

Bites
Barbeque Trail leads to Atlanta
a travelogue trilogy part II

by Tim Yearneau

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CHAPTER 1

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All I wanted to do was make my car payment. How I went so wrong I don't know. With work done for the day I hopped on my bike and spun the pedals in an easy circular motion as I began the march to Atlanta, heading down the four mile stint of bike trail through breezy trees and glimmering ponds. The sunshine pouring through the blue skies filled me with all the vitamin D imaginable. Arriving at the end of the trail I strapped the bike to the car and boogied straight to a nearby coffee shop.

For me as an educator the sad fact is money is tight this time of year. It's that short, dreadful period between the last regular school year pay check and first summer school pay check. Bills pile up, but money doesn't. With Atlanta days away, the pressure mounted.

Acknowledging I'm to be reimbursed for my trip expense doesn't change the equation. I pay upfront and get reimbursed later. Adding to the vise I'm leaving early to spend time as a tourist, meaning my own money will pour from my pockets.

I calculate and re-calculate until my teeth hurt, but repeated spreadsheet calculations don't ease the stress. The next paycheck would arrive on Monday, four days away. In the meantime I'd be in Atlanta running up expenses, though having fun. This won't change anything either, perhaps only ratcheting up the anxieties.

Nor does rationalizing that I've taken other trips with far less coin help me. I once drove down to Texas with two others for a wedding. It only cost me \$300 for the entire six day period, and I had the time of my life.

Considering all this I packed up my laptop, plopped in the car, and exited the parking lot heading east on 494. Exiting ten miles later, the friendly confines of Walmart waited. I zoomed from aisle to aisle, scooping up all that would be necessary.

Somewhere during my zooms a thought coursed through my brain. *Dang it, I forgot to make my car payment.* The credit union where I make payments is near the end of the bike trail, but I forgot. And they aren't set up for online payments. Now, during rush hour, I'll have to drive all the way back, though I very much don't want to.

I pushed buttons on my cell phone, *ring, ring, ring.*

"Hello," said the voice on the other end.

"Yes, my car payment is due today. Could I pay it over the phone with my credit card?"

"We don't allow car payments with a credit card."

"Oh ... mmm, I know there is a ten-day grace period for making a payment. I'm going on a trip tomorrow morning and won't be able to get in before I leave. What's the final due date for the grace period to expire?

"June 8th."

"Oh, that's cutting it close. I'm not getting back until the evening of the 7th," I said with a tinge of negativity, adding a terse, "I'll hop in my car and leave now." I convinced myself she noted my negativity through the phone and somehow felt bad.

"Okay, thanks for calling," she said, failing to acknowledge my emotions.

I knew with precision the alternate route I would take. I've used it for years on the way to work to avoid the kluge of freeway traffic. I vroomed through a maze of sides streets like a Formula One driver with a bad haircut. Shagging it into the credit union the clock on their wall read 4:41 pm, a cushion of nineteen minutes. I greeted the clerk with a smile. I was fortunate in that only a few of my nerves were frayed. I readied myself to dispense a woe-is-me tale in an attempt to make her feel bad. *If only they allowed car payments online; if only they took car payments by phone; if only if*

Leaving the credit union and re-entering 494 east for the drive home, I encountered a murderous traffic jam. I exited on south 169 to relieve the pressure, but the weight of tight finances still haunted me, causing my hands to clutch the steering wheel extra tight while simultaneously gritting my teeth. My forearms stiffened like wood and sweat worked its way down my brow and lip in a slow steady drip. If my problems weren't enough, as though pouring salt on a wound, a new traffic jam took hold, far exceeding what I had left behind on 494; cars lined up for miles. An emotional choke hold suffocated me in pity. They say that most of life isn't fair, whoever *they* are, but I resent it being so brutal.

However, my prior experience in Chicago paid dividends. I took a deep breath, giving myself permission to curse a little, while staying in the same lane. I thought about using my ingenious lane-switching algorithm, but then remembered the results achieved when I used it in St. Louis. Complete failure.

Instead I stayed calm and regained my composure, rolling the windows up, and turning on the air conditioning. I got smart and tuned in a good radio station all the while whistling while I waited. At the precise moment I exited onto Old Shakopee Road, following the straight and narrow path to home sweet home.

I stayed up until midnight, washing, packing, and architecting a way to fit everything I needed into a lone backpack. The dress shoes presented the biggest challenge given their bulky nature.

I'm not about to pay the airlines a baggage fee. Nope. I've even avoided fees before on overseas flights, researching weight limits and testing mockups to stay under. A lone backpack did the trick before, and will do again this time.

On other trips barbecue took a backseat to something with greater priority; The Fever in Chicago, American Idol in Los Angeles. I could use the same type of rationale here, but I won't.

I'm going to Atlanta to be a local union delegate for the National Education Association Representative Assembly convention, herein known as the NEA. This purpose alone credentials me for bailing out on barbecue with a litany of excellent excuses; *I'll be too busy, someone else is paying the freight, this is too important, there'll be conflicts with NEA events, I'll be tired.* Blah, blah, blah. All lame. I have plenty of time and I'm coming early to be Joe Tourist. As I later learned a delegate works hard, but plays hard too.

As a final excuse I wanted to be done with this book, so I rationalized that I could come back to Atlanta another time. Besides, adding Atlanta to the Mr Y BBQ Tour would add torturous months to the editing process, sending my illusionary timeframe into oblivion.

All of this is absurd, I finally concluded. I'd be a fool if I didn't hit barbecue while in Atlanta; the heart of the Deep South, the very soul of barbecue country. I needed to take advantage of the here and now for who knows how long it might be before I would come back. Opportunity is knocking now, not tomorrow; carpe diem, dammit. I'm all in.

* * *

I strolled down the concourse of the Minneapolis-St. Paul International airport at a leisurely pace. My departure gate for Atlanta graced the far end, as far as you can go, beyond the visible horizon. With not a worry in the world I glided into the concourse mini-mart and purchased some blueberry yogurt. I had left home in plenty of time, rushing out the door to avoid being a last minute casualty.

As I removed the top to the yogurt, I felt the weight of the backpack jerking down on my back. I had loaded it to the hilt, filling every spare inch. I ripped the plastic spoon from its package and dumped the mucky yogurt cover in the nearest trash bin. I took the newspaper I'd just bought, rolled it up, and tucked it under my arm. I continued to stroll down the concourse as I took sweet gulps of yogurt, all the while playing a pleasant jingle in my head. The sky looked blue and beautiful as the rays of the sun broke the clouds.

"Passenger Tim Yearneau, this is your last boarding call for Delta Flight twelve-ninety-one. Please proceed to the gate for your last boarding call," a voice bellowed over the airport intercom. Son-of-a-beehive! I paused in shock. According to the clock I witnessed a minute ago I had almost twenty-five minutes left. Other passenger names poured out of the overhead speaker, too. I've boarded lots of airplanes before with minutes to spare and been just fine. Scrambling to organize I picked up the pace, taking gulps of yogurt at an ever increasing clip.

"Passenger Tim Yearneau, this is your last boarding call for Delta Flight twelve-ninety-one. Please proceed to the gate for your last boarding call." Now dumping the yogurt and newspaper in the trash with a one-piece motion, fear gripped me. The potential humiliation, not to mention extra expense, motivated me as I made a quick check of the backpack for tightness of fit, bolting at full-speed like Dagwood Bumstead racing out the door, sweat flying from me onto the concourse floor. Get in my way and you'll get hurt, I thought. Moving in leaps and bounds down the long and forever hallway, my bum knees didn't complain a bit.

Flying at full tilt, powered by panic, I heard it one more time, *"Passenger Tim Yearneau this is your last boarding call for Delta Flight twelve-ninety-one. Please proceed to the gate for last boarding call. This is your last call."* I'm almost there, I thought, I'm close, don't you see me? I'm running as fast as I can. Hang on. Don't close that gate!

* * *

I had experienced this monstrous dilemma before of running full speed down an airport concourse in order to catch a flight. The most memorable happened a little over a dozen years ago on my way to Uzbekistan to pay a visit to Lisa Ocone.

I had flown into Dulles airport in Washington D.C. with her sister in order to make a connecting flight to India, our first leg. We had done everything they said to do for an international flight, arriving fully three hours early. As fate would have it seven other flights arrived at the same time.

Lisa Ocone's sister went ahead to the departure gate at Terminal 2, across the tarmac. Meanwhile, I zig-zagged in one of the many lines that stretched down and around the corner. We passengers were like ants in an ant farm awaiting marching orders. Not only did I have the backpack strapped to my back, I luggered a heavy-as-a-brick suitcase earmarked for Lisa Ocone as well. Overwhelmed by the arriving flights the understaffed counter agents made heroic efforts to move passengers on to their connecting flights.

When I got to the counter I had only twenty-minutes to get from there to the departure gate at Terminal 2, which I must remind you, was on the other side of the tarmac, where Lisa Ocone's sister sat waiting.

They ran my backpack through the x-ray machine and after being scanned, I grabbed it for the long run to the tram. Except, they made an error. I had to run it through again.

After the second scan I grabbed it again and headed off. Except, I had another checkpoint to head through. From there I bolted to the tram like O.J. Simpson in a Hertz commercial.

Halfway through the slow-as-a-turtle tram ride something seemed strange. Reaching behind and tapping my back I figured it out. No backpack. All of my possessions for the entire trip lay in that backpack which sat at the second checkpoint in the main terminal.

I could see our Boeing 747 Jumbo jetliner out the window of the tram. I fidgeted in a sweat filled panic for the tram to finish crossing the tarmac. Muttering prayers of hope didn't do a lick of good.

Arriving back at the main terminal, I sprinted like the Road Runner back to the checkpoint to reclaim my backpack. But there were more delays as I had to prove who I said I was. This subtracted precious minutes to get on that plane. When they finally let me go, I grabbed my backpack and bolted to the tram.

I stood the entire tram ride back; my anxieties having a field day. I exited in full sprint, running the corridors of Terminal 2 as fast as my legs would allow, the weight of my backpack taking its toll. The departure gate, as fate would have it, sat on the far terminus of that long, never-ending, marathon concourse. In ok shape, but not an Olympic Athlete, I reached a physical limit.

Up ahead Lisa Ocone's sister urged me to the finish line, waving me on with a flurry of motion, exhorting me with all her might, "Hurry! Hurry! Run! They're closing the gate!" I walked at a brisk pace, all that I could muster and all I had left, out of breath.

When I got to the gate, with the Boeing 747 Jumbo jetliner in full view, the agent informed me, "We've closed the gate for boarding."

"But the plane is right there!" I said.

"I'm sorry sir, we've removed the wheel blocks."

Just put the wheel blocks back, I thought. So I said, "Can't you just open the gate? The plane is right there!" My pleading was to no avail. A group of 30 passengers on the way to their homeland in Africa were stuck like me. But they were fully paying customers, and I wasn't. I had standby status due to getting my plane ticket in exchange for doing web design work for an airline employee friend of mine.

"Aren't you mad? Aren't you mad you paid full fare and they won't let you on?" I exhorted the Africans. "The plane is right there," pointing to the jet out the window. I noted their rising anger. "It's right there! And they won't let you on. Aren't you mad?" They growled like raging bulls. I had achieved my goal.

"You! Come with me!" an agent said pointing at me, her body filled with her own unique brand of rage. I knew I'd been caught, and followed with humility. Stopping in a bolt, and facing me square, she said, "You can't do that to us!! We have enough trouble as it is! If you cause us trouble then not only will we not let you on, we'll revoke the flying privileges of the employee you got the ticket from!!!" Wow! The sheer force of her anger pounded me into submission.

My friend, the airline employee, had warned me about this very situation, and now I was seconds away from it becoming true. Full of honest remorse I said to the agent, "I'm sorry. It was a heat of the moment thing and I wanted to be on that plane and it's still right there. My friend warned me about causing trouble and I certainly don't want to. You have a tough situation here and I realize I'm making it worse. I'm sorry." My head drooped, and I was unable to look her in the eye.

* * *

Today, in my current dilemma, sprinting down the concourse of the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport in order to catch Delta Flight 1291 to Atlanta, thoughts of that prior experience at Dulles Airport dominated. I continued to sprint at a desperate pace, and finally reached the Delta ticket counter. I couldn't help but notice the counter agent holding the mike to his face ready to declare me booted from the flight.

"I'm here! I'm here!" I yelled, nearly out of breath.

The counter agent saw me and said, "You don't have to worry any more. You don't have to run. Go ahead and walk and get on the plane. There is plenty of time." He said it with soothing calm.

I did as he said and slowed to a walk. "I heard my name and I'm like 'Oh no!' I ran full tilt and I'm out of breath. Thank you, thank you," I said, still inhaling short bursts of air. He smiled, grabbed my ticket, and scanned it. I grabbed my things, grateful as can be, and took the first steps down the runway to the plane, never looking back.

I would be remiss if I didn't fill you in on the final outcome of my India flight those years ago. Lisa Ocone's sister and I did indeed miss it. They weren't about to open the doors for us.

Tension and chaos further strafed the air. In addition to the agent's fury, Lisa Ocone's sister was none too pleased, and the African passengers were still going bananas. In the midst of this veritable pounding the agent started punching some buttons on her terminal.

"Did you know," she said in a calm tone, "that because of the kind of ticket you have I can book you First Class on every leg of your trip, including your return flight?"

"No I did not," I said, attempting to process this unforeseen turn of events.

"I can book you on the first flight out tomorrow."

"That would be fantastic!" I said, now beaming a broad smile, knowing that lemons had just been turned into lemonade. The Chaos Theory at work.

* * *

Today's flight to Atlanta was uneventful, pleasant if you will. I brought a book to read, *Red Shift Blue Shift: The Pendulum of Tim* by Leslie Peterson, a local Minneapolis writer. It's a fun, creative sci-fi adventure story and reading it during the flight provided me great tranquility. While sitting in my seat I couldn't help but reflect one more time about my India trip those years ago. I had pulled the thrill of victory out of the agony of defeat, and gotten more than I bargained for when the agent booked me First Class the rest of the trip. Perhaps in Atlanta, I mused, that same kind of good fortune would come tumbling down again in my search for the perfect barbecue.

Arriving in Atlanta I was struck by how big the airport is. Getting to Hertz to pick up my rental car took some navigating and a trailblazing spirit. I had to go down long corridors, up and down escalators, ride a few obscure elevators, take a train ride, do more walking, walking and walking until I was there. Hertz has a very cheery and professional process for checking in, and in no time I exited the parking ramp in a Ford Fiesta, ready for adventure.

I had it in my mind that Hartsfield International Airport lies a dramatic distance south of downtown Atlanta. It does not. I headed north on 85, zipping by downtown in minutes, and continued on to my motel in Norcross, a northeast suburb. I exited onto a random road to ask for directions and pulled into the nearest restaurant.

I approached a waitress who, without prompting, asked me, "Where are you from?" in her beautiful southern drawl. I love that sweet southern accent. There's something wholesome, charming, and warm about it.

"Minneapolis. Say do you know where Indian Trail Lilburn Road is?" I couldn't help but notice her alluring attire. Knit leggings, short skirt, busty top. If I didn't know any better, I'd say I'm was in the Atlanta version of Hooters with a bit of added sultry twist. She guided me on my way, still melting me with that sweet southern drawl—an interesting start to an educators convention.

CHAPTER 2

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Feeling exhausted and in the throes of sinus problems, I took a nap to freshen up. Part of my fatigue came from my continued anxieties over tight finances. Repeated spreadsheet calculations came up with the same dismal numbers and it sucked the energy right out of me.

I woke up from my nap with most of the afternoon gone. I headed to the grocery store to pick up stuff for a Super Salad. I love salads and wanted to save money and eat healthy at the same time. I'd lost a bunch of weight at work during our Biggest Loser contest and I had made a commitment to a lifestyle change. It's the best I've done in terms of losing weight and keeping it off in over a dozen years.

Salads became my counterweight to eating barbecue. Let's face it: eating barbecue is a deliciously spiritual experience and good for the emotions, but it's a killer on the waistline. A little research shows that barbecue is some of the worst food on the planet for our health; high on fat, calories, cholesterol, sugar, sodium, and who knows what. In short, it's death food.

But it came time to start the adventure with barbecue leading the charge. Research on the barbecue scene in Atlanta named popular places like Fox Bros., Fat Matt's, Heirloom, and Harold's. But I had to know where the locals went. Taking a stroll to the front desk I asked the clerk, "Hey, where's a good barbecue place around here?"

The friendly middle-aged white suburban fellow, said, "Well, I like Shane's BBQ. There's one about six miles from here." He pointed to the main road a short jog from the motel.

Heading back up to the room I fired up my laptop, a five-year old MacBook Pro. I discovered Shane's is a chain of 150 restaurants, with the original one being in McDonough, Georgia, some fifty miles from Norcross. I made a blink of a decision to eat at that one.

Franchises are great and all that, but nothing beats the original. There's always an intriguing story behind it, and the mandate that powers the Mr Y BBQ Tour is to get that story.

I plowed down 85 south for the journey to Shane's. Traffic flowed nice and smooth, except for the temporary traffic jam near downtown. Following 85 as it weaved through downtown, I caught 75 south looking for Eagles Landing Parkway exit. I found it a pounding distance south of downtown Atlanta and exited east for the drive to McDonough.

Getting there took a bit as the road alternated between urban structures, open country, more urban structures, and more open country creating a kind of disconnect for the urban traveler.

When I stopped my car for the red lights that adorned the intersection where highway 155 crosses over, I recognized the small structure sitting kitty corner from the pictures online. The road sign occupying the corner of their lot confirmed I'd arrived.

The original Shane's Ribshack is a small white country structure with a red angular roof, the kind I might find in a Norman Rockwell painting. For good measure, wooden steps lead to the front door, and a wooden walkway leads to a side door. In its truest sense, it's a hole-in-the-wall.

I entered the front door and plopped up to the red counter to place an order. The kitchen space looked as crammed as an overstuffed closet. Architects seemingly forgot about the kitchen when they were hired to expand the premises. It's like we're under orders to keep it jammed.

At Shane's, the kitchen is hidden from view by the wall displaying the Big Red menu. The color scheme of the place is easy to describe. White with thick strokes of red. Shane's would fit in perfectly in Lincoln, Nebraska, home of the University of Nebraska Cornhuskers; Big Red territory.

At 9 pm that night, an hour before closing time, buzz and energy filled the air. From the moment I stepped in the door, the constant stream of customers kept employees busy at an adrenaline-fueled clip. I scoured their menu and went for the traditional half-slab ribs, corn on

the cob, French fries, baked beans, and Brunswick stew. The last item raised the bar on my curiosity.

I hounded the clerk, a short blond college age woman with a ponytail, wearing a Shane's t-shirt and baseball hat, "Are you camera shy?" I asked. "I'm from out of town. I love barbecue ribs and whenever I go on trips I hit rib places and interview people and post little YouTube videos. I'm writing a travelogue book on all of it too. Are you open to being on-camera?"

The worker said, "No, I'm not camera shy, but the owner's daughter is in the back."

My eyes shot big, "Oh, that would be great!"

"She's busy now, but I'll talk to her and let her know you're here."

"Fantastic." Game on. I headed out to the screened porch area and immediately recruited a family eating there to film me as I made a glorious Mr Y BBQ Tour introduction.

In a flash a server arrived with my order. It came that fast. I grew anxious on the inside, ready to bug the server about the owner's daughter, but held back reasoning she'd fill me in when she had good news about my request. A short while later my server stopped by again to check on things.

My impatience proved too much to bear, "Did you talk to the daughter?"

"She's still busy." My nervousness increased as the clock on the wall now read 9:30 pm. Please, I thought, please let this interview happen.

Hungry, I dug in. The atmosphere out there had the feel of a cabin in the woods, and it sang with a bouncy jibe from the honky tonk southern Cajun music playing overhead.

I started with the sides and worked my way up to the ribs. Being honest I rate the French fries as average. The baked beans were respectable and held their own. The corn-on-the-cob good, as corn-on-the-cob by its very nature is good. The Brunswick stew would have to wait.

During cow week at my student's culinary course at Hennepin Technical College in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, I learned there are multiple ways to make barbecue ribs. They can be boiled, baked or smoked.

The ribs I ate at Shane's were either baked or boiled, I couldn't tell which. All I know is that the light-brown muddy colored meat fell off the bone *sooooo* easy and the texture *sooooo* tender. Dang it was good. Part of the fun is trying the sauces and they didn't disappoint: Original, Spicy, Mustard, and Hot.

In mathematical terms the sauces had a narrow standard deviation from the mean. In more verbose terms, on the high end of the spectrum, Hot brought the heat, but it wouldn't power a furnace and knock me on my pants. It'd be a climb to the mountain top for the novice, but a walk in the park to the hardcore. I'm a brave soul and willing to be daring, but I don't want to have to call the fire department.

Spicy wasn't hot. No siree Bob. But it did have a twangy kick that lingered, which separates it from the crowd. The word spicy inherently implies a bite that grips, but doesn't hurt. It makes a statement, but doesn't light a match.

The mustard sauce is really Mustard lite. It was flavorful enough to be noticed, but not enough to cause me a tortured face.

Original could very easily be named Neutral. A slight bend towards sweet, putting an overt emphasis on slight. To borrow a term from the Intelligence community, it is the Safe House of their sauces.

For those who come to Shane's expecting their sauces to follow a scorched earth policy, they'll be disappointed. For those who are looking for their sweet tooth to go bananas, forget it. No trip to the dentist will be necessary, for there won't be any cavities.

Non-extremists like me find Shane's to be the perfect place. Their sauces fit a narrow range, befitting a narrow standard deviation from the mean. I want to have my cake and eat it too.

To summarize, the Hot on one end gave me a chance to be daring without the worry of it ending badly. Original on the other end satisfied my sweet tooth, but avoided being over the top. The bottom line was that wimpy like me walked away happy.

The waitress never did come back and give me an update on the daughter, so I took matters into my own hands. I walked into the main entry area, the crossroads of the structure if you will, and waited. Patience is a virtue and I had a lot of it. Customers kept coming, one after another, in onesies and twosies, and in groups, but always a line. I intended for the line to come down, and then pounce.

A taller 6'3" middle-aged white gentleman paced back and forth, looking out the windows with a nervous tick, checking the clock as though in a hurry. Dressed in a dark blue polo shirt and tan pants, he checked the doors, and at one point stopped his pacing long enough to flick off the OPEN sign.

Sitting one chair over from me was Shawn, an African-American man with a heavier than average build, wearing a blue mechanics shirt. He had moved to Atlanta from Chicago a number of years ago. I made easy conversation with him which soon turned towards his newest passion, barbecue. He dreamed of opening his own barbecue place someday.

"Did you know Shane's offers franchises? Look, it says so right on the cup," I told him matter-of-factly.

Shawn looked at the cup in his hand and raised his eyebrows. The Truth stared him in the face, "No, I didn't."

"Barbecue is competitive." I said. "Everyone's got an ego, but it's a fun ego. No one is out to harm anyone else."

"Yeah, I know," he said. "Me and my brother compete with each other all the time over whose barbecue is better."

"Hey, are you camera shy? Could I interview you for my camera? I like to make little YouTube videos and post them."

Shawn said, "I'm still working on my barbecue skills. Besides I'm shy. I have to work on my skills and build my confidence." I sensed the lack of confidence in his barbecue skills presented a hefty roadblock to opening his own place.

"You know it's funny," I said "I love to eat barbecue, but I'm just a consumer. I don't actually make it. I should try and make some ribs sometime, and come up with my own secret sauce like everybody else. That would be half the fun."

"You should, it would be fun." Shawn grabbed his order, said his goodbyes, and headed out the door. My conversation with him lasted but a fleeting moment, but I had met another kindred spirit, another member of the fraternity, and that's all that mattered.

Still waiting for the line to die down and for the daughter to show herself, I schmoozed with the tall gentleman still pacing to and fro like an expectant father. Curiosity popped as to why he flipped the switch on the OPEN sign. Most customers wouldn't take it upon themselves to do such a thing, but he didn't look like an employee either.

"The line never slows down does it?" I asked him.

"No, it never does, that's why I had to turn off the sign and lock the doors. If I don't, the customers keep coming. The workers want to go home too," he said, with a friendly smile. I still puzzled for an explanation as to who this man was. Soon it became apparent from the shiny badge on his shirt.

"I'm from out of town and love barbecue. I bring my camera everywhere I go and do interviews and make little YouTube videos. I'm writing a book too. My waitress explained the owner's daughter is here tonight and I'm waiting to talk to her when it's not so busy."

"Oh, that's great. Where are you from?"

"I'm from Minneapolis." I started in, "The last time I was in Atlanta was in 1996 when I came for the Olympics. Everyone is so hospitable here. That's one of the biggest things I remember about Atlanta. Everyone rolled out the red carpet and laid on the Southern hospitality. It was wonderful. I came with my brother and his kid and we camped way up in Dahlonega. I just remember the Southern hospitality." I butchered my pronunciation of Dahlonega, pronouncing it *Duh-LA-ga-na*.

"Oh sure, Dahlonega," he said, pronouncing it the right way, *Da-len-ega*. "Well, you came to the right place. It's like that here. Everyone in these parts is so friendly and will roll out the red carpet for you."

"Are you camera shy?"

"No, no, no, I don't want to be on camera. I'm not dressed for it and I don't like to be on camera, especially since I'm working. Here let me give you a tour." By now I had figured it out. He worked as a local officer-of-the-law, on duty at Shane's.

Why do they need a Police Officer at Shane's, I wondered. Is it dangerous, am I in a bad area? Those thoughts faded quickly, as I recognized Shane's had a boatload of cash on-hand after a busy non-stop day of business. It made sense.

If he didn't have that badge on his shirt identifying him as a officer-of-the-law, I would think he was a personal concierge hired by Shane's. I got a wonderful earful on the short history of Shane's, which I soaked up with the curiosity of a first-grader learning the alphabet for the first time.

Next, he walked outside and gave me a rundown on three different outdoor seating options. The first, a screened porch, "is covered with windows in the winter." The second, a permanently enclosed area, "is air-conditioned for summertime comfort." The third, an open air deck, "didn't used to be this big. A year earlier a car careened off 155 and destroyed it. Shane's took this as an opportunity to expand it." They did a good job.

Walking down the steps to the playground, the officer-of-the-law gloated, "Most places don't even have a playground, much less a big beautiful one like this. This is what separates Shane's from everyone else. They do everything first class. They are great people, that family."

Back in the crossroads area he pointed to a frame on the wall holding a photograph of a love letter Shane's wife wrote to Shane. The officer-of-the-law explained, "They love each other so much, and it shows in how this place is run and how they treat their employees and their customers. They give back to the community with all their heart and they are just wonderful to have here. You'll never meet a better family. We're lucky to have them in our community."

Next, he gave me a mini-tour of the ordering area and filled me in on more Shane's history. I knew, listening to him, I'd scored gold. I never thought those warm fuzzy feelings from 1996 could ever be replicated. I was wrong.

Southern hospitality isn't a fad that withers with time. It strengthens like a hurricane as time marches forward. It creates happiness and warm feelings, and reconnects us to a better way, leaving the recipient full of gratitude to have experienced it, and questioning why there are divides in this world. If life has got you down, make it easy on yourself. Come to the South, rejuvenate your soul, and let faith be restored in your fellow man.

"Shane's is first class in everything, even their outhouse is air conditioned," the officer-of-the-law said, with oozing pride.

A tiny white structure with the word OUTHOUSE plastered across the top was unavoidable as one walked up the wooden walkway to the side entrance of Shane's. Its black angled roof mimicked the angular shape of the main building.

"Come with me, I'll show you," he said. He opened the door to the outhouse and I took a single step in.

The tiny structure approximated the size of a walk-in closet, enough room for a sink and a toilet. Turning my head slightly to the left I observed the air conditioning unit doing what it's designed to do.

"See, only at Shane's. They do everything first class," he said, with a smile working overtime. Amazed and speechless, I couldn't disagree.

Heading back in to the main building, I asked, "Are you from around here?"

Standing like two friends having a chat, he said, "No. I'm originally from New Jersey."

"Do you go back to visit very often?"

"Not real often, every once in a while."

"I heard you mention something about vacation and fishing."

"I'm going on vacation to Sea Island next week off the coast of Georgia for a little fishing. I love to fish. I made a deal with another officer that if I work his shift this week he'll cover me next week. I can't wait."

"Sounds fun. I'm not a big fishing kind of guy, but just getting out there away from the rat race is fun all by itself. Just the act of casting the line is relaxing."

"Oh yeah! It'll be fun to get away. I know what you mean."

With the doors locked and no more customers streaming in, the daughter finally appeared at the counter. Two daughters actually—Shaina and Summer. Both white Caucasian and college aged, but with divergent paths. One wore a baseball hat. The other, a head band. Despite their differences, it was easy to tell they were sisters.

They were willing participants in my scheme, answering my swarm of questions with precision. Shaina was the more outgoing of the two and did most of the talking. I scored the scoop on Shane's I'd dreamed about, my mandate satisfied.

"Do you like sweet tea, would you like some?" Summer offered with a cheery smile at the end of the night.

"Yes, I love tea."

"Great, here you go." She handed me a one-gallon jug. I had expected a glass, but this is the South.

"Did you try our peach cobbler? It's one of our specialties," Shaina insisted.

"No, I didn't. That's one thing I didn't get. I'm too full. But what the heck, who can say no?" She reappeared moments later with a large styrofoam container packed tight with peach cobbler. I made a deal with myself to save it and try it back at the motel. Portion control. I left Shane's with an overbearing feeling of warmth; Southern hospitality was alive and kicking. It's the gift that keeps on giving.

When I pulled into the parking lot of my motel in Norcross at 11:45 pm, I knew I'd be so pumped with adrenaline I wouldn't be able to sleep right away. I rushed up to the room, unpacked the laptop, hooked up the camera, fired up iMovie and went to work. After loading the footage I pushed the spacebar to start playing the clip, waiting in silent anticipation.

"NOOOOOO!" I screamed, stopping the clip. I checked my connections, and pushed the spacebar again. "NOOOOOO!" The adrenaline thing started to wear off. I sat and stared at the screen, running through the possibilities.

After some mental calisthenics I determined it had to be the settings on the camera. I spent the next hour checking every possible setting on both the camera and laptop. I even pulled the batteries out and theorized about them. Nothing I did changed the outcome. I came to the awful conclusion I'm screwed. I had great video, but no sound. My Interview of the Century was now a silent movie.

I toyed with the idea of leaving it that way. I could add subtitles and pattern it after the silent movies of the Roaring 20s. I even pulled up some on YouTube and examined them. No, I concluded after much consideration, I'm not going to do it. The flavor of my interview would be lost. It would take a lot of work for it to make sense, and my small time audience deserves better.

I had paid an unfair price for my bad habit of leaving the camera in the car. The humid, scorching hot Minnesota summers torched it, while the brutal winters froze the bytes out of it.

I needed a working camera for the rest of my trip. Like Albert Einstein I used thought experiments to find a solution. I liked the Kodak Playsport, but money was tight and I hadn't worked unplanned expenses into my budget. There are limits. My finances needed to be a zero sum game. The extra expense for a new camera over here had to come out of a bucket over there.

Salads. I would munch on extra salads and eat out less. That's how I kept my trip under \$300 those years ago, buying more from the grocery store and eating less at fast-food places and fancy restaurants.

I searched online for Best Buy stores in the greater Atlanta area. I searched their website and determined a brand new Kodak Playsport camera would run me \$145. I racked my brain. *Aha!*

Craigslist. I searched the listings for used Kodak Playsport cameras and found two for sale, one listed in Alpharetta and the other in Macon. Time for bed.