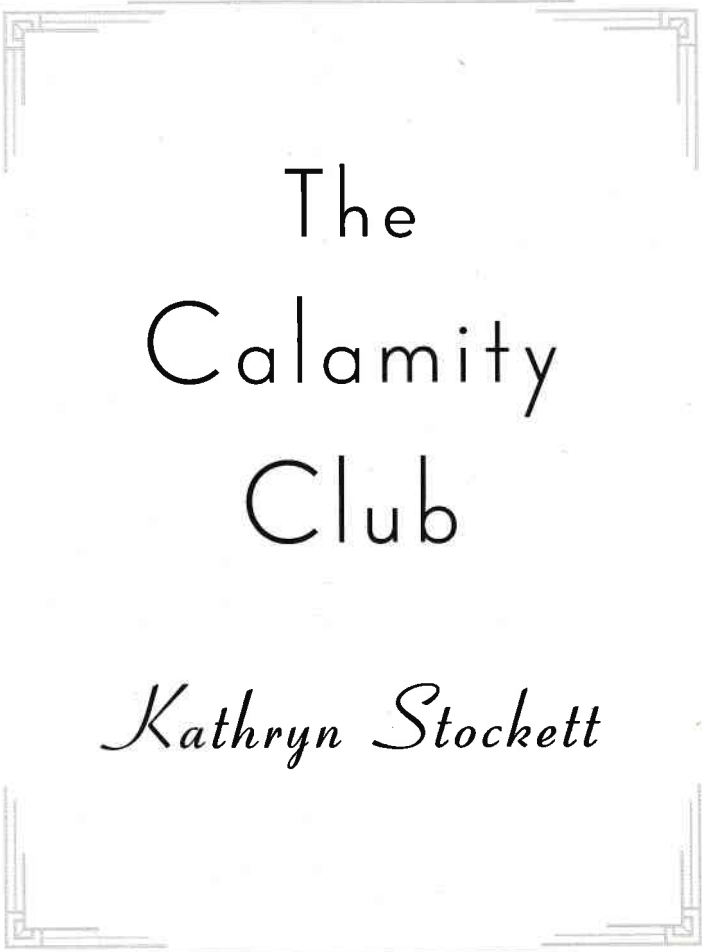


LBRIS

We know
books



The
Calamity
Club

Kathryn Stockett



FIG TREE

an imprint of

PENGUIN BOOKS

Prologue

Birdie

September 1933

Downtown Drugstore had a bell on the door that made a single *tink* sound when you opened it. Oxford Pharmacy had two bells on its door so it was more of a *ta-tink*, though nothing to startle over. But the Gathright-Reed Drug Co. door bore a foot-long strip of brass sleigh bells on its knob, which, when turned, sent metal balls clanging to announce somebody's coming in the dang store so you better turn around and look see who it is. And if you did, you'd see me.

At the pay counter to my right, a heavy woman was buying something. *Pripp*, the nosiest of my sister Frances's many friends. Her blond bobbed hair headed more left and right than down on this humid September morning. "Birdie, hadn't seen you in a while," she said. She was paying for a pair of rayons sized, I'm sure, extra-know-it-all.

"Hey, Pripp," I said and kept walking straight on past her.

I went to the back of the store and stood myself behind the most human-sized rack I could find and picked up whatever thing was closest. It was a tin of men's Brylcreem. I held it close to my face, hoping it would make me less talkable to. *Why the heck do I have to do this—and at a store on the square no less, when all the other girls got to go to the other side of town to buy bedsheets or race records?* Deep down I knew perfectly well why: because no one would ever suspect me of such a thing. I was Birdie Calhoun, twenty-four years old,

churchy and chinless, kind to all animals and people. I'd never do anything even close to what I was doing.

"I'm just saying," Pripp said up at the counter, though I could hear her all the way back here, "I don't think it's fair for y'all to charge thirty-five cents for my size when you only charge thirty for the regular—" I heard her clicking nickels and pennies at the older lady on the other side of the counter.

"Well, it is near double the rayon," the lady said. "Nother way to look at it is it's a bargain for what you're getting."

Behind the display, I waited on Pripp to leave, and also a pimply boy up front who was flipping through a book at the lending library rack. Up every wall of the place, products filled the shelves, colored boxes and tins with signs explaining what they could do for you: *For That Movie Star Look*, *For That Annoying Itch*, *For the Picky College Gentleman*, but what about *For the Unmarried Lady Who Does Not Want to Be Doing This One Bit*? Where was the little sign for that? The sleigh bells clanged, and I leaned over to see. The boy at the lending rack had walked out. One down, one to go.

At the counter, Pripp hitched her yellow purse strap up on her shoulder, and I held my breath. But instead of walking out, she was looking around—evidently for me—so I put the Brylcreem down as she came my way. There was no logical reason for me to be holding that.

"There you are, Birdie," Pripp said. She had a smarty-looking smile, close-lipped. Full of guarantee that whatever I said, she would be repeating. "Noticed y'all missed church on Sunday, your spot up front was empty, and Frances has been short on her volunteer hours, I tell you Garnett Pittman is not pleased about that, Frances ought to let us know—"

"She took a trip. Frances and Mrs. Tartt are on a trip," I said. With Pripp it was all one sentence, so you had to wedge it in when you could. "They went down to Jackson to see about some family."

Pripp frowned, looking almost offended. "Well, she didn't mention any traveling trip to me, and Chairlady Garnett needs to know who's coming in the Orphan so she can adjust up the schedule, after so many little girls got adopted all we got are big girls now, not to mention—"

"I got to do something, Pripp." My heart felt like it was trying to hammer its way out of my chest. "I need to get somewhere."

“Well. Don’t forget to tell Frances what I said,” and she stood there until she realized all she was getting was a nod from me. Finally, she turned around and walked out, sending the strip of bells clanging for the third time.

I was the only customer left in the store. Just me and the lady at the counter up front, and the pharmacist, who was standing in the back, wearing his judgy white coat up on his judgy high pedestal, grinding something in a bowl. *Lord, don’t make me have to talk to that man.* I approached the older lady at the glass-topped counter.

She was around sixty, wearing a white ruffled pinafore, glasses nestled atop a bed of gray hair. I said it fast and low. “I need to purchase some Merry Widows please, ma’am.”

She dropped her chin at me, said, “*Ob.*” Then she leaned up and looked all the way down at the pharmacist standing in the back. “Well, I—Mr. Castel generally does these type transactions, but it don’t require a doctor’s note no more . . .” She reached under the counter and set a round, silver-dollar-sized tin down, protecting it with her hand. “At’ll be fifty cents.”

In the mirror behind her, I could see my chin-length brown hair, flat and damp in the heat. “I’m going to need more.”

She nodded and reached down and set another silver disk on the counter, covering both now with her spotty, veined hand. “Alright, ’at’ll be one dollar.”

I didn’t want to have to go to any more drugstores and do this with any more ladies, or worse, men. I’d already been to the two other stores, the ones my sister and Mrs. Tartt didn’t frequent, but they didn’t carry the right brand.

“You know they’s three come to a package,” she whispered to me.

I nodded. I knew that. A warm spongy thing slid down my back. “Yes, ma’am. I’m still going to need more.” I hadn’t even told her the worst part yet.

She wrinkled her already wrinkly forehead and pushed aside a clump of damp gray hair. “Exactly how many you looking to buy in total?” she asked and eyed my plain blue dress that my meemaw had made me, with plain buttons to match a plain unmarried woman. When I whispered the number, the glasses on top of her head perked up, like little ears.

“That is a unusual amount,” she said.

I know, lady, I know. I wiped my damp forehead with my dress sleeve. Her eyes had stopped on my unringed finger. *Dang it, I should’ve worn gloves.*

"I don't know if I'm allowed to—" She glanced over at the pharmacist but he was gone now, and for all I knew he was weaving through the racks, headed this way. She whispered, "It might be against the law to sell ninety-nine prophylactics to a unmarried lady, I'll have to check on that—"

"No, you don't, it's alright because—they're not for me, they're for somebody that's allowed to . . . administer them." That these were not for me was completely true, I'd never even had a proper boyfriend before, which was *fine*, but the second part, that "allowed to" part, that was most definitely not true.

"She really needs them," I whispered.

She tapped her ink-stained fingers against her lips, negotiating that number, ninety-nine, in her head and figuring it would be thirty-three containers since they held three apiece or maybe I needed to tell her that math. I was pretty sure she got it though.

"Well, I can certainly understand a . . . woman's plight," she said and shook her head as if recalling a time when she could've used a few of these herself. "But if I sell these to you, I'm s'posed to ask—she understands they're for disease prevention use only?"

"Yes, ma'am, she understands that."

"Not to stop a lady from . . ." She stared at me. "It ain't legal for that other reason."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well then I guess I got to ask, does he? Have himself a disease?"

I looked her straight in the eye and said, "It is very, very likely, ma'am."

She nodded and worked her tongue across her teeth.

Saying something so true gave me a jolt of urgency—this needed to happen now and it needed to happen quick before somebody else walked in the store, and I guess she sensed it too because with a hard snap she shook open a white paper bag that I could tell already was going to be too small. She slid the two silver disks on the counter in there and then, under the counter, dropped in the other thirty-one. When she tried to fold down the top of the bag, the edges wouldn't meet, so I took it from her and shoved it down in a sack half full of groceries. I moved a box of Uneda Biscuit on top of it and slid three fives, a one, and two quarters across the counter.

She looked down at the money. "One more thing." She set a blue book

on the counter, already open to a page. "You got to sign here who they're for, that's Mr. Castel's rule."

I took the pencil and let it hover a second over the paper. Should I make a name up? Would that draw more attention? But then the bells on the front door *cla-clanged* so I scratched the name of the first married woman who came into my head and shut the book hard. "Thank ya, bye," I called, moving past a lady holding a little boy by the hand, and pulled the noisy door open again.

Lord, my sister was going to kill me.

LBRIS

We know
books



Part 1



Meg



CHAPTER 1

July 1933

When I was first brought here to the Orphan, I used to put a pretend play on in my head. In it, my mama would walk in and say, *Margot! I have returned! I am here to take you home!* I would have her dressed in the yellow outfit she left me in with the red rickrack on the collar, or a snappy slim blue number cut on the bias, her good ruby hair comb fixed to her hair. When I got her dressed up the way I liked with all the things matched perfect, she would lean down and say, *I am so sorry I left you, Meg.*

Now at this part of the story, I know most these girls here would run right into their mama's arms. Say all is forgiven, hug her neck, let's go home. But not in my play. When my mama said this, I liked to yell at her a little first.

Well, well, I liked to say, *you sure been eating good.* And I might add, *I guess there's plenty for you now that you do not have a little girl to look after,* and then I would tell her how it *sure got cold when you were gone* and how *I burned everything that lit* and she was a *Number One Giant Shitpile for a mama* and I had a mind to *find myself a new one.* Around this time was when her begging and pleading would start. She would begin offering me things like a sack of hard candy or new patent leather shoes, a encyclopedia set with no letters missing, oh I went wild with the goods, and when it cost high enough, I would sigh and say, *Fine, I accept your offer.* Then I'd flip that big phony Miss Garnett the finger and me and my mama would walk out the door.

Mama had never left me alone at the house before that week. The most she would let me do by myself was walk the mile to school. And down to the colored Negro Ophelia's house when Mama was at work but she always came to Ophelia's after and toted me home. Carried me in her arms singing "I Can't Give You Anything but Love, Baby," until one day she did not come carry me home.

Course, that was back when I was still only nine. I am eleven now so I do not bother with those old baby plays anymore. My best friend Ava here said at our age we cannot afford to waste time dreaming about what is apt not to happen.

My paper name is Margot but I generally go by Meg. Like I said, I arrived here at the orphanage two birthdays ago. Most folks just call it the Orphan or else the Old Orphan, though I have yet to find where this New Orphan is and believe me I have asked. All it is is a old wood house run by these volunteer ladies in a town called Oxford, which is located up in the top part of Mississippi. They got sixteen of us packed in the place, which is high. I hear it is the hard times. Our numbers will thin come next View Day. That is when folks come look at us and decide do they want to adopt us or not.

Out front of the house, the ladies keep the place fixed up right nice. Azalea bushes, a birdbath lawn ornament I can see when the door is open to the little room they call the vestibule, plant in a pot, that type thing. There is fresh white paint on the inside of the front door, though I have not seen the other side since the day I arrived. They lock us up in here like we are criminals. In the vestibule, there are two clean windows and that big framed sign. If Miss Garnett is not looking, I slip up there and wonder things about that sign until my head starts to hurt.

Such as, who came up with those particular rules in the first place? And is a retarded nature different from your regular ole retard? Mostly what I think about, though, is that leprosy item. Did some leper orphans show up here, so they had to put it on the sign? And which volunteer answered the door to that unusual call, because most these ladies will hightail it out of here if one of us girls so much as sneezes so they do not give it to their own kids at home. I can just about hear that volunteer lady saying, *You put what you want on that sign, but I will not operate with lepers.* And then another popping her

hand on her hip and saying, *Or Oriental types either*. I wonder what those ladies would do if a retard leper Jew walked in the door. That would be some entertainment for me.

To the right of the sign is what is called the Ladies' Lounge. We girls are not allowed in there, but I can see in there too when the door opens. Oh they keep that room nice for their satisfied selves. Plush upholstered things to sit on, a silver coffee urn, flowery curtains on the windows, plus they keep tasty food up in that room, I know, I can smell it.

This up-front area is the more attractive part of the Orphan.

Beyond the vestibule is a long plain hall. Looking down it, a person would not suspect much right off. Along the right side of the hall is the toddler room, where they got some pretty good-looking toys, baby doll with a play crib, rocking horse, a whole shelf of books I would like to look at. But somebody separated the toddlers a few years ago from the big girls, so now they sleep and eat in there in a cute little room. On past that is the baby nursery, which is kept very white and clean. Babies are the choicest type orphan so they tend to go quick. Big girls are not allowed in these rooms either.

When a girl gets to be around age seven or so, things change. First off they make you start wearing a long-sleeved dress with a petticoat under that covers you near neck to toe. You're moved upstairs to sleep in the big girls' room with the scary water stains on the ceiling from a leak in the roof. The squeaky wire cots up there got lumpy cotton-boll mattresses covered in pee stains of yore. And Lord do not even get me started on what they give us solid-food eaters for meals. In the big girl dining room, it is a gray lumpy meal for breakfast, then for lunch and supper, overcooked peas, a corn cob or a potato half with no salt or butter to speak of, one square of cornbread apiece. If I was offered a box of diamonds or a plate of ham, I would probably take the ham. It is a wonder nobody has starved to death here but a flu or a deadly pox is what tends to kill us, and those generally only take the babies. I guess God is like those charity ladies. He also prefers a baby over a big girl.

But the worst room in this whole place is the office. Miss Garnett put me in here to keep away from the rest.

Why ain't you up in the school anymore with the regular girls, huh? It is that awful Dorella calling to me, from out in the hall with some other girls. *And who you been talkin' to in there, Santy Claus? Easter Bunny? Hub, Nutmeg?*

she says and sticks her nasty tongue out at me, white and thick with thrush. Dorella got herself adopted one time but was returned for the reason of Lazy. I bet it was for nastiness too. That gray ring of dirt stays permanent on her neck.

I am like a sitting duck in here for those other girls to tease.

When Miss Garnett stuck me in this dingy little room on a hard chair at a old wood desk, it did not look or smell this bad. Surely not when the book-keeper lady used to work in here before she quit. In the past few months the mildew odor and spots on the walls have got even worse. As for light there is not but one greasy hot bulb hanging that will burn the print clean off your finger should you attempt to examine how electricity works. The only window in here is boarded up. Five splintery boards going across it that makes me mad to look at. That somebody did that deliberate just to spoil my damn view.

You better watch out at the wash pump later, Nutmeg, Dorella hisses from the hall, and the other girls laugh. I hate that nickname. Dorella is the one that damn gave it to me in the first place.

It was on account of when I tried to explain to her there is something called a FLUSH TOILET hooked up in the Ladies' Lounge. All we girls got is a outhouse out back. Lord, did Dorella eye me suspicious at this news.

Then where do the crap go? she asked, so I said, *The crap goes outside.* So she said, *Then why they don't just go outside in the first place like regular folks?* I said, *Because they can do it in the house now.* So she said, *That's disgusting. I think you just tryin' to make me look stupid,* so I said, *Well I do not have to try much for that, now do I?* Which I thought was pretty good.

But she said, *Well I think you're nuts, Nutmeg.* And it was like a big bell *D-O-N-G-E-D* in the Orphan. Ever since then, it has been *Nutmeg this* and *Nutmeg that*. Pinning signs on my back that say *PROPARTY OF MISIPI INSANE HOSPITUL* or *NUTMEG! CRAZY AND TASTIE TOO!* like I am a damn Christmas cookie. What do they expect? You cannot put me in a little room by myself eight hours a day with nothing to do but count pennies from the donate box or write some View Day cards or dull verses and not expect me to talk to some pretend people. Or sing Christmas carols out of season or stack the chair on the desk and the books on the chair and climb up there to see if my ugly world looks any different. Sometimes I wish that Dorella Pratt would just die of the flu.

She and the rest knew not to mess with me when my old friend Ava was around, though. Ava could attach herself to their necks and give them a Chinese haircut that would ruin their whole week. Ava was brave. One of the first days I got here, Dorella held my head under the water pump and liked to drown me dead and when Ava stepped up and told her to quit it, Dorella said, *Who's gone make me?* So Ava shucked Dorella's underpants off her and dropped them right down the shitter. Dorella had to reach in that nasty hole or she would get the belt for loss of underpants. That was when I knew Ava was the best friend for me. But two months ago she turned twelve and got sent to Biloxi to work at the cannery.

CHAPTER 2

Every morning, the first thing Miss Garnett does is come into the office, where I am made to report directly after breakfast. She noses around looking, like I have harbored a criminal in here. She leans her bony self over my shoulder to see what I am doing. *Have you finished copying out your Bible passage yet, Meg?*

Yes, I tell her. And to irritate her, I like to wait a second to add, *Ma'am.*

I flatten the page out where I copied out the whole dull Proverbs 13. This one is about a wise son and a father and what you call a *scorner*. What in the world it has to do with me, a eleven-year-old girl with a eighth-grade reading level, I do not know. If I try to tell Miss Garnett this, she will say, *Idle hands are the devil's playthings*, or else make me write the begats. I drooled so much falling asleep on those, the paper rippled.

Me and Miss Garnett, we are like oil and water.

She is the lady in charge of the place and generally dresses in a plain, bland-colored number. Her short yellow hair stays pressed to her head and her face is not ugly, just waxy and flat. She is also flat across her chest and on her behind. My mama had all kinds of rounded parts to her and was petite in stature. I would say Miss Garnett is older than my mama, but I could not

say exact since I am not good at guessing the age of people over twelve. I would get fired if I worked that booth at the fair.

Some time after I was brought here, Miss Garnett got elected chairlady. That did not just happen out of the clear blue sky. Miss Garnett has got influence. Since I have that kind of time on my hands, I have put it together how she operates too. When she is speaking to one of the volunteer ladies here, she looks them right straight in the eye to draw their attention. If there is a particular point to make, she will slice the air for emphasis. She slices and slices to where she might as well be slicing her a rib roast. If there is a terrible tragedy or a illness in the volunteer lady's family or a birthday or the day their mama died, she is sure to remember it. Miss Garnett does not forget things, and if she cannot pinch you for picking your nose at nine o'clock, she will remember to get you for it at noon.

But what Miss Garnett gets excited most to talk about is somebody she calls *the feeble-minded woman*. She will stand in the hall and rant on and on about this crazy woman. And to ensure whoever is listening is listening good, she will stop. In the middle of a sentence. Then she will go on talking and slicing, and if she had a rope she would probably lasso their damn necks to make them listen to what this feeble-minded woman has done now. And they do listen too. She has got them concerned.

I have wondered right much what this feeble-minded woman looks like. By what I hear, I picture a mean ugly woman with a hunched-up back and ten imbecile children born by ten different daddies, white, black, or blue, whatever you please. I sort of see them all living in a great big shoe, though I believe that might be from a old picture book I saw. Miss Garnett says this woman is dragging our great state to a even more sunken level. Well that must be a low place since my mama always told me the state of Mississippi was full of nothing but cotton, hypocrites, and horseshit, and the best thing a Mississippian could do was get the hell out.

Ask me, Miss Garnett likes rules more than she likes people. Ava, who was here before me, said when the Big Phony took over as chairlady, she made a lot of new rules. Such as, big girls were not allowed around the babies or toddlers anymore. And now, we are not even allowed mail—she put a stop to that too. Ava said it's because a letter might make us cry, and that is all these volunteer ladies need added to their day. And we are sure not allowed

to ask where in the hell did my mama or daddy go to. It was that last rule what gave me the most trouble at the beginning.

When I first got here, I begged every lady on a daily basis, *Where is she? What do you know? Why won't you tell me?* Oh I threw temper fits. Racked my own brain for where she might have gone to. I had a list going: Maybe she got in a car accident and is bleeding by the road. Maybe she got kidnapped and is being held for ransom. Maybe she decided times were too hard to look after a girl. Leave her behind for the charity ladies to deal with. That one scared me bad.

Whenever I asked, all those ladies would say to me was, *You just count your blessings and be glad you're here, young lady.* And quick as they could, go rock a baby.

Those big girls can't be helped anyway, they say. Those big girls are past helping.

They say, *Poor white trash, they'll grow up and leave their own babies behind.* Do they think I cannot hear them?

Miss Garnett likes to slice her hands and say, *It starts with the mother and spreads to the child, unless somebody does something to stop it.*

Miss Garnett, she kept her eye on me from the very beginning. Anytime I was so much as two minutes late to Sunday chapel or that mealy mess they call breakfast, she would pinch me up under my arm where the skin is soft. So hard my eyes would smart. Or if she spotted me laughing with Ava or having any kind of a time, here came the pinchers. She did not do the rest like she did me. Most days she could hardly bring herself to touch the other big girls, like they smelled bad. Which some do. Ava said it best: *The bitch has got it out for you, and that is a flat-out fact.*

One afternoon, Miss Garnett came and got me from the schoolroom upstairs. I love the schoolroom, you cannot beat it for a place to learn. Most girls here throw a fit that we are made to attend school year-round, with only a few weeks in summer to give the teacher, Miss Spencer, a vacation. But not me, I would attend school every day if I could. I even liked to linger after lessons to clean the boards and straighten up the chairs. Miss Spencer would sometimes let me watch her grade the spelling papers if I did not breathe down her neck. It is the only decent room in the house for the big girls and