center City, it's called. I moved here as a teenager with my first apartment. I remember passing some woman then, vaguely recognizing her, maybe she was famous, an artist or musician, or famous only to me, a teacher I might once have had, marking her in my mind on these streets, watching her age over the rest of her life. I wonder if someone now secretly keeps track of me.

In Center City, if you cross paths with someone as you walk in one direction, you are likely to meet them again going the other way, on your return. It's that kind of place. O.K., so I walk through Center City with my husband Lee and our good friend, Larry, each relatively new to the city, having spent only the last thirty or forty years here. It is the week of the Republican convention. You can tell this from the red, white, and blue buntings that hang outside the grocery store, the locksmith's, and even in the window of the local dog-grooming establishment. You can tell from the men who might be astronauts swimming championship lengths through "my" little four-foot-deep pool at the hotel where the big Bush is staying. And there are mini-Mummers' parades stopping afternoon traffic and guests (read, delegates) have to show their room keys at the door to get into their hotels.

Tonight, Lee remarks that the streets are cleaner than we have ever seen them. We have just left our favorite restaurant. It is not part of the Restaurant Revolution, for which Philadelphia thinks it is famous, just a good neighborhood standby. We continue to call it Chun Hing, but its name, after a kitchen fire and redo, is now Grand Canal, though it's still Chinese rather than Venetian. The restaurant is almost empty, as always. Hopefully it can hold on until the new Performing Arts Center across the street is finished. Tonight Larry jokes that when they see us at the door, the chef and waiter say to each other, "Get ready, the customers are coming." We know this is not entirely accurate because sometimes we see take-out customers. A sign up front says, "Bathroom reserved for take-out and eat-in customers." Do take-out customers go to the bathroom? They do tonight and I decide the ones we see, kind of disheveled and ordering fifteen egg rolls at a pop, must be protesters.

After dinner we walk by the Performing Arts Center, which was stalled for a while when high steel girders began to drop in the wind. Construction continues now, and at the Broad Street side is some public art, a ticker-tape video display that reads appropriately like a fortune cookie. We walk a block in each direction, making an *L*, and get to the Doubletree Hotel, where the street is blocked off from cars and deserted, except for a squad of police with plastic riot helmets pulled down over their faces, looking as fierce and anonymous as they did in Chicago in '68. Behind the line of police a few people wait to cross the street. The subway entrances are closed off, except for exiting police, as if the whole force were just commuting to work.

Every few minutes a half-nude guy with long hair streaks down Broad Street on a bike. *Broad* is probably the Indian word for "14th," since it's the one exception in the number grid the city is built on. And here and there street signs now optimistically call it *Avenue of the Arts*. We are all suddenly stunned, for it's become clear that tonight it's not our street, our city. Larry says it's the boardwalk in Atlantic City. It has that midway quality, street theater, *déjà vu* performance art. Like the time in the '60s Judith Malina and the Living Theater were marched nude down this very street in handcuffs. Now a troop of rollerbladers coast down leaning forward, making some kind of political statement maybe, not clearly Right or Left.

Everything looks familiar yet unrecognizable. We begin walking north on sidewalks noticeably empty even for a weeknight in Philadelphia. It goes through my mind there might be a bomb scare, so there's an edge to being out of the house. On Locust Street, outside the Academy of Music, stands a little clot of people, most with ear-pieces or walkie-talkies, plainclothes folks. Then we pass the Bellevue, which after running out of other hotel names, is called, again, the Bellevue. A busload of Asian tourists packs up and leaves quickly, except for one or two with big cameras who can't resist a last, parting shot.

On to the Union League, that elitist structure with its brownstone exterior, raised entrance, and colonnading stairs that distance it from the street and the common gaze. Predictably, it has reasserted itself as the bastion of local conservative activity this week. What's unpredictable is the red, white, and blue neon insignia over the door, an easy stand-in for the Warner Brothers logo that introduces Mickey Mouse cartoons. Other writing, on the side of the building, reads *Mug Yuppies!* There are police here in anticipation of protesters (not in sight at the moment, although the next day costumed fife-and-drum players will be stationed at the top of the steps as sign-carrying protesters circulate at

street level).

Something's happening on Chestnut Street, though. We can see down the one block to 15th where a crowd is gathering. But we won't leave Broad until we show Larry the new Ritz-Carlton, late the classy, domed bank building where several friends have had their safety-deposit boxes riffled in the turnover. Lee and I have been inside; it mostly looks like a bank that serves drinks. Outside, hotel security men and women, in the white T-shirts and black pants of the hospitality industry, mill around with their ear-pieces. More police are coming up from the closed-off subway exit because we've reached City Hall; if anyone wanted to make a point, this would be the place.

And here we are, getting somewhere: smoke and hordes, a line of police at the corner, a squad of police on bikes, then a thin stream of demonstrators with signs: *FREE MUMIA. NO DEATH PENALTY. CORPORATIONS LIE!* Here I wish I had time to make my own sign in answer, an incredulous *NO!* How straggly a group of individuals is, especially in comparison to the police cavalry that has just arrived. It takes only a dozen people on horseback to block this large street. I see them through the eyes of my ancestors on the Pale. Men on horses loom as an *L.A. Times* reporter in front of us in a good-looking suit scribbles away. The standing cops shove up against the demonstrators and make a line from the subway entrance to the curb. What are they trying to block, the street entrance? Just then, the adrenaline, or testosterone, kicks in. Lee **MUST** get past. He argues with a cop, and I imagine a nightstick connecting with his head. In fact, I imagine a cop knocking him to the ground, the way they are swatting at the demonstrators edging past.

Then Larry catches up with Lee. I'm behind, ready to go back the way I came. But the cops let them through and I follow. It amazes me how a show of force can turn the obedient citizen into a troublemaker. I think of Latin-American dictatorships, or any country with a history of oppression. You stop trusting laws and law-keepers when you can't walk down the street of your choice. The TV news shows a raid on puppetmakers in a West Philly warehouse. The puppetmakers are dressed like '60s flower children, girls in long, Indian folksinger skirts. Some laugh. "Hey, we're making puppets, not bombs!" one says into the mike.

The street behind the horses stands empty. A block north the bulk of the protest, a big crowd, fills the intersection north of City Hall, contained by more police. Then the mounted police wheel and thunder down 15th Street to Chestnut to form their line. Horseshit lines the swept streets. I suggest that we cross to where it smells better. There's smoke or tear gas, thick air I remember from long-ago rallies. It brings back DC in the war, Guatemala in newsreels, Greece at the time of the revolution. A newspaper kiosk at the corner reminds me of the one overturned onto the crowd a few feet from where I stood in downtown Athens in '64. Larry says his friend Bonnie spent six days living at the Athens airport then.

At some point we must pass between the horses to get by. What large beasts they are, especially under riders with guns. I fear I'll annoy them and they'll rear and kick, so I'm very cautious. At the corner a rare college student, not a protester but a convention volunteer, happily gives us his viewpoint: demonstrators threw acid in a cop's face, others broke cops' legs and knees with pipes. Later on the news amends these weapons to detergent and bamboo sticks. Anyhow, he tells us to be careful and hands out the convention newsletter.

We follow a trail of overturned dumpsters down 15th Street. Something's going on behind the Union League on Sansom (pronounced *Sampson* for no particular reason by native Philadelphians, but differentiating them from interlopers). Rubberneckers crowd the sidewalks. We join them. The police seem to harass demonstrators without detaining them. But we turn the corner onto Walnut and confront chaos: crowds running and smoke (although we're not sure if it's coming from burning trash or Susanna Foo's; this is restaurant row). Stretch limos, other cars flat on the street, tires slashed, keyed from engine to trunk. Nice, though, how people in the crowd join chauffeurs and car owners to change tires. On the sidewalks people line up to see as if they were at a parade or block party. But there's a note of panic too, like a block party on acid.

A young woman in a red T-shirt busily takes notes. She smiles. She speaks with a French accent and tells us she writes for a Geneva newspaper. Then we all stare across the street. We see Georges Perrier, celebrity chef, gesticulating, deep in the crowd outside Le Bec Fin (four stars), still wearing a kitchen towel around his neck. Lee pulls the Swiss reporter over and introduces them. Never one to say *no* to the press, Georges of course talks to her, especially since she speaks French. Larry and I follow to see what's up. A girl and boy sit outside the restaurant handcuffed, in police custody. They stole a camera, someone says. They slashed a tire. No one's sure. The girl, a pretty, quiet-looking blond, could be a Bryn Mawr student, the boy is dark, good-looking. They're not Georges's customers; since they're in shorts, they couldn't have passed his dress code. The girl's nose and cheeks are pink. She cries. I don't blame her, with those bruisers of cops breathing down their necks. We feel an element of community punishment here, like being put in stocks. A little civic righteousness.

A shopkeeper pulls down shutters, locks up, and turns to us. "There hasn't been so much commotion around here since Georges caught his hand in the slicing machine."

We go on to the corner of 17th, a block from Rittenhouse Square where the NRA has just held a

dinner dance for the delegates. A thin blonde stands at the corner in a party dress and sneakers, the apparent dress code for departing ball guests. She swings a flare, which seems a little improvisational. "This way to Zanzibar," she calls, and I almost believe it. But I see she's only guiding fellow delegates, as they swarm out of the park, to the jazz club at the Bellevue, Zanzibar Blue, for a nightcap.

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