

The Body of Christopher Creed, by Carol Plum-Ucci

- **Secretly** think of a student in our school who is often an outsider, whom you don't particularly like or have teased...
- Imagine that student has suddenly disappeared, and nobody knows whether he or she has run away or has been the victim of a crime or accident or whether this student has even committed suicide.
- Read the following extract from the novel.
- What is all this about?

Alex Healy, what I'm hoping is that the name Chris Creed does mean something to you. That probably means that, somehow, I have struck gold.

There's nothing unusual about a runaway these days. There's also not much original about a suicide or a murder. The weirdest fact about Chris Creed's disappearance was that he was just plain gone. There was no trail of blood, not even a drop of blood. No piece of clothing on the side of the road. No runaway bus-ticket stub. No money missing from his bank account. No empty bottle that had

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been filled with pills the day before he disappeared. No missing razor blades. No nothing. The only thing we knew was that Chris Creed was not abducted compulsively by a stranger—because there was a note, which was written at least twenty-four hours before he turned up missing.

Steepleton could have dealt with a runaway, a suicide, an abduction, or even a murder. Other towns survive them. But there are two things our town couldn't cope with, the first being a very strange mess that occurs when the weirdest kid in town suddenly disappears. He's gone, but his weirdness seems to linger. It grabs at the most normal and happy kids, like some sort of sick joke. And then it's those people who are acting weird. The other thing the town can't face up to is the black hole itself—the thing that comes out of nowhere and eats a kid alive and doesn't leave a hair from his head.

You can't have a funeral, because there's no body and no evidence that he actually died. But to push for some big-time Unsolved Mysteries hunt, a town has to feel sorry for how they mistreated the weird guy who's gone. To feel genuinely sorry, you have to be honest. And Steepleton needs its lies like a toad needs bugs.

To hear some people tell it, I saw Creed dead. I saw him dead, and it made me crazy. There are other people who add to that version of the story—that I

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actually helped kill him. They say I can't face what I saw, or what I did, depending on who's telling the story. They would all say I'm on this giant denial trip if they ever guessed I was trying to find him. Or they'd say that I'm trying to prove my innocence with a search that I know won't lead anywhere. I am looking for Creed, and I admit my bolts were not screwed in so tight for a while there. But I've never told myself any lies about it. And I'm sure Chris Creed is alive.

I guess it's up to you to decide whether I'm nuts or normal, and since this is just the Internet, I don't give a rip what strangers think. It's bad enough to put up with what some of my neighbors think. Steepleton is like most other small towns out there, I guess. Small-town people live up each other's butts, and some people will tell stories about who stinks the worst. I wonder if small towns are America's final kick in the ass insofar as prejudice and judgment are concerned. There are black families in Steepleton, a Japanese family, a couple Saudis, one family of rich Pakistanis. It's not a racial thing like my mom coped with, growing up there. But it's there, part of the little-town mentality, that thing that makes people want to sniff out neighbors who are weird or less fortunate, and talk about those people's bad luck to establish their own goodness. There are also some

people who are very sympathetic about what happened to me, and they have been pretty cool.

So when I left, it wasn't entirely to get away from small-town smell-my-butts. I left to get away from death and the fear of ghosts. Small towns grow out of the woods, and the woods are dark and scary. I did see death, and I have seen a ghost. But neither of them was Creed. I will swear to that until I die, though there will always be those feebies who don't believe me. It's their problem, not mine.

Alex Healy, if you are who I think you are, everything I have said in this letter and everything you're going to read in this story will make perfect sense. If it makes no sense, then just write me off as another Internet loony who's suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. That part has been medically established.

Three people will bear up to the truth in this attachment. My mother—not that a mom counts for much while standing in her kid's defense. There's a girl, too, who's got a reputation as being, well, not so upright. And then there's the town's chief of police, an African American who walked the beat in Atlantic City for fourteen years before becoming chief in Steepleton. His name is Douglas Rye, and he became chief about two weeks after Chris Creed disappeared. He read this story and will vouch for every word.