

Illumination

(Part 2)

By H.J Black (2nd year Creative Nonfiction)

*"Life is a series of natural and spontaneous changes.
Don't resist them-that only creates sorrow.
Let reality be reality.
Let things flow naturally forward in whatever way they like."
- Lao Tzu (Tao Te Ching)*

Prologue:

Life is not fiction. There are no heroes and no villains, there is no narrative, there is no author, its main character – the sole traveler, does not reach the end of a difficult path to find answers capable of filling them with the righteous endeavor. A black screen does not appear signaling *'the end'*, there is only tomorrow and the next day, and the knowledge that whatever solace the character finds at one point will not last forever. There are no neat endings. I knew that when I scaled the sheer cliff face leading up from the Anglesea back beaches that life would go on in a world without my beautiful Sophie. That the grief and despair still existed – that the pain was real. There is no escape from it, there is no exit, all that remains is the knowledge that there are many more barriers to cross, that my pain is constant and sharp and that I do not hope for a grander world for anyone. The knowledge that I want my pain to be subjected upon others, that I want no one to escape, the knowledge that after climbing the cliff that there is no catharsis. The knowing that after all that has happened, that after watching my Sophie hanging from the banister and making my way down to the beach, that I have gained no deeper knowledge of myself. That no new information was or can be extracted, that all of this has meant absolutely nothing.

"Muddy Water, let stand, becomes clear."

Lao Tzu

'1 in 5 Australian women have experienced sexual violence since the age of 15 ...'

I would be returning to where I had come from. All those years ago. The blood and the toil and the anger and the control, I would be returning to the only area of my life that I had truly mastered in essence, to the site and source of change and metamorphosis, from where the sporadically terrifying boy became a mere vessel of a man – the vessel that encompassed compassion and kindness and responsibility and morality, and no one would ever understand how boxing had done that to me, but it did. It was *Mailer* who had once said that such a sport was the only of its kind because it 'arouses two of the deepest anxieties we contain. There is not only the fear of getting hurt, which is profound in more men than will admit to it, but there is also the opposite panic, equally unadmitted, of hurting others'. It was Mailer's words that taught me how boxing was life, that life was fear and that fear was consequence, and when an old friend called me on day 28 asking me to come back to the gym, I thought of what *Bukowski* said about the 'gods offering you chances, knowing them and taking them' and I said yes.

I'm glad you're coming back, Jimmy, he told me as I walked through the doors to Moreland City Boxing.

I'm glad to be back.

You look like shit.

Tough couple of months.

You still with that bird?

No.

That's a shame ... she was a nice girl.

She was.

I'm really glad you're back here mate, it's been too long.

I know ... I guess I just wanted to get back to primordial reality.

What the fuck is primordial reality?

Boxing.

It's not just reality, Jimmy, boxing is self-preservation, something you never learned.

Yeah the mirror reminds me daily. So what do you want me to do?

Got an up and comer. Name's Nat. She's done for the night, you passed her on the way in.

All I saw was a chick sitting on the front step smoking cigarettes and reading a book.

Yeah that's her. Fucking ferocious.

She's your fighter?

Yep. Go and say hello. You can start tomorrow.

Okay.

Oh and Jimmy, don't take it personally.

I didn't reply and made my way for the door, passing the rows of rotting heavy bags and the few people left stretching down for the evening. Moreland was inner city, hidden in a dark corner with a sign out the front screaming '**24 HOURS**' and was named after its head trainer, who was known as Mory and had painted its walls with photo's of past glory. On my way out I passed a picture of myself, popped in a fighting crouch with gloved hands raised. It was a long time ago. Sophie had taken that photo. She loved taking photos.

"We turn clay to make a vessel, but it is on the space where there is nothing that the usefulness of the vessel depends."

Lao Tzu

Part 2:

'93 per cent of offenders are male ...'

It was dark and cold and a freezing sleet had burdened early June and the girl sat hunched in darkness with the incandescent glow of each puff of her cigarette illuminating her short, spiked black hair and matching leather collar and fishnets. Displacement was truth. Mistrust was both wise and irrational.

Hello.

Fuck off.

A slick of blue lightening splashed across the dark near midnight sky, it was the first time I saw Natalie's eyes. Dark brown, mistakably black. I remember those eyes.

What are you reading?

A book.

What's it abo...

Who the fuck are you?

A friend of Mory.

He said you'd be coming. I saw your photo.

Yeah ... I'm here to help you tr...

I don't need your fucking help okay, and I can't be your friend so piss off and leave me alone.

What?

I can't be your friend Jimmy ... Leave me alone, I have to go to work.

"Respond intelligently even to unintelligent treatment."

Lao Tzu

Part 3:

'76 percent of rape offenders sentenced in the past 6 years received a custodial sentence ...'

What the fuck?

Hello to you too.

What are you doing?

Getting a cup of coffee, did you want one?

No, I can buy a fucking cup of coffee myself.

Okay, just two thanks, one flat white, strong, two sugars, one soy chai, both medium.

No problems, Jimmy, that'll be \$7.40 pal, where's your girl.

She's gone.

That's a shame man.

Yeah it is.

It's cold out tonight brother, going for a walk?

Yeah.

Same place?

Yeah.

Your friend want a coffee?

She's not my friend.

"The best soldier does not attack. The superior fighter succeeds without violence. The greatest conqueror wins without struggle. The most successful manager leads without dictating. This is intelligent non-aggressiveness. This is called the mastery of men."

Lao Tzu

Part 4:

'Rape victims are three times more likely than non-victims of crime to endure a major depressive episode ...'

It was perhaps 3 or maybe 4 am when the rain let up and the city wind went about freezing everything in its wake and I headed west along a familiar path, neither cold nor warm, tired nor awake, merely numb as I thought about the stains of the past, and sipped my coffee and smoked my cigarettes and thought about Natalie and the chances of running into her at the all night café, and I thought about the warning from Mory. I can't be your friend she told me. Don't take it personally.

It was 29 days ago that my Sophie ended her life. She tied a noose made of her Father's work ties and placed it around her neck and leaped from the upstairs banister. No final words, no call for help.

Thirteen days ago I had driven down to the beach and waded out into the water to die because without Sophie there was no life – to live on without her would to not be alive. And so I was here taking mundane steps through the night, barely living, nearly dying, wandering aimlessly, too afraid to sleep yet hoping to awake from such a nightmare, thus I walked on travelling quickly to a sad place. Misery loves company.

“Prepare for the difficult while it is still easy. Deal with the big while it is still small. Difficult undertakings have always started with what's easy. Great undertakings always started with what is small. Therefore the sage never strives for the great, and thereby the great is achieved.”

Lao Tzu

Part 5:

'90 per cent of people who commit suicide suffer from depression ...'

So you're fucking stalking me now, is that it?

Jesus Christ Natalie, you scared the fuck out of me.

It's 4 am in the morning, and you're sitting in my seat.

It's the Shrine of Remembrance, there are approximately 14 benches, 15 if you include the pylon next to the flame, I'm sure you can find another one.

Yeah but that's my seat, James.

Alright then, have it, I'm going home anyways. And don't call me James.

Hey, aren't you gonna take your coffee?

Nah, it's Chai, I don't drink that shit.

Then why'd you buy it?

Just do me a favor and leave it there please. Just leave it.

Why? Whose is it?

Just leave it.

*“He who overcomes others is strong,
but he who overcomes himself is mighty.”*

Lao Tzu

Part 6:

'7.1% of Australian women over 18 years experienced an incidence of physical or sexual violence in the previous 12 months ...'

To share a bond is far greater than any friendship, and far easier to let go of when it is gone. There is a vast expanse between being lonely and being alone. There are 73 million children in the United States and 39 million of them are victims of sexual abuse. Natalie spoke of the latter with as much verve as she had recounted the former and we sat smoking cigarettes a few nights later at the Shrine with a cup of coffee, Sophie's soy chai resting between us, and I don't remember the exact moment when things changed between us, but I know that they did. She told me to pick her up from a dark St. Kilda side-street one night after I asked her in the ring who she was fighting against and she didn't answer the question but told me where to meet her. She sat alone on the curb and her face was ashen, a pasty winter white spotted with patches of skin colored concealer. She sat with the same blue little book and her short black hair was covered with a beanie which she apologised for because she hadn't had the time to wash the "cum" from her hair.

I make them wear a rubber, but sometimes they refuse.

Fulfilling work?

Funny.

You didn't answer me today.

Answer what?

About who you were fighting against ...

In the ring?

Yeah.

My Father ... he raped me when I was 5 and then every night after my Mother died. I came to Melbourne when I was 17. I've had the bug ever since.

Yeah I have depression as well. My girlfriend hung herself a few weeks back.

Are you suicidal?

Before I could cover up the day old blue bruise around my neck, Natalie reached for my jacket collar and smirked.

It's harder than it looks isn't it? Hanging yourself.

It is.

Was she the love of your life?

Yes.

How do you know?

I just know.

Why did she do it?

That's personal.

You can trust me.

Why?

Because I'm not your friend.

Sophie had the bug I guess. Depression. Deep inside her brain, a virus eating away at her. Her brother told me her first boyfriend raped her when she was 15 in the back of his ute. Her next boyfriend beat her. She told me that I saved her. I believed her.

She thought love would save her. How stupid.

I guess ... If you don't mind me asking, why do you do what you do?

Because I hate men and I want them to suffer.

A cadaverous lay are you?

No ... A man's hatred of women is about power. And in that moment of climax, when their faces become contorted and the scream out, they are completely vulnerable. The power has shifted. The power is mine.

The world is fucked.

The world is changing. It is what you make of it.

...

James?

Yes.

Do you still want to kill yourself?

Yes. But I also want to kill all of them.

Who?

The fiends – the men who turn innocent girls into damaged ones. If I were strong I would sift through the detritus, I would read the terrain, I would search for signs of passing, for the scent of my pray, and then I would hunt those motherfuckers down. The ones who abused her, raped her, spat on her. I would hunt them down and I would kill them.

Water isn't strong.

What?

Listen I have to get back to work and I need to stop at a 7/11 to get some gum. I fucking hate the taste of cock. But I want you to take this and read it.

What is it?

Tao Te Ching.

What?

It's the way James. It's the way out, it's an understanding of yourself, a chance to look back and reflect, it's the way ... Just read it okay. It helped me accept who I am and what I have become.

Okay ...

Live a happy life James. Thank you for tonight.

What the fuck are you talking about?

Goodbye.

Wait, Natalie ... Will I ever see you again? I asked with mild concern.

I don't want to hurt you, James, she told me with a grin. I told you we couldn't be friends.

"He who knows much about others may be learned, but he who understands himself is more intelligent. He who controls others may be powerful, but he who has mastered himself is mightier still."

Lao Tzu

Part 7:

'Depressed individuals with suicidal ideation and previous suicide attempts constitute the most high- risk group ...'
'1 in 15 rape victims contract a sexually transmitted disease as a result of being raped ...'

That night I returned home and opened the blank moleskin diary Sophie had bought for me when she finished reading my first novel, inscribed with a message on the first page reading ...

You are mine.

Forever!

Only I may call you James.

So that every time you hear it,

You'll know that your girl is near.

I'm so proud of you.

Love Sophie xxx

... And I made note of what Natalie said to me so that I wouldn't forget it, taking a photo with words of a moment in time – a crucial moment, the kind that you feel as it leaves a mark. It was to be the last time I ever heard her voice as she died due to complications of HIV a few weeks later –the bug– what I had mistaken as guttural slang for depression was in fact hooker speak for the precursor to AIDS and it finally killed her. Mory told me that as he hung her photo on his wall with a tear in his eye – tears of shock I figured. Her short hair was spiked, she was popped in a fighting crouch, her hands raised.

Natalie was my friend.

It is she that crafted the *Tao Te Ching*, she who spoke to me through the little blue book. They are her words – the words of a true believer. They are the poems of a victim who refused to victimize another, of a fighter as wary of hurting others as she was of hurting herself. She is the fallen star giving forth light without shining long after its demise, and I'll never entirely know why she chose to invite me out that night, perhaps it was the universality of pain, and the occurrence of what we need over what we want or a fighter's intuition, but she did just to tell me that the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step through a past made of stone, into tomorrow and the next.

For a single star can never illuminate the darkness; it only ever shows the way to lost travelers.

Thank you, Natalie.

Thank you.

"Water is fluid, soft, and yielding. But water will wear away rock, which is rigid and cannot yield. As a rule, whatever is fluid, soft, and yielding will overcome whatever is rigid and hard. This is another paradox: what is soft is strong."

Lao Tzu

- *Author's note: The names of certain characters have been changed to preserve their identities. Spoken dialogue sequences have been recalled largely from memory and the author's private journal.*