

## Cali

By [Elizabeth DeOrnellas](#)

I like the word "Cali" for the same reason I like the word "y'all" - it's fun to say, and I feel that it accurately conveys something about a place. Or at least about my feelings regarding said place.

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[California Gurls](#) is my least favorite Katy Perry song. Everything about the lyrics and the video makes me want to puke. (*It still gets stuck in my head - definitely an earworm.*) And I'm a genuine Katy fan - mostly because of [Roar](#) and [Firework](#).

I'm still trying to conceptualize that people are actually born in California.

That people grow up here. A lot of people. They go to high school here. Most appear to stay for college (*Why would you not? The UC System is a quality system - and it certainly offers a lot of options.*) It seems like many never leave.

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I'm from the D.C. suburbs. After high school, I fled the winter, even though mid-Atlantic weather is about the most temperate version of the four seasons you can possibly get.

Fairfax City is too far inland for hurricanes (*we got a few "rain days" off school - everyone laughed*); too far South for snow (*ice is a definite threat, however; also, during my first year of teaching, Snowmageddon decided to hit right when I was trying to fly home for Christmas*); and definitely not in Tornado Alley (*though they still tell stories about the time a tornado hit my rival high school*).

When I moved to Tulsa, my grandmother called me every time there was a tornado anywhere in Oklahoma. My mom only called if it was in Tulsa. My then-boyfriend told me not to be stupid. He grew up in Wichita. He believed in knowing where the basement was. And going there.

There were two things about downtown Tulsa that freaked me out immediately: There was almost no traffic; and, when the sun went down, the heat stayed. I couldn't believe that I was walking around after midnight, and it was still over 100 degrees. I kept checking the clock.

One thing the mid-Atlantic does very well is thunderstorms. I love thunderstorms. As a swim coach, not so much, because then the Monday night meet takes forever, and you have to awkwardly shelter in your car (*rubber tires ground lightning, you know*) until the powers that be (*often my father, who was a referee*) decide whether or not to just call it. As a pool manager, I refused to close until I actually heard thunder (*or a guard I really trusted did - it was a short list*). I had a few 15-year-old guards who would gleefully call for a closure at any sign of a storm; they

loved running outside the office in the rain to update the whiteboard saying when we would reopen (*30 minutes for every thunderclap when I started with NV Pools; they then changed it to 45 minutes*). As a little kid, watching the thunder shake the glass sliding door to the patio? Like watching God dance. I saw lightning strike once. It broke a patio brick in half. My mom told me to get away from the window after that.

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I took this [test](#) to determine where I'm from. It's one of those surveys that made the rounds on Facebook; this one's actually spookily accurate, most of the time. The top result for me, the first time I took it, was Jacksonville. Apparently "sunshower" is a Florida term. I couldn't remember if we actually had a word for that in Northern Virginia, but I know it happened. (*My second result was Northern Virginia; credit where credit's due :)*

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### **California is a pop song to me.**

It's a place delusional people go because they believe they will actually become famous actors.

It's where my cousins disappeared to.

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One of my strongest memories of Brian is from the summer the cicadas hit. If you don't know what a cicada is, then you don't understand the Biblical plague of locust. If you do, then you get it.

Cicadas emerge from the ground all-at-once - think zombie apocalypse, but smaller, and louder. Incredibly loud. The incessant buzzing drives you crazy after a while. This isn't the normal "darn it, a cricket snuck in the basement again" chirping. This is a grating, sawing, whine that sounds like it's being produced on an actual metal saw by thousands of metal wires.

We would walk to school, and cicadas would hit us in the head.

I did not deal with that well.

[Cicadas exist on different cycles](#): 13 or 17 years. I remember being so angry when I figured out the one cycle (*not the elementary school one that I remember as horrific; but a later, less traumatizing middle school invasion*) affected my neighborhood, because we lived in a 30-year-old single family home that my mom bought from my grandmother, but not the McMansion neighborhood where a lot of my new friends lived (*I went to a small, neighborhood elementary school - 300 kids in K-6; my middle school had 900 kids between the two grades*).

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The cicadas did not phase Brian.

He was fascinated by them.

So fascinated by them that he mostly just helped my mom - getting them off the rug if any made it inside, picking them off the patio, that kind of thing ... he did occasionally try to torment me with them, but I was already so traumatized that really all he had to do was laugh at me.

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My parents didn't own a camcorder when I was little. The only family video we have of me as a toddler is from my great-uncle, Frank.

One video shows me running in and out of the waves at Myrtle Beach. I very much hated sand in my bathing suit. You can hear my youngest uncle saying, "Put a suit on that kid!" I find that highly ironic, considering that's the uncle who prides himself on being intentionally controversial.

The other video is Brian and I singing into hairbrushes. Very enthusiastically. We are taking requests (mostly from our parents, but you can tell everyone in the room is into it). Lots of nursery rhymes: *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star; I'm a Little Teapot* ... that kind of thing.

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My sister is four years younger than me. When she was born, home became boys versus girls very quickly. Eric was four years older than Brian (who is five days older than me). My sister and I are four years and two days apart. Brian, Jean, and I are all March babies; Eric was February. Joint family birthday parties were definitely a thing.

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I felt that I wasn't cool enough to hang out with Eric and Brian, especially once we weren't little kids anymore. Eric hit that age where you naturally drift away from your younger siblings (*Eric and Brian are my cousins, but my mom babysat them, so it felt like having siblings, a lot of the time. I guess that's why it was really easy for me to accept that a lot of my students didn't really mean "cousin" when they said "cousin" - I get that "brother" and "cousin" can be complicated concepts.*) Brian and I drifted apart too. I was a teacher's pet. He was a if-it's-stupid-busy-work-why-do-it. Really bright; just not into the game.

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Eric and Brian moved to California when Brian and I were in fifth grade. We didn't see them a lot after that. This was pre-Facebook. When that became a thing, Brian and I reconnected. It wasn't the same.

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Eric died. I've written about his death more eloquently at other times in other places. I'm not feeling eloquent tonight. Just stripped down. Just tired of pretending. Pretending it didn't affect me. That I was always the one who had her shit together. I don't. I haven't. Not all the time. No one does.

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I'm still adjusting. Back home, when people say "the City," they mean D.C.

I had to move to Tulsa to understand that not everyone in America has been to D.C. To understand that sometimes people only go there once in a lifetime. To know that some hate it, based on one visit, because people don't smile at you on the street.

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Here, when people say "the City," they mean San Francisco. When they say "Washington," they mean the state.

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I am genuinely afraid that one day California is going to slide into the ocean. I've done some reading on it - sounds like it's just going to crack a lot. [The New Yorker told me](#) that everyone in Seattle is going to die one day. Well, maybe not everyone. But a lot of people, if they don't get their evacuation plans in order.

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The first time I visited the West, it was to see my uncle in Idaho. The sky was on fire. The drought was so bad, we had to walk (or drag our butts) when we tried to tube certain rivers. There was so much smoke. I remember all of that. But mostly I remember that I could see the Milky Way. I could actually see it. That was mind-boggling. I don't think I ever even appropriately understood that word until I looked up into the sky and saw gauze. And realized that gauze was the galaxy.

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I think California is a bubble. I know it's a big state. I know it's a complicated state. I know it's only really a blue state in statewide elections. I know its pockets of red are as blood red as any of the red states I've lived in. I know when people say "rough neighborhood" here, sometimes they mean Crips and Bloods were born here. All of them. The whole network. The originals. Like vampires. Or just desperate people. Trying to scrape a living from the same city that beat Rodney King into the ground. On TV.

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That's the thing about California: Wanting to grow up to be an artist is different when you can just drive south and see the Hollywood sign. It's a long drive, but you don't have to cross a state line.

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I crossed a country. Half a country for my first post-college job. The whole country last November. East Coast to West Coast.

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I like the sun here.

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I do not understand sunny people.

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I understand Southern honey. As in "honey," as in "bless your heart, honey," as in "you catch more flies with honey, darlin'." I understand southern hospitality. I understand midwestern hospitality. I understand that hospitality can still be genuine when it's tinged with religious judgment, racial animosity, old-school sexism (*they call it "chivalry" or "being a Southern gentleman" or "being a lady"*), and/or homophobia.

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I have never understood how a school nurse could call two students "disgusting" for kissing in the hallway. That's a lie. I call students "disgusting" for kissing in the hallway. But not because they're both girls. Because I don't believe in PDA.

It's a tone thing.

That's not all it is.

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I am happy that in California students have access to real sex ed. I am happy that California politicians seem pretty on board with Common Core. I don't think they're going to have the knee-jerk "let's just get rid of this" reaction that I saw happen in Oklahoma (after I left) and North Carolina (while I was there).

I am in favor of improving public education. That's one of the things I like about California: Innovation.

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**I'm just not sure how to retrain my brain.** I got in trouble a lot in Oklahoma for being a brash, brusque East Coaster. I have always carried around the legacy of D.C. The capital is a company town. The company is the government. Everyone has a finger in the pie. When you ask, "What do you do?" you always mean, "What is your current job?"

People in D.C. take their resume very seriously. They believe in networking. They believe in lobbying. They believe in angling for the next promotion. They believe in making the right alliances. They believe in walk-and-talk meetings. They believe in busy. They believe being busy means you are important. They believe being overworked means you are both important and diligent. Only the Congressmen take long vacations. D.C. is Intern Land in the summer. Capitol Hill empties of all those who need to go home and tend to their flocks (and their money), and it refills with eager, young, fresh-faced things with shiny dreams and cutting smiles. Not too cutting - this isn't New York. The heels aren't as high, and it's OK to wear flip flops on the Metro, as long as you put your heels back on for your meeting. Don't call it the Subway. That's New York. Sarcasm is only acceptable if you've already paid your political dues, or you just believe you have because you told the people back home that you were different. That you wouldn't let Washington change you.

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I avoid saying, "I'm from D.C." I say, "I'm from the D.C. Area" or "I'm from the D.C. suburbs" or "I'm from Northern Virginia." I learned very quickly in college that people assume the wrong things if you leave the "Northern" out.

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I feel connected to D.C., but I don't feel I can claim the city. I've always been able to vote for a Congressional representative who can vote, for one. I take the Metro when I want to go to the City. The traffic is terrible. In that respect, the Bay feels like home.

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When people say “real America,” I feel like I’ve lived there. Not because I’ve lived in any one particular place. Because I’ve lived in a lot of really particular places:

*\*D.C. suburbs (densely populated, always growing, purple-trending-toward-blue island filled with liberal academics and military conservatives; Virginia Beach-Norfolk-Newport News is the other densely populated, blue-tinged island in Virginia; it’s a Navy town though, so more red there - that’s where my in-laws live)*

*\*Triangle area (blue island in a purple-took-a-hard-right-toward-red state; Charlotte is also a blue island, fueled by banking money and populated by some of the state’s last remaining ,moderate Republicans - there are fewer of them than there used to be)*

*\*Oklahoma (Midwest meets South meets not-quite-Texas-no-one-is-Texas meets we-have-actual-Indians-here-and-they-say-“Indian”-even-though-it’s-called-the-Office-of-Native-Education-the-Cherokee-lands-are-beautiful-but-not-their-real-lands-and-they’re-separate-from-everything-else-the-Indian-mascot-at-your-school-is-a-Plains-Indian-not-these-Plains-OK?-one-of-your-kids-is-named-Kevin-Howlingcrane-and-they-were-right-he’s-not-ever-going-to-look-you-in-the-eye-he-was-taught-not-to-he’s-one-of-the-sweetest-freshmen-you-will-ever-meet)*

*\*Cali (That’s what I’m calling it, for now)*