

When I Returned to the South, Something Had Changed

When I returned to the South, something had changed.

My Southern experience began in South Carolina, where I stayed in Myrtle Beach. I was approached by two Black traffickers while cleaning out my vehicle. They showed me a large wad of cash and invited me to come to their house, saying there were other women there. I felt deeply uncomfortable and did my best to handle the situation and remove myself safely.

In that same area, I began noticing White women asking for money. Some spoke openly about drug addiction. I could not help but wonder if these were some of the women being trafficked.

Later, my luggage and all of my clothing were stolen.

I made it to Florida. There were more Asians and Hispanics. I started noticing the churches more, foreign churches and American churches. There were surveillance signs and outdoor cameras at almost every one.

I recognized the Spanish had moved in, but there was a certain air to the experience, a forcing, an evil toward Whites. As I have been living in Florida periodically since 2008, these experiences were new to me. I had never experienced racism or hostility like this before. The South always had an atmosphere of Southern hospitality and Americanism. Life was fun, easygoing, and filled with positive energy, which is why I always returned.

However, last year was different.

I returned and noticed a major change on the highways. Most of the drivers were Hispanic and foreign. It started to worry me. There was an air. Hispanic males driving box trucks at every turn. I began to understand more fully what was happening.

One Hispanic male driver had water flooding out of the back of his box truck. It was pouring onto the road and had a foul smell. I knew this was not normal, so I contacted the authorities to notify them.

I moved through different areas on the Gulf Coast, and I also took a trip to Tampa. I noticed the same thing there. Foreigners, foreigners everywhere.

I would enter a store as a White woman and notice the teller was Hispanic. I tried to check out like normal. I always offer a courtesy. I appreciate my time in the checkout line because it gives me a chance to get to know people, smile, and say hi. However, this time was different. Instead, I experienced microaggressions from these new faces.

I had never had trouble with Hispanic people before. In fact, I had gotten along well, with friendships and even romantic relationships. While I had experienced hostility before as a White woman, this year the hostility was too much to ignore.

I would go to check out, and there would be no smiles. My items would be grabbed with hostility and even thrown down. I noticed this pattern in many stores. I realized there had been a culture shift, not a small one, and it was everywhere.

I went to Walmart and noticed many eyes staring at me, as if I were in a foreign country. But I was not. I was in America. I was in Florida.

There was an air.

I took an opportunity at a yoga store and was very happy to be working near the ocean. One day, when I was moving boxes to the dumpster, I noticed several Hispanic women. As soon as they saw me, their demeanor changed, becoming demeaning and rude. The buildings were more Spanish. It felt like these foreign women were examining their new "fort," but I, an American, was in the way.

Outside a restaurant, a man stood in what looked like an old Spanish uniform, like something from a bullfighting celebration. He was guarding the door. I noticed this in other places as well, women in Spanish dress, a form of protest. I was uncomfortable. The culture had never been this strongly Spanish before. It had always just been American. We were all together.

Wherever I went, I encountered negative energy and microaggressions.

While running, a Hispanic woman stopped and stared at me, glared, and then turned sharply, as if trying to provoke a reaction. Another woman sitting on the sidewalk looked at me with a challenging expression. She looked sad, and I could understand, but it was clear she was directing harm toward me.

These experiences continued.

One day, I was on a trail and noticed two foreign men on scooter bikes drive by. I thought they had left, but they turned around and came back slowly, passing by my vehicle, stalking. I chose to turn my vehicle on and lock my doors, even though it was the middle of the day.

Another time, I was walking along a sidewalk when a man on a scooter drove past me at high speed, not slowing down at all. I felt like he might run me over, so I quickly moved off the sidewalk into the grass.

In Tampa, I noticed larger Black and Hispanic populations, and I experienced microaggressions with both. I also noticed Southern Whites becoming more outwardly expressive, they were angry. There seemed to be an old South style of dress reappearing. I noticed more black baseball hats that resembled ICE hats.

One day, I went to check out of a coffee line. As a courtesy, a Black male who was checking me out gave me a free item as a kind gesture. It was nice to meet a genuine person. As I was having so many troubling experiences, it felt reassuring and helped to calm me down.

One day, I saw a White male in an older truck driving slowly by a large group of migrants at the store. He looked like he was trying to intimidate them. He reminded me of an old South "Confederate."

There were not any Americans shopping in the store that day. It was all foreigners. I felt like an outsider. I would do my best to hold the door with kindness. However, the entitlement of some of the foreign women felt hostile and uncomfortable. They would walk through without saying thank you. I never liked this kind of treatment and felt it was wrong.

Foreign males rode scooters and motorcycles through parking lots and then walked through spaces as if they owned them. There was an energy, I know I am not supposed to be here, but I am here anyway, pushing into the local culture.

Driving I would notice, the cartel was in town. The men had a certain look about them. I later verified my experience with research. Violent crime almost daily, cartel. Gangs.

One day I saw an Indian man rummaging through a trash bin.

When I stayed in hotels, I noticed the same energy.

A young Mexican couple stayed in the room next to mine. I could hear them, and I felt uncomfortable. I left and returned later. When they were leaving, the woman looked through my window at me in a very strange and scary way. I should have been afforded privacy, but she looked through anyway. It felt as if she had a demon within her that wanted to harm me.

During my stay, I noticed multiple couples with children. In one case, a Mexican father and a White mother. I became nervous about trafficking. I saw a foreign man escorting two young women in what looked like foreign maid clothing. It was strange. He was accommodating, but the situation felt wrong, like it may be human slavery.

I stayed in several hotels, and there was a pattern. Every time I heard children, I became concerned. I hoped they were safe, especially when children would arrive later at night. Sometimes I would not hear the children in the morning. I thought of all the signs of human trafficking.

One night, a White gentleman held the door for me. I was grateful. He was with a very young foreign woman who stood quietly behind him. His tone shifted. He told me to "go." It was not polite. It was commanding.

The South had changed.

I continued staying in hotels while waiting for my apartment to be ready. It took months, as the building was newly developed and required inspection. I was happy to be on the coast. It felt like home. I had been stationed at Tyndall nearly 20 years earlier. Back then, we were not divided by race. We were simply American.

One day, in a checkout line, I had another experience that stood out.

A Black man approached me and said, "I was in line." I knew he had come from another lane. I was first. His tone was rushed and felt hostile. I offered to let him go, but I felt the way he spoke to me was domineering, as if I had done something wrong.

A Black woman joined in and supported him, saying he had been there first. I knew this was not true. She began to stare me down aggressively. I remained courteous, but the situation escalated.

He said he had children in the car.

She continued staring at me, sizing me up. I asked her to stop. Instead, she threatened me. "I am from New York. I will put you on the ground so fast."

I could not believe what was happening. I had done nothing wrong.

I said, "Absolutely not. You do not threaten people."

She continued moving toward me. I said I was not feeling well. She mocked me. I went toward a worker for help, but I was not receiving support.

"You are continuing to threaten me. At this point, I am calling the police," I said.

More Black women came to her defense, shouting, "It is not that serious," and "Come on." I was overwhelmed. It was chaotic and bizarre.

I heard an older White gentleman from the back say, "I heard you threaten her. It was loud and clear."

I was grateful. Someone had seen the whole thing.

I knew this experience was not normal.

The police were called, and she left. I made sure to get her license plate.

That experience stayed with me.

All around, I saw signs of activism, graffiti, and foreign presence. One day at a conference near my vehicle, I saw attendees. It felt like a foreign takeover, like a mob or mafia presence. Microaggressions were constant. I felt uncomfortable everywhere.

When my apartment was finally ready, I moved in. Construction continued around me. Foreign workers. I was happy to see Black and White males, but I was nervous about the whistling and new behaviors from the foreigners. They would alternate between American music and Spanish music.

On a loudspeaker, Spanish music was playing nearby.

Spring break, multiple people were shot where I was staying previously, it was like a Black mob they said. One of the aggressors was foreign, he shot his White male Uber driver.

Soon after moving to my new apartment, I began feeling unwell. Headaches, throat irritation, and nose stinging.

One day, a drone hovered directly above me and stopped. Another time, I saw a drone near a window. It was looking inside. Everything felt off.

My body was aching. It was reacting to something in the air. No matter where I went, the symptoms followed.

I noticed dead frogs. The pavement looked white, like a dusty film covering it.

The pain worsened. My forehead and neck hurt constantly. My skin stung to the touch.

I did not understand what was happening.

After researching, I learned about mosquito fogging programs. I had never known about them before. It explained the symptoms. Even indoors, pesticides were present.

Even with the windows closed, the air affected me. The water was contaminated. I became nervous brushing my teeth or showering.

I began noticing new moles appearing frequently.

Neighbors were also affected. One day, an ambulance came for a child having an asthma attack. A neighbor said she had to protect her dog's paws. Many people were not well.

Poison control advised me to leave.

Others along the coast reported the same symptoms. Some counties sprayed more heavily. In Walton County, the effects were immediate.

I saw a fogging truck spraying into oncoming traffic. It did not make sense.

The pain became unbearable. I experienced tremors in my heart. I felt unsafe even inside my apartment.

Mosques, mosquito programs, the scent of war, of Germany, of Russia, of Israel.

My mail was going missing. One package after another. One day I received strange plastic pieces instead of the package I was supposed to.

I had to leave Florida.

My research continued. There are concerns about pesticide program expansion into other areas. People are getting sick. Some have developed cancer and long term disabilities. My throat is still in pain, months later.

Still, the spraying continues.

The racism continues.

The energy has changed. America is not what it once was. It feels more divided, more foreign, and more unsettling.

A reminder to love the one you have, that freedom is not free, and to remember.

Cowdrey