

One Woman's Journey From Homeless To Harvard

September 9, 2010

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Steve Hart

Liz Murray's story of overcoming adversity became the subject of a movie for Lifetime Television.

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Growing up in the Bronx in the 1980s and 90s, Liz Murray dealt with the typical stresses childhood. But she also had to grapple with being the daughter of drug addicts — which ultimately meant fending for herself.

When Murray got lice, she had to deal with it alone. She and her sister went days without food, once eating toothpaste and lip balm to quell their hunger.

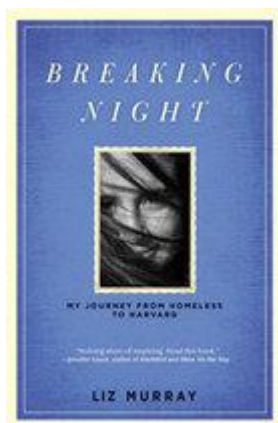
After years of neglect, Murray left home at 15. She spent her adolescence sleeping on the streets, the subway and the couches of friends.

Murray's story could have ended tragically. Instead, she won a scholarship to Harvard University and graduated in 2009.

Murray, now a motivational speaker, shares her story in her memoir, *Breaking Night: A Memoir of Forgiveness, Survival, and My Journey from Homeless to Harvard*.

Excerpt: 'Breaking Night'

by Liz Murray



Prologue

I have just one picture left of my mother. It's 4x7, black-and-white, and creased in different places. In it, she is seated slightly hunched, elbows touching knees, arms carrying the weight of her back. I know very little about her life when it was taken; my only clue is written in orange marker on the back. It reads: *Me in front of Mike's on 6th St. 1971*.

Counting backward, I know that she was seventeen when it was taken, a year older than I am now. I know that Sixth Street is in Greenwich Village, though I have no idea who Mike is.

The picture tells me that she was a stern-looking teenager. Her lips are pressed together in thought, offering a grimace for the camera. Framing her face, her hair dangles in beautiful wisps of black, smokelike curls. And her eyes, my favorite part, shine like two dark marbles, their movements frozen in time forever.

I've studied each feature, committing them to memory for my trips to the mirror, where I let my own wavy hair tumble down. I stand and trace similarities with the tip of my finger through the curve of each line in my face, starting with our eyes. Each pair offers the same small, rounded shape, only instead of my mother's brown, I have Grandma's rich yellow-green. Next, I measure the outline of our lips; thin, curvy, and identical in every way. Although we share some features, I know I'm not as pretty as she was at my age.

In my years with nowhere to live, behind the locked bathroom doors in different friends' apartments, I've secretly played this game in the mirror throughout all hours of the night. Tucked in by their parents, my friends sleep while images of my mother's graceful movements dance throughout my mind. I spend these hours in front of their bathroom mirrors, my bare feet cooled by gridded tiles, palms pressed on the sink's edge to support my weight.

I stand there fantasizing until the first blue hints of dawn strain through the frosted bathroom glass and birds announce themselves, chirping their morning songs. If I'm at Jamie's house, this is just the time to slip onto the couch before her mother's alarm beeps her awake, sending her to the bathroom. If I'm at Bobby's, the grinding noise of the garbage truck tells me it's time to sneak back to the foldout cot.

I travel quietly across their waking apartments to my resting spot. I never get too comfortable with my accommodations, because I'm not sure if I will sleep in the same place tomorrow.

Lying on my back, I run my fingertips over my face in the dark, and I envision my mother. The symmetry of our lives has become clearer to me lately. She was homeless at sixteen too. Ma also dropped out of school. Like me, Ma made daily decisions between hallway or park, subway or rooftop. The Bronx, for Ma, also meant wandering through dangerous streets, through neighborhoods with lampposts littered with flyers of police sketches and sirens blaring at all hours of the night.

I wonder if, like me, Ma spent most days afraid of what would happen to her. I'm afraid all the time lately. I wonder where I will sleep tomorrow — at another friend's apartment, on the train, or in some stairwell?

Tracing my fingertips over my forehead, down to my lips, I long to feel my mother's warm body embracing me again. The thought sends tears streaming from my eyes. I turn to my side, wiping my tears away, covering myself with my borrowed blanket.

I push the feeling of needing her far out of my mind. I push it beyond these walls lined with Bobby's family portraits; past the drunken Latino men just outside, slamming down winning hands of dominoes, seated atop milk crates on Fordham Road; away from the orange blinking lights of the bodegas and over the rooftops of this Bronx neighborhood. I force my thoughts to fade until the details of her face blur. I need to push them away if I am ever to get some sleep. I need sleep; it will be only a few more hours before I'm outside on the street again, with nowhere to go.

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