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Mrs. Audubon

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Mrs. Audubon

MARY F. WHITESIDE

tree swallow

family: Hirundinidae

passerine bird noted as social and adaptable; nests in natural hollows of dead trees, old woodpecker cavities, nest boxes, or other unconventional sites; the female lines her nest with feathers often gathered by the male; agile fliers

Second-floor dormitories, gawking men. Married life amid raucous strangers. A private room in a public house. This meager roost's array of clothing, watercolors, crayons, and paper; bird skins, nests, tiny eggs, and feathers. Smoldering tapers. A waiting cradle. Soon, he promises, a house of our own. Yet, the Indian Queen. This crowded room.

Like a specimen pinned to John's board, I await our first child. Confined by shouting and fetid tavern odors while he escapes to draw and note the habits of everything, I burrow into my feather tick. John tirelessly restive. His undivided attention implausible. I thought he'd change.

eastern phoebe

family: Tyrannidae

passerine bird considered hardy and very active, rarely lives in groups; a mated pair spends little time together; unlike many other birds only the female constructs the nest usually in niches or overhangs

New territory called John. My wave the answer to his shrinking boat. Downriver, smoke drifts from chimneys.

Inside the cabin, a roaring fire. Deer hide over narrow windows. Bearskin across plank door. Rocking cradle near feather-tick-covered walnut bedstead. Mother's china sooty; trunks of clothing needless. John's cherished La Fontaine's Fables and his tattered Linnaeus remain—his flat tin-lined chest of drawings, secure.

Snowflake minutes drift into gray-banked hours. In every candlestick, a taper. Lullaby sung, story read.

So he makes promises...

chuck-will's-widow**family: Caprimulgidae**

crepuscular bird that is solitary, except after nesting and when migrating; builds no nest structure; distinctive, repetitive melancholy call; graceful, buoyant flight

Pushing aside beginner spelling and grammar books, I hover over a thin, leather-bound ledger. Squint in candlelight, the columns never adding up to my expectations. John says he'll earn his way as long as he can hold a piece of chalk to drawing paper. But his dream—a book of American birds—has yet to take flight.

So he makes promises. While I struggle. For most of our married life, I've lived in someone else's home. In this old overseer's cabin, I am governess and mother, forced to haggle with planters whose children attend my school. Yet even in dwindling light, I clutch hope and smother my worries—shadow-birds, unrecognized by John, that flicker and flit as great-winged creatures.

**OBSCURE MIST** JULIE COVINGTON**WALKABOUT** JULIE COVINGTON