Chapter 15

A shallow, muddy stretch of the Raritan River is the divide between a suburb called Highland Park and New Brunswick.

“Holy shit!”

I shot Maurice Tyson a look of disapproval. He knew that I had a thing about public profanity.

“Sorry,” Tyson apologized. “But over there -- I think that’s the…” Maurice stared into a thick Monday morning fog that lifted off the Raritan and made the Albany Street Bridge all but disappear.

I followed Maurice’s eyes and got my first glimpse of a phallic-looking vehicle penetrating the dense wall of Monday morning river mist.

I couldn’t stifle my own oath. “What the hell’s that?”

“I’ll tell you what it is! It’s the Wienermobile!”

For some mysterious reason, Maurice was an expert on one of America’s most imaginative marketing inventions -- the Oscar Mayer Wienermobile. I, on the other hand, knew nothing about the traveling hotdog and bun which was at least twenty-five feet long and ten feet high. Maurice gave me a quick tutorial while we walked across Albany Street, a main drag that ran through the heart of New Brunswick. We were on our way to the Hyatt Hotel hoping to track down Yigal Rosenblatt whom I figured had to be taking full advantage of Twyla Tharp’s free room.

“Oh,” Maurice gasped again as the gargantuan frankfurter rolled into full view. A blast of dark gray smoke blew out the wiener’s back end. Then the vehicle wheezed a few times and passed out.

“Oh, oh, oh,” Maurice mumbled, grabbed me by my arm and began running toward the disabled conveyance. We were a bun length away when two men who may not have been old enough to buy beer climbed out.

“Damn!” one of the men yelled and kicked the wiener’s rear passenger-side tire.

The other man was less distressed. He turned to Maurice and me who were now at his side.

“Name’s Frank,” he said and stuck a hand at my belt buckle.

I wondered if the kid were putting me on. “Frank?”

“Yup.”

“Whatever you say.”

“The mobile’s been givin’ us trouble the last couple of days,” Frank explained. I looked at the dormant wiener and empathized.

“Can’t drive this no more until it’s fixed. Know where we could park it?”

I tried to find another sane-looking soul who might come up with a suggestion. Even though it was 9:30 in the morning and we were standing on one of New Brunswick’s busiest thoroughfares, there wasn’t a human in sight except Maurice Tyson.

“Albany Street’s fairly flat,” I observed. “Might be able to push it back toward the river.”

Frank cranked his head to the side. “Sweet. So we push the wiener backwards into that side street over there.” He pointed to a road that ran parallel with the river.

“Right?”
“Sounds like a plan.”
“How about holdin’ up traffic?” Frank proposed to both Maurice and me. “You know – until we get on the side street.”
“Will we get a whistle?” Maurice asked.
The last time I recalled feeling I was in such a state of unreality was when I smoked hemp. “What are you talking about, Maurice?”
“A whistle. These guys who drive the wiener are called Hotdoggers. They go all over the country and wherever they stop, they give away whistles that look like wiener.”
Something this weird needed validation. “This true, Frank?”
“It’s true.” Frank turned to Maurice. “Hell, man, we’ll give you a whistle. Give you a handful if you want. We got wiener whistles up the yazoo.”
A smile stretched across Maurice’s face. Only a few moments of sheer happiness had ever crept into Tyson’s life and this was clearly one of them.
A couple of minutes later, Frank, Maurice and I were waving off inbound traffic while cranky Hotdogger number two jockeyed the Wienermobile backwards until it reached a side road called Johnson Drive.
“This here road goes to that place, right?” Frank pointed to a gleaming white tower connected to a series of angular buildings resting on acres of manicured grass.
“Seems to, yup,” I replied. To be honest, I had never before set foot on the road that led to the office complex.
“So what is it?”
“Johnson & Johnson.”
“The baby powder company?”
“That’s the one.”
Frank seemed impressed. “This where they make the powder?”
I was about to explain that this was Johnson & Johnson’s headquarters which made nothing but a lot of managers very, very comfortable.
“They make tampons,” said Maurice, drawing this odd bit of knowledge from his undersized memory bank.
“Really?” Frank was on the verge of pressing Tyson for more information, when a city cop pulled alongside the Wienermobile.
“Get this thing out of the middle of the freakin’ road!” he yelled.
Hotdogger number two flipped off the Wienermobile’s engine and threw the key to the cop. The kid clearly had a problem with authority figures. “You want this thing off the freakin’ road? Then you move it!”
The cop barreled out of his car. “Watch your smart-ass mouth, boy!”
“Whoa!” Frank stepped between the two hotheads. “We’re not lookin’ for no trouble, officer. We got a blown engine and this here thing can’t be moved until we get a tow.”
The cop was too busy staring down the angry Hotdogger to hear much of what Frank was saying. The eyeball-to-eyeball standoff might have gone on for some time had it not been for another New Brunswick PD patrol car that had worked its way through a tangle of vehicles choking Albany Street to a standstill.
“Christ Almighty!” a cop with stripes on his arm shouted at the patrolman. “What the hell are you doin’? You let the city get tied up in knots because of this? I want this street clear – now!” He waved his arms at the snarled traffic. Cars and trucks were either stopped cold or slowing to check out the drama unfolding on the corner of Albany Street and Johnson Drive.
“All right, goddamnit!” the junior cop relented. “I’ll call in a tow!”
“Tow my ass!” the senior cop shouted back. “That’ll take another half hour. The road’s packed all the way to Edison! Since your car’s practically up the ass-end of this thing, push the sausage or whatever the hell it is down Johnson Drive.”
“It’s not a sausage,” Frank broke in. “It’s an Oscar Mayer Wiener.” Both cops gave Frank one of those killer looks and the Hotdogger quickly skipped to the side.
The junior cop stormed to his city-owned Chevy, rammed it into gear and slid the front bumper and hood under the back end of the Wienermobile’s elongated bun. A perfect fit.
“One of you boys get behind the wheel and steer!” the junior cop screeched at the pair of Hotdoggers. Frank took up the passenger seat and Hotdogger II slipped behind the wheel. Once the Wienermobile’s transmission was in neutral, junior cop gave the vehicle a whack and it made a slow turn onto Johnson Drive.
“Where we goin’?” the Hotdogger with an attitude shouted at the senior cop who was now jogging alongside the wiener.
The cop pointed to Johnson & Johnson’s main entrance. “The driveway up ahead. Turn left and park it there.”
Junior cop gave the wiener enough momentum to navigate the turn into J&J’s property. The maneuver worked perfectly. The mobile came to a stop about the same time a Johnson & Johnson security guard arrived on the scene.
“What are you doin’? the guard screamed. “What are you doin’? What are you doin’?”
The Wienermobile had inserted itself into Johnson & Johnson’s sanctuary and the guard knew it was a non-consensual act. No unauthorized vehicles were allowed to breach the boundaries of the corporation’s worldwide headquarters.
“This here is staying put until we get a tow,” the senior cop informed the guard.
“That’s not gonna happen!”
“It’s already happened, bozo.”
What little authority the guard had was fading fast. “Who said you could do this? Who said?”
Frank pointed to me. “This man told us to take the side street and...”
The guard cut off the hotdogger’s explanation. “You!” he roared and glowered at me. “Who the hell are you?”
“Just trying to help,” I explained. My mantra. As Doug Kool said, it’s what you do. If I weren’t planning to be cremated, the words would be etched on my tombstone.
“This can’t happen!” the guard insisted and unholstered a walkie-talkie to beep someone higher up the security chain. “They said to get it off the property!” he said a few seconds later, repeating an executive order from somewhere deep inside J&J’s command center.
Whoever they were did nothing to intimidate the cop with the stripes. “It’s not goin’ back onto that goddamn street!” he bellowed back.
The guard squawked into his radio one more time but was clearly getting no help. Johnson & Johnson’s red-faced sentinel was on his own and the way he was sweating, dealing with a wiener wasn’t in his job description.
“All right, all right!” the guard sputtered. “But Jesus Christ! You can’t leave it blocking the whole damn driveway!”
“You got a better suggestion, genius?” the senior cop asked.
“Pull it up more!”
The junior cop stuck his head out the driver’s side window of the squad car. “What’s pull it up more supposed to mean?”
“More. You know, more!”
“Idiot.” The senior cop pointed a finger at the hot-tempered hotdogger. “You – steer the thing over there!” He waved at the sixteen-floor tower that housed Johnson & Johnson’s executive brain trust.
The guard glanced at the gleaming white building. “Oh, good god, not…” Nothing was more sacred on the corporate grounds than the white spear that was the cerebral cortex for the world’s largest diversified healthcare business. The security officer turned to the senior cop and used his wide eyes to beg for mercy.
But it was too late. The junior cop bumped the mobile and it moved forward along a ribbon of asphalt that wound its way through twenty acres of perfect landscape. The hot dog might have ended up in front of the corporation’s main entrance had it not been for the now totally panicked guard who sprinted alongside the Wienermobile screaming at the hotdogger doing the steering. When the guard realized it was going to take more than words to keep a disaster from turning into a catastrophe, he ran a few yards in front of the wiener. Then he made an abrupt about-face, planted his feet, stretched out his arms and turned himself into a human barricade.
“Ah, shit!” the hotdogger with an attitude yelled and yanked the steering wheel hard to the left. The Wienermobile missed hitting the guard but the hotdogger’s maneuver sent the vehicle down a steep curved drive that led to an underground garage. The wiener plummeted toward the entrance to the sub-surface executive parking lot.
“What the hell?” the junior cop cried out.
“Mother of God!” the guard croaked.
The hotdogger with an attitude pounded the wiener’s brake pedal but the wiener kept skidding down the drive. He yanked the emergency brake lever and jammed the mobile’s transmission into reverse. The metal-mashing sounds that followed were ear piercing. But the noise was mellow compared to the resonance of steel and fiberglass being mashed against the driveway’s stone wall.
“Sonofabitch!” roared the hotdogger. The Wienermobile had traveled halfway down the drive that was the only way in or out of the garage. The back tip of the Oscar Mayer hot dog was flattened against one side of the driveway and the vehicle cab was flush against the opposite wall.
“What the hell have you done?” the security guard wailed.
The senior police officer quickly grasped the extent of the tie up and assaulted the junior cop with a minute’s worth of profanity. Junior cop didn’t seem at all upset by the incident and, in fact, looked as amused as Maurice Tyson.
“Back that thing out of there!” yelled the guard.
The hotdogger in the driver’s seat retracted the mobile’s sun roof – a “bun roof,” Maurice told me. “Hey, jerk head! The freakin’ transmission’s shot, man! So’s the damn brakes!”
The sweaty guard swallowed and made the sign of the cross.
Hotdogger with an attitude added more bad news. “The only thing that’s keepin’ this thing from rollin’ the rest of the way down and takin’ out the garage door is a piss pot of brake fluid that’s leakin’ out fast!”
“But you have to back it out!” the guard implored. He was near tears.
“Mr. Guard,” Frank called out through the open bun roof. “The Wienermobile can only go one way and that's down! We need something to stick under the front wheels before the brakes let go altogether!”

“What?”

The senior cop grabbed the guard by his shoulder and told him to radio for help. “Somebody needs to open the garage doors and throw a chuck under them wheels!”

The guard was more comfortable taking orders than solving problems -- particularly a problem that was blockading the transportation artery used by the corporation's most powerful men and women. He turned to me once he finished talking to a J&J garage attendant. “Seventy cars down there and now not one of 'em can get out. See what you done?”

Before I could complain that I was being falsely accused, the executive garage door rolled up and a husky man with a crew cut walked out carrying a ten foot piece of lumber.

“That's a six-by-six,” the senior cop said knowingly. “Should do the trick.”

The garage attendant kicked the beam under the Wienermobile's front tires and the angry hotdogger lifted his foot from the brake pedal. Then Frank and he made an emergency exit through the open bun roof.

“I'm puttin' a call in for a wrecker,” the senior cop said to the guard.

“You know who owns those cars parked down there?” the guard asked anyone who'd listen. “I'll tell you who owns 'em! The people who can fire my ass, that's who! That garage is filled with Beamers, Lexus's and Jags, for chrissakes. And not one of 'em can get out because …” The guard turned to the two young men hauling themselves off the Wienermobile's roof and onto the ledge of the driveway wall this.

“Because of this … this bratwurst.”

“It's a Oscar Mayer Hotdog, sir,” Frank said and got back such a vicious stare that he and his colleague loped away from the driveway and headed toward Johnson & Johnson's prized piece of outdoor artwork, Henry Moore's Mother and Child.

“All of yous – clear out!” the security guard shouted at the small crowd that by now had lined the sidewall of the executive garage driveway to get an interior view of the Wienermobile through its bun roof opening.

I told Maurice that the show was over. Tyson agreed to leave the premises but only after hustling two wiener whistles from Frank.

#  #

The New York metro TV outlets had a field day with footage of the Oscar Mayer frankfurter stuck in one of Johnson & Johnson's most guarded orifices. According to news reports, things got worse shortly after Maurice and I left the scene to continue searching for Yigal Rosenblatt and Twyla Tharp. About the time we found the happy couple downing Caffe Lattes at a nearby Starbucks, the Wienermobile's gas tank ruptured. A HazMat team was called in to handle the fuel spill and all attempts to dislodge the wiener from the executive garage driveway were put on hold. When a pair of heavy-duty wreckers were given the go-ahead to extract the wiener, workers discovered that any yanking and pulling would cause serious damage to the stone walls bordering each side of the driveway. It was at that point that a J&J heavyweight made an executive decision to bring in a crane to hoist the wiener up and away from the garage entrance. That meant waiting until morning before the luxury cars trapped
in the garage could be given their freedom. Finding a crane, it seemed, was not that simple – even for a corporation with $70 billion in assets.

“The trials and tribulations of the captains of capitalism,” Doc Waters chuckled as he and a dozen other Gateway residents watched NBC’s eleven o’clock news broadcast on our only TV. Seeing some of the city’s royalty – and in New Brunswick that definitely included J&J’s brass – get royally screwed proved to be top-notch evening entertainment.

Then the anchorman reported Johnson & Johnson was arranging a limousine pickup for every executive whose car was stuck in the underground garage. The mood went sour. Professor Waters said: “Still an embarrassment to the company.”

“You think?” I asked. It seemed to me that the corporation had turned a serious transportation problem into a minor inconvenience.

“David Letterman’s going to be working this for the next month and a half,” the professor prophesized. “Somebody sticks a wiener where it doesn’t belong and it’s a manna from heaven for every comedian in America.”

Doc’s humor didn’t register with Yigal Rosenblatt who was spending his last night in New Brunswick before returning to Florida. The lawyer was preoccupied with Twyla Tharp -- one of the few women ever to get past the Gateway’s front door. A half hour earlier, I had spotted Manny’s niece taking an evening walk and hauled her into the shelter before she found a way to violate her parole. In a few minutes, I’d be taking her back to the Hyatt. For the moment, Twyla was tantalizing Rosenblatt and every other Gateway resident.

“Know what I love, Bullet?” Twyla asked.

“What?”

“Wiener. I love wiener.”

Why wasn’t I surprised?

I shifted gears. “It’s getting late. We need to get back to the hotel.” Sequestering Twyla with a bunch of sex-starved men had its risks – but an even bigger peril would have been to let her loose on her own. I didn’t want her wandering into any compromising situations with Yigal, Doc or anyone else who might raise Maglio’s ire. Plus there was the matter of the two Hispanic thugs still wandering the streets. Thanks to Twyla’s stripper pole, one was down for what could be a long count. The second, however, was still in good health and probably a bad mood. I wasn’t sure what his next step might be but hurting, harassing or even kidnapping Twyla as a way of getting to me could be an option. Until I could deposit Manny’s niece in a safe place, I would do what I could to keep her protected.

“That wiener wagon got stuck right across from the hotel, didn’t it, Bullet?” Twyla asked. Only Albany Street separated the Hyatt from Johnson & Johnson’s executive garage. “I really would love to see the wiener. Just a quick look. Can we, please Bullet?”

Yigal jumped on the idea. “Yes, we should. Good idea.”

I checked my watch. Eleven thirty. I didn’t have the fortitude to beat off another crazy proposal. The prospect of wandering through downtown New Brunswick at this time of night put me on edge. But since Central Jersey’s newest attraction was attracting a horde of curiosity seekers, I figured there had to be a few midnight spectators who would give us cover. Besides, I wasn’t about to let a couple of would-be assassins dictate every move I wanted to make. I piled Twyla, Yigal and Doc into my car and drove to the Hyatt.
After parking the Buick only a few spaces from where Four Putt Gonzales had been shot in the leg, we headed toward Albany Street. We were on the sidewalk bordering Johnson & Johnson’s campus when Doc grabbed my arm. “That truck – I’ve seen it before,” he said, pointing to a nondescript pick-up that made a right turn on a street that ran behind the Hyatt.

“Looks like eight million other trucks,” I said.

“It had an out-of-state plate,” Waters noted. “I can’t place where I saw it, but…”

An impatient Twyla Tharp pulled on the professor’s arm. “It’s just a truck, Doc! Come on. Let’s go!” She dragged Waters ahead, Yigal and I trailing.

Johnson & Johnson’s property was designed by I.M. Pei to be a seamless part of New Brunswick. The corporate headquarters’ grassy perimeter rolls up to city sidewalks without any kind of barrier. Except for bums and inebriated college students, pedestrians are rarely discouraged from wandering around the property. On this particular evening, there was a group of spectators lined up along one side of the garage driveway to get a late-night look at the disabled Wienermobile.

“No security,” Professor Waters observed. I caught a quiver of uncertainty in his voice.

As usual, Doc was right. We showed up mid-way through a shift change of Johnson & Johnson’s security guard. Five minutes earlier or later and we probably wouldn’t have gotten within fifty yards of the garage entrance. Now there was no one to stop us or about two dozen other Oscar Mayer fans from pressing ourselves against the driveway wall and gawking at the immovable dog and bun. Twyla began stroking the wiener in a way that made Yigal’s knees go weak. Doc noticed a man standing behind the large Mother & Child sculpture that stood between us and J&J’s front entrance.

“The thing in his hand,” Doc whispered to me. “It’s either a video camera or a weapon.”

The distant, dark form shifted to the right. The man was too tall and heavyset to be either of the Hispanics who had been chasing me since my visit to Orlando. The pale light filtering out from J&J’s headquarters lobby caught the object in the man’s hand.

“It’s a camera,” I said. “No big deal. He’s taking pictures of the frankfurter.”

The professor shook his head. “It’s not the hot dog he’s videoing. It’s us!”

“Well, then maybe he wants a few candids of Twyla…”

“He’s been pointing that camera at you, me and Yigal since we got here.”

I doubted there was anything sinister about the mysterious figure. Still, a logical plan would be to blend in with the small crowd, wait for the next security team to arrive and then get escorted across the street to the Hyatt. But aggravation overrode logic. I was tired of being followed, intimidated, photographed, bombed and shot at. I was through boxing with shadows. It was time to go on the offensive so I called Doc and Yigal into a huddle. “Let’s go talk to Mr. Candid Camera.”

The professor glanced over his shoulder at the heavyset man dressed in a lightweight jacket and baseball cap. “That isn’t a good idea, Bullet.”

“Maybe not but it’s what I’m going to do. I could use a little back up just in case.”

“You know, you’re right – he’s probably here to take a little footage that he can send as a video clip to his friends,” said Doc, looking for a way out.

“If he’s a regular Joe, he won’t mind my striking up a conversation. But if he isn’t…”

“He could make a run for it,” Yigal predicted.
“Good point. If he does, here’s what we’ll do. Yigal, you and Doc approach him from either side and I’ll come at him straight on.”
Doc pulled at his hair. “This could turn out bad, you know.”
“Couldn’t be much worse than a few pounds of C-4 blowing up in your face or fifteen rounds of ammo coming your way,” I said. “Look, you’re probably right, Doc. Chances are he’s nothing more than some slob fooling around with his Camcorder. Let’s go find out.”
“I’m telling you, I have a bad feeling.”
No more discussion. I ordered Yigal to take the right flank and Doc the left.
“What if he does run?” Yigal wanted to know.
“I don’t know. Chase him.”
Yigal bounced off on a path wide right of the large Henry Moore sculpture. I nudged Doc on a course heading to the left of the mystery man and I strode directly toward the target.
As we approached, the man backpedaled toward Johnson & Johnson’s front door. When we moved closer, he turned and ran full tilt into Yigal’s zone. His mistake. Panicked, Rosenblatt exploded into a super-storm of out-of-control energy. The lawyer’s arms flapped, his legs pumped and his head wagged so ferociously that his yarmulke took off like a Frisbee.
“Yigal!” It occurred to me that the man in our crosshairs might actually be a nobody who thought he was a whisker away from being mugged. Being responsible for someone else’s heart attack was something I didn’t need.
“Yigal!” I screamed again.
Rosenblatt was in a frenzy, whirling his body around like a mini-tornado. Camera man cut his sprint to a crawl.
“Yigal! Get out of his way!”
My screaming had no impact on the lawyer but it flustered camera man. He lowered his head and launched a full-speed assault on the lawyer, catching Yigal with his shoulder and driving him into J&J’s manicured turf. Rosenblatt was pudgy and out of shape so he was easy to put down. But he had a Weebles-like quality that had him back on his feet in a second. Whether it was deliberate or another impulsive act of lunacy, the lawyer took after camera man.
With the lawyer flailing away only a few feet behind him, camera man had little choice but to head toward the driveway that led to J&J’s underground executive parking lot.
Rosenblatt kept charging, arms flapping and head gyrating. He was nearly on top of the man when the two reached the yellow tape that cordoned off the entrance to the garage.
From the distance, it was impossible to tell if camera man was pushed by Yigal or whether he slipped on the layer of absorbent material that had been shoveled onto the pavement by the HazMat team. Whatever, the man tumbled through the tape and slid face-first down the driveway. Yigal also fell hard but managed to keep himself from plummeting toward the Wienermobile.
I was too far away to get a close-up view of what happened next. According to Twyla, the man with the video camera rolled under the Wienermobile’s chassis. Still skidding, he slammed into the six-by-six beam wedged beneath the mobile’s front wheels. The force of the impact dislodged the wood and the Oscar Mayer vehicle broke loose.
Unfortunately for camera man, his descent was slightly faster than the wiener’s start-up speed. He banged into the closed door of the garage an instant before the Wienermobile hit the entryway, catching camera man with the full brunt of the out-of-control bun.

Twyla and the other wiener admirers erupted with a chorus of gasps and screams. Doc Waters and I raced to the edge of the driveway, hopping over Yigal who was seated on the ground brushing debris from a gash on his right arm. We half-ran, half-slid to what was left of the J&J garage entrance, ending up on either side of camera man. The lower half of his body had been pulverized by the Wienermobile -- his mangled legs stuck under the front wheels. Blood gushed from a jagged tear in his neck.

“Damn!” I shouted at Doc. “His artery’s been cut.”

“Got to stop the bleeding,” the professor said and like magic, a cotton blouse fell from the sky. Waters quickly turned the woman’s shirt into a compress and jammed it against the man’s neck. I looked up and spotted Twyla Tharp hovering over the wall wearing nothing but a skimpy bra.

A half-dozen men joined Doc and me at the lower end of the garage driveway. They tried pushing the Wienermobile uphill a foot or two but the vehicle didn’t move.

“Not good,” Doc Waters muttered. “He’s trapped.”

“Check his skull,” I ordered. The injured man’s baseball cap had slipped forward and a visor covered his forehead and eyes. Trickles of blood leaked from under the sweatband.

Waters gently removed the man’s hat and then pulled back with a start.

“My God!” the professor whispered.

“What?”

“It’s… It’s Conway Kyzwoski!”

---

Book of Nathan

Available at Amazon.com (hardcover - $19.72; Kindle - $2.99)