SUSAN STRAIGHT

Bird Proud

Family and belonging at LAX

Bobby and Lee Sims at the anniversary party, sharing jokes and stories

The history of Los Angeles is inextricably tied to migrations—though America has lately begun a harsher new chorus of the old anti-immigrant sentiment, Southern Californians should shake their heads and know better. From the first group of forty-four *pobladores* or townspeople to settle along the river at the behest of Felipe de Neve, Gobernador de Las Californias, to the latest immigrants arriving this week from Oaxaca or Guatemala or Nigeria or Iraq, or the migrants moving from the Midwest or northeast, Los Angeles has been shaped and shaded by people from other places.

Those *pobladores* included twenty-two children, sixteen of whom had African ancestry and would be considered "black" today. They were the basis, with the original Native Californians, of who we are today. New residents have married each other, or native Angelenos, or fellow migrants from Wisconsin and New York, and their children, born here, are Californians.

My family represents a classic spectrum of immigration and migration. My mother is from Switzerland, my stepfather from Canada. My former husband's mother's family is from Mississippi, his father from Oklahoma. Today, listening to the expressions of deepseated anger at people born elsewhere, hearing the pessimism of Californians who say the state will collapse, reading that Americans aren't getting married, or are getting divorced, or aren't having babies, I keep in mind The Proud Bird.

The Proud Bird is an iconic restaurant near Los Angeles International Airport, a place where African American Angelenos have gathered for decades to celebrate and dance and eat. Last summer, while jets thundered overhead, my ex-husband Dwayne, his aunt Loretta, and I parked near the replica of a famous plane from World War II. I met my husband in the eighth grade. We were married for fourteen years, have been divorced for thirteen years, and along with many others in our family who aren't married anymore, we still see each other all the time and share a huge extended family. Loyalty and longevity in relationships, whether bound by legal documents or not, are hallmarks of our family.

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The Proud Bird, near Los Angeles International Airport, and iconic aircraft

We went into the lobby of the Tuskegee Room, where black and white photos of Tuskegee Airmen, posed near their aircraft, filled with pride, hope, resignation, anger, and defiance, seemed to study us. In one photo, airmen posed in Los Angeles with Lena Horne. Back then it was segregated Los Angeles and a segregated military—a part of history many Californians forget. At my side, our cousin, John Larkin, looked at the photos and murmured, "They never got their due until they were gone."

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As we entered the Tuskegee Room, I thought about how many decades of California history are contained here. The room was elegantly decorated for the sixtieth wedding anniversary of Robert and Lee Sims, my former husband's uncle and aunt. They graduated from Jefferson High School together in 1947—a photo of them in gleaming cap and gown, taken in front of the high school, was displayed beside their wedding portrait, taken at the Ebenezer Baptist Church on Fifty-first and Hooper.

At their table, Uncle Bobby and Aunt Lee received legions of well-wishers. Nearly two hundred of us surrounded the dance floor while their favorite band warmed up with classics by Duke Ellington. As a young couple, Bobby and Lee danced to such bands back on Central Avenue in the 1940s and 1950s, when South Los Angeles was the hot jazz scene and skirts twirled like morning glory blossoms.

I first met them at nineteen, knowing I'd marry their nephew. Lee's people were originally from Louisiana, and she came to California when she was young. From her front yard in Inglewood, where Dwayne and I went every year for

Super Bowl Sunday, she gave me a cutting of a red-leafed plant, vivid as black-cherry Jell-O, for the balcony of my first married apartment. She pressed it into my palm wrapped in a damp paper towel, and said she'd brought it home from an island in the Caribbean. She called it "blood plant" because of the color.

I was a petite blonde girl on her nephew's arm. She might have studied me with suspicion—maybe the suspicion that many Americans today seem to be cultivating in response to harder and harder times—but she never did, and times were much harder back then for African Americans and Angelenos.

In Lee's living room, in 1980, the Sims men debated which meat had tasted the worst back when they were starving in Oklahoma, after their father died and they had to shoot dinner. Possum, raccoon, rabbit or squirrel. Uncle Bobby could certainly have mistrusted me—he'd come to LA to stay with his own aunt and uncle, whose brother quit Oklahoma after being shot in the knee during the Tulsa Riot of 1921. That June, most of the black community of Greenwood in Tulsa, Oklahoma was burned to the ground after a mob decided a young black man had touched a white woman in an elevator.

It's the oldest tragic story—the seed for hundreds of lynchings—and yet no Sims has ever been unkind to me. Their nephew and I, along with our siblings, children, nieces, nephews, and cousins, were first-generation Californians—mixtures of black and Chicano and Haitian and Swiss and Filipino and Samoan and French. Some of us probably have skin the same shade as a few of those original *poblador* children.

Some of the loudest political voices have begun to insist that nothing can overcome the nation's recent divisions and animosities. Such negative beliefs weaken not only family and clan, but California and America as a nation. Except for the Native Americans, all of us came here from somewhere else: Italy, like my daughters' godmother's parents who ended up outside Philadelphia; and Japan, like my college roommate's great-grandparents; and like Uncle Bobby's grandmother's mother, who arrived in chains from Africa and was a slave in Tennessee.

Does America not remember this?

That slave woman had a Cherokee lover whom she was not allowed to marry, but their descendants did marry. They lived in single rented rooms or "colored" hotels in segregated Los Angeles, in Chicago and New York, and Washington, D.C., trying to get a foothold on the American

Lee and her court of bridesmaids and flower girl, in front of her mother's house in South Los Angeles

Dream. A generation later, my high school sweetheart and I got married. Most of our furniture was donated by our families, and our first daughter slept in a dresser drawer by our bed for a few weeks. I have some of that furniture still: a small Sears oak table from my mother-in-law's mother, who was born in Mississippi; next to me as I write, there is a black-lacquered wooden bowl painted with wildflowers of the Swiss Alps, brought to California by my mother from her small village.

At The Proud Bird, people shifted from table to table, relating stories of old Los Angeles, the dances and proms, and parties and restaurants. Chicken and waffles. Soul food on Central Avenue. Uncle John, Bobby's youngest brother, told stories of the Mexican food given to him by families along his mail route in Glendale. Aunt Loretta, as beautiful when she was a teenager as Lena Horne, visited with people she hadn't seen in years. I listened to decades of history and peals of laughter.

Uncle Bobby is a large, voluble man, a former Los Angeles County sheriff's deputy, and after the toast to his long marriage and to years of fishing in retirement, he joked that he'd been ready to start a new job as director of transportation for the city of Bell, and he'd planned to hire a few friends he named in the audience—but that deal was off. Everyone laughed. Bell is famous now—but just the latest story in greed and politics.

The band's female vocalist then performed "Satin Doll" and "I'm A Woman." I went outside with my cousin Teri's

Robert Sims and his groomsmen, including my father-in-law General (in glasses), in front of the house before the wedding

son, David, who's in his twenties. We walked around The Proud Bird. Over a small bridge, we could see a wedding reception taking place. The bride was glowing, her dark skin soft against a dress and stole of white satin. The groom wore white, too, and the bridesmaids were clad in a vivid tangerine to match the bride's bouquet of lilies and roses. They were young, and David and I joked that they were bumping Jay Z while we could hear the strains of Duke Ellington from our own party.

Sixty years of marriage in one room and one hour of marriage in another. Los Angeles can still be in love. California is not going to collapse because people come here from other states or nations and marry each other and have children whose skin is a blending of theirs—whether pink or gold or brown or taupe. I felt unaccountably happy, wandering back under the eyes of the black men in uniform and the planes they piloted to help keep their nation free, at the behest of their President. Inside the Tuskegee Room, I watched our elders holding court at the tables, bobbing their heads to the song "At Last," made famous by Etta James, a native of Los Angeles born to a fourteen-year-old African American mother who told Etta that her father was the white pool player "Minnesota Fats."

"At last, my love has come along . . . my heart was wrapped up in clover, and life is like a song. . . ." **B**

Los Angeles can still be in love.