

WHISPER
DOWN
the LANE

CLAY McLEOD CHAPMAN



QUIRK BOOKS
PHILADELPHIA

This is a work of fiction. All names, places, and characters are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to real people, places, or events is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2021 by Clay McLeod Chapman

All rights reserved. Except as authorized under U.S. copyright law, no part of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Chapman, Clay McLeod, 1977- author.

Whisper down the lane / Clay McLeod Chapman.

Summary: "Two narratives—Richard in present day, settling into a quiet but pleasant life as a newly married art teacher; Sean in 1980s Virginia, when cult leaders, serial killers, and stranger danger are on the rise—converge around a few small lies that spiraled into a terrible tragedy. Thirty years later, it seems someone is out for revenge."—Provided by publisher.

LCC PS3603.H36 W55 2021

DDC 813/.6—dc23 2020047601

ISBN: 978-1-68369-215-7

Printed in the United States of America

Typeset in Chronicle + Albertus

Designed by Ryan Hayes

Cover photo by Oksana Shufrych/Shutterstock

Production management by John J. McGurk

Quirk Books

215 Church Street

Philadelphia, PA 19106

quirkbooks.com

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

FOR MOM

“Estimates are that there are over one million Satanists in this country. The majority of them are linked in a highly organized, very secretive network. From small towns to large cities, they have attracted police and FBI attention to their Satanic ritual child abuse, child pornography, and grizzly Satanic murders. The odds are that this is happening in your town.”

—Geraldo Rivera in *Devil Worship:
Exposing Satan's Underground*

“The stubborn fact remains,” one read, “that whether or not we believe, *they* most assuredly do.”

—*Rosemary's Baby*

DAMNED IF YOU DON'T
RICHARD: 2013

They found Professor Howdy spread across the soccer field. What was left of him, anyway.

His chest cavity had been carefully cracked open, his rib cage fanning back as if it were the glistening crimson trigger hairs on a Venus flytrap, patiently waiting for its prey to wander inside its gaping maw. The entirety of his intestines, large and small, had been gingerly unspooled to the end of their connective tissues across the lawn in some sort of luminous pattern.

I say *luminous* because his guts looked like beams of wet sunlight radiating out from the rest of his hollow self.

Pattern because there seemed to be a particular—I don't know—*methodology* to the placement of his organs. Someone arranged them to look this way. On purpose. To see.

For who, though?

It felt like he was meant to be revered. I say *revered* because, even to my eye, there was something beatific to the way his body was presented. Holy, almost. And trust me—this is coming from a completely nonreligious person. I've never even set foot inside a church.

That's not entirely true. There were a few visits to Sunday school

that I can barely recall at this point. Distant memories by now. I vaguely remember taking communion as a kid. Once.

Take and eat, the pastor said as he pressed a stale cracker past my lips, *for this is my body*. That dry sacramental wafer adhered itself to the roof of my mouth. I couldn't wash out the pasty undertaste for the rest of the day, stuck with this phantom flavor on my tongue.

But that was years ago. A whole other lifetime ago.

All I'm trying to say is, even I could sense the awe of this grisly exhibition. *Feel it*, somehow. The downright ardor of it.

Professor Howdy's lungs fanned out like angel wings flapping against the grass. The liver, the stomach, the spleen—*that is the spleen, isn't it?*—placed with exacting precision. Each organ was its own celestial body orbiting the corpse it had erupted from.

His heart now rested in the patch of grass directly above his head. A bleeding crown.

Dawn broke an hour or so before our school's groundskeeper—Diego, I think his name is—discovered the poor professor. The morning sun found his body first, pelt glistening in dew. His blood had a crystalline sheen against the green, like red stained glass. Something you might see in Sunday services. *Saint Howdy*. Our school's tragic rabbit, angelic white fur and glazed-over pink eyes, captured among all the other apostles.

Professor Howdy was always kept in Miss Castevet's classroom. He belonged to the school, its students, but Miss Castevet was ultimately responsible for his upkeep. That meant cleaning out his cage. Feeding him. Picking up the poo pellets. The nitty-gritty stuff nobody else, particularly the kids, ever wanted to get their hands dirty doing.

Students were always welcome to stop by Miss Castevet's room and pay Professor Howdy a visit. She set up designated feeding hours for anyone to swing by and offer up a handful of rabbit chow for him to nibble directly from their palm. And sometimes, on the *specialest*

of occasions, as Miss Castevet liked to say, she would even pull Professor Howdy out from his cage and let him hop around the room. Door closed, of course. There had been one particular incident at the very beginning of the school year, when someone—I'm not naming any names here (*cough, cough*, Benjamin Pendleton, *cough cough*)—left the classroom door open and the professor broke free, hopping down the hall. The ensuing manhunt—*bunnyhunt?*—was a school-wide event. All the students got involved in the search party.

Eventually, he popped up in my classroom. I spotted him tucked behind the tempera paints, struggling to squirm further in. I was hailed as a hero for returning the professor to his cage unharmed, alive, and in one piece. *The new art teacher saves the day!* the students sang out. *Yay, Mr. Bellamy!*

Everybody loved Professor Howdy. He was, without a doubt, the Danvers School's unofficial mascot. Who would think about doing something as awful as this? To a rabbit?

Our rabbit?

Teachers always arrive early to school to kick-start their day. Get those lesson plans prepped. Get their classrooms in order. Get ready for the oncoming onslaught of students.

Miss Castevet is always one of the very first teachers to arrive. You'll find her Nova parked in one of the nearest spots to the main entrance. When she enters her classroom first thing in the morning, she's greeted by the gentle sounds of Professor Howdy leaping about in his cage, his fur brushing up against the thin metal bars. The pads of his feet strum the spokes.

Not this morning. Miss Castevet sensed the silence coming from his corner of the room as soon as she called out to him. *Good morning, Professor Howdy.*

He wasn't in his cage. The gate had been left wide open.

Once students started shuffling into class, they noticed his absence

as well. *Where's Professor Howdy, Miss Castevet?* they all asked. *What happened to Professor Howdy?*

Professor Howdy's just feeling a little sick, she lied. She had no clue where he was. Not yet. Only the groundskeeper and our principal, Mrs. Condrey, were aware of the kindergarten crime scene on the soccer field. They were keeping this bit of grisly information to themselves for now.

Rumors quickly began working their way through the faculty. Condrey called Miss Castevet into her office to break the news about her beloved bunny. I wasn't there to hear it myself, but several teachers whispered to one another in the lounge that they'd heard an audible sob escape from behind Condrey's closed door. A moan. You would've thought a member of her family had passed away. In a sense, one had. Miss Castevet needed to take a moment before the bell for second period rang to collect herself. Even then, she broke down during class. Simply glancing at his empty cage, gate open, was enough to summon her tears.

Summon. I can't stop myself. What other words were there to describe what happened?

Where'd you go? Tamara always asks me in moments like these, whenever she catches me drifting off into my thoughts. *Lost you there for a second...*

Sorry, I'd probably say, most likely smiling back. *Just remembered something*.

The students are still in the dark. No press release from the main office just yet. Kids can't understand why Miss Castevet is so upset. It won't be long before some second-grade sleuth puts two and two together. The whispers are already drifting through the faculty now, a brushfire passing from class to class. The teachers' lounge is festering with speculation and it's not even fourth period yet. We've all become embroiled in detective work, a bunch of amateur Sherlock Holmeses.

Elementary school, my dear Watson . . .

A yummy morsel of gossip like this is too good to pass up. *Did you hear?* each teacher whispers. *Professor Howdy's been gutted. Torn open along his underbelly, groin to gullet . . .*

It wasn't until lunch period that word finally reached me.

I pulled cafeteria detail today. That meant surveying the students as they munched their nuggets, like I'm some police guard standing watch over gen pop. Miss Castevet usually takes this shift, but she'd called out, and as the alternate turnkey, I'm on deck to replace her. I honestly thought I'd never get called. Miss Castevet never misses her lunch shift. Never misses anything. She constantly volunteers to chaperone after-school events. This school is her life.

And somebody just gutted it.

"Have you heard?" Mr. Dunstan, our music teacher, murmurs over the lunchtime din. The two of us stand at the back of the cafeteria by the trash cans. Kids dump what is left of their lunch, creating a congealing mound of breaded chicken cutlets and chocolate milk.

"Hear what?"

"Professor Howdy," he whispers, rather mock conspiratorially, as if the students might be eavesdropping on our conversation. Not that these kids care what us adults natter on about.

Except her.

That girl. Over there. All the way across the cafeteria. Corn-silk blonde hair. She's looking right at me. I spot her as Mr. Dunstan murmurs into my ear. She's sitting by herself. The contents of her bagged lunch spread out evenly before her, both hands gripping her sandwich. Just staring back. Not blinking. At least, I think she's staring. Maybe I am imagining it. Her eyes don't drift. Perhaps she is gazing into space and I just happen to be in her visual line of fire.

Is she in my class? It's pretty early in the school year, so getting a lock on everyone's name is still a hurdle. For me, at least. I've always

been terrible with names. Names and faces.

Do I have her? I think. I squint to see her. *Is that . . . what's-her-name.*
Her name . . .

Sandy.

I almost say it loud out. To be honest, I'm not entirely convinced I didn't. Not from the way Mr. Dunstan is staring at me.

"The rabbit," he clarifies. He shakes his head and sighs. Such a solemn air. It feels a wee bit performative for my tastes, to be honest. Dunstan is just gunning to play the pipes at the wake. *Danny Boy*, I bet. Maybe he'll get his choir kids to sing a song they've prepared in class just for Professor Howdy. Perhaps even some choreographed dance routine. With scarves.

"How awful," he says, already humming the initial strains of some funereal dirge. Dunstan strikes me as a doughy Humpty Dumpty. His oval-shaped torso and bald pate glisten with the thinnest sheen of perspiration. The man is perpetually sweating. Always licking his lips. Always humming an ethereal strain to an unknown song, a symphony hiding behind his lips, seemingly unaware that he's even doing it. He has left me in suspense for long enough, leaning over and whispering into my ear that someone *eviscerated* our school's unofficial mascot.

"They're saying," he whispers, his eyes still on the kids, the warmth of his breath spreading down my neck, "it looked *ritualistic*."

He doesn't know I've already seen it for myself. That I was the one who discovered the body.

I bike to school. No car for me. I let my license lapse at some point a while back and still haven't renewed it. There's a well-furrowed bike path that cuts through the surrounding woods behind the building, allowing kids who live on the south side to Schwinn their way to school. They just have to cut through the soccer field to get here. I can bike to work in ten minutes flat.

This morning was no different. Not until I noticed that patch of

white.

Braking, I turned to take in the glistening spectacle. My first thought was the groundskeeper must've run the rabbit over with his lawnmower without realizing it. An accident. But the longer I looked, taking in the fastidiousness of the display, the devout attention to detail, the more I saw it as sculpture. A work of art.

I couldn't shake the creeping feeling that, whoever did this, they'd made it just for me.

It's all for you, Richard, I heard the rabbit whisper. *All for you.*

There was a birthday card tucked in his guts. The corners of the cardboard stock were softening with blood, held upright within the ribs' grip.

Nobody knows it's my birthday. I choose not to celebrate it, haven't celebrated it, not even with Tamara, for years. I figured the day had faded by now. Nobody knows. And yet, this sacrificed rabbit felt like a gift. A present someone went ahead and unwrapped without me.

I carefully plucked the card out from Professor Howdy's rib cage, making sure not to touch any of the blood. It was an old card, printed years ago, yellowing around the edges.

The picture on the front was of a dimple-cheeked baby emerging from a head of lettuce. Leaves unfurled around his pudgy body, this plump infant sprouting out from the soil itself.

A Cabbage Patch Kid.

I haven't seen one of them in years. These dolls were all the rage when I was a kid. They flew right off the shelves every Christmas. Children were given an adoption certificate with each doll. You had to take an oath to raise them. Kids were instructed to hold up their right hand in front of an adult and pledge, *I promise to love my Cabbage Patch Kid with all my heart.*

I remember these dolls kicking up some dust in my hometown. Boys and girls suddenly weren't allowed to bring their Cabbage Patch

Dolls to school anymore because some fundamentalist mother on the school board believed they were possessed. By signing that contract and taking that oath, children were bringing the devil into their homes. It seems so silly now—but back then, people believed, *actually believed* these toys were vessels for the devil.

Can you imagine? The local church even hosted a Cabbage Patch burning. They tossed dozens of dolls into a pile and lit them up, the flames swallowing that patch whole.

Just some stupid-looking dolls. Dimples and blank eyes, bovine smiles. That's all they were.

So why were my wrists shaking?

I opened the card. In red crayon, the letters loose and crooked, as if a child had scribbled it, it read—