Prologue

My Philadelphia, or I Am a Marked Car

Gathering information and relaying it to my viewers is what I do for a living. I sit in a chair, look at a glass lens, and talk to someone I can't see. I think, "What are they saying?" or perhaps "Do they like me?" It is an unusual way to make a living, giving information to nameless and faceless people. But, except for one brief fling in New York, it's what I've been doing here in Philadelphia for thirty-four years now.

Those thirty-four years have been a learning experience for both of us—the city and me. Philadelphia has had to learn a number of painful lessons about class, about race, about confrontation and entitlement. As for me, the job that lured me to this city and the job I got were in different worlds. In three years, my job description changed. The world of the microphone was replaced by the world of the camera, and I had to face down my personal insecurities quickly and painfully. I also had to learn some hard lessons about being well known and negotiating the networks of power. I've been flattered, threatened, humiliated, and honored, all in pursuit of a story. What keeps me at it is the big story, the one that continues to obsess me—the relationship between power and politics and how those forces come together in one of the world's most beautiful cities.

But I haven't always been an eyewitness to history in Philadelphia. For the Brooklyn-born son of an electrician, it was a strange fate that set me down in the soft pretzel capital of the world, talking to a camera.

From 1957 to 1966, starting at the age of fifteen, I was a radio reporter in Miami, where I chased ambulances for news stories, covered politics, and hung around police stations. I made a brief stop in St. Louis, returned to Miami as a news executive, and spent three unbelievable summers traveling with the Beatles on their North American tours, reporting to fifty radio stations. (No, that's not in this book, though John Lennon does turn up later on.) Then, in the summer of 1966, I was offered a position as anchor-reporter at WFIL Radio in Philadelphia. The nation's fourth largest metropolis was a mystery to me, but I figured the job would provide a juicy item for my developing resume.

In 1966, three stations were doing news in Philadelphia. WCAU TV, with anchorman John Facenda, and KYW TV, with anchor Vince Leonard, were the leaders of the pack. Facenda, the dean of Philadelphia broadcasters, was a native son who was also the voice of the National Football League's dramatic weekend documentaries. Leonard, who came from the Midwest, was the consummate broadcaster, a good journalist with all-American looks. WFIL TV, located in the same building as the radio station I came to work for, was a distant third. Eventually, I would work for all three stations, but on that foggy night when I arrived in town, that all lay in the future.

My first view of Philadelphia was of a fire. I was crossing the Walt Whitman Bridge late at night. The date was September 12, 1966, and at the age of twenty-three, I was arriving to begin a job as radio newscaster for WFIL Radio. I saw the flames roaring at several locations to the south. I paid my toll, immediately drove to a phone booth, dialed up, and asked for the fire emergency line, where I promptly and vigorously reported these flashes of fire. There was a pause on the line. Then the fire radio dispatcher said, "Whateryoutawkin about? Them there's oil refineries. You crazy?"

Nevertheless, he thanked me. Feeling like a fool, I drove on, looking back at the patches of fire and the skyline of a city that would offer wonderful opportunities and trap doors of jeopardy.

In the months that followed, I moved cautiously through this metropolis of city and suburb, encompassing three states and bounded by an ocean to the east, rivers to the west, luscious green mountains to the north, and smaller cities to the south. I was exploring, trying to get

a feel for the area. So this is Philadelphia, I began to understand, a city where they put mustard on soft pretzels, devour the lowest of meat products called scrapple, and consume more cheese steaks than any community in the world. This is Philadelphia, where politics is a blood sport and going to jail has become a badge of honor. This is Philadelphia, where power is concentrated in two professions joined at the hip—politics and law. This is Philadelphia, where race is used as a political weapon on both sides of the racial divide, where blacks—chased out of their neighborhoods by gentrification and singed with economic hardship—emerged in the sixties in a wave of protest followed by electoral power. This is a community where crime is an obsession, safety a priority. It's a region of livable homes and unbearable poverty. It's a treasure chest of arts and culture, ranging from the art museum on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway to the opera house in Wilmington. Visually, the area blends urban sophistication with a small-town flair and suburban beauty in a way unmatched in America. But most of all, this is a town more than a city, a conglomeration of neighborhoods with separate identities and a collection of villages in outlying counties, and its greatest strength is not in the concrete canyons of Market Street but in the soul and hearts of the millions of people who make it the most livable big-little city in America.

Over the years, through success and failure, I became addicted to Philadelphia, like its other citizens complaining about everyday problems but reveling in the joy of just being here. I came here to get some big-city reporting experience, and I wound up experiencing thirty-four years of the best and worst of human behavior in the corridors of power and on the streets. I have worked for three major news operations in Philadelphia. In between, I spent sixteen months in a city to the north named New York. But that Philadelphia addiction drove me back.

All cities, small and large, lay claim to being the greatest, the best, and the most livable. Philadelphia and its surrounding counties have never made those grandiose boasts. In reality, it took professional sports victories to make people of the region feel good about themselves. When the Flyers won the Stanley Cup in 1974, people declared, "Philadelphia is back." Who's kidding whom here? Philadelphia is back from what? The fact is that this community never needed a comeback. It has always been a great American city; good looks can obscure the true meaning of greatness.

My Philadelphia has the good looks, the big buildings, and the small row homes. But to this reporter, Philadelphia stands out for two reasons—the people who live here and the way they are.

Chances are that, as you read this book, you will get an impression of Philadelphia that's different from the one you have now. That doesn't invalidate your Philadelphia. But this book is about *my* Philadelphia. My Philadelphia is a burgeoning suburban superpower, a community with a countryside of smaller communities, a city of pomp and hopeless poverty, a region where people never take yes for an answer. In this town, you either put up or shut up, and if you don't have the goods, please don't come to market. There are no pushovers. Philadelphians can spot a phony a mile away. As they say in South Philadelphia, money talks, bullshit walks.

Perhaps this book will also serve to illuminate the perils of being well known. Being well known doesn't mean you're a better person. It does get you a better table at a restaurant, a good seat at a concert, but with it comes a price—the pained expression on a child's face, the total lack of privacy, and, sadly, the fear of walking into a crowd of strangers.

It has been said that I am an icon in Philadelphia. Frankly, anyone who could last this long would be a candidate for icon—or relic. On the way to a mayor's reception at Lemon Hill Mansion in Fairmount Park, a production assistant noted that we were taking a car with no station logo on the side to avoid notice. I retorted, "Are you kidding? I *am* a marked car."

That comment became a source of constant ribbing in the newsrooms I have worked in, but it is a fact of my life. A television journalist, bringing his face and perspective nightly, becomes as familiar as a favorite lamp, a member of the family. Being recognized is a product of just being here. One of my greatest pleasures is to walk the streets of a faraway town, where my peripheral vision isn't telling me that someone is watching. At times, I've needed a vacation from myself. But being a marked car, accepting adulation and sometimes contempt, is not as important as being respected. Respect, to this reporter, is being recognized for your work, not your facial features.

My Philadelphia is not the town that Bill Cosby and Oprah Winfrey sell in TV commercials. The people who visit never see it all. Tourism is great for the cash register, but day trippers will never feel the grit of the street, the lure of the people.

There is no pretense or superficiality in my Philadelphia, none of that Southern California "gosh and gee whiz and have a great day," those moronic, utopian, feel-good expressions of the perfect life. Philadelphia is not *The Truman Show.* Cherry Hill is not the San Fernando Valley. But its people and its diner crowds are much more interesting. If you want to know more about my Philadelphia, sit yourself down at Ponzio's or the Melrose or Oak Lane Diners. The tables may be small, the stools a bit undersized, but there you will meet the people, observe their manners, hear their accents, eat their foods.

In my Philadelphia, race relations are far from subtle. People are loath to hide their prejudices. It's ugly, but it's real, and preferable to the phony baloney racial harmony of the new South. And despite the tensions, a simple fact remains: more blacks and whites work and live together peacefully in this city than in any other in America.

In my Philadelphia, people debate the issues till they are red in the face and dry in the mouth. There was never any middle ground, for instance, about former mayor Frank Rizzo. You either loved him or hated him. But the big man embodied the spirit of individual Philadelphians. To Rizzo and to most Philadelphians, everything is black and white. There are friends and enemies, and there is no in-between. The best and worst of Rizzo will stand out in this book, and not just when I'm talking about hizzonner.

It is true that my Philadelphia contains some of the worst drivers in America. Road rage is the rage of Philadelphia, and unfortunately I have become one of those drivers, complaining about people who tailgate at high speeds and then, in a hurry, doing it myself. Yet find yourself stuck on any street in any neighborhood, and someone will stop and help, without trepidation.

In my Philadelphia, crime is a major issue and is not swept under the rug. Because of good politics and public relations, a dramatic shift has occurred: people seem less afraid, and because of that, Center City has resumed its lock as the city center. Then, in 1996, the murder of jogger Kimberly Ernest in Center City frayed the myth of the safety net, even though federal statistics show that, in general, crime is down in the area.

In my Philadelphia, habits die hard. In 1902, for example, the nation's first Horn and Hardart automat opened at Eighth and Chestnut. And on April 4, 1967, it was one of the last to close. Tradition and endurance go hand in hand in Philadelphia.

In my Philadelphia, people may feel unloved by the rest of the nation, but they still live up to the advertising slogan—"Philadelphia ... the City That Loves You Back." They disdain those who take cheap shots at their town. Witness Phillies great Mike Schmidt, respected as the finest third baseman in baseball history but despised by thousands of fans for his negative vibes about the city. He seemed ill at ease here and complained about the fans. No wonder Schmidt decided to live in Florida.

But they are also the most generous people in America. When trouble breaks, they break in with aid, monetary and personal. In the business of TV news, you just mention someone in need and the phone rings off the hook. On June 6, 1967, when a power failure affected thirteen million people, some for up to ten hours, neighbors and strangers delivered thousands of flashlights and candles in the Greater Northeast, South Philadelphia, and Montgomery County.

In my Philadelphia, performance counts. For years, the national press has made chopped liver of Philadelphia fans for booing and throwing things onto the field. What's the problem here? The difference between Philadelphia fans and their counterparts across the country is simple: Philadelphians will pay big bucks to watch millionaire athletes, but if they don't perform, they are usually fired—by the fans. Eagles quarterback Randall Cunningham soared, sank, and sought new employment, though when he made a 1998 comeback with Minnesota, he was cheered on by Eagles fans who remembered his greatness. Another Cunningham, Billy, of basketball fame, is still revered, along with Julius Erving and ex-Eagles coach Dick Vermeil, for his hard work. These men all work in other cities, but the love for them here has never stopped.

In Philadelphia the welcomes are generally shaky for new people on the block, even in TV news. In my Philadelphia, good looks don't count as much as good reporting. The names of failed TV personalities are written on pink slips. Some of the most beautiful and handsome anchors in America have had brief stops in Philadelphia. They dazzled with their glamour, but Philadelphians want more than that. That's why I will forever be grateful for the opportunities viewers have given me here.

In my Philadelphia, the people want their public figures to be vulnerable and therefore acceptable candidates for forgiveness. Ed Rendell can lose his temper, and Philadelphians mark it down to hard work and stress. Frank Rizzo could invariably say the wrong thing, but he never paid at the voting booth on his first two bids for election. Two events in

my career illustrate this point—my brief stint in New York and the libel lawsuit filed by another former Philadelphia mayor, Bill Green. Either one might have jeopardized my career. But the people in my Philadelphia were forgiving, although never forgetting. Today, viewers still walk up to me and say, "Welcome back, Lar," a reference to my return to Philadelphia TV in late 1978; lots of others still bawl me out for having left in the first place.

A flag of caution here. In this book I will refer to "the people of Philadelphia." They may actually come from Cherry Hill, Dover, or Upper Merion. They may come from Kensington or Kingsessing. I don't intend these interpretations as a form of stereotyping. Not all people fit a general mold, but many do, or they fit it in one or more particular ways. There are similarities that simply can't be ignored. This is a family town, a town with a stable way of life encouraged by postwar construction that gave hundreds of thousands affordable housing.

The people of my Philadelphia take pride in living here but are proprietary in their allegiance. Where you live is much more important than where you work. Where you live also means how much you will know. Delaware, for example, is a tight-knit community where there are few secrets and even fewer mysteries. The Anne Marie Fahey murder changed that, but even in the layers of intrigue, this murder case highlighted the simple reality that everybody knows everyone and everything about them in that little diamond of a state. Tom Capano, convicted of dumping her at sea, was so well known that it was almost impossible to pick a jury. The people of one of Pennsylvania's two Springfields want to make sure you know which county they live in, since one is in Delaware County, the other in Montgomery. The residents of Mount Laurel, New Jersey, are careful to separate their fortunes from those of Cherry Hill or Moorestown residents. On the fashionable Main Line, the people of Gladwynne, which is part of Lower Merion Township, clearly delineate between their plush neighborhood and the middle-class neighborhood of Narberth in the same township. If you live in Overbrook, is that the town of Overbrook or the neighborhood of Overbrook Park? In Nicetown (what a wonderful name), the block captains don't want you to confuse the neighborhood with Olney or Feltonville, two nearby neighborhoods with their own personalities. In Northeast Philadelphia, an area called Mayfair, the jewel of the Frankford area corridor, is just a few miles from Oxford Circle, but it could well be a thousand miles.

My Philadelphia includes areas that have been grossly neglected. Camden and Chester come to mind, and the leadership of the remainder of the region should be sued for nonsupport. The great Philadelphia councilman Thacher Longstreth, a twenty-five-year veteran, has been urging regional cooperation for years, but in my Philadelphia, turf is turf, and individual interest reigns supreme. The power of personal interest often collides with much more dire human needs.

In my Philadelphia, geography is paramount. You're either from Fishtown, with its ethnic diversity, or Kensington, its immediate neighbor, with its narrow row homes in the shadow of the Frankford El. The street map defines the diagonal boundaries. East of the Boulevard and west of the Boulevard are separated by one street, Roosevelt Boulevard, but they are miles apart. In my Philadelphia, your credibility lives or dies on your mastery of geography.

Beyond these geographical boundaries lies another world, the landscape of the mind, sometimes called the human spirit. For a reporter navigating this mapless landscape and learning to cover this area, the effort seems equal to pursuing a graduate degree—a degree in understanding humans. With this study come some real mysteries. Why, for example, do many Philadelphia men wear bow ties? There are more here than almost anywhere, Is gasoline gas, or is it gazz (heavy on the z's), as Philadelphians and South Jerseyans like to call it? In the neighborhoods, why does everyone shop on a street they call the avenue? Who mapped the city's streets, and why is it impossible to figure out how to get to any neighborhood outside of the carefully planned grid of Center City? Why are there are two downtowns—Center City and South Philadelphia, which is affectionately called downtown by the people who live there? In the suburbs there is also a hub—the King of Prussia Mall, one of the world's largest shopping centers. It certainly doesn't offer the charm of Manayunk, a neighborhood of steep hills and hip bistros, or of Center City, but it is without question a suburban center of significance. More mysteries.

My Philadelphia contains some unforgettable personalities, many of whom you'll meet in this book. But the most fascinating personality is that of the people—solid, honest, very challenging, not easily impressed, and persistent in their ways. They have their shortcomings and bad habits, their frustrations and their prejudices, but they are also, on the bottom line, fair and reasonable. What other group of people would have given a twenty-three-year-old newsman the opportunity to

anchor the news and would hang with him through thirty-four years of joy and gloom, success and despair, sharing the events that shaped their community and his career? Philadelphia has changed in the last thirty-four years, and I've grown with it, but there is one constant-the unrivaled passion of the region's people to demand the best and settle for nothing less.

This book is my view of Philadelphia and its surrounding regions. This is not a history; it is a journal of the most important events of this community from the perspective of a reporter who lived that history up close. It is also a chronicle of power in government and in journalism. I hope you take from this a sense of the textures of the people and the place—and that it offers you a new and more controversial look at some of the people who made news, for better or worse.

I have done it all in Philadelphia—helped raise two wonderful kids with a dynamic and loving woman, tried to help people in the community, and covered more news than I can remember. That news took me from Paris to Pennsauken, from Tel Aviv to Torresdale, from Mount St. Helen's to Mount Laurel. I've encountered presidents, senators, mayors, and kings, movie stars, superstars, fanatics, phonies, and ordinary people who've made extraordinary achievements. In my business, I've met some wonderful people and some real jerks. I have been honored, chastised, respected, and sued. My career has been rich in challenges. And now I've faced another challenge—to tell the story of my life in Philadelphia, candidly and with nothing to hide.