

The Existential Terror of San Francisco

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After I sold my company I decided to visit New York City one time before I moved out to San Francisco. The trip was a lot of fun, but at one point I found myself completely out of cash, my ATM/debit card snapped in half, my credit card deactivated for suspected fraud, and my phone out of batteries. Then I got off at the wrong subway stop and found myself deep in the wrong part of Harlem.

As scary as that was, it wasn't anywhere near as frightening as the existential terror I feel every day walking the streets of San Francisco.

When I walked through the streets of Manhattan, I saw residents going for a stroll or walking their dog or playing with their kids and I thought "Ah, I could live here". But even while I'm living in San Francisco I still can't quite believe it can be done. I saw a mother out walking with her daughter and thought "What are you doing?! Don't you know this is no place for a child?"

The whole city feels like some sort of movie set; oversized and fake. Every time I go out I worry that I might miss my mark or fumble my lines and on the rare occasions that I do, I am mercilessly excoriated by the city officials. When New Yorkers bark at you for screwing up, it's because they're impatient. But San Franciscans seem to do it much more frequently and with much more emotion. You're not just wasting my time, their tone of voice says, you're insulting me with your stupidity.

I've been to San Francisco before, of course, but always on very carefully planned excursions. Go to this place, take this subway, get off here. I realized after I moved here that this was the first day I'd really woken up in the city and it was terrifying. I ran down the street to catch my train to work and (after getting barked at by city employees for waiting in the wrong place) found the train packed to the edges, with barely enough space for me to stand.

The city maltreats you even when you're not doing anything wrong. I tried to take a bus from the place I was staying to downtown one night and, after everyone else got off at earlier stops, the bus driver noticed I was the only one left in the bus and kicked me out before he'd finished the route. "Yeah, this is the last stop now," he said. "Get out."

Of course the downtown district is a den of filth and vice, shops with names like "Tenderloin Liquors" and "Adult Show Superstore" with gangs of leering indigents sitting on every streetcorner. In Harlem, people mostly kept their eyes down and kept walking. Here everyone calls out to me, like a dark postapocalyptic scene from *Blade Runner* or *A.I.*

Of course, San Francisco isn't all pain. Every time I begin to think it's too much to bear and that I have to get out of town now, it does some little thing to redeem itself. I'm spit on by every drunk and transit worker, rained on from the entirely cloud-covered sky, splashed on by the busses refusing to follow their routes, but then I'm wonderfully treated by the staff of the soaring San Francisco Library and then I'm cheerful again until the next guy spits in my face.

One night, the friend I'm staying with invited me to go with her to San Francisco's Midnight Riders and lent me a bike to do so. The bike was a road bike, which I didn't know how to use, and I didn't have a helmet. We sped down hills as I peddled furiously and met up with a group of drunk people (some of whom were also on cocaine) carrying axes (the theme was "I Married an Axe Murderer") as we sped around the city, culminating at the pier, where some of them stripped down and jumped into the freezing water.

After that terrifying night, San Francisco didn't really scare me anymore, but it still felt wrong. Perhaps a movie set is a fairly safe place to actually be, but when you live on-stage it's difficult to get any privacy. Having to live my life on stage in this dark, cartoony, mask-filled world seems like a more terrifying nightmare than anything an axe-wielding gang of cocaine-high bikers could do.