The Labyrinth of Homicide and Healing

By Eros Salvatore

Some names have been changed to protect the innocent and the guilty alike.

How I met Tawnya had everything to do with how she was murdered. The year was 1998. Fentanyl was unknown, Columbine had not yet happened, 9/11 was unimaginable, and Donald Trump wasn't even a reality TV star. Still, tragedy was always lurking somewhere in Humboldt County. Locals call it living behind the Redwood Curtain, its thousand-year-old sequoias witness to numerous crimes against humanity—from the 1860 massacre of Native Americans on Indian Island to present day homicides. The Netflix series *Murder Mountain* was not just sensationalized, it was true: a friend of a friend was found enslaved on a black market cannabis farm on Murder Mountain a few months after the show's 2018 release.

I was an undergrad at Humboldt State University, doing a social work internship with the Public Defender's Office. Jamie was my boss. And he was good. Too good. Respected by many, but hated by a few. Once a probation officer told me to tell Jamie to "Go to hell." I let him know Jamie was already there with a subpoena awaiting his arrival.

Juvenile Hall was my beat. Once a week I visited the over-capacity, aging facility with its cinder block walls and wired safety glass. The county was short on violent young thugs, so they filled most of the beds with drug addicts and thieves. These youthful offenders ranged from a foul-mouthed ten-year-old boy who demanded more rights than he had, or deserved—he was a pest, even to me—to a naive eighteen-year-old girl who put in a request to transfer to the adult county jail in hopes that it would be better there. It wasn't.

The jail guards, euphemistically called Youth Counselors, ranged from the joyous to the malevolent. There were the helpers, like Judy, who brought a pack of divination cards that featured wild animals to work. Every child got to pick a card when they were taken out of handcuffs upon arrival, then listen in awe as Judy would tell them about their totem animal. And there were the haters, like Sam, whose hobbies included badgering detainees and eschewing professionalism. One day he picked on the wrong child, a skinny little boy named Jose. Jose punched Sam in the face and broke his nose. I was nearby when it happened. Sam deserved it. He couldn't stop yelling at the kid. He got a thirty-day paid vacation for his troubles. He didn't deserve that.

My job was equal parts interviewing and handholding. I reassured the mischievous children of Humboldt County while trying to find the best placement for them—family, foster care, drug rehab, group homes or the now defunct California Youth Authority.

Ten percent of my clients were Native American. They ranged from Ted, the Hoopa boy who stabbed a schoolmate in the leg with an Exacto knife, and wanted to go back to the rez to take care of his sick uncle to Gina, a girlish gang member from Eureka, the largest town in the Redwood Empire. She was the perfect combination of traumatized urban Indian and 1990's criminal chic. Minority: dark skin, dark hair, dark eyes. Pretty: bangs, nails, tattoos. Aggressive: hit, steal, inhale. Addicted: weed, cigarettes, or meth.

Nonetheless, I loved them. Their cheerfulness made my overcast life brighter. Then I met fifteen-year-old Tawnya Leavitt, a typical strawberry-blonde, blue eyes and heart-shaped face kind-of-girl topped off with a heavy dose of risky behavior. She was the dare in Truth or Dare, and Gina's best friend. I was coming back from winter break. Tawnya was coming off a Christmas detox in jail. But now she was smiling and filled with excitement; I was the first

person who had come to juvie to help her. That was the only present she would get during the holidays.

I had no illusions about her future. Her mother, Rhonda, had been an addict before becoming sober when Tawnya was eight. Dutiful daughter took up the torch with marijuana at nine, graduated to speed at eleven and had recently tried heroin. The mental health professionals wondered if she was molested, because she was rumored to be trading sex for drugs. She had spent the last half of 1997 in a therapeutic foster-care home for girls. One of the workers could still recall her personality over twenty-five years later: *nice and pleasant unless you offended her.* But she did well. The most important rule they had was that you couldn't come back if you ran away. So she ran away.

Now she had been arrested for narcotic possession, and I could tell she wanted to use again. She had a lust for adventure in her eyes, oblivious to tragedy. I tried to steer her away from trouble, but as soon as she got out, she ran away for the last time.

A couple of weeks later, I was perusing the aptly nicknamed *Sub-Standard*, our local newspaper. Over the weekend a teenage girl's half-nude body had been found by an airstrip on the coast. Her head had been bashed in. There was a photograph. I didn't recognize the face, so I turned the page and kept reading.

Then the phone rang. It was Jamie.

"Are you going to the funeral?" he asked.

I froze, connecting the dots in slow motion, as I flipped the pages of the periodical back to a picture of Tawnya's dimpled smile. "Everyone's going to be there," Jamie continued. "Staff from Juvenile Hall, the police, probation, city officials, activists, friends and family; even some of the kids in juvie will get a pass to attend."

"Of course, I'll be there," I replied in a voice not my own.

I gave Jamie my weekly report. Then I hung up. I had never known anyone who had been murdered. A few days later I was back in juvie interviewing clients.

"I know who did it," Stacy said.

Stacy was another friend of Tawnya's and the epitome of sex, drugs and rock'n'roll. Black hair, black eyes, pale face. Short, thin, slashed wrists. Stacy had used her weekend furlough to smoke meth, and was eager to talk. Unfortunately, I was unable to discuss the murder because of my role with the Public Defender's Office, so I referred her to the appropriate detective. I should have let her talk. I wanted to know. I spent the rest of the day consoling Tawnya's other incarcerated friends. I even wrote a poem with Gina.

At the funeral cousins cried, mothers wept, and delinquents spoke—reciting lyrics that praised the deceased. Teens with warrants were given summons by probation officers to appear in court. No arrests were made. Not the place to make a scene. Incredibly, three hundred citizens showed up in peace.

But I didn't go. Numb, I shuttled between school and home. Work, study, eat. Rinse and repeat. Tawnya's friends fared no better. Gina was released from juvie and would show up at Tawnya's house wasted, just to go to her best friend's room and collapse on her bed in tears. It seemed that Tawnya's soul wouldn't leave, trapped by a community bereaved.

In the following weeks the newspapers were full of articles about the murder: "Killer On The Loose," "Police Not Talking," and "The Last Movements Of A Slain Teen." Her friends asked why. Her family grieved. Her mother pleaded for justice, blamed the police, the courts, the system. No one had the heart to tell her the truth: that Tawnya's chaotic life mirrored her mother's choices. They were both wild and free in all the wrong ways.

In search of relief, I signed up for a religious studies class on the healing power of labyrinths. These were intricate paths made by medieval Christians in Gothic Cathedrals like Chartres and Reims for prayer and meditation. Carved into the stone floors beneath movable pews, the labyrinth outlined walkways that meandered back and forth, like a coiling circuit inside a circle. Not to be confused with a maze, their mysterious layout was the secret to their success: the seeker couldn't get lost; with no dead ends, there was only one way to walk.

At the center of the labyrinth lay a six-petaled rosette, each leaf capable of holding an individual walker for an extended moment in time. There they could pray ceaselessly in a trance-like state. Then, supplications satisfied, they retraced their steps back out. It was like an inner pilgrimage for those who weren't able to travel to Jerusalem or Rome. By reaffirming their journey of faith, the devout could visit God closer to home.

Labyrinths spread all over medieval Europe as people sought to supersede the authorities when they hungered for more of God then the Vatican would allow. The Reformation stopped their growth as the Church struggled to maintain control. Eventually, the pews remained in place permanently, covering the sacred circles for centuries. Then, just before the dawn of the new millenium, walking the labyrinth was rediscovered by the Episcopalians of San Francisco. They ended up laying its blessed lines into the polished limestone floor of Grace Cathedral—where public and parishioners alike participated in quarterly ceremonies marking the seasons like a pagan rite.

My religious studies class included a weekend field trip to Grace during spring break. I anticipated it like a witness to the Resurrection, overcome by fear and wonder. During a rainy day in March, I drove south to the city—a modern pilgrim seeking the ways of old. On my arrival I was still in the clutches of emotional denial. Nevertheless, the gothic sanctuary

welcomed me at the top of Nob Hill, its spire piercing the sky, its body decorated with stained glass panels that portrayed the lives of saints. *Praise the Lord!* A rose window exclaimed, as I ascended the stairs. A gilded bronze copy of Ghiberti's *Gates of Paradise* glazed the front doors, marking the threshold between the sacred and the secular.

The Cathedral was laid out in the shape of a cross, and with all the artistic adornments cloaking it like a burial shroud, I felt like I was at a funeral. I pondered the meaning of the Eucharist. Body of Christ, body of Tawnya, both a mother's loss. The interior was lit with an ambient light that cast hushed shadows upon muraled walls.

The labyrinth lay in the nave near the entrance, just behind the pious pews. Its lines were arranged like the notes of a geometric chorus whose melody led to the heart of the divine. Pilgrims walked in somber solitude, lit candles arranged ceremoniously along the sides. I watched the scene in silence, a statue of St. Francis watching me nearby.

I entered, itinerary planned out by fate. My feet fell at a snail's pace, and with each step, the haunting atmosphere lifted the veil between the living and the dead. As time slowed, Tawnya's murder loosened its grip, and I released the pain I had been unable to feel. When I reached the center, I stood on a rose petal and attended the funeral I had long avoided. But no tears came, instead, my gratitude for knowing Tawnya became the eulogy, and my sorrow was exchanged for grace.

As I turned to go, I could feel the remnants of Tawnya's spirit leaving me for the world beyond. In the Heavens, the Angels sang *Hallelujah! Death is slayed!*

At the end of the semester, I left the Public Defender's Office. I had learned enough. A few weeks later my replacement, a young woman whom I had never met, was held at knife point by two Native American kids, a brother and sister. They forced the Youth Counselors to unlock the

Juvenile Hall doors, so they could escape. Then they proceeded to steal the lady's car and make their way out to the rez where they were duly arrested.

Tawnya's murder was one in a number of senseless deaths and disappearances that have taken place behind the Redwood Curtain. Some, like Eureka's Karen Mitchell, a bright sixteen-year-old from a middle-class family who vanished on a busy street in broad daylight, were well documented and have become infamous Humboldt lore. Others never saw the light of day, particularly when they involved Native Americans, because no one cared about them or even knew they existed.

Tawnya was white enough to get in all the newspapers, but poor enough to be forgotten. Her case, although still open, has gotten little traction after an initial strong push. Her relatives have complained that Tawnya's name doesn't appear on lists of unsolved homicides in Humboldt County, nor does it get much attention on internet sleuth websites. There were some suspects. One was a guy nicknamed Stabby Joe who died in prison, but I couldn't find anything definitive. When I emailed the detective in charge of the case, I received the following reply: "Tanya's case is still open and actively being investigated. With that being said, there is not much I can tell you."

I still wondered what had gone wrong in Tawnya's life, so I reached out to any living relatives. Her mother was in a nursing home from a stroke and couldn't talk, while others were still too devastated to tell me much. But Amber, one of Tawnya's cousins, filled in the missing pieces. It was true Tawnya had been molested. Her step-father was responsible, and Tawnya had spent her childhood running away to Washington State to get away from him. There she stayed with Amber and her mom and formed a close bond. Amber was four years older than Tawnya. She had been kidnapped and abused at age fifteen, so she understood what Tawnya was going

through. Just before she went to juvie, Tawnya had begged Amber to come to Humboldt to live with her, but by then Amber was nineteen and had a baby. Her mom wouldn't let her go. When she found out Tawnya had been murdered, Amber tried to jump out of her mom's car while traveling seventy miles an hour on the interstate.

Eventually, Amber's life turned around, but twenty-seven years later she, like the rest of Tawnya's family, still wants closure. Something that is unlikely to come. I understand why Tawyna died though. It wasn't any one thing or person that killed her. It was a multitude of systemic failures and the frailties of human beings. May Tawnya Marie Leavitt rest in peace.

** If you have any information regarding the murder of Tawnya Leavitt please contact the Humboldt County Crime Tip Line at (707) 268-2539.*