

Finding a Silver Lining on I-10

Shay loaded the car to return to her parents' home for Christmas. This was never her intention, as she and Carl had planned a roadtrip to the Georgia mountains for a small family Christmas for just the three of them. Baby Maddie cooed from her carseat as Shay squeezed in the last of the boxes she was bringing back to Florida.

"OK, kid," Shay smiled. "You ready to see Memaw and Pop Pop?"

Maddie offered no objection, so Shay got into the Jeep and began the 450 mile journey from Biloxi to Gainesville. After 2 hours of driving, it was time for a pitstop and diaper change at the Circle K off I-10.

After leaving the bathroom, Shay carried a cranky Maddie into the convenience store to find some snacks and caffeine. She struggled to juggle her daughter, diaper bag, and cup she hoped to fill with ice and fountain Coke. Shay was halfway to her goal when a flailing Maddie knocked the cup to the floor. Tears welled up in Shay's eyes, as they often did these days.

"Need some help, ma'am?" asked a tall and handsome man. He had a heavy southern drawl and wore a store shirt that displayed the name John embroidered on the chest.

"No thanks, I'm ok," Shay sniffled back.

The man seemed to notice Shay's wedding ring. "Your husband will be out of the can soon then?"

That was too much for Shay. Tears burst from her eyes like water escaping from a poorly designed damn. Maddie joined in by wailing at full volume. Shay threw her few items on the counter near the Polar Pop machine and pushed by John while muttering a small "excuse me" on her way out.

Shay clutched Maddie to her desperately once outside. "Shhhh," she pleaded. "It's ok. We're gonna be ok." After some rocking, Shay listened to her daughter's slowed breathing which indicated that she would soon be back to sleep. After a few more minutes, Maddie was out and Shay hooked her back into her carseat. This single parent thing was going to be harder than she imagined.

When Shay turned to return to the driver's side of her vehicle, she noticed John standing about 10 feet away. He was holding a large soda cup and bag full of treats. She approached him with caution.

"Hope you don't mind, but you looked like ya needed some fuel," John started. "I got ya a cup of ice and a bottled Coke. I don't imagine that a young girl like yourself would want to accept an open drink from a stranger in Pensacola." He smiled at Shay which made her feel more at ease. There was something about this guy's energy that brought her peace.

Shay slowly approached John and accepted the bag of treats. There was the candy bar she had selected for herself earlier, as well as some chips and gummy bears. Shay smiled. "Gummy bears were Carl's favorite," she said. She looked up at John with sadness.

"When'd pass?" John asked.

The hairs on Shay's neck stood up. "How did you know I was a...a..." she trailed off.

"A widow?" he softly responded. She closed her eyes and nodded.

"No man in his right mind would walk out on a girl like you and that baby," John smiled at her. "You wanna talk about it?"

A laugh escaped from Shay. "Sir, I just met you!"

"Stranger things 'ave happened out here, I suppose," John replied.

Shay considered this. She would normally be so taken aback from this type of situation: a stranger bringing her food and now offering to comfort her about the recent loss of her husband. *Carl would not approve this*, she thought. Still, there was something about John that put her at ease.

"Yeah, I would like to talk if you don't mind listening," Shay finally replied. John smiled. Shay recounted how she met Carl, their first date, when she realized he was the one. She let the words flow from her and could feel herself healing as she did so. After what felt like an hour, she had to stop and drink some Coke to remedy her dry mouth.

"I'm sorry to drone on," Shay apologized.

"Not at all," John encouraged her. "You see, what you needed was a silver lining to your dark cloud. The kindness of a stranger. Not only are you grieving your own loss, you're also caring for that little blessing all on your own now," John motioned toward the Jeep where Maddie slept in the back. He paused. "Caregivers need care, too."

Shay considered this. She knew that she had to persevere for the sake of her child, but she somehow along the way forgot that she needed attending to as well. Perhaps going home to Florida for a visit wasn't such a bad idea after all.

After hopping in the Jeep and lowering the window, Shay finally offered her goodbye to her newly found friend. "John, I really appreciate your time. Thank you."

"Drive safely and don't forget to take care of yourself, too, Shay," John replied.

Shay smiled and was backing out of her parking spot when she abruptly braked. "How did you know my name?" she asked to no one. John was gone. Shay put the car in park and looked all around the lot but couldn't find him anywhere. She grabbed her phone from her purse and called inside the store and asked to speak to John.

There was silence on the line. "Ma'am, John died a week ago," came the reply. Shay was surprised but somehow knew that Carl had sent John to comfort her. With a smile she pulled out of the parking lot and glanced back at her baby.

"Get ready, Maddie. You aren't going to believe what just happened to mommy."