

SUSAN STRAIGHT

Photography by Douglas McCulloh

Off the Grid

Undercover independence

This is the state we're in—the California that people love to jeer in a perennial way, the one they used to say would be “the first failed state!” with a certain glee. They are from most any other state, and they think we all live in The Hills of Hollywood-Malibu-Laguna, a fictional place where we get plastic surgery, drink endless lattes, and rise from our hot tubs to descend directly from our crumbling/fire-flood-prone/iceplant-laden cliff onto our own private beaches. But we are not the only state this season with budget impasses, with shutdowns and IOUs and intransigent politicians who will not bend, even when people are going hungry.

Taxes. That is what all the arguments seem to be based on. We are a state sorely divided by the issue of raising taxes. Here in Riverside County, Supervisor Jeff Stone (born in Los Angeles, raised in Anaheim) has called for secession! He wants to split the state into two entities—I would live in South California, which doesn't even sound right. My own assemblyman, Ken Calvert (born and raised in Corona, worked at his father's restaurant) is focused mostly on immigration, according to the frequent mailers I receive about securing the border.

But we won't fail, contrary to the barely camouflaged derision of other Americans watching us, thinking we're sinking fast because of taxes, immigration, and government.

Oh, *government* might be failing. At every level, our state—which was headed by Arnold S, born in Austria, but now by Jerry Brown, someone whose father was an icon to my own parents—is plodding toward Epic Fail, as my kids like to say. There could be no more perfect phrase with which to describe it.

But *we're* not failing. We're just off the grid, as people put it, and under the radar, in every way possible. Politicians don't seem to know us or pay attention to how we're living. We are invisible, and that's fine with us, as long as we're not epically failing. Many of our transactions are unfettered by taxation or representation. They are based in kinship and geography and loyalty, and bred from years of government indifference.

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I live a few blocks from the hospital where I was born, in Riverside. Ah, the Inland Empire, the misunderstood, vaguely cinematic, desert-like place where we are all related to biker gangs (yes, The Hell's Angels did begin here in Fontana) and only make the national news when we pass legislation limiting our backyard rooster ownership to two. I have four chickens, myself, one of which is a Mexican fighting hen I inherited from my brother, also born here. He was encouraged to raise fighting roosters by his neighbor out in the orange groves, Big José, born in Chihuahua. My brother was unable to teach his roosters to fight, because he loved them, so instead he taught them to sit on the couch beside him and watch NFL games while eating Doritos. The mother of some of those roosters lives in my yard now. Her name is Coco. I inherited her after my brother died in 2002.

Today, I bought extra tamales from Angel Jr., my tamale guy born in East LA, who comes Thursdays in his white truck with the compartment filled with varieties of homemade tamales. I'd been saving for a few years to put a brick path in my backyard; I'd recently given away the third-hand, metal swing set that my three daughters and countless friends had loved for years. The absence of the swing set, and two of my three daughters who grew up and left for college, left an ache in my chest, so I called my friend Luis, born in Corona, and he recommended Ofa, born in Tonga, who was now in the yard with his cousin and three nephews, laying brick.

I bought Angel's tamales for the bricklayers because the previous day they'd requested shrimp burritos from Señor Baja, our local taco place. That's why I love California. While Ofa and his relatives, born in Tonga and raised in Hawaii and now living in Ontario and Rialto and San Bernardino, who all speak Tongan among each other and English to me, ate lunch, I got in my car.

I left my hundred-year-old former orange grove farmhouse and drove down my street, past my neighbor S, born in Oakland, who is working as a funeral singer for our nearby Catholic church. I waved at another neighbor K, born in Riverside, who unloaded lumber; an elementary

school teacher, he is doubling the size of his house. No McMansions in my neighborhood; his original wood-frame house is 650 square feet, and he's building a second bedroom after twenty years.

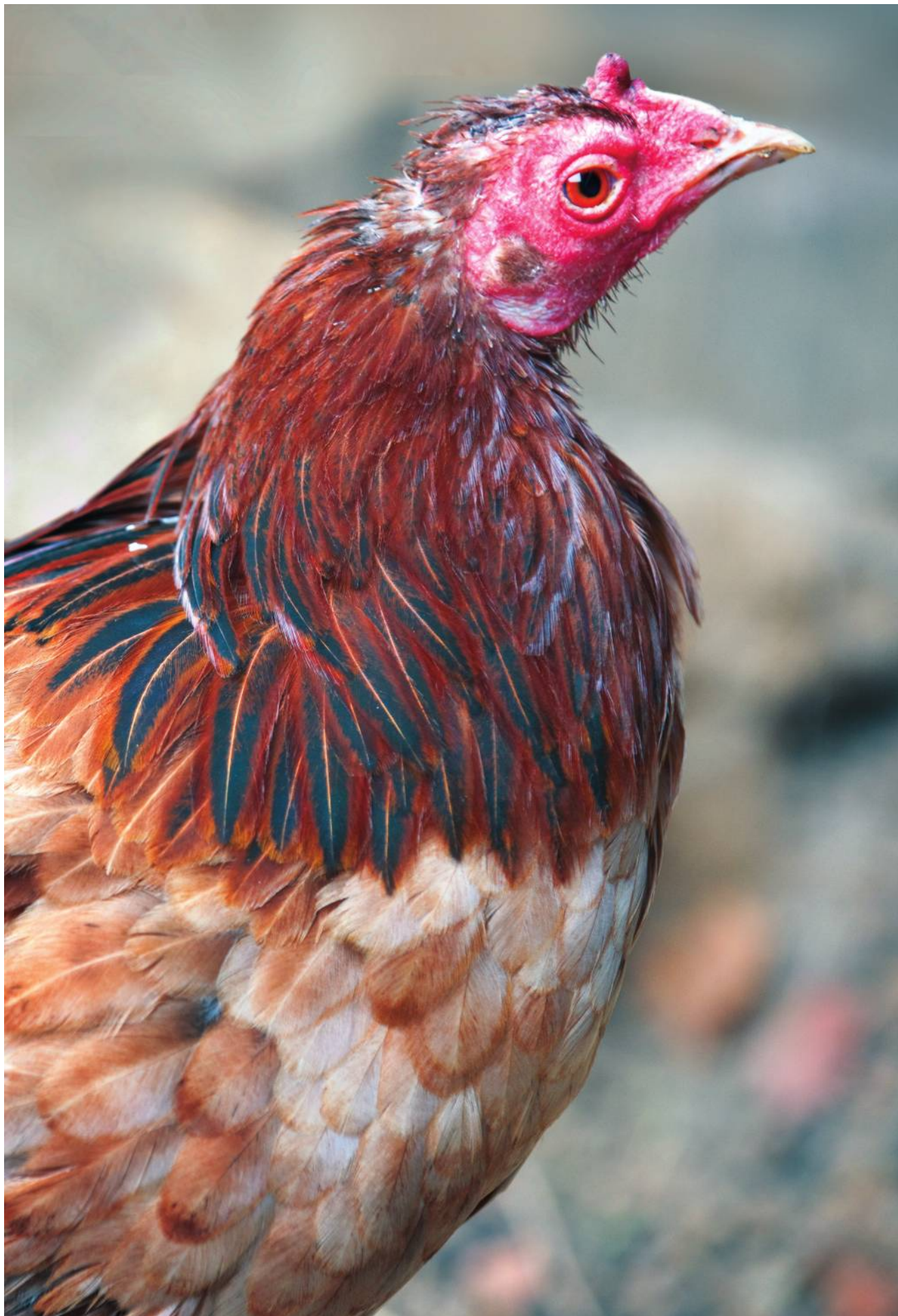
I drove past the hospital where I was born, and then the new multistory building downtown where a giant metal dome, which cost \$1.2 million, sits on one corner of the roof, looking exactly like a juicer for oranges. My neighbors find this hilarious since our city was once the citrus capital of the nation (in 1882, of the more than one-half million citrus trees in California, half were in Riverside) with the highest per capita income in America (in 1895, we had that distinction, due to citrus exports).

Riverside County's reported unemployment rate is one of the highest in the nation—16 percent—and has been for over two years. The foreclosure rate is one of the highest as well. But we have done this before—when our steel mill was disassembled and sold to China, when the Air Force Base was made into a reserve facility, and now, when the entire country remains in meltdown.

I drove to San Bernardino, past a towing yard where last year I retrieved my middle daughter's Honda after it was stolen and stripped down to the frame. We put it back together with seats and door panels bought from Pick-A-Part, the locally famous junkyard where my ex-husband and his friends, all born in the same hospital as I was, scour cars for any particular item they need.

In San Bernardino, my mother, who was born in Switzerland, had her first job in 1955, at a Household Finance Loan company. Back then, she saw loans refused every day, because people didn't have a steady salary, because they were the wrong color, because someone was in a bad mood. There was no subprime, no zero-down.

A few miles directly west of the red light where I stopped, my grandparents lived in Fontana after they immigrated from Switzerland in the 1950s. My grandfather, a former Swiss train conductor, worked for the Riverside Cement Company. My grandmother was a nurse for Kaiser Steel's company healthcare program—Kaiser Permanente.





It was one of the nation's first HMOs when it began to offer industrial healthcare for California steel mill workers. My grandmother has told me stories of injured steelworkers during the 1950s being brought to a wooden building in the yard where she tended to them.

Back at my house, Ofa and his cousin and three nephews had finished laying bricks. Ofa's cousin was a world-class surfer and rugby player, and he had just brought back from Tonga a long piece of sugar cane, which he balanced against my fence, built years ago by me and my neighbor J, born in Texas.

He told me, "Much better than American sugar cane. It's soft. Better for eating."

His wife was born in England. He met her when he played rugby there. Their son, born in Rialto, standing beside me, thought he was a ladies' man and inquired about my daughters. On his forearm was tattooed KILLA. Ofa and his cousin and I, all in our forties, rolled our eyes at him.

Ofa sawed off a section of the sugar cane and handed it to me. It had five buds at the joints, shaped like tiny plump

shields. Each bud will grow a new stalk after I plant it in the backyard, next to the lemon-scented *ti* grass given to me by Maria, the woman across the street, who was born on a rural farm in the Philippines and came here years ago when she married an American serviceman. The day she gave me the seedling-bunch of grass, she sat on my porch and told me a story about a woman in her village who turned into a dog at night, how she'd seen this woman transform.

On the other side of the sugar cane is my first navel orange tree, the kind originally planted by Eliza Tibbets, born in Cincinnati, who began the citrus industry in 1873 when she put into the Riverside ground (about six miles directly west of my home) two navel orange seedlings from Bahía, Brazil, sent to her by a USDA agriculturist in Washington, D.C.

We will not fail epically, in the backyards and driveways and parking lots of California. It doesn't matter where we were born. The government will have little to do with it. We will make deals and give each other plants and fix each other's cars and hand each other worn, creased dollar bills, and then tell a few stories before we go on our way. **B**