

ACT I

SCENE 1

(ALMA and SUSANNAH scurry into the attic of a house in Philadelphia.)

ALMA

Is it in there Susannah?

SUSANNAH

Papa said he put it in. I don't see it. Oh...Oh...Here it is. The Philadelphia Sentinel, April 13, 1847. "Miss Carrie Stearns to ride stage coach to Kansas."

ALMA

Won't she be surprised? Isn't it lucky your father owns a newspaper? Why don't we cut it out and put it on the first page of her diary?

SUSANNAH

Did you bring something to wrap the diary with?

ALMA

My Mama gave me this velvet ribbon.

SUSANNAH

Why would anyone want to leave Philadelphia? Everything is here.

ALMA

She has to go. Her Aunt Beatrice needs her help out in Kansas.

SUSANNAH

I wonder what it feels like not to have parents?

ALMA

Her Aunt Ethel and Uncle James treated her just like their own daughter. There, isn't this pretty? Where's Louise?

SUSANNAH

She's still helping Carrie pack. They'll probably be here any minute.

LOUISE

(Entering out of breath)

Is it ready?

ALMA

Yes, here it is.

LOUISE

Oh, I wish I could go with her!

SUSANNAH

Oh, Louise, you don't want to go. There are no schools, no churches, no boys, probably no people, no dances, no parties, no dressmakers.

LOUISE

Maybe they don't even wear clothes!

ALMA

You mean they run around naked?

LOUISE

(Screams)

SUSANNAH

Louise!

ALMA

Shhh, you two. She's coming.

CARRIE

(Enters)

Oh, girls, we only have a few minutes before the stagecoach comes.

LOUISE

What if you miss it?

(Screams girlishly)

SUSANNAH

Louise! I hope she does.

ALMA

Shhh. We have a present for you.

CARRIE

You're going to make me cry.

LOUISE

Don't open it now. Open it on the trip.

SUSANNAH

I can't believe you're really going.

ALMA

How long does it take to get to Kansas?

CARRIE

I'm not sure because I have to change coaches and they stop a lot. But Aunt Beatrice wrote me that when she went out there it took less than two months.

SUSANNAH

What will you do on the stagecoach? You can't sew. You can't read.

LOUISE

You might get sick.

SUSANNAH

There are no doctors out there.

ALMA

My father says there are a lot of Indians around.

LOUISE & SUSANNAH

Indians!

CARRIE

Oh, sure. Aunt Beatrice says there are plenty of them. And outlaws, too. And, of course, real cowboys.

SUSANNAH

But then who will you marry?

LOUISE

A cowboy!

ALMA

Maybe she won't get married.

SUSANNAH

If you stayed here you know who you'd get married to.

LOUISE

Billy Hotchkiss.

CARRIE

No. Not Billy Hotchkiss.

LOUISE

He's cute.

SUSANNAH

They've got a lot of money and a big house.

ALMA

I heard everyone is poor out west and they all live in dirt houses.

CARRIE

Well, it's hard at first. Some people have real houses, though. Some even have an upstairs.

ALMA

Does Aunt Beatrice?

CARRIE

Yes, I think so.

LOUISE

Wouldn't it be awful if it was a dirt house?

SUSANNAH

Everything's dirty and dusty out there. It's brown all over.

LOUISE

Do they have flowers?

CARRIE

Well, maybe wild flowers.

ALMA

It's going to be lonely. Do you want to go?

CARRIE

I'm kind of used to traveling. And besides, if I hadn't come here I never would have met all of you.

SUSANNAH

What if you don't like it? You won't be able to come back here. Will you?

CARRIE
(Shrugs)

LOUISE

I don't want you to go.

SUSANNAH

Me either.

ALMA

You can write.

CARRIE

Oh, sure. And maybe you'll come visit me.

LOUISE

I will!

SUSANNAH

Sure.

ALMA

Sure.

CARRIE

I'd better go now. Don't say goodbye. Remember you promised.

(THEY embrace. CARRIE leaves the attic and crosses to ladder as the lights begin a slow cross fade.)

SUSANNAH

Let's made a promise that we'll all get married on the same day.

LOUISE

I promise!

ALMA

I don't know if I want to get married.

LOUISE
(Screams)

SUSANNAH

Louise!

ALMA

SHHH!

SCENE 5

(PETREL is discovered at a writing desk)

PETREL

(Speaks with English accent)

Fifteenth of June, 1851. Dear Mummy. We finally arrived in Kansas on March tenth. You wouldn't believe how enormous this country is, Mum. It took us only one month to cross the Atlantic and two and a half months to get to Kansas!

I'll never forget the look on your face when my brothers and I stepped onto the deck of the John Jacob Westervelt. But you needn't have been upset because, as it turned out, that sturdy little ship pulled us through a really frightening hurricane. Nobody was hurt but a number of us became quite seasick and spent the better part of the journey trying to regain our appetites. When we finally docked in New York, I literally kissed the ground, then immediately became ravenous!

We found Uncle Edward at once when we got to Wichita. There's an entire community of British who welcomed us with open arms! But, the *best* news is that we've already staked our land claim and have built an honest-to-goodness house.

(PETREL eases away from the desk to the window.)

Oh, Mum, the weather is sunny and the climate is mild; no fog, no rain—just open, blue sky and fertile soil everywhere one looks. We've already planted our little seeds, which was really no task at all, and now the most difficult part, if there is a difficult part, appears to be just waiting for the food to appear. I can hardly wait to look out and see the yellow corn swaying in the breeze.

My new friend, Jennifer, has been here nearly three years and has been filling me in with all sorts of stories about what to expect here. She was attacked by wolves her first year, got caught in a prairie fire the second, and during the drought she was only allowed to bathe once a fortnight! Oh, it sounds like such an adventure, really! Do you know, we've already had a fox hunt? *(Aside)* Of course, we had to use a rabbit instead of a fox.

Today I baked my first loaf of bread! Mummy, did you know that baking bread is quite simple compared to churning butter and chopping wood? As for my dear brothers, they do seem to have it slightly easier because they spend a good deal of the time sitting on the back porch, smoking their pipes, and waiting for the crops to grow.

(Eases back to desk)

Ah, well, but I do feel wonderful, Mummy. You see, I've met a young man by the name of Kuthbert Jones. He's tall and blond and quite handsome, actually, and ... I've grown quite fond of him. As a matter of fact, we were married June first and nothing could be finer! On that happy note I'll close this letter. I do miss you and often wonder when we will see each other again. Reg and Bertie send their love. Your dear daughter, Petrel.

