A Life in Pieces

Inspired by an interview with ‘Alison’ by Marguerite Schinkel
Artwork by Morag Kewell
Introduction

I first met ‘Alison’ (name changed for protection) in August 2014. I was carrying out interviews for my research project ‘Lives Sentenced’, which examined how people give meaning to going to prison over-and-over again for short periods. Life-history interviews revealed how the meaning of subsequent sentences changed as they grew older and their lives changed. I interviewed men and women, in the community and in prison.

Alison was in prison, had brown eyes and long dark straight hair, and talked to me openly about her past, her times in prison and her hopes for the future. Like so many other women and men I spoke to, she had experienced a lot of trauma, done a lot of things she regretted, and received a lot of punishment. Her story was different from all the others, as everyone’s story is individual, but the magnitude and frequency of the struggles in her past was typical among the people I spoke to.

Alison’s story is a good example of the lived-experiences of people who are repeatedly imprisoned and the kinds of crime for which they are imprisoned. Alison described very well how at times she was sent to prison for help, but did not receive this help while she was there. Like others I interviewed, she took steps to move away from offending many times, and managed for long periods, but faced setbacks triggered by further trauma and turning to drug or alcohol in order to cope. While she wants to change, prison has become so normal for her that it is an easy place to live.

This graphic work of non-fiction, A Life in Pieces, evolved as part of the research, but is also a standalone product. After Alison’s life history interview, I sent the interview recording, like all the other recordings, to my transcriber, Morag Kewell. I then did two things with the pages and pages of transcripts she sent back. For the larger research project, I used specialist software (QSR NVivo) to look in-depth at all the different topics people spoke to me about. It was also important to keep each person’s story as a whole narrative. For this, I edited the transcripts so that my questions disappeared and the text started with people’s childhood and moved through their lives gradually. I called this the ‘Life Story’ and shared it with the person whose life it described when I met him or her again for a further interview.

When I met Alison again, about two years later, she was in another prison, for another crime, and about to get out. When I asked if she would be interested in allowing her life story to inspire a graphic novel, she was excited about the idea and felt that this might be a first step towards her making a positive difference for others. I knew that Morag wrote graphic travelogues and asked her if she would be willing to work on this project. A Life in Pieces is the result.

I hope readers agree that Morag has done an amazing job of capturing the ups and downs of a life lived in and out of prison. As Alison is a pseudonym and Morag has never met her, none of the characters in these pages look like their real-life counterparts. I hope you’re gripped by the pages that follow, and take away a sense of how trauma and repeated imprisonment interact with, and impact people’s lives.

Marguerite Schinkel
MA MUM DIED WHEN I WAS A YOUNG.

SHE DIED OF A HEART ATTACK, SO IT WAS LIKE SHE WAS THERE ONE MINUTE AND GONE THE NEXT.

...SO IT TOOK ME MANY YEARS TO ACCEPT THAT.

ROUND ABOUT 12, 13, I STOPPED GOING TAE SCHOOL AND WASNAE LISTENING.

I WENT TO STAY W' MA GRANDPARENTS, MA NANA AND GRANDAD. IT WAS GOOD THERE. WE GOT HOLIDAYS.

LIKE MA NANA SAID "GO TAE SCHOOL" OR "DO THIS!" I'D BE LIKE "YOU'RE NAЕ MA MUM!"
I ended up stealing cars, breaking into places, so I was put into a children's home at the age of 13.

I could just run amok in there as well. I didn't listen to anyone. I didn't stick by the rules, never really got punished for it. I didn't want to go to school, so I used to lie in my bed.

I met a guy in there. I was going with him for about a year.

He ended up stabbing me several times.

I was 15.
Once I'd came out of hospital, that's when the drugs started.

I was a smoker, cigarettes and maybe a bottle of cider between six and us at the weekends, but drugs wasn't really an issue.

After I got out of hospital and met up with friends that I hadn't seen for a while, and they were on drugs, and it just sort of happened really quickly.

The first time I ever tried heroin, I used a needle. So right in front of me using needles as well.

Well, hold on a minute. This is quite dangerous.
I started offending to feed the drugs, like shoplifting, or driving without a license...

Or breaking into a house, theft, it got really bad, cos it wasn't just heroin.

It was smoking crack cocaine as well.

And that's when I started being on remand basically, when I was 16.
The first time I went in on remand, it was an older woman, she was sitting smoking drugs.

So I just thought “this is great, ken, coming tae prison and getting drugs for nothing.”

I got community service for fines, got a lot of fines.

I would go for few probation appointments, miss 6, go for a few, I knew how tae work the system.

I could go in and tell her the reason for me not being there was because someone was ill in the family and they believed that back then.
WHEN I STARTED THE CRACK ON TOP A THE HEROIN, I’D GOTTEN A FLAT OF MA OWN AND IT WAS IN A LOVELY AREA.

THEN ONE OF MY FRIENDS, SHE STARTED SMOKING IT BEFORE ME AND SHE USED THE JAMAICAN GUYS.

I GOT INTRODUCED TO HIM AND HE ENDED UP COMING UP AND STAYING IN THE HOUSE, AND WE ENDED UP IN A RELATIONSHIP.

HE WAS FEEDING ME DRUGS, SO HE’D FUND THE CRACK, BUT HE WOULDN’T GIVE ME HEROIN. I’D HAVE TO GO OUT STEALING AND HIDING IT FROM HIM.

THAT ENDED WHEN HE GOT 5 YEARS FOR SELLING DRUGS.
My first prison sentence was because I breached my probation.

It was an 18 month order for driving, I went to a few appointments and then it was revoked, then I got a sentence.

It was revoked for not turning up to appointments.

I was a drug user. If I didn't have anything to sort me out that day, I couldn't go to that appointment. So they really should have got me on a Methadone script.

I got five months prison for it.

I was 20, so I went tae the Y.O.'s. The first time I went I was a bit nervous, 'cos I'd heard lots of stories about the Y.O.'s.*

*Young Offenders Institute

But once I got past the scared and shocked part, it was ok. I liked the people, I got on with them.
I'd come out of prison and had met a guy in a bar, and had been seeing him probably about six to eight months.

I didnae want tae have the baby, but between my family and his family, it wasnae something that was up for discussion.

That's the main reason that I had him, I was still on methadone when I fell pregnant.

The birth of ma son, just the whole experience of giving birth was amazing, I loved it.

Once it's happened and you're holding him...

It's amazing seeing them for the first time.

Me and his dad stayed together for just over a year, but he was too controlling and didnae want ma own family in the house...

...so I got ma locks changed.
THINGS SORTAE WENT DOWNHILL AGAIN.

I ENDED UP RELAPSING, BACK ON DRUGS WHEN MARK WAS ABOUT THREE.

I WAS SHOPLIFTING AND DOING THINGS TAE GET BY AND GET EXTRA MONEY.

I SOLD MA BODY FOR MONEY TAE GET DRUGS, PUT MASELF IN REALLY BAD SITUATIONS.

IT WAS THE COURTS THAT ORDERED ME TAE START METHADONE.

THERE WAS LOADS OF SUPPORT THERE, YOU DONE A LOT OF GROUPS AND ONE-TO-ONES AND JUST KNOWING THAT YOU WERE GETTING BREATHALYSED, EVEN WITH DRINK AT THE TIME, OR YOU WERE GETTING A URINE TEST TO SEE IF YOU WERE CLEAN...

...IT WAS JUST SOMETHING THAT I THOUGHT “RIGHT, I HAVE TAE DO THIS” AND THERE WAS ENOUGH HELP THERE.
Since then I was doing not tae bad, when ma nan went intae hospital wi pneumonia and she'd asked me tae go down tae ma cousin's tae let him know, and he's...

...Well he's got mental health problems.

And when I went down there was him and this other guy in the house.

He totally turned on me and helped the guy rape me, basically.

Ma cousin, he got sectioned to a mental hospital.

It was DNA that got the rapist, and they caught him at Gatwick airport trying tae leave the country.

My anxiety started from the rape. I didnae have a clue where this guy was.

He got 12 years.
The reason why I think I started drinking was because I didnae want tae go back on the drugs, 'cos I know what it does tae you.

I cannae put ma body through it again.

Even when I came off methadone masef, that was a really big struggle for me. I struggled big time, but I was determined.

And I thought “you can go intae a shop and buy drink, it’s nae bad. I’ll just use the drink instead of the drugs” I didnae realise you could get addicted to it.

I hid it for like well over a year from ma family that I had a drink problem, because I was never that drunk and I used tae drink out o’ Coca Cola bottles so they thought it was juice.

Until ma brother noticed how many bottles were in the bin.

I was like “I’ve nae got a problem” I was happy, Ken. Then I started dabbling in crack again…

…And ma auntie just took Mark and I wasnae getting him back until I’d wisened up. He’s still with her now.
Even when Mark was staying at Ma Aunie’s, I was staying out of the jail.

I would take him to the riverside, or to the carnivals, go to the park, but the drink was under the buggy.

It takes a few months for it to get to a bad situation that I’m shoplifting and that.

I’m controlling it tae start wi’, like budgeting and that wi’ money…

…but once you get mair addicted tae the drink, that goes oot the windae and you’re oot shoplifting or stealing tae get money.

That’s why you’re oot for so long, ’cos it takes a few months tae get tae the stage that you’re gonnae pick it up oot the shelf and just walk oot without putting it in the bag.
Since then, my crime's been mostly police assaults and breach of the peace...

'Cos when I drink, I get angry.

My offending's gotten worse, the drink's actually made it worse, because it's assaults.

One guy I assaulted was Nigerian, so I've got some racial charges as well. Ken, like where I've been shoplifting for the drink, the security guard happens to be black.

I've called him everything, but that's one thing I'm not, because my daughter is mixed race, so I'm nae a racist.
I got out in January. I was daein' brilliant, I was stayin' off the drink.

I was pickin' Mark up from school.

Knowing that I had tae be there for Mark was a big motivation, and I knew I couldnae go up tae the house drunk or pick him up from school drunk.

I managed my anxiety because of ma cousin.

She was wí me quite a lot of the time. She has a little boy of two so I used tae focus on him or carry him and try and forget what was roond aboot me.

So long as I was speakin' tae someone and that, dinnae get me wrong. On a bus I was sittin' at the back and listenin' to everything, but I managed it.
My partner got out of jail in February and he started drinking straight away and I didn’t start drinking straight away.

I was going through quite a lot, like in the last three weeks before I came back to prison, ‘cos he started the domestic abuse.

He was arrested for it, but he was let out, so I was drinking a lot more just to cope w’ that.

I got out in January, ma partner got out in February and from the March, we was both just drinking. Now we’re both back at it again.

I’ve let mark doon big time.
When I was out there, I had a support worker. She got me to start seeing a rape councillor and just my local GP...

... and I was waiting for an appointment with a psychiatrist.

The time I wait for an appointment, I end up hitting the drink pretty hard because I cannae cope.

Just to cope wi' the outside world.

I can't do things unless I'm drunk, or whatever.

To do normal things.

Even going tae the supermarket to shop and that, I couldnae even contemplate. I wouldnae even get out ma front door. Ma hands get all sweaty, I panic, ma heart's racing, I'm sweating.
MA COUSIN, HE'D BEEN RELEASED INTAE THE COMMUNITY AGAIN.

SOCIAL WORK WAS TRYING TAE GET A MEETING SET UP WI' ME AND MY SOCIAL WORKER AND THE PEOPLE THAT WAS HELPING HIM.

JUST TAE FIND OUT WHERE HE WAS LIVING AND THINGS LIKE THAT, BECAUSE I WAS SCARED.

I KNOW IT'S IN THE CITY CENTRE SOMEWHERE, SO MAIST OF MA DOCTORS ARE IN THE CITY CENTRE, THE COURT, THE SOCIAL WORK.

SO THAT WAS A PROBLEM FOR ME, I STOPPED GOING TAE APPOINTMENTS.

IF I SEE HIM, I DINNAE KEN WHAT I'M GONNAE DO.

I'M GONNAE PUT MA HANDS AROUND HIS THROAT AND KILL HIM ... OR IF I'M GONNAE BREAK DOON ... OR STAND STILL AND NO' MOVE.
I HATE GOING ON THE BUS BY MYSELF.

BUT IF I'VE GOT A DRINK IN ME, I'LL EASILY LEAVE THE HOUSE.

BECAUSE I'VE GOT MORE CONFIDENCE, I'M NO' SCARED AE NOTHING, I'M A TOTALLY DIFFERENT PERSON.

SO I'M USING ALCOHOL TO GO AND DO THINGS, AND WHEN I TURN UP TAE APPOINTMENTS DRUNK...

THE SOCIAL WORKER'S TELLING ME TAE LEAVE...

...AND THE HOUSING...

...AND EVERYTHING FALLS TO PIECES.
Drinking's what's brought me back to prison again.

Headbutting the police, spitting at them...

...resisting arrest, breach of the Peace and shoplifting.

I went shoplifting and got caught, started trying to run away fae them.

Then because they grabbed me, I started fighting with them and that's why all the charges.

I was drunk at the time.

'Cos when I'm drunk, I'm a totally different person.

If someone annoys me, I'm quite violent wi' a drink in me.
I'm fully committed. I've been in 10 weeks.

I'm trying to get a lawyer to get me a deal if I plead guilty to all the charges, they'd drop it to a summary.

But the crown council said no.

They rejected it, so I'm pleading to it anyway. I'm gonna have to, 'cos if I take it to trial, I will get longer, 'cos it was all on CCTV.

I dinnae really want the judge to look at it, 'cos I was going mental.

Camera 1
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I can't really remember much because I was that drunk, but just what my lawyer's telling me, and my partner, he was standing watching it.
This sentence will probably be 3 years, it does scare me.

But then maybe, you get these little sentences, 'cos say like you get 20 months, it gets halved to 10, and then by the time you've done your remand and that, you're on the waiting lists to see so many people...

Mental health, psychiatrists, all these people...

...you're walking out these gates with your head up your arse, still with all your problems.

So maybe if I get a bigger sentence, it'll be longer they work for me.
RIGHT NOW, I'M STILL ANXIOUS QUITE A LOT.

IF THERE'S A BIG GROUP OF PEOPLE AT TEA TIME WHEN THE DOOR'S OPEN AND WE'RE GETTING FED...

...ALL THESE PEOPLE ARE COMING OOT AND I FREAK RIGHT OOT.

JUST DINNAE LIKE IT AT ALL.

BUT I'VE GOT TAE TRY AND COPE WIT IT AND DEAL WIT IT. I JUST GET THE MEAL AND JUST GO RIGHT BACK INTAE MA CELL.

CLOSE THE DOOR.

UNTIL IT QUIETENS DOWN, AND I'LL GO OUT AND I'LL GO AND GET MA MAIL AND THAT.
MA SENTENCE LAST YEAR WAS FOR DRIVING...

...AND SHOPLIFTING FOR DRINK...

...AND A POLICE ASSAULT...

...AND RESISTING ARREST. SO BECAUSE I'VE PREVIOUS FOR IT, THAT'S WHY THEY WOULD PUT IT ON INDICTMENT.

THE LAST TIME THE JUDGE WAS LIKE

"I'M NOT releASING YOU INTO THE COMMUNITY, I DON'T THINK YOU'LL SEEK THE HELP YOU REQUIRE."

"SO IT'S A CUSTODIAL SENTENCE."

THAT SENTENCE, I DIDNAE REALLY GET ANY HELP.

I DIDN'T SEE A PSYCHIATRIST, THAT WAS AFTER MA RAPIST HAD BEEN FOUND GUILTY AND HE GOT HIS TWELVE YEARS.

I DIDNAE GET ANY HELP.
There's no enough help for females.

We're all on waiting lists...

...and if you was to work here for a day and you look at some of the people that have got really bad mental health problems and are struggling to cope...

...there's two members of staff on each level and they can't even be bothered to speak to them half the time.

But if the prison had the facilities, the jail would probably help me.
Ma son’s dad still comes and sees me and sends money and that.

He sees him, and he pays for quite a lot of his after school activities and that, so yeah, if it wasnae for him, he wouldnae do half the stuff.

But he’s still away from his mum and his dad, and his mum and dad aren’t together.

When I see him, I feel like I’m mair like a big sister to him.

I cannae discipline him and I cannae say no tae him if he’s misbehaving. I dinnae like giving him intae trouble and that. Because it’s ma auntie that’s looking after him just now, it’s ma auntie that takes him to school, it’s ma auntie that makes sure there’s food on the table, so I feel like I’ve got nae right tae dae all that wi’ him, so it’s a funny relationship we have, me and Mark.

And he knows that he can misbehave, or like certain things on Facebook, he’ll ask ma auntie and she’ll be like “No, you’re not getting it, you’re too young”, and he’ll come tae me and I’ll let him download it on my phone and things. I need tae do a parenting class or something.

He asks me what kind of people is in, and he’s like “What kind of people is there, is there girls? Is there kids?”

I dinnae want tae scare him, tell her there’s bad people, ’cos then he’ll nae want tae come.
Anyway, I've had enough.

I managed tae stay oot drunk for a few months when m' partner wasnae around.

I need tae think aboot the relationship wi me and him, even though I still have feelings for him, maybe it's nae good in other ways.

I'll see if he's made any changes in prison.

Every Thursday I'm daen a listening group that's started here, it's about depression and relationships.

Ma three goals are a better relationship wi Mark.

Look at ma relationship wi ma partner... and the drink.

But I need tae make sure that he's gonna try and change, and try and help himself.
I dinnae want tae live here anymore.

I just think too much has happened here, and too many bad memories.

I know too many people...

I just hope I'll be in a new house, new city, wi' ma daughter.

...the drink scene, the drug scene...

It'll just be temporary accommodation I'll need tae go for when I get out, so I'll see what happens.

Ma auntie's spoke about moving away too. She's had enough as well.

I wouldnae go intae a hostel, my mental health wouldnae be able tae take that, I don't think.

People are still drinking in there and using drugs.

It's just gonna set me up tae fail if I go intae somewhere like that.
Every sentence I get, at the end of it, nothing’s changed.

I still walk out a drinker, go back on drugs... I still go oot and commit crime.

Now I’m older, I’m a lot more calmer. It doesn’t bother me, being in prison.

Sometimes when the doors get opened, I just get up and shut the door over, so that’s how much I’m used to it.

Because it’s that easy, the jail. It’s that easy now.

When I got the sentence after the rape had happened, and they said “we don’t think you’d seek help”...

I’ve lost a lot of family events, funerals and family have died and because they’re nae next of kin or whatever, I cannae get oot the go to the funeral.

I felt “you’re punishing me for when I’m going through something bad like this” and it got tae me ‘cos I’m like “he’s sitting in the jail and I’m daen the same.”

I dinnae get tae get oot tae the weddings or birthday parties, things like that, that’s when you look at photos when you do get oot, you’re the only one nae in it.

To be continued...
Glossary of Terms

P. 5: Remand - when you are on remand you are held in prison until your trial or sentencing.

Crack cocaine – type of cocaine that can be smoked and gives a short and intense high.

P. 8: Methadone – drug that is prescribed to addicts as a replacement for heroin (the prescription is also called a ‘script’. As it is dispensed by pharmacies, they can take it legally and for free, but many find it harder to come off methadone than off heroin.

P. 20: charges – accusations of crime(s)

P. 21: fully committed – remanded in custody for more serious crimes, which means the exact crimes the person is accused of have to be decided within 80 day and their trial (if any) has to start within 110 days.

Summary – there are two types of court proceedings in Scotland: summary for less serious cases, solemn for more serious cases. The maximum sentence that can be given in summary cases is twelve months and in solemn cases in a Sheriff Court (rather than the High Court) the maximum sentence is five years.

Crown council – experienced advocates appointed for three years who act as prosecutors in the most serious crimes.

P. 24: Pleading – pleading guilty

Indictment – on solemn proceedings (for more serious cases – see ‘summary’).

Custodial sentence - prison sentence
Marguerite Schinkel is a Lecturer at the University of Glasgow. Having come from the Netherlands, via Canada to Scotland twenty years ago, she lives in South Lanarkshire with her husband, three children, dogs, cats, chickens and neighbours and likes reading, photography, the outdoors and hearing people’s life stories.

Morag Kewell lives in Glasgow and is a creative jack-of-all-trades working out her studio in The Hidden Lane. She is the author of several illustrated travel guides and runs a small sculpture company.

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