

America 250: Yo America! We Did It! (Sort Of)

A Birthday Greeting from Philadelphia

Yo, America.

Two hundred and fifty.

Look at you.

Happy Birthday, kid.

I know... I know.

You're probably expecting one of those big speeches today.

Fireworks.

Flags.

Some politician standing behind a podium telling everyone you're the greatest nation in the history of the world.

That's not really my style kid, you know that.

Never has been.

You know me better than that.

Around here, birthdays are for telling the truth,

Shooting the bull,

Catching up.

The good.

The bad.

And if we're being really honest...

A little bit of the ugly too.

So pull up a chair.

We've got a lot to talk about.

I've known you your whole life.

Actually...

Longer than that.

I was here before you.

Before there was a White House.

Before there was a Capitol.

Before there was Wall Street.

Before there were fifty states.

I was here when we both relied on mamma England for everything we needed.

Back when you were just thirteen loud, stubborn colonies trying to convince the rest of the world that ordinary people could govern themselves.

I'll admit...

It sounded a little crazy.

Most revolutions don't end with people arguing over constitutions.

Most experiments don't last 250 years.

Ours has.

Sort of.

Don't smile too much.

We're just getting started.

You probably think you know me.

Most people do.

They spend a day walking my streets.

They ring a bell.

Tour an old hall.

Take a picture with Rocky.

Grab a cheesesteak before they head home.

They leave thinking they met Philadelphia.

Truth is...

They met my souvenirs.

If you really want to know me, you have to stick around awhile.

Long enough to hear the church bells.

Long enough to watch the river at sunrise.

Long enough to notice the little signs that read, "George Washington slept here."

You gotta stick around long enough love these dirty streets,

Hate the day in and day out routines,

But miss them when you're gone.

Around here, history isn't locked behind museum glass.

It's on those street corners.

It's under your feet.

It's in the air and in the stories the people tell.

It's part of the neighborhood.

Every few blocks, something happened.

Every generation left a mark.

Some of them made me proud.

Some of them still keep me up at night.

I've watched this country from the very beginning.

I watched men walk into Independence Hall with impossible ideas and very human flaws.

They didn't agree on much.

They argued.

Compromised.

Stormed out.

Came back.

Argued some more.

Just like family really..

Funny thing...

Two hundred and fifty years later...

You're still doing the same thing.

Good.

That means you're still trying.

Democracy was never supposed to be quiet.

If it feels messy sometimes...

That's because it is.

Always has been.

Always will be.

The trick isn't avoiding the argument.

The trick is remembering you're still family when it's over.

I remember your birthday.

No...

Not the fireworks.

Those came later.

I remember the idea.

I remember ordinary men saying something extraordinary.

That people weren't born to serve kings.

That rights didn't come from governments.

That freedom belonged to ordinary people.

That was a dangerous thing to say in 1776.

Hell, it still is.

Don't let anyone tell you those men were perfect.

They weren't.

Some owned slaves.

Some disagreed with each other constantly.

Not wholly different than today really.

Some couldn't even imagine the country you would become.

But they did something remarkable.

They wrote down an ideal that was bigger than themselves.

Bigger than their generation.

Maybe even bigger than the country they were creating.

And here's the funny thing, kid...

They accidentally gave every generation that came after them permission to criticize you.

Because once you promise liberty...

People are going to ask where it's missing.

Once you promise equality...

People are going to notice when it's absent.

That's not your weakness.

That's your inheritance.

Every generation has held you accountable using your own words.

I'd call that a pretty good legacy.

Growing up wasn't easy.

You made mistakes.

Some of them were honest.

Some of them were unforgivable.

You built a nation while denying freedom to millions.

You fought a war with yourself over it.

You buried hundreds of thousands before you finally admitted the promise had to mean more than it did in 1776.

Even then...

You didn't get it right.

Not immediately.

Not completely.

Not even today.

You stumbled through Reconstruction.

You legalized segregation.

You looked away when you should've spoken up.

Then, somehow...

You found people willing to remind you who you said you were.

Frederick Douglass.

Susan B. Anthony.

Martin Luther King Jr.

Countless others whose names history forgot but whose courage changed it anyway.

See, that's the thing about ideals.

They have a way of refusing to stay buried.

Every time you drifted away from them...

Someone picked them back up.

Brushed them off.

And handed them back to you.

"Try again."

That's happened more than once.

It's going to happen again.

Then we got to know each other a little better.

The last twenty-five years...

Well...

They've been something.

I watched smoke rise over New York.

I watched this country pull together in ways I hadn't seen for generations.

I also watched fear convince good people to do things they'd later question.

I watched young Americans leave for wars that lasted longer than anyone expected.

Some came home.

Many didn't.

I watched markets crash.

Factories close.

Neighborhoods change.

Families lose homes they'd spent a lifetime paying for.

But as much as the neighborhoods change,
sometimes I think they really haven't changed that much at all.

I'm a city of neighborhoods.

Every one of them has its own story.

Its own food.

Its own music.

Its own traditions.

Irish.

Italian.

Black.

Puerto Rican.

Asian.

Jewish.

Old families.

New arrivals.

Every generation brought something with them.

Every generation left something behind.

Funny...

Sounds a little like you.

We both came to be because of the idea from people,

from other places,

who dreamed of a more free life.

You know something else about me?

I love a celebration.

I really love celebrating with all of those people I was just talking about.

I've celebrated victories before.

I celebrated when the war for independence was won.

I celebrated when brothers finally stopped fighting each other.

I celebrated when soldiers came home from Europe and the Pacific.

I threw one heck of a party in 1976.

Every Fourth of July I still light up the sky because some birthdays deserve fireworks.

And every now and then...

I celebrate something a little less historic.

Twenty-five years without a championship finally ended in 2008.

You would've thought we'd won the Revolution all over again.

Ten years later...

The Eagles finally climbed the mountain.

Turns out...

Philadelphia had been carrying that weight a long time.

Guess we needed that one.

Maybe more than we realized.

I watched technology connect the world...

Then convince people to stop talking to their neighbors.

Somewhere along the way, it became easier to win an argument than understand one.

You started shouting.

Everybody did.

Sometimes it felt like nobody was listening anymore.

Then came a pandemic.

The streets got quiet.

That was strange.

But when I think about it, it wasn't the first time.

Then came protests.

Then came another election.

Kid...

I've heard people predict the end of America before.

You'll survive this too.

A few black eyes and scars are nothing to be embarrassed about.

It makes us have character,

makes us wiser.

But only if you remember who you're supposed to be.

You know...

People have always misunderstood me.

They think I'm angry.

They think I'm cynical.

They think I boo because I enjoy it.

Because I'm mean,

or because I want to bring others down.

That's never been it.

I boo because I care.

If I didn't care...

I'd stay home.

I'm not perfect either, and I've been around long enough to admit it.

Can I tell you a secret?

I've had my own doubts too.

Boston gets remembered for the Revolution.

Washington became the capital.

New York became the center of money.

Sometimes I wondered if people forgot where your story really began.

Then I realized...

I didn't need to be the biggest city.

I already had the greatest story.

Most of all, around here, we expect effort.

We expect honesty.

We expect you to own your mistakes.

When you fall short...

We're going to tell you.

Not because we hate you.

Because we know you're capable of more.

Family doesn't always tell you what you want to hear.

Family tells you what you need to hear.

So when I remind you about slavery...

Or segregation.

Or the promises you still haven't kept...

Understand something.

I'm not trying to tear you down.

I'm trying to remind you who you said you wanted to be.

One more thing before I let you go.

This year one of my bridges turns one hundred.

Funny, isn't it?

You turn two hundred and fifty.

The Ben Franklin Bridge turns one hundred.

Bridges don't care who's crossing them.

Rich.

Poor.

Republican.

Democrat.

Young.

Old.

They simply connect.

You could use a few more bridges these days.

Not the kind made of steel.

The other kind.

The kind that lets people disagree without becoming enemies.

The kind that remembers an argument doesn't have to become a war.

The kind that helps people connect rather than separate.

These bridges, don't stop building them.

Well...

I guess that's enough out of me.

You've got places to be.

Problems to solve.

Dreams to chase.

The next chapter is yours.

You don't have to be perfect.

You just have to keep trying.

Happy Birthday.

Love,

Philly.

P.S.

When you fall short of those promises you made all those years ago...

Don't be surprised if you hear a not-so-quiet BOOOO! coming from somewhere in the

back.

That'll be me.

Don't take it personally.

Around here...

We boo because we care.

And after the boos...

You just might hear me say...

Get up, America...

'Cause Philly loves you.

Now pick yourself up.

Dust yourself off.

You've got another 250 years of work to do.