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Departure

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Departure

Kimberly Lee

Swallows migrate annually in search of food and a more hospitable locale, escaping oppressive environmental conditions that are unfavorable to their survival. -The Ornithology Primer by Albrecht Culpepper

My shoe box contains no shoes. It's lined with wax paper, doubled over, and folded along the edge. Food for the colored train car. Three pieces of fried chicken, three biscuits, corn on the cob, two slices of pound cake. The girls have boxes too. Carrie wanted drumsticks—like most children. I gave her two, plus a thigh.

The whole thing was Noah's idea. He came home one night from the field with a wrinkled flyer: "California Jobs for Negroes." A few of his buddies were going. He wanted to go, see what it was, get settled, set everything up. In one month's time, I would follow him out there with the girls.

Noah is a proud man, maybe too proud. But I like that. He looks every man straight in the eye, no matter what color. He talks back, stands firm on his feet. I've heard the word as we pass by on the road. "Uppity." The night riders know who he is, where we live. They came by our house and he raised his shotgun, shot high into the air. No one was hurt, but I knew that if he stayed, he would be. He left town deep in the night.

Noah said he first noticed me on a Palm Sunday. I was in the choir stand, singing "I'll Fly Away." He said, "it wasn't my favorite hymn then, but it is now." Do birds fly at night? I'm sure some do. When they need to.



Swallows quickly adapt to their habitat at the migratory site, thriving on abundant food sources and congenial surroundings. This newfound stability serves to instigate participation in typical avian behaviors such as nesting and preening. -The Ornithology Primer by Albrecht Culpepper

Back home I taught in the woods. One big room. My girls, plus J.C. who was 13, and Edna who was 7, and Douglas who was 9, and Lottie who was 5, and Willie who was 11 and a half. Plus 13 others. We got the school district's scraps—books with missing pages or pages that were scribbled on. One time we got a book that had been gnawed on, like someone had tried to eat it.

I can't teach here, but my girls have new books. They join the Campfire Girls; it meets at a white lady's house across town. They will take piano, or violin.

Noah works on the shipyard, helping build submarines for the war. We sell the vegetables that grow in the yard. I meet Augusta at church. It's my turn to bring home a crinkly flyer: "Women Needed for War Effort."

I arrive on my first day, my hair freshly pressed. Augusta gives me one look and hightails it to her locker. She returns and wraps a scarf around my head, then nods at the helmet in my hands. I put it on, and get to work.

The air is different here. Lighter. It could be that I've never been this close to an ocean, never felt the calm mist tickling my skin. Or maybe this is what it feels like to breathe easy, and free.



Genetic factors and instinctual knowledge are believed to produce a signal, prompting swallows to return to their original home site when conditions are conducive to their existence. -The Ornithology Primer by Albrecht Culpepper

I go back just one time with the girls for my grandmother's funeral. We step off the train and the air settles on my shoulders as if it is full of burdens looking for a fresh place to land.

I need a hat for the service. Nervous, I jangle change around in my hands, waiting for the bus. I step up and pay the fare, then step off and go to the middle door, closest to the colored section. Carrie points to Maddie as I sit down. She's sitting just behind the driver, not noticing the ugly stares coming her way. I get her and bring her to the back. Now I know why I was nervous.

I say goodbye to my grandmother, wearing the hat that I wasn't allowed to try on. We board the train home, to a place where we will not be asked to live a lesser life.