

CHAPTER 6

I headed back across the freeway into the main part of downtown Atlanta, where Olympic Park sat. I hadn't been there since 1996 and I didn't know how I'd feel or what emotions would percolate or if I would feel anything at all. I can't deny my Olympic experience was a special period in my life that left an indelible mark on me.

When Pete and I left for the Olympics in 1996 we were both broke, not too different than today. On every trip certain events get etched in my memory with vivid clarity.

Back then Plymouth automobiles had kiosks in malls across the country. I worked at kiosks in the Minneapolis area setting up test drives. I was one of the best at this. To help pay for my Olympic experience I convinced my boss, who ran the program nationally, to let me also work a kiosk at a local Atlanta mall. She agreed wholeheartedly. I more than held my own.

Olympic Park was built specifically for the Olympics. So was Turner Field, which was converted for baseball after the Olympics, becoming the new home of the Atlanta Braves.

Downtown bustled with Olympic visitors. Not to repeat myself, but vendors hawked goods with abandon on every square inch of real estate. I still have an Olympic t-shirt I bought from one of them.

The three of us, Pete, Chris and myself, were trekking along Peachtree street jammed. Out of nowhere Pete's son, Chris, screamed "LOOK!" He pointed at something on the ground.

Lying there ready for nimble fingers to snatch was a wad of rolled up bills. We counted upwards of \$400. After a lively debate we made the decision to do the right thing and search for the owner. True Catholics. We asked around and found him, a German tourist. The wad had fallen out of his pants pocket. We felt good about what we'd done. We could have kept the cash and who would know, but it was the right thing to do. Still true to this day.

Concerned for getting separated in the mass of humanity I implored Pete to set a meeting spot in case we got separated.

"No. No. We won't get separated," he said in smug confidence.

I front-loaded a great deal of sarcasm when I replied, "okay." 45 minutes later I asked him, in all seriousness, "Where's Chris?"

"I don't know," he said, whirling his head in multiple directions. "*Bleep*."

We searched at a frantic pace as there wasn't a way for us to contact Chris. Back then cell phones weren't in vogue like they are today. Being he was 9 years old, this was a problem. We searched and searched. Blood pressures rose. Words spit like nails, Our feet pounded the pavement until raw. Emotions were near to erupting. But then, amongst the mania, we found him. After a scolding by Pete, a soothing calm cast over us.

The Olympic spirit burned bright in Olympic Park. A stream of humanity rolled through it like a rustling river that never ends. The concerts, the events, the mass of tents, the flow of energy had no off switch. This uplifted our spirits well into the nighttime. But eventually we had to leave.

The three of us hauled out of there for a 26 hour drive to Miami, Florida. We had tickets to the Olympic soccer matches at the Orange Bowl. Pete and I alternated driving. We high-tailed it nonstop to Savannah, Georgia, then made a sharp right, heading south along the ocean to St. Augustine, Florida.

We stopped at a late-night gas station to fill up and get snacks. I wore my black backpack inside, tired and grubby. It's how I carried things.

"You better watch out for this guy," Pete smirked to the clerk, "he's shady. I'd check him out."

The clerk failed to find the humor, glaring at us, asking, "Do you know what happened?"

"No," we said in unison.

"A bomb went off at Olympic Park a couple of hours ago. It was in a backpack underneath a bench. A lady died and others were injured. They're looking for a white male." She went on to describe details as to where the bomb was placed, and a police description of the subject. Unbeknownst to us, it matched me.

Pete's eyes opened wide with mouth agape. "We were just in Olympic Park a few hours ago. We walked by that bench." We lost our smiles and scuttled the humor, departing in a somber mood for the rest of the long drive to Miami.

The bomber failed to dampen the Olympic spirit. I don't remember who played or scored at the soccer game in Miami, but I do remember the flaming bright orange of the Orange Bowl seats and the manic soccer crowds.

My image of the Orange Bowl got formed watching the Miami Dolphins play football on TV. Don Shula, the coach, worked the sidelines always pacing back and forth. And when the Dolphins played it always seemed to be a balmy sunny day. And the palm trees in the background always swayed gently from the light breeze. It seemed so glamorous, so perfect on TV. I watched from the frozen tundra in Minnesota with envy.

It's kind of strange this is what I focused on during the soccer match. I loved the ambience of the palm trees, the crowds, the Olympic spirit, but tuned out the soccer match itself.

Back in Atlanta Pete had an extra ticket to the track meet at Turner Field. He sold it to a Mexican man for face value, \$60. After he sold it we tramped into the stadium and up to our seats.

Midway through the track meet, a middle aged white gentleman sat down next to us, in the seat Pete had sold to the Mexican man. The gentleman had purchased it for \$110, a nice profit for the scalper.

More interesting, he was a big time reporter for another major network. His network didn't own broadcast rights to this Olympics so he came as a fan. Pete recognized him and began a long conversation. I learned later he rose to fame due to his reports at previous Olympics. His next Olympic assignment was to attend the Winter Olympics in Nagano, Japan, two years later. I still brag that we sat next to a big time Olympic reporter. Don't ask me for a name, for like a good politician, I don't remember.

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My reason for heading into downtown Atlanta, now, was to go learn about the world's most popular drink, Coca-Cola. On most trips I avoid tourist traps because they're just that. They seem too mamby pamby for me and I'd rather take the road less traveled. However, I just couldn't get around this one. Atlanta is home to the World Headquarters for Coca-Cola. It wouldn't matter if I wandered off the beaten path, I'd still end up sipping a Coke.

Reaching the outskirts of Olympic Park the dashboard clock read 5:07 pm. In a hurry, I pulled into the first parking lot I saw. A slim, squeaky clean, white suburban man approached, wearing a dark company polo shirt and reflective sunglasses, the kind that says, *Look at me man, I'm cool.*

He asked, "Where are you going?"

I hadn't been paying attention and he caught me a little by surprise, "Oh, I'm going to the World of Coca-Cola. Do you know where it is?"

"I'll mark you down for 6:30 pm," he said, not so concerned with my question. "We have a Dave Chappelle show tonight right over there," he pointed to a building adjacent to the parking lot, "and we need this stall."

Taken aback, I said, "Well, I'm going to need a little more time. Make it 2 hours. If it's a problem for me to park here I can go elsewhere."

"No, that's ok. I'll mark you down for 7 pm. You look like a good guy. I'll only charge you \$10. The World of Coca-Cola is right over there somewhere," pointing in the vicinity of Olympic Park. "I think it's on the other side of the park." He wasn't too good at hiding the fact that he didn't know, adding, "Hustle back. Don't be late. We need this stall."

"Ok," I said. As I walked along Olympic Park I realized that he had hustled me, and didn't care a hoot about me. His only concern was to fill a stall, and he got me to agree to a time limit so he could fill the stall with another person who'd pay more. This was wrong.

Just then I turned my head to the right and noticed a sign across the street, PARKING \$3 ALL DAY. Salt in a wound. I burned to turn and yell, "You little no good *jerk!* Screw your stupid Dave Chappelle concert. You just jacked me for loose change. You *suck!*" He didn't even know where the World of Coca-Cola was, and he worked two blocks away. What a bum.

The World of Coca-Cola is right on the other side of Olympic Park. Not figuratively or sort of. It's like, right across the street. The beauty of staying at the Omni Hotel is that it, too, borders Olympic Park. Also, the Georgia World Congress Center, the Georgia Dome, and CNN Center are a stone's throw away.

I still remained skeptical of going to the World of Coca-Cola. I couldn't get over that it had the aura of band-aid populist tourism. That didn't seem to be a factor when I plopped my money down and bought a discount ticket good for both the World of Coca-Cola and CNN Center.

The lobby is impressive in its array of Coke Can art, where they have works of art in the shape of colorful Coke Cans using international themes. There are seven exhibits to see, each demonstrating a distinct aspect of Coca-Cola. The central foyer leading to these exhibits flows with bright fun colors courtesy of mural artists.

I performed a preliminary scan and scoped out my options. I narrowed my list of must see exhibits to three, maybe four, depending on how much time I had.

Moms and their hoards of kids lined up to get their pictures taken with the Coca-Cola Polar Bear. I lined up for a short while before exiting. It took up too much time on the clock. I hustled upstairs and gave cursory looks to other less desirable exhibits.

The Vault looked interesting. It looked more like it should be on the TV show CSI. The line to it snaked in horrible fashion and they only let in a certain number of people at any one time.

We entered an area illuminated by red lights, highlighted by a bank of whiz bang spymaster looking monitors. Hidden cameras projected our images up on the screens. This for sure gave it a CSI feel, which I have to admit, was pretty cool.

Exiting this area placed me in the part of The Vault that I can only describe as a history lover's dream. The hallways were stacked with goobs of touch and feel artifacts such as a yellow delivery truck and down-through-the-ages vintage Coca-Cola vending machines.

Coca-Cola is more than just brilliant at marketing; they're dynamic story tellers too. They tell their tale using plumb trivia facts and curious history, all the while plastering splinters of old newspaper articles on the walls, bringing to life their fluctuating past.

Central to the Coca-Cola story are the changes in ownership, the secret formula, and efforts to protect it. John Pemberton invented it. Asa Griggs Candler protected it. The Woodruff family grew it. And the company gone public blew it.

According to the Coca-Cola website, John Pemberton moved to Atlanta from Columbus, Georgia, in 1870, settling in a house on Marietta Street. It's there he concocted the first batch of Coca-Cola syrup in 1886. It went on sale for the first time at Jacobs Pharmacy, down the block from Pemberton's house, for 5 cents a glass as a fountain drink. Pemberton's partner and bookkeeper, Frank M. Robinson, penned the famous "Coca-Cola" trademark in an adaptation of Spencerian script.

There's a lot to learn in The Vault. During the first year sales averaged nine glasses a day. But then its popularity started to grow. Enter Asa Griggs Candler. In 1888 he started buying up all the rights to Coca-Cola. A slashing, savvy businessman himself, he propelled Coca-Cola to the next level.

The only person he trusted was himself, and fueled by this paranoia he built the Triangle Building on Edgewood Avenue. Inside, behind a fireproof door, he built the Triangular Room where he stored ingredients and mixed the formula together. He alone ordered the ingredients and locked away the purchasing records. Par for the course, he held the only key. He didn't stop there, inventing a way for others to produce the syrup without knowing what the ingredients were.

Asa Griggs Candler's own popularity paralleled that of the company he owned, being voted in as Mayor of Atlanta in 1916. He cashed in the chips in 1919, selling Coca-Cola to Atlanta banker Ernest Woodruff for \$25 million. Mr. Woodruff wasted no time taking the company public, issuing an IPO for 500,000 shares at \$40 apiece.

Up until the time Ernest Woodruff purchased Coca-Cola from Asa Griggs Candler the formula had never been written down—by far the best way to protect it. Woodruff asked Candler's son to write down the formula and used it as collateral to secure a \$25 million loan from Guaranty Bank of New York City. As part of the deal, he placed the document in the bank's vault. After paying back the loan in full in 1925, he moved the formula to the vault of Sun Company Trust in Atlanta.

Over the years, Coca-Cola learned to laugh and show us their flaws, like when they messed with the original formula in 1985 and the public screamed. It became the biggest debacle in their history. A couple of months after launching New Coke they canceled it, returning back to the original Classic Coke we all know and love so well.

Other stories painting their walls burst curious points of trivia. We learn how the distinctive Coke bottle got its shape. The questions over why Coca-Cola left India for two decades got answered. I couldn't pour through all of it for I existed in a time crunch.

As the popularity of Coca-Cola grew it soon found itself at the doorstep of history, possessing the most sought after trade secret in American History. Competitors came out of the woodwork, using every cloak and dagger scheme possible to score the formula. Imitators flooded the marketplace, selling fakes and palming off the Coca-Cola trademark.

Coca-Cola fought back and won. No one could replicate the unique taste of the original, keeping the secret formula secure. One ad declares:

IMITATIONS ARE MADE TO FOOL YOU, NOT TO PLEASE YOU, COCA-COLA IS BEING IMITATED AND WE OFFER \$500 REWARD ... Don't allow an unscrupulous dealer to palm off on you something 'just as good.' ... Nothing is just as good as the original. We will take immediate legal steps to prevent such a fraudulent imposition upon the people.

For deliberate reasons Coca-Cola doesn't have a patent for their secret formula. Instead, they choose to keep it a trade secret. Patents expire and at some point they would've had to share their secret formula with the world. They didn't want to.

By comparison a trade secret never expires, and they never have to tell anyone anything. The formula becomes a trade secret by the act of taking deep and verifiable security measures against a would-be thief. Their strategy works; it's been the most sought after trade secret in American history for the past 140 years.

Speaking of secrets, the most stunning discovery about The Vault exhibit is that the secret formula is stored in a real vault at the end of the exhibit. Not a fake, not an imitation. A *real* vault. It's in there, the secret formula, the thing John Pemberton created in 1886, just steps away from millions of visitors. Get too close and buzzers go off, alarms sound, red lights flare, and a voice warns to step away.

In 2011 Coca-Cola make the decision to move it from the Sun Company Trust vault to their own vault inside the World of Coca-Cola. This was not a random decision; they did so to coincide with an important date, their 125th anniversary. It stunned me they would be so bold as to place it in so public a place.

Next, I wandered through the in-house bottling plant. It's a real production line used to make the small bottles of Coke they give away at the end of the tour and sell in their downstairs store. I came away in wonderment at the smooth efficiency and sophisticated science behind the simple task of putting soda in a bottle and slapping a cap on it.

The drive for science and sophistication came at the hand of Earnest Woodruff's son, Robert. By sheer persistence and force of will he raised the bar on the brand quality put into every bottle of Coke.

Each station is marked with a color coded circular sign identifying what that station is. For instance the *Water Treatment* station had a navy blue sign while the *Laser Coder* station had an orange sign. Putting so much thought and effort into each station made it more informative and fun for tourists like me to follow the steps in making a simple bottle of Coke.

After the last bottling station I cruised into the Taste Testing room. Coca-Cola makes different sodas and drinks for something like a bazillion countries around the world. This room offers an opportunity to sample some of those drinks.

For each drink, they identify what country it's sold in. For instance, *Thums Up* is sold in India while *Vegitabeta* is sold in Japan. *Lemon Crush* for Bahrain, *Beverly* for Italy, and *Smart* for China. *Bibo* for South America and South Africa, *Sparberry* for Zimbabwe, *Seagram's Ginger Ale* for Mozambique while *Stoney Tanawizi* stands tall in Tanzania ... and so on and so on.

When I was four-years old my grandma came over to chat with my mom. They were sitting at the kitchen table while I stood by a red hot burner on the stove. "Don't put your hand on that burner," my grandma said, "you'll burn yourself and it will hurt really bad." I believed her, but had to find out for myself. I plopped the full force of my hand on it. Within an instant I screamed bloody murder. The damage to my hand took weeks to heal.

As I neared my first Taste Testing station a nearby tourist said, "Don't try the Italy drink. It sucks. It tastes horrible and is the worst one in here." My natural inclination was to believe him, but to try it anyways. I plopped my cup underneath the spigot and pushed the lever releasing the liquid. I brought the cup to my mouth and took a big swig. The bitter bite tasted like turpentine mixed with corn syrup. I started to spit it out simultaneous to my face contorting by reflex reaction.

"See what I told you?" the tourist said.

"You're right. That's terrible. How can anyone like that?" I asked, still spitting out the goo.

"I don't know man, I don't know."

The Italy *Beverly* drink casts a long shadow. Three months after arriving back in Minneapolis a co-worker and I had a meeting of the minds about the World of Coca-Cola. Six years earlier he had visited there too.

"Did you try the drinks in that one room?" he asked.

"The Taste Testing room? Yes, I did," I said.

"Did you try that one Italian drink? I remember it being the worst."

"Yes, I did. You're right, it was horrible. I don't know how anyone can stand it."

"I don't know either, but the Italians seem to like it," he said with an easy smile.

The time pressure I operated under forced a pause in my activities. I did some mental calculations and determined I could only stay a short time in the Taste Testing room. I'd have to pick up the pace and get moving. The parking lot attendant would be waiting and I had given my word. The forced efficiency I operated under paid dividends, though. In the end only the *Beverly* drink left my taste buds raw.

Coca-Cola never fails to take advantage of the opportunity to market themselves to visitors. Shepherded into a small movie theater, I sat and watched a short film about Coca-Cola that can best be described as dumb and dumber. It had a kid-corny mad scientist and an assistant spitting out door-knob vocabulary in annoying British accents. Fun though.

The dumb fun continued in the 4-D theater, playing a short, interactive movie about the secret formula; the seats move, water sprays, things poke, and best of all, it's all in 3-D.

Already convinced that the marketing people at Coca-Cola are geniuses, they cajoled me into a forced march to dispel any remaining doubts. I headed through a one-way turnstile down a hallway, with repeated warnings that this is a one-way ticket only.

I stuck my arm in the hole in the production display and grabbed my small, but free, bottle of Regular Coke, bottled a few floors above in that production line. After a few more tidbits are thrown in I'm shuffled to the end of the hallway where I moved my happy feet through an exit, receiving in return a pleasant smile and a "Thank you, have a nice day."

The one thing that strikes me as the twisted evolution of our modern world is that there are two kinds of Cokes: Regular and Mexican. Regular Coke uses high-fructose corn syrup and is predominately sold in the United States. Mexican Coke is manufactured in Mexico and contains real sugar. It's predominately sold in Central and South America, but is growing in popularity here.

Back in the good old days the Coke sold throughout the United States had real sugar, like today's Mexican Coke, but now it costs too much and we get the artificial stuff. In order to get the genuine Coke that used to be sold here, but that now isn't, we have to search the grocery aisles for Coke in a real glass bottle, and check the label. If it says *hecho en Mexico*, bingo!

Somehow the logic doesn't fit, but I won't try to figure it out. To add insult to injury Mexican Coke has the label painted on, like the original back in the day, whereas with Regular Coke we get plastic bottles with the label glued on.

And now for the genius part. After gliding through the exit I found myself in the middle of their big, outsized, colorful, gleaming souvenir store replete with super friendly helpful staff and gobs of every kind of souvenir imaginable. I don't know if they borrow this strategy from Las Vegas casinos or if they invented it.

It isn't a matter of wondering if they have what I want, it's a matter of understanding that whatever I want is there, for a price. My cheap, slim-tight budget demanded I stick to one low-cost t-shirt; no other souvenir allowed.

But which one? I narrowed it down to one artsy t-shirt. I cruised to the cash register to thwart any weakness, but fussed and fidgeted along the way, suffering the throes of indecision. I experienced apprehension, for the hour had come to fork over my parking stall. Seconds away from the cash register I ditched the artsy low cost t-shirt, choosing instead a plain, but catchy, black t-shirt with I HAD A COKE IN ATLANTA imprinted above a Coke logo, for more money.

Those geniuses sitting in their ivory tower a few blocks away giggled, knowing they had a sucker in their grasp; I snatched a simple red Coke mug too, closing out my visit to the World of Coca-Cola. The clerk handled me with another purifying dose of Southern hospitality, which they seemed to know I love so much.

What I really did that day was pay Coca-Cola for the right to enter their museum, so I could buy an advertisement on a t-shirt that I would wear for free, for years, promoting them. And don't forget the mug. Las Vegas, here I come.

I'm wired like a true Catholic. Having primary concern for the happiness of the parking lot attendant, I whisked through the doors of Coca-Cola to the outside world and made a bee-line back to the lot. I worked up a sweat and kept my feet moving. It didn't matter that I was the tourist spending money and buying souvenirs and pumping up the local economy. I had an attendant to please.

I arrived back at my car out of breath and only a minute or two past 7 pm. The attendant, an employee of National Parking Solutions, asked with curious friendliness, "How'd you like it?"

"Fun," I replied. "Hey, do you know where Fox Bros. Barbecue is?" I had innocent faith he would know.

He didn't receive my question with discernible concern, barely giving a cursory glance. "Don't have a Smartphone, huh?" he said, turning and walking towards the street. "I have to go wave my flag and get cars in here."

"I'll follow you. I can wait."

Out in the street he made a veiled attempt to help, punching a button or two on his Smartphone before quitting and going back to waving his red flag. He interjected, "I can't help you now. If you want to wait a few minutes"

"Forget it," I said, not feeling it. First I have to hustle and now I have to wait.