

RYDER MAWBY
STAFF

Expectations vs. reality

There is arguably no state as iconic as California. Just saying the name conjures a flurry of cinematic imagery — Beverly Hills palm trees, 90s nostalgia and the Hollywood sign.

My childhood knowledge of California was nothing more than Malibu scenery I appropriated from Hannah Montana, Lana Del Rey’s discography and the classic Golden Gate Bridge desktop wallpaper. I vividly remember the day I discovered that “Hollywood” and “Los Angeles” were essentially the same place (I felt absolutely *lied* to). I had been developing two completely separate, sun-kissed dimensions in my head, and when I finally came to my epiphany it felt like these two imaginary worlds had collapsed into a messy conglomerate of pop culture and utter chaos.

Growing up in a hidden college town in Southwest Virginia, I was completely opposed to California at first; I viewed the West Coast as this social wonderland full of drugs, parties and sex. This world seemed too foreign and intimate for a gauche preteen raised in the South to embrace.

But as school-related drama intensified and I became more insecure in my living situation, I began to fantasize over my escape. New York City had always been *the* dream ever since I watched [Rachel](#) and [Kurt’s](#) New York Academy of the Dramatic Arts auditions in Glee (although I have absolutely no performative ability).

After realizing that NYADA is in fact *not* a real school and reading into the legal intricacies behind a teenager moving to a city alone, I realized that my only chance of leaving Virginia would be through my aunt who lives in San Francisco. I took a leap of faith and texted her, asking if I could potentially move in with her for my senior year of high school. To my surprise, she embraced me with open arms. And thus, my new reality was born.

Fast forward about a year. The time had come for me to leave Virginia. Saying goodbye to my mother was possibly the most emotionally difficult decision I've ever had to make. Struggling my way through the TSA checkpoint with tears blinding my vision was by no means a pleasant experience. As the airplane took off, I took my last look at the Appalachian Mountains. I had just left behind everything I ever knew — it was time to look forward.

Upon arrival, I was hit with an immediate wave of culture shock. I had never before used public transportation, so taking BART from SFO to my new home in Twin Peaks was quite the physical and emotional journey. I remember feeling nauseous as the 36 pulled up to my stop on Starview Way. I hopped out of the bus and before me stood my new home, with the ominous Sutro Tower looming in the background. Here I was — in the middle of San Francisco — with nothing but a suitcase, my extended family and limited street smarts.

If there was one way to describe the neighborhood I lived in, it would be “little boxes made of ticky tacky” from Malvina Reynolds’ song, “[Little Boxes](#).” I turned one way and POP, there was a powerful cobalt blue house on the corner. Then I turned the other way and there was a periwinkle purple house of the same model, all with that quintessential San Francisco charm.

On clear days I could see the idle ocean in the distance, waiting for me. I had grown up about a five-hour drive from the Atlantic Coast, so the steady ocean breeze was a friendly introduction to my new home. There was now a literal *ocean* of possibilities at my fingertips. For the first time in my life I felt free.

Then there was the political climate. I had half-expected to face a “[liberal cesspool](#),” as several lovely Twitter conservatives had cautioned. But what I discovered instead was an environment where politics are treated as healthy discourse rather than an uncomfortable conversation to be avoided. Over the course of the next year, my political views gradually shifted left as I was exposed to more diversity of thought and background — from smoking pot and discussing capitalism with some friendly folks in Dolores Park to witnessing firsthand the [gentrification](#) crisis in the Mission.

Those who fantasize about escape often romanticize the places they turn to. In my case, I had painted San Francisco as my Garden of Eden. I had spent the entirety of my life tucked away into Ellett Valley and, despite viewing myself as an open-minded person, I came to realize that I was much more innocent and naive than anticipated. San Francisco was my escape from this callowness. I was enticed by the unknown.

I expected endless sunshine but what I got instead were scattered sunshowers. The reality I faced was far from Bel Air glamour, but also a far cry from the Blue Ridge Mountains I had grown to appreciate. But in a way, the heavily romanticized image I created is exactly what drove me to where I am today, writing this column. Talk about divine intervention.

In retrospect, my move to the West Coast was a remarkably warm experience. This hospitable embrace was critical as I came to the eventual realization of my identity as a queer, leftist individual. As much as I miss my loved ones and the comforting sight of

early morning fog rolling through the mountaintops, I feel like I have an actual *purpose* here in the Bay. I feel *heard*. I feel *seen*. But above all, I feel free.

Ryder Mawby writes the Monday column on his transition from the East to West Coast. Contact him at opinion@dailycal.org. LAST UPDATED: September 28, 2020