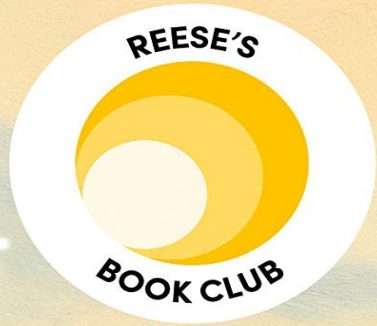


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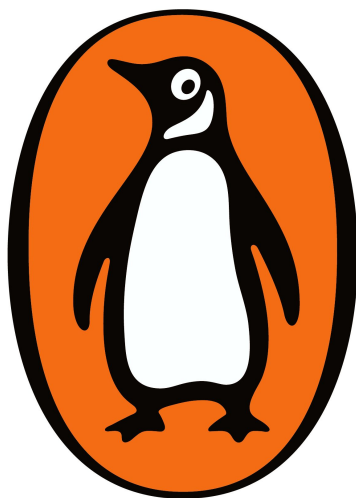


Jojo Moyes

a novel

The Giver *of* Stars





Jojo Moyes

THE GIVER OF STARS



Contents

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Postscript

Acknowledgements

About the Author

Jojo Moyes is a novelist and journalist. Her books include the bestsellers *Me Before You*, *After You* and *Still Me*, *The Girl You Left Behind*, *The One Plus One* and her short story collection *Paris for One and Other Stories*. Her novels have been translated into forty-six languages, have hit the number one spot in twelve countries and have sold over thirty-eight million copies worldwide.

Me Before You has now sold over fourteen million copies worldwide and was adapted into a major film starring Sam Claflin and Emilia Clarke. Jojo lives in Essex.

By the same author

Sheltering Rain
Foreign Fruit
The Peacock Emporium
The Ship of Brides
Silver Bay
Night Music
The Horse Dancer
The Last Letter from Your Lover
Me Before You
Honeymoon in Paris
The Girl You Left Behind
The One Plus One
After You
Paris for One
Still Me

*To Barbara Napier, who gave me stars when I
needed them.*

And to librarians everywhere.



Prologue

20 December 1937

Listen. Three miles deep in the forest just below Arnott's Ridge, and you're in silence so dense it's like you're wading through it. There's no birdsong past dawn, not even in high summer, and especially not now, with the chill air so thick with moisture that it stills those few leaves clinging gamely to the branches. Among the oak and hickory nothing stirs: wild animals are deep underground, soft pelts intertwined in narrow caves or hollowed-out trunks. The snow is so deep the mule's legs disappear up to his hocks, and every few strides he staggers and snorts suspiciously, checking for loose flints and holes under the endless white. Only the narrow creek below moves confidently, its clear water murmuring and bubbling over the stony bed, headed down towards an endpoint nobody around here has ever seen.

Margery O'Hare tests her toes inside her boots, but feeling went a long time back and she winces at the thought of how they're going to hurt when they warm up again. Three pairs of wool stockings, and in this weather you might as well go bare-legged. She strokes the big mule's neck, brushing off the crystals forming on his dense coat with her heavy men's gloves.

'Extra food for you tonight, Charley boy,' she says, and watches as his huge ears flick back. She shifts, adjusting the saddlebags, making sure the mule is balanced as they pick their way down towards the creek. 'Hot molasses in your supper. Might even have some myself.'

Four more miles, she thinks, wishing she had eaten more breakfast. Past the Indian escarpment, up the yellow pine track, two more hollers, and old Nancy will appear, singing hymns as she always does, her clear, strong voice echoing through the forest as she walks, arms swinging like a child's, to meet her.

'You don't have to walk five miles to meet me,' she tells the woman, every fortnight. 'That's our job. That's why we're on horseback.'

'Oh, you girls do enough.'

She knows the real reason. Nancy, like her bedbound sister, Jean, back in the tiny log cabin at Red Lick, cannot countenance even a chance that she will miss the next tranche of stories. She's sixty-four years old with three good teeth and a sucker for a handsome cowboy: 'That Mack McGuire, he makes my heart flutter like a clean sheet on a long line.' She clasps her hands and lifts her eyes to Heaven. 'The way Archer writes him, well, it's like he steps right out of the pages in that book and swings me onto his horse with him.' She leans forward conspiratorially. 'Ain't just that horse I'd be happy riding. My husband said I had quite the seat when I was a girl!'

'I don't doubt it, Nancy,' she responds, every time, and the woman bursts out laughing, slapping her thighs like this is the first time she's said it.

A twig cracks and Charley's ears flick. Ears that size, he can probably hear halfway to Louisville. 'This way, boy,' she says, guiding him away from a rocky outcrop. 'You'll hear her in a minute.'

'Goin' somewhere?'

Margery's head snaps around.

He is staggering slightly, but his gaze is level and direct. His rifle, she sees, is cocked, and he carries it, like a fool, with his finger on the trigger. 'So you'll look at me now, will ya, Margery?'

She keeps her voice steady, her mind racing. 'I see you, Clem McCullough.'

'*I see you, Clem McCullough.*' He spits as he repeats it, like a nasty child in a schoolyard. His hair stands up on one side, like he's slept on it. 'You see me while you're lookin' down that nose of yours. You see me like you see dirt on your shoe. Like you're somethin' special.'

She has never been afraid of much, but she's familiar enough with these mountain men to know not to pick a fight with a drunk. Especially one bearing a loaded gun.

She conducts a swift mental list of people she may have offended – Lord knows there seem to be a few – but McCullough? Aside from the obvious, she can find nothing.

'Any beef your family had with my daddy, that's buried with him. It's only me left, and I ain't interested in blood feuds.'

McCullough is directly in her path now, his legs braced in the snow, his finger still on the trigger. His skin has the purple-blue mottle of someone

too drunk to realize how cold he is. Probably too drunk to hit straight, but it's not a chance she wants to take.

She adjusts her weight, slowing the mule; her gaze slides sideways. The banks of the creek are too steep, too dense with trees for her to get past. She would have to persuade him to move or ride right over him, and the temptation to do the latter is strong.

The mule's ears flick back. In the silence she can hear her own heartbeat, an insistent thump in her ears. She thinks absently that she's not sure she's ever heard it this loud before. 'Just doing my job, Mr McCullough. I'd be obliged if you'd let me pass.'

He frowns, hears the potential insult in her too-polite use of his name, and as he shifts his gun she realizes her error.

'Your *job* ... Think you're so high and mighty. You know what you need?'

He spits noisily, waiting for her answer. 'I said, do you know what you need, girl?'

'Suspect my version of what that might be is going to differ a mile or two from yours.'

'Oh, you got all the answers. You think we don't know what you all have been doing? You think we don't know what you've been spreading among decent God-fearing women? We know what you're up to. You got the devil in you, Margery O'Hare, and there's only one way to get the devil out of a girl like you.'

'Well, I'd sure love to stop and find out, but I'm busy with my rounds, so maybe we can continue this —'

'Shut up!'

McCullough raises his gun. 'Shut that damn mouth of yours.'

She clamps it shut.

He takes two steps closer, his legs spread and braced. 'Git off the mule.'

Charley shifts uneasily. Her heart is an ice pebble in her mouth. If she turns and flees, he'll shoot her. The only route here follows the creek; the forest floor is hardscrabble flint, the trees too dense to find a way forward. There's nobody for miles, she realizes, nobody except old Nancy making her way slowly across the mountaintop.

She's on her own, and he knows it.

His voice lowers. 'I said git down, *now*.' He takes two steps closer, his footsteps crunching in the snow.

And there is the bare truth of it, for her and all the women around here. Doesn't matter how smart you are, how clever, how self-reliant – you can always be bettered by a stupid man with a gun. The barrel of his rifle is so close now that she finds herself gazing down two infinite black holes. With a grunt he drops it abruptly, letting it swing behind him on its strap and grabs at her reins. The mule wheels, so that she lurches forward clumsily onto his neck. She feels McCullough claw at her thigh as he reaches back for his gun with his other hand. His breath is sour with drink, and his hand is scaled with dirt; every cell of her body recoils at the feel of it.

And then she hears it, Nancy's voice in the distance.

Oh, what peace we often forfeit!
Oh, what needless pain we bear –

His head lifts. She hears a *No!*, and some distant part of her recognizes with surprise that it has emerged from her own mouth. His fingers grab and pull at her, one arm reaching for her waist, throwing her off-balance; in his determined grip, his rank breath, she feels her future morphing into something black and awful. But the cold has made him clumsy. He fumbles as he reaches for his gun again, his back to her, and at that moment she sees her chance. She reaches behind into her saddlebag with her left hand, and as he turns his head she drops the reins, grabs the other corner with her right fist, and swings the heavy book as hard as she can, *smack*, into his face. His gun goes off, the sound a three-dimensional *crack!* ricocheting off the trees, and she hears the singing briefly silenced, the birds rising into the sky – a shimmering black cloud of flapping wings. As McCullough drops, the mule bucks and lurches forward in fright, stumbling over him, so that she gasps and has to grab the horn of the saddle to stay on.

And then she is off along the creek bed, her breath tight in her throat, her heart pounding, trusting the mule's sure feet to find a hold in the splashing icy water, not daring to look back to see if McCullough has made it to his feet to come after her.



Three months earlier

It was, everyone agreed, fanning themselves outside the store or passing in the shade of the eucalyptus trees, unseasonably warm for September. The meeting hall at Baileyville was thick with the smells of lye soap and stale perfume, bodies wedged together in good poplin dresses and summer suits. The heat had permeated even the clapboard walls so that the wood creaked and sighed in protest. Pressed tight behind Bennett as he shuffled his way along the row of packed seats, apologizing as each person rose from their chair with a barely suppressed sigh, Alice swore that she felt the warmth of each body leach into her own as it leaned backwards to let them pass.

So sorry. So sorry.

Bennett finally reached two empty seats and Alice, her cheeks glowing with embarrassment, sat down, ignoring the sideways glances of the people around them. Bennett looked down at his lapel, brushing at non-existent lint, then spotted her skirt. ‘You didn’t change?’ he murmured.

‘You said we were late.’

‘I didn’t mean for you to come out with your house clothes on.’

She had been trying to make cottage pie, to encourage Annie to put something other than Southern food on the table. But the potatoes had gone green, she hadn’t been able to gauge the heat of the range, and the grease had splattered all over her when she dropped the meat onto the griddle. And when Bennett came in looking for her (she had, of course, lost track of time) he could not for the life of him see why she wouldn’t just leave

culinary matters to the housekeeper when an important meeting was about to take place.

Alice placed her hand over the largest grease mark on her skirt and resolved to keep it there for the next hour. Because it would be an hour. Or two. Or – Lord help her – three.

Church and meetings. Meetings and church. Sometimes Alice Van Cleve felt as if she had merely swapped one tedious daily pastime for another. That very morning in church Pastor McIntosh had spent almost two hours declaiming the sinners who were apparently plotting ungodly dominance around the little town, and was now fanning himself and looking disturbingly ready to speak again.

‘Put your shoes back on,’ Bennett murmured. ‘Someone might see you.’

‘It’s this heat,’ she said. ‘They’re English feet. They’re not used to these temperatures.’ She felt, rather than saw, her husband’s weary disapproval. But she was too hot and tired to care, and the speaker’s voice had a narcoleptic quality so that she caught only every third word or so – *germinating ... pods ... chaff ... paper bags* – and found it hard to care much about the rest.

Married life, she had been told, would be an adventure. Travel to a new land! She had married an American, after all. New food! A new culture! New experiences! She had pictured herself in New York, neat in a two-piece suit in bustling restaurants and on crowded sidewalks. She would write home, boasting of her new experiences. *Oh, Alice Wright? Wasn’t she the one who married the gorgeous American? Yes, I had a postcard from her – she was at the Metropolitan Opera, or Carnegie Hall ...*

Nobody had warned that it would involve so much small-talk over good china with elderly aunts, so much pointless mending and quilting or, even worse, so many deathly dull sermons. Endless, decades-long sermons and meetings. Oh, but these men did love the sound of their own voices! She felt as if she were being scolded for hours, four times a week.

The Van Cleves had stopped at no fewer than thirteen churches on their way back here, and the only sermon that Alice enjoyed had taken place in Charleston, where the preacher had gone on so long his congregation had lost patience and decided, as one, to ‘sing him down’ – to drown him out with song until he got the message and rather crossly closed his religious shop for the day. His vain attempts to speak over them, as their voices rose and swelled determinedly, had made her giggle.

The congregations of Baileyville, Kentucky, she had observed, seemed disappointingly rapt.

‘Just put them back on, Alice. Please.’

She caught the eye of Mrs Schmidt, in whose parlour she had taken tea two weeks previously, and looked to the front again, trying not to appear *too* friendly in case she invited her a second time.

‘Well, thank you, Hank, for that advice on seed storage. I’m sure you’ve given us a lot to think about.’

As Alice slid her feet into her shoes, the pastor added, ‘Oh, no, don’t get up, ladies and gentlemen. Mrs Brady has asked for a moment of your time.’

Alice, now wise to this phrase, slid off her shoes again. A short middle-aged woman moved to the front – the kind her father would have described as ‘well upholstered’, with the firm padding and solid curves one associated with a quality sofa.

‘It’s about the mobile library,’ she said, wafting her neck with a white fan and adjusting her hat. ‘There have been *developments* that I would like to bring to your attention.

‘We are all aware of the – uh – *devastating* effects the Depression has had on this great country. So much attention has been focused on survival that many other elements of our lives have had to take a back seat. Some of you may be aware of President and Mrs Roosevelt’s *formidable* efforts to restore attention to literacy and learning. Well, earlier this week I was privileged to attend a tea with Mrs Lena Nofcier, chairman of the Library Service for the Kentucky PTA, and she told us that, as part of it, the Works Progress Administration has instituted a system of mobile libraries in several states – and even a couple here in Kentucky. Some of you may have heard about the library they set up over in Harlan County. Yes? Well, it has proven *immensely* successful. Under the auspices of Mrs Roosevelt herself and the WPA –’

‘She’s an Episcopalian.’

‘What?’

‘Roosevelt. She’s an Episcopalian.’

Mrs Brady’s cheek twitched. ‘Well, we won’t hold that against her. She’s our First Lady and she is minding to do great things for our country.’

‘She should be minding to know her place, not stirring things up everywhere.’ A jowly man in a pale linen suit shook his head and gazed around him, seeking agreement.

Across the way, Peggy Foreman leaned forward to adjust her skirt at precisely the moment Alice noticed her, which made it seem that Alice had been staring at her. Peggy scowled and lifted her tiny nose into the air, then muttered something to the girl beside her, who leaned forward to give Alice the same unfriendly look. Alice sat back in her seat, trying to quell the colour rising in her cheeks.

Alice, you're not going to settle in unless you make some friends, Bennett kept telling her, as if she could sway Peggy Foreman and her crew of sour faces.

'Your sweetheart is casting spells in my direction again,' Alice murmured.

'She's not my sweetheart.'

'Well, she thought she was.'

'I told you. We were just kids. I met you, and ... well, that's all history.'

'I wish you'd tell her that.'

He leaned towards her. 'Alice, the way you keep hanging back, people are starting to think you're kind of – stand-offish ...'

'I'm English, Bennett. We're not built to be ... *hospitable*.'

'I just think the more you get involved, the better it is for both of us. Pop thinks so, too.'

'Oh. He does, does he?'

'Don't be like that.'

Mrs Brady shot them a look. 'As I was saying, due to the success of such endeavours in neighbouring states, the WPA has released funds to enable us to create our own travelling library here in Lee County.'

Alice stifled a yawn.

On the credenza at home there was a photograph of Bennett in his baseball uniform. He had just hit a home run, and his face held a look of peculiar intensity and joy, as if at that moment he were experiencing something transcendent. She wished he would look at her like that again.

But when she allowed herself to think about it, Alice Van Cleve realized her marriage had been the culmination of a series of random events, starting with a broken china dog when she and Jenny Fitzwalter had played a game of indoor badminton (it had been raining – what else were they supposed to do?), escalating with the loss of her place at secretarial school due to persistent lateness, and finally her apparently unseemly outburst at her

father's boss during Christmas drinks. ('But he put his hand on my bottom while I was handing around the vol-au-vents!' Alice protested. 'Don't be vulgar, Alice,' her mother said, shuddering.) These three events – with an incident involving her brother Gideon's friends, too much rum punch, and a ruined carpet (she hadn't realized the punch contained alcohol! Nobody said!) – had caused her parents to suggest what they called a 'period of reflection', which had amounted to 'keeping Alice indoors'. She had heard them talking in the kitchen: 'She's always been that way. She's like your aunt Harriet,' Father had said dismissively, and Mother had not spoken to him for two whole days, as if the idea of Alice being the product of her genetic line had been so unbearably offensive.

And so, over the long winter, as Gideon went to endless balls and cocktail parties, disappeared for long weekends at friends' houses, or partied in London, she gradually fell off her friends' invitation lists, and sat at home, working half-heartedly at scrappy embroidery, her only outings accompanying her mother on visits to elderly relatives or to Women's Institute gatherings, where the subjects for discussion tended to be cake, flower-arranging and *Lives of the Saints* – it was as if they were literally trying to bore her to death. She stopped asking Gideon for details after a while as they made her feel worse. Instead she sulked her way through canasta, cheated grumpily at Monopoly, and sat at the kitchen table with her face resting on her forearms as she listened to the wireless, which promised a world far beyond the stifling concerns of her own.

So two months later, when Bennett Van Cleve turned up unexpectedly one Sunday afternoon at the minister's spring festival – with his American accent, his square jaw and blond hair, carrying with him the scents of a world a million miles from Surrey – frankly he could have been the Hunchback of Notre Dame and she would have agreed that moving into a clanging bell-tower was a very fine idea indeed, thank you.

Men tended to stare at Alice, and Bennett was immediately smitten by the elegant young Englishwoman with huge eyes and wavy, bobbed blonde hair, whose clear, clipped voice was like nothing he'd ever heard back in Lexington, and who, his father remarked, might as well be a British princess for her exquisite manners and refined way of lifting a teacup. When Alice's mother revealed that they could claim a duchess in the family through marriage two generations back, the older Van Cleve almost expired

with joy. ‘A duchess? A royal duchess? Oh, Bennett, wouldn’t that have tickled your dear mother?’

Father and son were visiting Europe with an outreach mission of the Combined Ministry of East Kentucky Under God, observing how the faithful worshipped outside America. Mr Van Cleve had funded several of the attendees, in honour of his late wife, Dolores, as he was prone to announcing during lulls in conversation. He might be a businessman, but it meant nothing, *nothing*, if it was not done under the auspices of the Lord. Alice thought he seemed a little dismayed by the small and rather un-fervent expressions of religious fervour at St Mary’s on the Common – and the congregation had certainly been taken aback by Pastor McIntosh’s ebullient roaring about fire and brimstone (poor Mrs Arbuthnot had had to be escorted through a side door for air). But what the British lacked in piety, Mr Van Cleve observed, they more than made up for with their churches, their cathedrals and all their *history*. *And wasn’t that a spiritual experience in itself?*

Alice and Bennett, meanwhile, were busy with their own, slightly less holy experience. They parted with clutched hands and ardent expressions of affection, the kind heightened by the prospect of imminent separation. They exchanged letters during his stops at Rheims, Barcelona and Madrid. Their exchanges reached a particularly feverish pitch when he reached Rome, and on the way back it was a surprise only to the most disengaged members of the household that Bennett proposed, and Alice, with the alacrity of a bird seeing its cage door swing open, hesitated a whole half-second before she said yes, she would, to her now lovelorn – and rather deliciously tanned – American. Who wouldn’t say yes to a handsome, square-jawed man, who looked at her as if she were made of spun silk? Everyone else had spent the past months looking at her as if she were contaminated.

‘Why, you are just perfect,’ Bennett would tell her, holding his thumb and forefinger around her narrow wrist as they sat on the swing seat in her parents’ garden, collars up against the breeze and their fathers watched indulgently from the library window, both, for their own reasons, privately relieved about the match. ‘You’re so delicate and refined. Like a Thoroughbred.’ He pronounced it ‘*refahnd*’.

‘And you’re ridiculously handsome. Like a movie star.’

‘Mother would have loved you.’ He ran a finger down her cheek. ‘You’re like a china doll.’

Six months on, Alice was pretty sure he didn't think of her as a china doll any more.

They had married swiftly, explaining the haste as Mr Van Cleve's need to return to his business. Alice felt as if her whole world had flipped; she was as happy and giddy as she had been despondent through the long winter. Her mother packed her trunk with the same faintly indecent delight with which she had told everyone in her circle about Alice's lovely American husband and his rich industrialist father. It might have been nice if she'd looked a tiny bit mournful at the thought of her only daughter moving to a part of America nobody she knew had ever visited. But, then, Alice had probably been equally eager to go. Only her brother was openly sad, and she was pretty sure he would recover with his next weekend away. 'I'll come and see you, of course,' Gideon said. They both knew he wouldn't.

Bennett and Alice's honeymoon consisted of a five-day voyage back to the United States, then onward by road from New York to Kentucky. (She had looked Kentucky up in the encyclopaedia and been quite taken with all the horse-racing. It sounded like a year-long Derby Day.) She squealed with excitement at everything: their huge car, the size of the enormous ocean liner, the diamond pendant Bennett bought her as a gift from a store in London's Burlington Arcade. She didn't mind Mr Van Cleve accompanying them the entire journey. It would, after all, have been rude to leave the older man alone, and she was too overcome with excitement at the idea of leaving Surrey, with its silent Sunday drawing rooms and permanent atmosphere of disapproval, to mind.

If Alice felt a vague dissatisfaction with the way Mr Van Cleve stuck to them like a limpet, she smothered it, doing her best to be the delightful version of herself that the two men seemed to expect. On the liner between Southampton and New York she and Bennett at least managed to stroll the decks alone in the hours after supper while his father was working on his business papers or talking to the elders at the captain's table. Bennett's strong arm would pull her close, and she would hold up her left hand with its shiny new gold band, and wonder at the fact that she, Alice, was *a married woman*. And when they were back in Kentucky, she told herself, she would be *properly* married, as the three of them would no longer have to share a cabin, curtained off as it was.

'It's not quite the trousseau I had in mind,' she whispered, in her undershirt and pyjama bottoms. She didn't feel comfortable in less, after Mr

Van Cleve senior had, in his half-asleep state one night, confused the curtain of their double bunk with that of the bathroom door.

Bennett kissed her forehead. 'It wouldn't feel right with Father so close by, anyway,' he whispered back. He placed the long bolster between them ('Else I might not be able to control myself') and they lay side by side, hands held chastely in the dark, breathing audibly as the huge ship vibrated beneath them.

When she looked back, the long trip was suffused with her suppressed longing, with furtive kisses behind lifeboats, her imagination racing as the sea rose and fell beneath them. 'You're so pretty. It will all be different when we get home,' he would murmur into her ear, and she would gaze at his beautiful sculpted face and bury her face in his sweet-smelling neck, wondering how much longer she could bear it.

And then, after the endless car journey, and the stopovers with this minister and that pastor the whole way from New York to Kentucky, Bennett had announced that they would not be living in Lexington, as she had assumed, but in a small town some way further south. They drove past the city and kept going until the roads narrowed and grew dusty, and the buildings sat sparsely in random groupings, overshadowed by vast tree-covered mountains. It was fine, she assured him, hiding her disappointment at the sight of Baileyville's main street, with its handful of brick buildings and narrow roads that stretched to nowhere. She was quite fond of the countryside. And they could take trips to town, like her mother did to Simpson's in the Strand, couldn't they? She struggled to be equally sanguine at the discovery that, for the first year at least, they would be living with Mr Van Cleve ('I can't leave Father alone while he's grieving Mother. Not just yet, anyway. Don't look so dismayed, sweetheart. It's the second largest house in town. And we'll have our own room.') And then once they were finally in that room, of course, things had gone awry in a way she wasn't sure she even had the words to explain.

With the same gritting of teeth with which she had endured boarding school and Pony Club, Alice attempted to adjust to life in the small Kentucky town. It was *quite* the cultural shift. She could detect, if she tried hard, a certain rugged beauty in the landscape, with its huge skies, its empty roads and shifting light, its mountains among whose thousands of trees wandered actual wild bears, and whose treetops were skimmed by eagles. She was

awed at the size of everything, the vast distances that felt ever-present, as if she had had to adjust her whole perspective. But, in truth, she wrote, in her weekly letters to Gideon, everything else was pretty much impossible.

She found life in the big white house stifling, although Annie, the near silent housekeeper, relieved her of most household duties. It was indeed one of the largest in town but was stuffed with heavy antique furniture, every surface covered with the late Mrs Van Cleve's photographs or ornaments or a variety of unblinking porcelain dolls that each man would remark was 'Mother's favourite', should Alice attempt to move them an inch. Mrs Van Cleve's exacting, pious influence hung over the house like a shroud.

Mother wouldn't have liked the bolsters positioned like that, would she, Bennett?

Oh, no. Mother had very strong opinions on soft furnishings.

Mother did love her embroidered psalms. Why, didn't Pastor McIntosh say he didn't know a woman in the whole of Kentucky whose blanket stitch was finer?

She found Mr Van Cleve's constant presence overbearing; he decided what they did, what they ate, the very routines of their day. He couldn't stand to be away from whatever was going on, even if it was just she and Bennett playing the gramophone in their room and would burst in unannounced: 'Is it music we're having now, huh? Oh, you should put on some Bill Monroe. You can't beat ole Bill. Go on, boy, take off that racket and put some ole Bill on.'

If he'd had a glass or two of bourbon, those pronouncements would come thick and fast, and Annie would find reasons to lurk in the kitchen before he could rile himself and find fault with dinner. He was just grieving, Bennett would murmur. You couldn't blame a man for not wanting to be alone in his head.

Bennett, she discovered swiftly, never disagreed with his father. On the few occasions she had spoken up and said, calmly, that no, actually, she'd never been a great fan of pork chops – or that she personally found jazz music rather thrilling – the two men would drop their forks and stare at her with the same shocked disapproval as if she had removed all her clothes and danced a jig on the dining table. 'Why'd you have to be so contrary, Alice?' Bennett would whisper, as his father left to shout orders at Annie. She realized swiftly it was safer not to express an opinion at all.

Outside the house was little better; among the townspeople of Baileyville she was observed with the same assessing eye they turned on anything 'foreign'. Most people in the town were farmers; they seemed to spend their whole lives within a radius of a few miles and knew everything about one another. There were foreigners, apparently, up at Hoffman Mining, which housed some five hundred mining families from all over the globe, overseen by Mr Van Cleve. But as most of the miners lived in the company-provided homes there, used the company-owned store, school and doctor, and were too poor to own either vehicles or horses, few ever crossed into Baileyville.

Every morning Mr Van Cleve and Bennett would head off in Mr Van Cleve's motor-car to the mine and return shortly after six. In between, Alice would find herself whiling away the hours in a house that wasn't hers. She tried to make friends with Annie, but the woman had let her know, through a combination of silence and overly brisk housekeeping, that she didn't intend to make conversation. Alice had offered to cook, but Annie had informed her that Mr Van Cleve was *particular* about his diet and liked only Southern food, guessing correctly that Alice knew nothing about it.

Most households grew their own fruit and vegetables, and there were few that didn't have a pig or two or a flock of hens. There was one general store, huge sacks of flour and sugar lining the doorway, and its shelves thick with cans. And there was just the one restaurant: the Nice 'N' Quick with its green door, firm instruction that patrons *must wear shoes*, and which served things she'd never heard of, like fried green tomatoes and collard greens and things they called biscuits that were actually a cross between a dumpling and a scone. She once attempted to make some, but they emerged from the temperamental range not soft and spongy like Annie's but solid enough to clatter when dropped onto a plate (she swore Annie had jinxed them).

She had been invited to tea several times by local ladies and tried to make conversation but found she had little to say, being hopeless at quilting, which seemed to be the local preoccupation, and knowing nothing about the names they bandied around in gossip. Every tea after the first seemed obliged to begin with the story of how Alice had offered 'biscuits' with her tea instead of 'cookies' (the other women had found this hysterical).

In the end it was easier just to sit on the bed in her and Bennett's room and read again the few magazines she had brought from England or write Gideon yet another letter in which she tried not to reveal how unhappy she was.

She had, she realized gradually, simply traded one domestic prison for another. Some days she couldn't face another night watching Bennett's father reading scripture from the squeaking rocking chair on the porch (*God's word should be all the mental stimulation we require, wasn't that what Mother said?*), while she sat breathing in the oil-soaked rags they burned to keep the mosquitoes away and mending the worn patches in his clothes (*God hates waste – why, those pants were only four years old, Alice. Plenty of life left in them*). Alice grumbled inwardly that if God had had to sit in the near dark stitching up someone else's trousers He would probably have bought Himself a nice new pair from Arthur J. Harmon's Gentleman's Store in Lexington, but she smiled a tight smile and squinted harder at the stitches. Bennett, meanwhile, frequently wore the expression of someone who had been duped into something and couldn't quite work out what and how it had happened.

'So, what the Sam Hill is a travelling library, anyway?' Alice was startled out of her reverie with a sharp nudge from Bennett's elbow.

'They got one in Mississippi, using boats,' called a voice near the back of the hall.

'You won't get no boats up and down our creeks. Too shallow.'

'I believe the plan is to use horses,' said Mrs Brady.

'They're gonna take horses up and down the river? Crazy talk.'

The first delivery of books had come from Chicago, Mrs Brady continued, and more were en route. There would be a wide selection of fiction, from Mark Twain to Shakespeare, and practical books containing recipes, domestic tips and help with child-rearing. There would even be comic books – a revelation that made some of the children squeal with excitement.

Alice checked her wristwatch, wondering when she would get her shaved ice. The one good thing about these meetings was that they weren't stuck in the house all evening. She was already dreading what the winters would be like, when it would be harder for them to find reasons to escape.

‘What man has time to go riding? We need to be working, not paying social calls with the latest edition of *Ladies’ Home Journal*.’ There was a low ripple of laughter.

‘Tom Faraday likes to look at the ladies’ undergarments in the Sears catalogue, though. I heard he spends hours at a time in the outhouse reading that!’

‘Mr Porteous!’

‘It’s not men; it’s women,’ came a voice.

There was a brief silence.

Alice turned to look. A woman was leaning against the back doors in a dark blue cotton coat, her sleeves rolled up. She wore leather breeches, and her boots were unpolished. She might have been in her late thirties or early forties, her face handsome and her long dark hair tied back in a cursory knot.

‘It’s women doing the riding. Delivering the books.’

‘Women?’

‘By themselves?’ came a man’s voice.

‘Last time I looked, God gave ’em two arms and two legs, just like the men.’

A brief murmur rippled through the audience. Alice peered more closely, intrigued.

‘Thank you, Margery. Over at Harlan County they’ve got six women and a whole system up and running. And, as I say, we’ll be getting something similar going here. We have two librarians already, and Mr Guisler has very kindly lent us a couple of his horses. I’d like to take this opportunity to thank him for his generosity.’

Mrs Brady motioned the younger woman forward. ‘Many of you will also know Miss O’Hare –’

‘Oh, we know the O’Hares all right.’

‘Then you will be aware that she has been working these last weeks to help set things up. We also have Beth Pinker – stand up, Beth –’ a freckled girl with a snub nose and dark blonde hair stood awkwardly and sat straight back down again – ‘who is working with Miss O’Hare. One of the many reasons I called this meeting is that we need more ladies who understand the rudiments of literature and its organization so that we can move forward with this most worthy of civic projects.’

Mr Guisler, the horse dealer, lifted a hand. He stood up and after hesitating a moment, he spoke with a quiet certainty: 'Well, I think it's a fine idea. My own mother was a great reader of books, and I've offered up my old milk barn for the library. I believe all right-minded people here should be supporting it. Thank you.' He sat down again.

Margery O'Hare leaned her backside against the desk at the front and gazed steadily out at the sea of faces. Alice noted a murmur of vague discontent moving around the room, and it seemed to be directed at her. She also noted that Margery O'Hare seemed supremely untroubled by it.

'We have a large county to cover,' Mrs Brady added. 'We can't do it with just two girls.'

A woman at the front of the hall called: 'So, what would it mean? This horseback-librarian thing?'

'Well, it would involve riding to some of our more remote dwellings, and providing reading materials to those who might not otherwise be able to travel to the county libraries, due to, say, ill-health, frailty or lack of transportation.' She lowered her head so that she could see over her half-moon spectacles. 'I would add that this is to aid the spread of education, to help bring knowledge to those places where it might currently be sadly lacking. Our president and his wife believe this project can bring knowledge and learning back to the foreground of rural lives.'

'I ain't letting my lady ride up in no mountain,' came a call from the back.

'You just afraid she won't come back again, Henry Porteous?'

'You can have mine. I'd be more'n happy if she rode off and never come home!'

A burst of laughter travelled across the room.

Mrs Brady's voice lifted in frustration. 'Gentlemen. Please. I am asking for some of our ladies to contribute to our civic good and sign up. The WPA will provide the horse and the books, and you would simply be required to commit to at least four days a week delivering them. There will be early starts and long days, given the topography of our beautiful county, but I believe there will be huge rewards.'

'So why don't you do it?' came a voice from the back.

'I would volunteer, but as many of you know I am a martyr to my hips. Dr Garnett has warned me that to ride such distances would be too great a

physical challenge. Ideally we are looking for volunteers among our younger ladies.'

'It ain't safe for a young lady by herself. I'm agin it.'

'Tain't proper. Women should be looking after the home. What's next? Women down the mines? Driving lumber trucks?'

'Mr Simmonds, if you can't see there's a world of difference between a lumber truck and a copy of *Twelfth Night*, then Lord help Kentucky's economy, for I don't know where we'll be headed.'

'Families should be reading the Bible. Nothing else. Who's going to keep an eye on what they're putting out there, anyhow? You know what they're like up north. They might spread all kinds of crazy notions.'

'It's books, Mr Simmonds. The same you learned with when you were a boy. But, then, I seem to remember you were more keen on tweaking girls' pigtails than you were on reading.'

Another burst of laughter.

Nobody moved. A woman looked at her husband, but he gave a small shake of his head.

Mrs Brady raised a hand. 'Oh, I forgot to mention. It is a *paid* opportunity. Remuneration will be in the region of twenty-eight dollars a month. So, who would like to sign up?'

There was a brief murmur.

'I can't,' said a woman with extravagantly pinned red hair. 'Not with four babies under five.'

'I just don't see why our government is wasting hard-earned tax dollars dishing out books to people who can't even read,' said Jowly Man. 'Why, half of 'em don't even go to church.'

Mrs Brady's voice had taken on a slightly desperate note. 'A month's trial. Come on, ladies. I can't go back and tell Mrs Nofcier that not one person in Baileyville would volunteer. What kind of place would she think we were?'

Nobody spoke. The silence stretched. To Alice's left, a bee bumped lazily against the window. People began to shift in their seats.

Mrs Brady, undaunted, eyed the assembly. 'C'mon. Let's not have another incident like the Orphans Fundraiser.'

There were apparently many pairs of shoes that suddenly required close attention.

'Not a one? Really? Well ... Izzy will be the first, then.'

A small, almost perfectly spherical girl, half hidden among the packed audience, raised her hands to her mouth. Alice saw rather than heard the girl's mouth form the protest. 'Mother!'

'That's one volunteer. My little girl will not be afraid to do her duty for our country, will you, Izzy? Any more?'

Nobody spoke.

'Not one of you? You don't think learning is important? You don't think encouraging our less fortunate families to a position of education is imperative?' She glared out at the meeting. 'Well. This is not the response that I anticipated.'

'I'll do it,' said Alice, into the silence.

Mrs Brady squinted, raising her hand above her eyes. 'Is that Mrs Van Cleve?'

'Yes, it is. Alice.'

'You can't sign up,' Bennett whispered urgently.

Alice leaned forward. 'My husband was just telling me that he believes strongly in the importance of civic duty, just as his dear mother did, so I would be happy to volunteer.' Her skin prickled as the eyes of the audience slid towards her.

Mrs Brady fanned herself a little more vigorously. 'But ... you don't know your way around these parts, dear. I don't think that would be very sensible.'

'Yes,' Bennett hissed, 'you don't know your way around, Alice.'

'I'll show her.' Margery O'Hare nodded to Alice. 'I'll ride the routes with her for a week or two. We can keep her close to town till she's got a nose for it.'

'Alice, I –' Bennett whispered. He seemed flustered and glanced up at his father.

'Can you ride?'

'Since I was four years old.'

Mrs Brady rocked back on her heels in satisfaction. 'Well, there you are, Miss O'Hare. You have another two librarians already.'

'It's a start.'

Margery O'Hare smiled at Alice, and Alice smiled back almost before she realized what she was doing.

'Well, I do not think this is a wise idea at all,' said George Simmonds. 'And I shall be writing to Governor Hatch tomorrow to tell him as much. I

believe sending young women out by themselves is a recipe for disaster. And I can see nothing but the foment of ungodly thoughts and bad behaviour from this ill-conceived idea, First Lady or not. Good day, Mrs Brady.'

'Good day, Mr Simmonds.'

The gathering began to rise heavily from its seats.

'I'll see you at the library on Monday morning,' said Margery O'Hare, as they walked out into the sunlight. She thrust out a hand and shook Alice's. 'You can call me Marge.' She glanced up at the sky, wedged a wide-brimmed leather hat onto her head, and strode off towards a large mule, which she greeted with the same enthusiastic surprise as if it were an old friend she had just bumped into on the street.

Bennett watched her go. 'Mrs Van Cleve, I have no idea what you think you're doing.'

He'd said it twice before she remembered that this, in fact, was now her name.