

FEVER DREAMS ■

Susie Potter

Avery Graham was nine years old, and she was precocious. The first time she'd heard someone call her that, she'd thought they'd said "precious," but she'd wondered why they said it so funny. She'd used her mom's tablet to Google "word that sounds like precious," and she'd figured it out, kind of. Precocious basically meant she was smart for her age, too smart according to her parents. It meant that she knew things she shouldn't.

Avery guessed that was kind of true. For instance, right now, she was in the backseat of the minivan, her little brother Jackson strapped in his carseat next to her, and she was doing something her mother thought she wasn't or couldn't, something she did a lot lately.

She was listening to the "Murderers" podcast her mother was listening to, the one her mother thought she didn't pay attention to on the long drive to school. There was another school close by, but Avery's parents said she had to go to the Christian school, even though it meant almost an hour's drive every morning.

In the morning, on these long drives, Avery was allowed to watch Youtube videos on her mother's phone, a treat reserved only for these moments. Her mother would hand her the phone, the earbuds already plugged in, and tell Avery to "have fun." But, one morning, when Avery had been trying and trying to find a "Try Not to Laugh" video she hadn't seen before, she'd started listening to her mother's podcast.

It was pretty interesting, and Avery wondered why she had never listened before.

“Avery,” her mother had said, glancing at her in the rearview mirror, “what are you watching?”

“Just finding a video,” Avery said, but really, she’d kept the earbuds in without playing a video. She made sure to keep her eyes glued to the phone screen. That way, her mother would think she was immersed in something else, something allowed and safe.

The podcast Avery had first heard had been about a lady killer. The lady was named A-Lean, which Avery thought was an awfully weird name. The lady had had many bad things happen to her before she became a killer. Those things made Avery feel kind of bad for A-Lean, and she was confused. How could you feel bad for a killer?

When anyone said anything about criminals in her house—robbers or shooters or drug dealers—her dad would say things like, “That fucker deserves to die. He’s exactly what’s wrong with our country.”

Her mother would say something like, “Language, Henry.” Then, more quietly, “But I agree with you. These people are ruining everything.”

The fact that Avery felt bad for A-Lean, a killer, made her feel like something was wrong with her. Her parents didn’t feel bad for anyone. Everything was always someone’s

fault, their “own doing,” as they liked to say.

Avery’s parents didn’t like illegals, whatever that meant. They didn’t like criminals. They didn’t like the lady at McDonald’s when she was hard to understand.

Once, her dad had yelled through the drive-through speaker, “You shouldn’t be allowed to work here if you can’t understand enough English to take an order!”

Avery had gotten her Happy Meal real fast after that, but it hadn’t made her feel happy. It made her feel sad.

She’d also felt sad when she’d learned Happy Meals came from cows.

“I don’t want to eat cows,” she’d said. “I like cows.”

“Don’t be silly,” her mother had said. “God put animals here for us to eat.”

Avery didn’t really know if she thought that was true. God was born in that barn-thing with all the animals around. In the books at church, God or Jesus—but they were the same thing, weren’t they?—was always posing with lambs and stuff. He must have liked them all right. Avery couldn’t imagine Jesus eating a lamb or a cow. But maybe he did?

There was a lot Avery didn’t understand about Jesus and church and God and her parents and how it all fit together.

At church, they were always talking about loving people.

And, when Avery had first heard the podcast, she'd felt like she could love that A-Lean lady, but that wasn't right. Killers were supposed to be killed. Criminals weren't supposed to live.

But ... at church, they just said love everyone. Weren't killers everyone?

All of this was really confusing to Avery, and the thing was, she would have liked to talk about it with her mom and dad. But, if she did, if she brought up the A-Lean thing, they would know that she was listening in on the podcast. They'd make her stop. And, for some reason, she liked listening to the podcast. Yes, it was scary. Sometimes, it kept her up at night, especially if the episode was about someone who came in through windows or someone who mashed out teeth, but she still liked to listen. She liked to learn about people for some reason.

On this particular morning, though, a blustery Wednesday when Avery had woken up feeling a little dizzy and thirsty- a feeling she hoped would go away soon- the podcast did something different than it usually did. It started talking about the killer way, way before he was a killer, way back when he was just a little boy.

The killer was named Ah-Tis Tool, as far as Avery could tell. The podcast guy was talking about how Ah-Tis was a little boy. He was four or five and playing with his toys, and his dad decided to sell his body.

Avery wasn't really sure what that meant- sell his body.

At first, she thought it must be the same as the way people sold cows for meat, and it made her shudder. But, then, she wondered, how could this boy grow up to be a killer if he got sold to be killed away?

Thinking about all this, her stomach turned as she looked down at the McMuffin in her lap. She'd felt a little funny, a little off this morning, and the sandwich, which she knew was made of dead pig or cow or something, was making it worse. She balled up the remainder of the sandwich in the wrapper as quietly as she could. She'd told her mom she didn't like these sandwiches or really anything that came in the yellow wrappers, but her mother didn't care. She'd said that Avery needed her protein and she would learn to like it.

The speaker on the podcast explained how the man, the man who bought Ah-Tis, had taken him into a room. Avery couldn't really understand what the man had done to Ah-Tis, though she had an inkling- some kind of feeling like it had something to do with how babies were made, even though she didn't know how a man and a boy could do that thing, that thing which she only vaguely understood. That thing no one was allowed to do unless they were married.

Oh, how Avery itched to ask her mom, but she couldn't let her know she was listening.

Avery sighed, catching herself in the middle and turning it into a yawn. She didn't want to alert her mother to anything.

She tried to sort through all she'd heard. She was fuzzy on

the details, but she could tell something awful, just awful, had happened to little Ah-Tis, and she knew she felt bad for him. This was okay, she reasoned, because Ah-Tis wasn't a killer yet. He was just a little boy, a little boy whom something bad had happened to.

Why was it okay, she wondered, to feel bad for the bad person before they became bad? It seemed to her that it was still the same person. And probably the person did the bad things because of the bad things that happened. Her mind was getting so jumbled her head was starting to hurt.

And it hurt even more as she listened to something really bad Ah-Tis did when he was grown up. The fact that he'd done something bad didn't surprise her. Grown-ups were always doing bad things. Just the other day, Ms. King, the science teacher, had gotten in trouble for wearing a necklace that showed Jesus still on the cross.

A boy in class had said, "My mom says it's bad to wear things where Jesus is still on the cross."

"Why?" the teacher had asked.

"Dunno," the boy, called Matthew, had said, shrugging, "but it is."

By the end of the day, the story had spread all around school. Ms. King had gotten taken out in the hallway. There had been raised voices, and then Ms. King wasn't allowed to come back to class anymore.

Avery knew that grown-ups had done something bad to Ms. King, but, as she listened to the podcast, she realized Ah-Tis had done something much worse.

He had taken a little boy out of a store, a little boy named Adam. Adam was a name Avery knew, a name from the bible, a name of two boys at her school. It was so much more familiar than the name Ah-Tis, and she wondered for a tiny moment if familiar could mean better. But that didn't seem quite right for some reason.

Avery forced her attention back to the podcast, the strong, masculine voice. She almost wished she hadn't because ... oh no ... she wanted to cover her ears as she understood the words, now spoken so plainly, as if the man on the podcast didn't know how to explain it in big, hard to understand words. The man said that Ah-Tis, the same little Ah-Tis who had been the boy she'd felt sorry for, had cut off Adam's head. He'd thrown the head out the window and sped away, leaving Adam's parents crying.

Avery didn't get to hear any more after that, and she was glad. Her mom let her off at the school, kissing her cheek. Avery noticed she felt a little funny, even more dizzy, as she walked into school, but she didn't tell her mom. Her mom would just say, "Buck up," or, "Stop trying to get out of school." She did that a lot when Avery felt bad.

All day long, Avery thought and thought. She thought so much she didn't know the answer when she got called on in math class, and she earned a demerit. That was five demerits for her now. When you got five- and Avery was

always racking them up without meaning to- you had to go in a little room alone and read the bible, if you could read. If you couldn't, you had to look at pictures of Jesus in a big book.

Walking into the little room, Avery wished she had the picture book. Sometimes, one of the nicer teachers would give it to her. It was better even though some of the pictures were sad. But, today, she'd been given the big, black bible, so she flipped to a random page. The verse said: "As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross."

Avery stopped reading because she knew what came next, and she didn't want to read it. The word "cross" reminded her of some of the sad pictures in the picture book, the ones where Jesus was all bloody and crying.

Thinking about all the blood- the blood on Jesus, the blood that she pictured as Ah-Tis chopped off Adam's head, the blood that might have been ketchup on her morning egg McMuffin, she felt her stomach churn, and she was sick, the gross stuff spewing onto the bible, which she was sure must be a sin.

The teacher wasn't mad when she came in a few minutes later.

Instead, she said, "Oh, you poor thing, you're not feeling well. Let's call your mom."

"Okay," Avery said, nodding her head weakly. For she

suddenly felt very weak.

The teacher, her soft words, the cool touch of her hand to Avery's forehead, reminded Avery of what she knew came at the end of the story in the bible, the part where Jesus said it was okay that the men killed him. The part where Jesus said to forgive them.

At this point, Avery's head was feeling muddled and confused, and the room felt a little spinny. Everything was getting all mucked up in her head. Adam and Ah-Tis and Jesus, all dancing there together in a way that she couldn't comprehend.

Avery was vaguely aware of her teacher and some other woman coming back into the room, though she couldn't remember when they'd left.

“Just sent her in there a couple of minutes ago.”

Mumbles.

“Yes ... fine ... then sick all over.”

Something was suddenly in Avery's mouth.

“Oh wow, it's high.”

Avery felt herself slipping into a weird sleep. It felt like sleep, but different, hot, restless. She couldn't tell what was real exactly.

In her dream, at least she thought it was a dream, she saw Ah-Tis. He was scary at first, big and mean, and she wanted to run away. She was scared that she would be like Adam, that Ah-Tis would chop off her head.

She felt herself rustling, clutching at her throat, making sure her head was still on.

“Never seen anything like it! Food poisoning? What could take her over so quickly?”

“I think she’s going to vomit again. Her mother’s on the way. Should we call ...”

A droning sound came from somewhere. Was that real? Was the dream real? Which part, exactly, was the dream?

Avery was still muddled, but her eyes drew back to scary Ah-Tis, and she realized he wasn’t scary anymore. He was almost dead now, like Jesus. But Ah-Tis wasn’t on a cross. Instead, he was lying in a bare room, clutching a place on his stomach, saying, “I’m not sorry. You’re not sorry.” He was saying it like it was to someone in the room but to someone he could not see.

And then, Avery felt relief because she must be the person he couldn’t see ... although why would he say those things to her? Maybe he wasn’t talking to her at all? Maybe he was talking to Adam or bloody Jesus.

Something weird started to happen to Ah-Tis, as Avery watched him in the corner of the strange gray room, a tiny

room with a bathroom in it like she had never seen before. He started to shrink down, morph into a little child.

Why, he was little Ah-Tis now! He was back to the little Ah-Tis the bad man had taken into that room.

And suddenly, Jesus/God was there, a lamb by his side, and his arms wide open.

“Come here, little Ah-Tis,” Jesus/God said. Little Ah-Tis smiled, and he ran into the arms of the figure. They swooped him up, and Ah-Tis started to cry.

Other cries filled the weird room. One of them sounded like a little boy. No, two of them did. They were two distinct cries, connected somehow. And then, there was a cry that sounded like her mother’s.

It was Avery’s mother, her mother rushing into the room and swooping her into her arms.

“She’s so sweaty. What ... how did this hit her so fast?”

“I’m okay, Mom,” Avery tried to say because she felt like she was starting to wake up, like some coldness was at her forehead, something cold and white and clean, but her mother didn’t hear her.