

INT. BEDROOM - SOUTHEASTERN KENTUCKY, 1906 - NIGHT

A little girl lies pale and feverish in the middle of a cottony white antique bed. A croupy cough racks her body.

A doctor peers over the girl, checking her breathing with his stethoscope, noting her fever with his hand.

Standing next to the bed, the girl's pretty but frail young mother, watches fearfully. In her hands is a faded stack of letters held loosely with a ribbon. She twists the bundle nervously, coughing herself every now and then.

The doctor raises concerned eyes to hers, but she shakes her head, indicating it's nothing. He frowns and turns back to the child.

EXT. WHITE FRAME HOUSE - LATER

The doctor, BILL NOLAN, exits the house, closing his bag.

PATTON CAUDILL, a rugged farm man with poetry in his eyes, leans against the porch rail, smoking a pipe.

DR. NOLEN

Thought any more about going out  
West?

Patton taps his pipe against the porch railing then takes out a leather tobacco pouch.

PATTON

Dora's against it. This is her  
home.

DR. NOLEN

Dora's not going to be alive to  
fight you, Patton, if you don't get  
her out of this damp climate.  
Sarah, too. . . You can find a new  
home, but you can't bring back the  
dead.

Patton meets his gaze, the fear of losing his family evident in his eyes.

EXT. SOUTHEASTERN KENTUCKY MOUNTAINS - DAWN

Panoramic view of Appalachian mountains with a light mist hanging over lush green. Pockets of fog gathered in the "hollers" begin to thin as the sun slowly begins to rise over the crest of the hills. A caption reads "Three Months Later."

An aerial shot moves deeper into the green of the mountains, as the faint outline of the small town becomes visible and a voice-over begins.

AUDREY (V.O.)  
I was just a little girl when we  
left our home in Kentucky...

EXT. POOR FORK, KENTUCKY - MORNING

The sun is low on the horizon, the fog almost gone. A town sits nestled in a valley next to the twisting Cumberland River. As the voice-over continues, an aerial shot eases into the heart of the town past several businesses including, "Cornett's General Store and Post Office," to a white-frame house next to a swimming hole in the river.

AUDREY (V.O.)  
We lived in a holler between Pine  
Mountain and Big Black. When Mama  
was a girl, she went swimming with  
her sisters and brothers in the Dan  
Hole. I don't remember the Dan  
Hole...or the journey that took us  
away.

EXT. WHITE FRAME HOUSE - SAME TIME

A close-up of the house, its flowering garden and wide front porch with a swing and cane-backed chairs.

INT. WHITE FRAME HOUSE - BEDROOM - SAME TIME

DORA CORNETT CAUDILL, the mother of the ill child, is now dressed for travel. An open trunk sits in the middle of the room. Dora stands near the window, staring out.

DORA POV

Sunlight filtering through the trees over the Dan Hole.

BACK TO SCENE

Dora turns with croupy coughing to pick up a packet of letters and two photos: one of a young man and another of a big family gathered outside the white house. She wraps these carefully in a cloth, then tucks them into the trunk, firmly shutting the lid. She impulsively picks up a pot of flowering Mountain Laurel as she leaves.

EXT. WHITE FRAME HOUSE - LATER

Dora steps onto the porch where her mother, MARY JANE CORNETT, sits in the swing between Dora's two children, AUDREY, 6, and her pale and thin sister SARAH, 5, who is coughing from time to time. Dora's gaze meets her mother's regretfully.

Dora's two younger sisters, IDA and SUDIE and her little brother MORTON, stand nearby on the porch, watching.

EXT. WHITE FRAME HOUSE - LATER

A buggy pulls up, driven by a small and solemn white-haired gentleman, Dora's father WILLIAM CORNETT. Next to him sits an austere middle-aged couple.

AUDREY (V.O.)

Mama and little Sarah weren't well. Aunt Precious' husband, Dr. Nolen, said the dry west would be good for them. He said he'd always wanted a practice out west, so he and Aunt Presh came along with us.

Next to William sits Dr. Nolen, a serious gray-templed man, slightly older than his equally serious wife, Dora's sister PRECIOUS. Both are thinning in stature, sedate and silent, but the man has kind eyes and a quick smile. Precious' face is marked with a frown.

On the seat behind them is Dora's plump and cheery Norwegian-looking sister-in-law, OTTA CORNETT, with her two children, LILLIAN, 8, and LONZO, 7.

AUDREY (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Papa found out you could get 160 acres of good farmland for next to nothing--all you had to do was live on it. Papa made it sound like such an adventure that Mama's brother Cam and his wife Otta decided to come, too.

EXT. WHITE FRAME HOUSE - LATER

William Cornett and Dr. Nolen heft Dora's trunks onto the back of the buggy.

Mary Jane gives Sarah and Audrey a hug then helps them climb onto the buggy. She squeezes the hands of Otta and Precious, then Lillian and Lonzo bend for kisses. Ida, Sudie, and

Morton join in for a round of hugs and good-byes. Mary Jane gives Dora a long embrace.

William pulls her gently aside then he helps Dora up and climbs into the buggy himself. Mary Jane stands back with her other children; all wave as they drive away.

AUDREY (V.O.)  
Papa and Uncle Cam went out first  
to make the claim. We all followed  
a couple of months later.

DORA POV

Dora watches the white frame house and her family until the wagon rounds a bend and she can see them no more.

EXT. TRAIN STATION - POOR FORK

A 1900s black locomotive, steam puffing white from its engine, sits on the tracks.

EXT. TRAIN STATION - POOR FORK

The family group stands beside the train, saying their good-byes to William. One by one, each gets on the train until only Dora, still holding the plant, and her children are left with William. Dora and her father exchange a quick stilted embrace.

WILLIAM  
Don't forget who you are,  
daughter...and where you come from.

William turns to go as Dora watches, then he stops and looks back briefly.

WILLIAM (CONT'D)  
Tell Patton his job'll still be  
here if he wants it back.

Dora's eyes are sad as she watches her father go, then she smiles down at her daughters and turns to board the train.

EXT. TRAIN STATION - LATER

Puffing steam, the train pulls out of the station.

INT. TRAIN - LATER

Dr. Nolen and Precious sit directly opposite Dora and her girls, absorbed in reading material.

AUDREY (V.O.)

Aunt Precious didn't have any children. Mama said Aunt Presh wanted to but we children didn't believe it. She was much too serious to be of any good use to children. Not like Aunt Otta, who loved as all as if we were her own.

Otta, Lillian, and Lonzo settle in across the aisle, happily watching out the window as the train leaves the station.

Dora sits with her potted plant next to her on the seat; Audrey and Sarah stand looking out, eyes wide with excitement. Sarah begins coughing.

Dr. Nolen looks up at Dora. His expression indicates 'all will be well.'

Doubtful, Dora averts her gaze out the window, her eyes are moist as she watches the last of the hills roll by.

EXT. TRAIN JOURNEY - SCENES OF TIME PASSING

A) Wide angle scene of a train winding its way down from mountains as the voice-over continues.

AUDREY (V.O.)  
Life as I know it began on that trip.

B) The hills turn to flat plains, covered with wheat as the voice-over continues.

AUDREY (V.O.) (CONT'D)  
But for the longest time, we lived on Mama's hope and her memories of "home"--until eventually home became the plains and the sagebrush and the cactus, and a night sky so big you wondered it didn't swallow up the day.

C) The plains slip away and the land turns barren and desert-like.

INT. TRAIN - SAME TIME

Dora's brow furrows as she watches out the changing landscape out the window of the train.

AUDREY (V.O.)  
But I'm getting ahead...and it is her story, after all.

EXT. TRAIN STATION - TAIBAN, NM - DAY

Patton Caudill, cheerful and sunburned, and CAM CORNETT, heavier and wearier-looking, stand waiting for their families as the train pulls in.

EXT. TRAIN STATION - DAY

The families disembark. Patton runs up and grabs the shy Dora, engulfing her in a gigantic bear hug, which he quickly opens wide enough to include Sarah and Audrey. Though Dora returns his embrace with equal affection, she is pale and tired.

Cam and Otta share a tight hug and kiss, then he hugs his children too.

Dr. Nolen surveys the scene with keen interest; Precious surveys it with disdain.

The sky is bright blue and empty, not a cloud or even a hill on the rocky cactus-covered horizon. The station is of Spanish adobe design; several Mexican men, dark and mysterious, eye the newcomers with curiosity. At the end of the platform, two loosely-clothed and braided Indian women walk with baskets over their arms.

EXT. TRAIN STATION - DAY

While the men load the trunks and baggage onto a waiting wagon and covered buggy, Dora, Otta, and Precious stare about them with expressions ranging from mystified to terrified. The children look merely curious.

As Patton comes back to get the last of their baggage, he sees concern in Dora's eyes. He looks at her adoringly then gives her another hug.

PATTON

It's a whole new world here, Doe.  
It's splendid; it's going to make  
you well.

Cam looks at Otta with doubt.

Precious stares at Patton with distaste, then maternally takes her sister's arm and begins to lead a reluctant Dora away toward the buggy.

PRECIOUS

Well, no one's going to get well in  
this heat. We'd best get Dora and  
the baby out of the sun.

EXT. TAIBAN HOTEL - DAY

The buggy carrying Precious, Dr. Nolen, Dora and Sarah stops in front of the hotel. Dora still holds the Mountain Laurel carefully, protectively, on her lap. She looks feverish and is coughing slightly.

Behind the buggy is a wagon with the rest of the family and a load of baggage. Audrey sits proudly on the seat with her father, who is driving.

Dr. Nolen jumps down and begin to unload. Precious turns to Dora.

PRECIOUS

You should stay here with us. God knows what your accommodations will be.

DORA

But we've just arrived. I want to spend time with Patton.

Precious frowns, then turns back to the other wagon.

PRECIOUS

(bossy)

Cam, come drive this buggy. You can bring it back to us later. You girls come ride here, too.

(accusingly to Patton)

I'll not have my sister suffering in this sun.

Patton gives his sister-in-law a wide friendly smile; Audrey looks up at her father.

AUDREY

Do I have to?

Patton hugs her and grins mischievously.

PATTON

No you don't. Just put on your bonnet.

EXT. HOTEL - DAY

As the wagons pull away, Dr. Nolen calls out to Dora.

DR. NOLEN

Lots of water and rest, Dora. I'll check on you soon.

Dora nods with an unhappy last glance at her sister.

EXT. TAIBAN - DAY

The wagon and buggy drive through the small town, passing a row of stores and houses.

DORA POV

Dora watches as they drive past a small white school building, with a gathering of typical children playing outside.

EXT. CROSSING THE DESERT - MINUTES LATER

The road is bumpy, dusty, and long. The newcomers watch with wide eyes as they pass numerous types of cactus, some pinon and juniper shrubs, a few cottonwood trees here and there but not much else.

Dora clings to the side of the buggy, coughing from the dust. Sarah is coughing also.

Otta watches them, concerned.

EXT. HOMESTEAD - LATER

The homesteaders have filed on adjacent corners so their dugout homes are only about 100 yards from each other. Surrounding their homes are fields of foot-tall corn plants drooping from the sweltering heat and lack of moisture.

As the buggy driver pulls away, Dora and Otta survey their rugged new habitats. They are half-dug into the ground with earthen walls and covered with wooden rafter roofs; hanging canvas on poles function as patios and kitchens. Patton and Cam lead the mules to a nearby shelter constructed of some wood and tree branches.

The children have already run into the dugouts, exploring.

INT. TENT - A MOMENT OR TWO LATER

Dora looks faint, and Otta leads her to a bench set up under one of the tents and proceeds to dampen a cloth for Dora's head in a bucket of water.

DORA POV - BEYOND THE CORN

The desert presents a formidable though barren facade, with its interminable sea of brown, broken only by the now-shadowy forms of some mesquite trees and cactus. Rugged mountains loom in the far distance.

BACK TO SCENE

DORA

(taking the cloth)

Thank you, Otta...It's not much  
what I expected.

Otta shakes her head, rolls up her sleeves and begins to put  
some wood into the stove as she talks with a slight  
Norwegian accent.

OTTA

The travel brochures didn't do it  
justice, did they?

Dora smiles and shakes her head as she presses the damp  
cloth to her neck.

OTTA (CONT'D)

Cam wrote me a little. Said he  
wasn't sure we could make much of a  
life here, but we've put our money  
in it so...

OTTA POV

Cam and Patton unhitch the horses. Patton' laughter rings  
out as they work.

OTTA

Patton never loses hope, does he?

Dora looks out at her husband, then back at Otta, smiling  
her affection.

DORA

No, that wouldn't be Patton...Otta,  
I haven't said this before, but I'm  
glad you and Cam are here.

OTTA

It's an adventure, isn't it? I'm  
glad we're here too...and we just  
won't worry about the water, will  
we?

Otta has a good fire going in the stove now and puts a pot  
of water on to boil.

Dora stares out at the drooping plants with concern.

DORA

They do look a little sad, don't they?

(looking around)

What are those wooden things over there...and there?

Otta looks at Dora, surprised she doesn't know.

OTTA

That's where they tried to dig the well..they hit rock every time...and not a lick of rain since they got here. Cam says if it doesn't rain soon, we could lose the crop...Didn't Patton tell you?

Dora shakes her head 'no' and studies the Mountain Laurel, drooping too.()