

Breaking Night: A Memoir Of Forgiveness, Survival And My Journey From Homeless To Harvard

Posted on October 17, 2018

Liz Murray's *Breaking Night: A Memoir of Forgiveness, Survival, and My Journey from Homeless to Harvard* tells the story of childhood neglect, parental addiction, homelessness, grief, education, and the difficult persistence of family love. The original essay focuses on one apparently small object: the black-and-white photograph of Murray's mother as a teenager. That photograph is an effective symbol because it brings together memory, resemblance, loss, and choice. Liz carries an image of "Ma" from before motherhood, illness, and severe addiction fully shaped the family's life. The photograph does not erase the harm Liz experienced, nor does it reduce her mother to that harm. It allows the memoir to hold two realities at once: Liz loved her mother deeply, and her mother's addiction and neglect repeatedly endangered her. The photograph becomes a portable form of connection and a warning about the future Liz does not want to repeat. (Murray)

The Memoir's Relational Center

Breaking Night is often described as an individual story of resilience, but Liz's journey is structured by relationships. Her parents, sister Lisa, friends, teachers, mentors, and classmates affect which choices become possible. Even when she is physically alone, family memory remains present. The memoir does not depict success as pure self-creation. Liz survives through personal determination, but also through moments of shelter, instruction, friendship, institutional access, and recognition from others. The photograph belongs to this relational structure because it connects her private future to the family past.

The Photograph as a Material Object

A photograph is physically small but emotionally dense. It can be folded, carried, hidden, damaged, or revisited. The image of Ma is black and white and creased by age, making it visibly vulnerable. Unlike a moving conversation, the photograph cannot argue, disappear, sell household property, or become intoxicated. It freezes one moment. Liz can keep this version of her mother close even when actual contact is painful or impossible. The object gives stability to a relationship marked by instability.

Ma Before Motherhood

The photograph shows Liz's mother as a teenager, before Liz knew her. This matters because children often experience parents only in the role of parent. The image suggests that Ma once had a youth, fears, desires, and possibilities of her own. Seeing her as a young person complicates judgment. It does not excuse neglect, but it expands Liz's understanding beyond the immediate household. Ma was not born as the addicted mother Liz later encountered. She had a history and vulnerabilities that preceded the family crisis.

Recognition and Resemblance

Liz sees aspects of herself in the image and in her mother's earlier street experience. The resemblance creates both intimacy and fear. Shared features can make the photograph feel like evidence of belonging, but the parallel between their homelessness also raises the question of repetition. Liz confronts the possibility that she may follow the same path. The photograph therefore functions as a mirror. It shows inheritance without declaring destiny.

Addiction and Harm

Ma's drug dependence shapes the household through scarcity, unpredictability, illness, and broken trust. The memoir describes situations in which parental needs for drugs take priority over food, clothing, supervision, and safety. A compassionate interpretation of addiction should not minimize these consequences. Addiction can be a health disorder and still cause serious harm to children. Liz's love does not require her to deny neglect, and acknowledging neglect does not require her to stop loving her mother.

Ambivalent Love

The photograph captures ambivalence: attachment containing affection, anger, grief, loyalty, disappointment, and identification. Liz does not present Ma as a simple villain. She remembers humor, tenderness, illness, desperation, and failure. This complexity makes the memoir credible. Family love often continues even when a relationship is unsafe. Literature can represent this contradiction more honestly than a lesson insisting that forgiveness means forgetting or that protection requires emotional indifference.

The Difference Between Forgiveness and Excuse

Forgiveness in the memoir does not transform harmful actions into acceptable ones. It changes how Liz carries the past. Excuse would deny responsibility; forgiveness may acknowledge responsibility while refusing to let anger control the future. Liz's title places forgiveness beside survival, suggesting that the two are related but not identical. She survives through boundaries, education, and help from others. Forgiveness becomes meaningful because it does not require returning to every dangerous condition.

Memory After Death

Ma's death intensifies the photograph's meaning. After death, reconciliation cannot occur through an ordinary future conversation. The image becomes one of the remaining ways Liz can encounter her mother. Grief often attaches to objects because they provide sensory evidence that the relationship existed. The photograph does not give complete access to Ma, but it helps Liz preserve a connection that death has made irreversible.

The Photograph and Narrative Control

As a memoirist, Liz selects scenes and objects to shape meaning. Including the photograph allows her to represent Ma without pretending to reproduce every part of her life. The image is framed twice: first by the camera and later by Liz's narration. This reminds readers that memoir is crafted memory, not a transcript. The selection is emotionally truthful because it reveals how Liz understands the relationship when looking back.

Homelessness

Liz's homelessness is not merely a symbolic test of character. It involves unstable shelter, interrupted schooling, hunger, exhaustion, exposure, and dependence on uncertain relationships. Describing her eventual achievement only as proof that anyone can overcome homelessness would be misleading. Many people face structural barriers and do not receive the same opportunities. The memoir's power lies in the specificity of her journey, not in a formula that blames people who remain poor or unhoused.

Breaking Night

The phrase "breaking night" refers to staying awake until morning. It reflects nights spent moving, talking, using substances around others, searching for safety, or surviving without a stable home.

Dawn can represent relief, but it also arrives after exhaustion. The title captures the memoir's movement through darkness without romanticizing it completely. Liz's education and changing relationships create a different relationship to time: she begins to plan beyond the next night. (Kellaway)

Education as an Alternative Path

Education becomes a route toward structure, recognition, and expanded possibility. It does not erase grief or automatically cure trauma. It gives Liz goals, adult allies, intellectual engagement, and access to institutions outside the family crisis. School becomes meaningful when teachers and mentors recognize her capacity and help translate effort into opportunity. Her achievement is personal, but it is also relational and institutional.

The Role of Mentors

The memoir complicates the myth of solitary success by showing the importance of people who offer guidance, recommendation, housing, encouragement, or practical information. A mentor cannot perform Liz's work for her, but can make a path visible. This distinction matters in discussions of resilience. Praising exceptional survival without building supportive institutions turns admiration into an excuse for neglect. Liz's story suggests that timely belief from another person can change what effort is able to accomplish.

Lisa and Sisterhood

Liz's relationship with her sister adds another dimension to family connection. Siblings can share a household while experiencing it differently. They may protect one another, conflict, separate, or remember events in distinct ways. The photograph of Ma is not only an individual mother-daughter symbol; it belongs within a family in which each person must interpret the same parental addiction. Liz's narrative is one perspective, not a complete account of every relative's inner life.

Father and Family Complexity

Liz's father is also intelligent, affectionate at times, and severely impaired by addiction and instability. The memoir resists a clean division between one harmful parent and one innocent parent. The entire family system is affected by drug use, illness, poverty, and limited caregiving. Liz's attachment to her parents reveals the emotional reality that children often love adults who cannot provide consistent care. Understanding that love should strengthen, not weaken, the case for protecting children.

Objects and Scarcity

In a household marked by scarcity, ordinary objects acquire unusual importance. Clothing, food, money, books, and photographs can be lost, traded, or taken. Ma's photograph is valuable not because it is expensive but because it carries identity. Liz's decision to keep it demonstrates the difference between possession as material wealth and possession as memory. She has little physical security, yet she chooses what part of the past to carry.

The Coat Episode

The original essay recalls an incident in which Ma sells or sacrifices clothing to obtain drugs. Such scenes expose the direct cost of addiction to children. They also shape Liz's future choices. The photograph does not lead her to imitate every aspect of Ma's life. It helps her remember the consequences of that path. The object contains love and caution at the same time.

Resemblance Without Repetition

One of the memoir's central achievements is separating resemblance from inevitability. Liz can share appearance, emotional intensity, family history, or street experience with Ma without repeating the same outcome. This is not a rejection of her mother as a person. It is a rejection of patterns that caused harm. The photograph supports a mature identity in which inheritance is acknowledged but interpreted actively.

Agency and Circumstance

Liz makes important decisions, including returning to school and seeking a different future. Those decisions occur inside circumstances she did not choose. The memoir therefore does not support a simple argument that success or failure results entirely from personal choice. Agency matters, but resources, relationships, timing, health, and institutional response shape its effectiveness. Ma's life and Liz's life diverge through choices and conditions, not one factor alone.

Trauma and Adaptation

Behaviors developed during instability can remain useful in one environment and costly in another. Constant vigilance may protect a young person on the street but make rest and trust difficult later. Independence may support survival but prevent asking for help. The memoir shows Liz adapting repeatedly. Her educational success should not be mistaken for proof that every effect of trauma disappeared. Achievement and continuing vulnerability can coexist.

The Ethics of Writing Family

Memoirists write about real people who may be unable to answer. This creates an ethical tension between telling the truth of one's experience and respecting the complexity of others. Liz's portrayal of Ma includes damaging facts but also tenderness and context. The photograph is ethically significant because it grants Ma a life beyond the role of failed mother. It does not conceal harm; it resists reducing a person to harm.

Photographs and Evidence

A photograph appears factual, but it records only a fraction of a second. It cannot reveal what happened before or after, how the subject felt, or what future events occurred. Liz interprets the image through later knowledge. Readers should understand it as evidence of existence and resemblance, not a complete biography. Its incompleteness is part of its emotional power: the young Ma contains possibilities the adult Liz can imagine but never fully recover.

Hope Without Sentimentality

The memoir is hopeful because Liz creates a future beyond immediate conditions. It is not hopeful because suffering was secretly beneficial. Homelessness, addiction, illness, and neglect caused real damage. The lesson is not that adversity automatically creates strength. It is that people may develop strength despite adversity, particularly when opportunities and supportive relationships become available. The photograph preserves the cost of the journey even as Liz moves forward.

Harvard as Symbol and Reality

Harvard functions as a public symbol of transformation, but the memoir's meaning should not be reduced to entry into an elite university. The deeper change involves believing in a future, building sustained habits, accepting help, and forming an identity beyond crisis. An admissions outcome is visible and dramatic; the daily work that made it possible is less visible. The photograph remains relevant because academic success does not dissolve family memory.

What Liz Keeps and What She Leaves

Liz cannot carry every object or repeat every family pattern. She chooses the photograph while choosing education instead of drug use. This contrast represents selective inheritance. She keeps love, memory, intelligence, and connection while trying to leave behind self-destruction and instability. The process is not complete or painless. It is a continuing negotiation with the past.

The Photograph as a Symbol of Forgiveness

Keeping Ma's photograph indicates that Liz does not want to erase her mother. Forgiveness here is an act of remembrance with boundaries. She recognizes Ma's humanity, youth, illness, and affection without denying the neglect she endured. The object lets her hold a relationship that cannot be repaired conventionally. It becomes a form of grief work.

The Photograph as a Symbol of Ambition

The same image can motivate Liz to choose differently. When she recognizes herself in Ma, she also recognizes the danger of surrendering to the same pattern. Her ambition is not a rejection of family love but an effort to create another outcome from related beginnings. The photograph gives direction because it represents both belonging and divergence.

Conclusion

The photograph of Ma is one of the most meaningful symbols in *Breaking Night*. Its creases and black-and-white image preserve a mother before Liz knew her, allowing Liz to see resemblance, vulnerability, and unrealized possibility. The photograph holds affection and anger, grief and warning, forgiveness and boundary. It shows that family relationships can remain emotionally powerful even when they fail to provide safety. Liz's movement from homelessness toward education is shaped by personal effort and by people and institutions that help her act on that effort. By carrying Ma's picture, she does not choose Ma's path. She carries the relationship while building a life that interprets the past differently.

Works Cited

Murray, Liz. *Breaking Night: A Memoir of Forgiveness, Survival, and My Journey from Homeless to Harvard*. Hyperion, 2010.

Kellaway, Kate. "Breaking Night by Liz Murray—Review." *The Guardian*, 30 Jan. 2011.