

Elliot Murawski

Righting

The first time I used heroin and crack cocaine I was fifteen years old. I'd begun my descent into a hedonistic abyss with my first girlfriend, who shared my relentless pursuit of nihilistic and unboundedly altered states of consciousness. This was the pivotal moment that began a 12 year long commitment to a serious and sincere substance dependence, characterised by the expected consequences of addiction; relationship breakdowns, health problems, violence, and legal troubles, all underpinned by ever-present degradation, desperation and misery.

I'd been a fairly happy child up until the age of about eleven. I was a smart kid, and although I grew up in a big household with three older brothers in low socio-economic areas, I didn't get into a lot of trouble until I hit puberty. I don't know if it was the combination of raging hormones and bad company, or the early onset of my later diagnosed mental illness, but by the time I reached secondary school trouble always seemed to find me. I lost interest in school work, and found myself completely incapable of paying attention in lessons. I'd get into fights both at school and hanging around on the streets after school. I was told consistently in all manner of ways that I just had to 'do life'. I seemed to be unable to articulate how I was feeling, but I knew that something inside of me just felt 'wrong', a feeling that I can still identify right up to the present moment, a void that I'd go on to attempt to fill with all kinds of quick fixes, starting with cigarettes and alcohol.

One thing I was always interested in, regardless of my dwindling academic achievements was writing. It started with music - I'd write lyrics every day, tenaciously striving to create impressive rhymes and patterns, obsessively looking up the meanings to words I knew existed, but I'd never known how to use in a sentence. The only lesson I never bunked off from at school was English (which I'm still surprised by because I couldn't sit in any lesson for more than ten minutes) but I genuinely loved learning about different writing styles, hearing the experiences of other people from far away places and long forgotten times, delivered in poetry and stories. I was fascinated by language. I'd see the skill of wordsmiths throughout history, from Shakespeare to Eminem. I listened to the way people communicated with each other all around me, at school, on TV, the different accents, intonations, sarcasm, humour. I continued writing notes and lyrics. I'd spend time with people from all kinds of different backgrounds both at and after school, always taking notice of any nuances and variations in communicating. Throughout my tumultuous teenage years and into addiction-addled adulthood, I always put pen to paper and wrote down my thoughts in some cacophony of rhythmic flow.

After struggling for a few years and moving schools, I finally got kicked out two weeks before I sat my GCSEs after being caught smoking heroin in the school toilets. I lost interest in anything other than escaping my increasingly overwhelming thoughts and feelings. Even writing stuff down wasn't helping any more, and by this point I'd discovered that the world was full of substances I could take to make myself feel the way I perceived everyone else to be - content. From the age of 16 to 26, although I held down a few jobs, my life eventually spiralled into a haze of chaos and destruction. I went from jotting down lyrics on paper in my pocket, to scrawling rambling nonsense across crack house walls in marker pen, and using syringes to write swear words in my own blood across the wall where my TV used to be. The external matched the internal. My behaviour reflected how I was inside - a mess.

I ended up in prison in 2016 at the age of 26 after becoming involved with organised drug supply. I was a driver for a gang operating out of east London supplying heroin and crack cocaine to other parts of the country, purely to fund my own expensive habit. It's a funny word, 'gang'. It's very much open to interpretation depending on who is using it; it could mean friends, it could mean organised crime, and it's even used as a collective noun in the building world, e.g. 'a gang of plasterers'. Although we weren't tradesmen we did operate as a business, the police described us as an 'organised criminal network', and there was a friendship element involved - so I suppose the word gang is spot on to describe our dynamic from multiple contexts.

It was in prison that I picked up a pen for the first time in years. I scribbled graffiti on my cell walls, and when I couldn't get hold of any paper, I'd start jotting down my thoughts. This was suggested to me by a cellmate, who obviously recognised my chaotic thought processes. In prison, you have to fill out applications to do things like go to the gym, or request a doctor's appointment. It's an essential part of jail life, and I'd be filling out apps every day. I don't know how anybody could read my applications, my handwriting had become barely legible after years of redundancy. Nevertheless, I persisted, and continued to reacquaint myself with a pen and paper, which would turn out to be the best thing I ever did.

I received a letter from my then ex partner, Lisa, after being inside for a month. We'd met the year before I ended up in prison, shortly before the relapse that took me there. The moment the officer handed me the A4 sized envelope, I knew who it was from - I recognised her handwriting immediately. I dreaded opening it. I expected to read pain - but instead I read forgiveness and love. She'd gone travelling after our relationship broke down in the midst of my addiction, and I'd wreaked havoc on her life as I did with anyone I encountered. In the letter she told me she was back in the country, and she'd been told I was in prison - and she wanted to visit me. My heart was pounding as I read the letter, written language once again evoking all kinds of emotions within me for the first time in years. I didn't know how to respond, what could I possibly say? She wasn't only the most incredible person I'd ever met, but also the person who had been hurt the most by my deceitful and antagonistic behaviours. She watched me spiral out of control as she tried desperately to hold everything together. I was incapable of finding the right words to respond with.

That was the beginning of my second chance. Not just at our relationship, but at life. A life that she saved, by encouraging me to continue writing, not just to her, but to myself, for myself. I wrote about my experiences, from the intense years of addiction right up to the mundanities of prison life; somehow I found there was something to learn, and a gallows humour in everything I came up against. It got me through the trauma, past and present. Everything was a story. Everything was an experience to be explained, described, analysed. My literacy levels improved over the months and eventual years, developing along with my relationships with the people I cared about who, I'm sure begrudgingly at first, slowly came back into my life. The writing gave me more than just a chance for reflection, it gave me a release, a chance to relieve the tension that builds up from the repeated and consistent suppression of any real attachment to my experiences. The further I get from those experiences, the more insight I gain into and the more I write about them, like watching a train whizz past you and seeing more and more carriages reveal themselves.

I served just under three years in prison. I progressed through the system with a pen in my hand, my writing permeating through the prison walls and out into the world. A world I was always scared of, and a world that I felt, at times, chewed me up and spat me out as nothing more than a pile of slimy bones. But the world feels different to me now. Maybe I feel different to the world. It's the organic progression of everything I suppose; it all changes, sometimes for the better, and sometimes not. And the way we relate to our own experiences changes too, as we find new ways of processing, new ways of expressing, and new ways of just doing life.

Elliot Murawski @bluebaglife

When Elliot went to prison for almost three years, addicted to heroin, his life and the life of his partner Lisa changed forever. During his sentence, Lisa started the Instagram account 'bluebaglife' as a safe space to share their on-going experiences. The name 'bluebaglife' came about when Lisa noticed that the heroin Elliot was using would come wrapped in cut off pieces of blue plastic carrier bags, she used to find small pieces all around the flat they shared. Elliot began writing to Lisa for bluebaglife, from his prison cell.

Since Elliot's release from prison, 'bluebaglife' has taken on a life of its own, it's now a growing community for the voices of others to connect through sharing, learning, and educating through discussions. The couple are using their motivated network of supporters to aid their collective recovery and to help undo the shame associated with addiction and prison. They are currently working online, in schools, universities and in prisons across the UK.

Elliot and Lisa started telling their stories around their experiences of addiction, prison, recovery and love on 'bluebaglife', their Instagram account. This account grew and began to offer the perspectives of people in prison, released from prison, as well as loved ones supporting, and all who experienced addiction in their lives.