

# Breaking Night



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LIZ MURRAY

Liz Murray grew up in the Bronx with her two parents, both of whom were drug addicts. She was homeless for most of her teen years, and her mother died of AIDS in 1996. However, Murray graduated from the Humanities Preparatory Academy in Manhattan in just two years, after which she won a *New York Times* scholarship and earned acceptance to Harvard University. At present, Murray is a motivational speaker; *Breaking Night* is her detailed autobiography.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Two major historical events loom over *Breaking Night*: the War on Drugs and the AIDS crisis. Throughout the '60s and '70s, the use of marijuana, cocaine, heroin, and other drugs increased enormously in American society. These substances were particularly easy to procure in large cities such as New York, and neighborhoods like Greenwich Village quickly became famous for their drug culture and nonconformist spirit. The War on Drugs was officially “declared” by President Richard Nixon in a 1971 speech, but it is more often associated with the 1980s and the presidential administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush. During this decade, punishment for the use or sale of drugs skyrocketed, even as the use of these drugs continued to grow. Another important historical event of the 1980s, at the time when Liz was growing up, was the AIDS crisis. Beginning in the early 1980s, a frightening number of Americans died from a little-understood immunodeficiency disease, AIDS. Among the many demographics at risk of contracting the disease were gay people, people who had unprotected sex, and intravenous drug users. Liz’s parents—and, by extension, Liz herself—are victims, first, of the War on Drugs (Liz’s father is jailed for selling painkillers) and later of the AIDS crisis (they’re both diagnosed with the disease).

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Dave Pelzer’s memoir [A Child Called It](#) (1995) bears a certain resemblance to *Breaking Night*. Both books deal with child abuse and poverty, and both have a fundamentally optimistic message: with hard work and determination, suffering people can lift themselves up. Jeanette Walls’s memoir [The Glass Castle](#) (2005) similarly describes a young girl’s experience with poverty and reckless and negligent parents, and her efforts to escape that life. Another memoir to which *Breaking Night* bears some resemblance is George Orwell’s [Down and Out in Paris](#)

[and London](#) (1933), in which Orwell, not unlike Liz Murray, describes his experiences living in destitution in big cities, supporting himself with various low-paying jobs, and balancing his enormous intelligence with his material needs (although, as Orwell acknowledges, his poverty was partly a self-imposed journalistic experiment). Readers might also check out James Mills’s 1966 novel *The Panic in Needle Park*, the basis for a brilliant film directed by Jerry Schatzberg and starring Al Pacino. The book details the experiences of two young drug addicts living in poverty in New York City in the 1970s, much like Liz Murray’s parents (who met in Greenwich Village around the same time). Notable literary works primarily or partly set in the Bronx, where Liz grows up, include Colum McCann’s [Let the Great World Spin](#) (2009) and Tom Wolfe’s *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987), which has memorable scenes set at the Bronx Zoo and Fordham University.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Breaking Night: A Memoir of Forgiveness, Survival, and My Journey From Homeless to Harvard*
- **When Written:** 2009-2010
- **Where Written:** Massachusetts and New York
- **When Published:** September 2010
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Nonfiction / autobiography
- **Setting:** New York City (mostly Manhattan and the Bronx) and Massachusetts (Boston and Cambridge)
- **Climax:** Liz’s acceptance to Harvard
- **Antagonist:** Poverty, drug addiction, and sexual abuse could all be considered antagonists in this book
- **Point of View:** First person (Liz)

### EXTRA CREDIT

**TV movie.** In 2003, the Lifetime channel released a TV movie based on Murray’s life, starring Thora Birch (who also played the teenaged daughter in *American Beauty*).

**More degrees.** Since earning an undergraduate degree from Harvard, Murray has continued to earn honorary degrees. In 2013, for example, she was awarded an honorary degree from Merrimack College, and later delivered that year’s commencement address.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Elizabeth Murray grows up in the Bronx in New York City in the

1980s. Her older sister's name is Lisa Murray, and her parents are Peter Finnerty and Jean Murray (though she refers to them as "Daddy" and "Ma" throughout her memoir). Daddy was a charming, intelligent student when he met Ma in the 1970s. Both came from emotionally abusive families. The two of them fell in love, but began using drugs (including heroin and cocaine) more and more heavily, until, by the end of the decade, they were full-fledged addicts. Their fortunes took a turn for the worse when Daddy was imprisoned for impersonating a doctor and selling painkillers, leaving Ma pregnant with Liz and already taking care of Lisa.

When Daddy gets out of prison, Liz is three years old. As Liz grows up, she witnesses her parents using cocaine and other drugs. She becomes accustomed to standing in line with her mother, who collects welfare checks because she's legally blind. These checks provide the family with a stable source of income, but Ma and Daddy spend most of the money on drugs, leaving only a little for food and electricity.

Liz attends school in the Bronx, but finds it almost impossible to focus, since she barely sleeps, barely eats, and can't concentrate on her homework with her parents arguing and getting high at all times of the day. She skips school and learns to destroy letters from the truancy officer before her parents read them. However, she also teaches herself to read by thumbing through her father's old books, and always manages to pass her end-of-year exams and graduate to the next grade level.

While she's still a young girl, Liz visits a friend of Ma, Ron. Ron provides Ma and the family with money, food, and drugs. He also molests Liz on multiple occasions, and at one point orders Liz and Lisa to show him their genitalia. When Liz tells Ma the truth about Ron, Ma is so upset that she has a nervous breakdown. Afterward Liz is examined by doctors, who find that Ron has abused her many times. Liz senses that she'll never feel normal again. She never tells Ma that she kept quiet about her abuse for months because she wanted to ensure that Ron would keep taking care of her family.

Over the next few years, Ma has multiple mental breakdowns, partly because she uses drugs more than ever, and partly because her family has a history of schizophrenia and other mental disorders. In Ma's absence, Daddy becomes a more active parent, and becomes adept at providing enough food for his children. However, it is during this period that Liz finds out that Daddy had another child, Meredith, in a previous relationship, and abandoned the child when she, Meredith, was only two years old. Liz also learns that her mother has been diagnosed with AIDS. Though Liz doesn't fully understand what this means, she senses that her mother isn't going to live much longer.

Liz spends more and more time with her friends. She also finds ways of earning money for herself. However, when Ma returns from the hospital, she takes Liz's money and spends it on drugs.

Ma also begins spending more time with an alcoholic security guard named Brick. Eventually, she leaves Daddy and takes Lisa to live with Brick; Liz continues living with Daddy. Around this time, however, Child Protective Services takes Liz to live in a state home, due to her "behavioral problems" and truancy. There, Liz is miserable, but she meets with a psychologist and is released to live with Lisa, Ma, and Brick.

Living with Brick is difficult for Liz, but she begins to enjoy herself after she starts middle school. There, she makes a close friend, Samantha, or Sam. She and Sam begin cutting class and exploring New York City. Liz is, as usual, careful to ensure that her parents don't learn the truth about her truancy. Meanwhile, Ma's health deteriorates further. Around the time that she begins high school, Liz meets a charming boy named Carlos Marcano. She, Carlos, and Sam begin spending more time together, and they hatch a plan to move far away from New York one day. Liz begins dating Carlos, and she also begins spending all her time away from Brick's home.

Liz and Sam begin living in friends' houses and spending virtually all of their time with Carlos. Carlos brags that he's about to inherit lots of money from his family. He lavishes money on his friends, and buys all of Liz and Sam's food. However, Liz notices that Carlos also flirts with lots of women. She begins to realize that he's a drug dealer and also a cocaine user. She questions whether Carlos really loves her, as he's claimed, but she's frightened to leave him. Then, suddenly, Liz gets a call from Lisa and learns that Ma has died of AIDS.

Liz visits with her family, who she hasn't seen in months. After the funeral, she resumes staying with Carlos. But she begins to worry that Carlos could hurt her, or will run out on her one day soon. She decides to crash at her friends' houses, and begins to formulate a plan to go back to high school and graduate. Although she's already seventeen years old, she enrolls at the Humanities Preparatory Academy, an experimental school designed for "troubled students" and dropouts. The HPA is run by a teacher named Perry Weiner, and Liz immediately likes him. She resolves to work hard and graduate from HPA.

Liz does well enough to graduate from high school in half the usual time. During this time, she depends on her friends for housing, and also relies on youth charities such as The Door, which provides her with food and clothes. She finds work as a political canvasser, and begins to develop a passion for history, theater, and English. By the time she graduates, she's earned near-perfect grades. She's also found strong role models in her teachers, especially Perry Weiner. Liz also begins to spend more time with her father and sister. Daddy tells her that he's HIV positive; rather than run away from her family, as she did when her mother was diagnosed, Liz makes an effort to treat Daddy with compassion.

Liz's guidance counselor advises her to apply to excellent colleges. Liz does so, but knows that she needs to prioritize finding scholarship money. With her counselor's

encouragement, she applies for the highly prestigious *New York Times* scholarship, which could provide her with enough money to pay Harvard's tuition. To her amazement, she wins the *Times* scholarship, beating out many thousands of highly talented applicants. She's also accepted to Harvard.

In the Epilogue, Liz explains that she graduates from Harvard in 2009. During her time in college, she continues to spend time with her family. During one visit to Harvard, Daddy writes Liz a letter that concludes, "Thank you for making us a family again." At present, Sam is happily married, Lisa is a college graduate and a schoolteacher for the autistic, and Liz travels around the world to tell her incredible true story.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Elizabeth "Liz" Murray** – Liz Murray is the author, protagonist, and narrator of *Breaking Night*, the story of her life leading up to her acceptance to Harvard University. Liz grows up in the Bronx in the 1980s and 1990s, at a time when the Bronx is one of the most dangerous parts of New York City, when the AIDS crisis is claiming lives every day, and when cocaine, heroin, and other drugs are tearing families apart. All three of these trends play a pivotal role in Liz's life. Her parents, Peter Finnerty and Jean Murray, are drug addicts who often choose to spend their money on drugs rather than food or other necessities for their children. As a result of her parents' neglectful behavior, Liz grows up knowing how to take care of herself: she's possessed of incredible willpower, and forces herself never to give up. However, Liz is also emotionally scarred by her relationship with her parents and her sister, Lisa Murray. At times, she hates her family for treating her so neglectfully. But she also feels extraordinarily guilty for abandoning her family and making her own way in life—especially after her mother dies of AIDS. In the end, Liz succeeds in reconciling the two "halves" of her early life: her struggle to succeed and her struggle to make peace with her family. She works hard, graduates high school, and wins acceptance to Harvard University. With these impressive achievements under her belt, she gains enough independence and, crucially, perspective to forgive her family members while still holding them accountable for their actions.

**Ma / Jean Murray** – Jean Murray—who Liz Murray always refers to as "Ma"—is a complex, tragic character. A attractive and intelligent young woman, she comes from a family with a long history of mental illness, and at several points in the book Liz implies that Ma has schizophrenia. Ma also becomes more dependent on drugs after she meets Liz's father, Peter Finnerty. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, she and Peter become full-fledged addicts and continue to using cocaine and other drugs as they raise their two young girls. Ma is, in many ways, a bad parent: she steals money from her own children to

pay for drugs, and she often abandons her children for days at a time. Yet in other ways, Liz depicts Ma as a sympathetic character, albeit one who Liz often resents. Ma often expresses sincere love for her children, but her love is undercut by, first, her dependence on drugs and, second, nervous breakdowns brought on by mental illness. In many ways, Jean Murray is a child—so that, ironically, it's often Liz who has to take care of her mother, not the other way around. After Jean's death from AIDS in the 1990s, Liz begins to come to terms with her mother: she recognizes that her mother cared about her and wanted her to be happy, but she continues to fault her for hurtful and neglectful behavior.

**Daddy / Peter Finnerty** – Peter Finnerty—who Liz refers to throughout as "Daddy"—is a clever and witty but troubled man. An excellent student, who at one point pursues a graduate degree in social work, Peter decides that there's more money in selling drugs to his wealthy college friends than there is in pursuing an advanced degree. By the late 1970s, he's become a successful drug dealer—a decision that arguably ruins his life. He becomes increasingly dependent on drugs, to the point where he doesn't seem to care about anything else, and shortly before Liz's birth, he's arrested for selling drugs and sentenced to three years in prison. For most of Liz's memoir, Daddy is a mysterious and sometimes sinister presence in Liz's life. Liz knows that he has a daughter from a previous relationship, Meredith, who he abandoned when she was only two years old—and this makes Liz afraid of her father and hesitant to trust him. For many years, Liz barely sees or talks to her father—they have even less of a relationship than do Liz and her mother. Following Liz's mother's death, however, as well as Liz's acceptance to Harvard University, Liz begins to reconcile with her father. She doesn't forget his neglectful behavior or his emotional callousness, but she also makes an effort to respect him and support him as he struggles with the symptoms of AIDS. Toward the end of the book, Daddy writes Liz a note saying, "Thank you for making us a family again."

**Lisa Murray** – Lisa Murray is Liz Murray's older sister. Though Lisa is a peripheral character in the later chapters of the memoir, she's an important influence in Liz's early life. As the older sister, Lisa sometimes teases Liz or pull childish pranks on her. However, Liz benefits from Lisa's example in many ways, and—like many younger siblings—learns not to make her older sister's mistakes. Lisa resembles Liz in many ways, but they have some important differences, too. Lisa tends to be more outspoken and more argumentative than her sister; as Liz puts it, she gets angry when she doesn't receive what's due to her. Liz, by contrast, is better at swallowing her pride and focusing on the long term. (Liz suggests that Lisa is more outspoken than her sister because she, Lisa, briefly lived in a wealthier foster home, and quickly became accustomed to getting as much food, attention, and love as she wanted.) Lisa also plays a pivotal role in convincing Liz to visit their mother when she's at the end of

her life.

**Carlos Marcano** – Carlos Marcano is a charismatic but somewhat sinister character, with whom Liz quickly becomes enamored. A handsome, confident young man, he dazzles Liz, as well as Sam, with his humor and intelligence. Carlos claims to be waiting on an inheritance from his family; he even brags that when his inheritance comes in, he'll buy an apartment and live with Sam and Liz. However, Liz begins to realize that Carlos is a drug dealer, as well as a user—and, as a result of his addiction, he's an unreliable, volatile person. Liz also begins to realize that Carlos, despite claiming that he only loves Liz, is in relationships with other women. In many ways, Carlos is a younger version of Liz's own father: smart, witty, handsome. Like her mother before her, Liz is tempted to enter into a life of drug addiction, tethered to a likeable but basically untrustworthy figure. Unlike her mother, however, Liz makes the difficult choice to leave Carlos and take more responsibility for her own future.

**Samantha / Sam** – Sam is probably Liz's best friend, and certainly one of the most important people in her life. The two girls meet in middle school, where Sam is a popular student and Liz is new and shy. Sam takes Liz under her wing, and from then on, they're inseparable. Like Liz, Sam is hardworking, energetic, and ambitious, and the two friends often discuss moving out of New York and traveling across the country together. But Sam is also surprisingly tender and vulnerable beneath her confident façade, a quality that seems to endear her to Liz. For many months, Sam and Liz live together with Carlos Marcano; however, they become separated as Carlos's behavior becomes increasingly irrational. Liz sees relatively little of Sam after she enrolls in the Humanities Preparatory Academy. In part, this is because Liz wants to focus on her studies, and Sam, whether or not she's a good friend, has often distracted Liz from school. At the end of her memoir, however, Liz reports that Sam is happily married and that the two of them are still good friends.

**Perry Weiner** – An English teacher and the head of the Humanities Preparatory Academy in New York, Perry Weiner is a dedicated educator who believes that all students, without exception, can benefit from a good education in literature, art, and history. During Liz's time at the Humanities Preparatory Academy, Weiner is an important influence in her life. His unique combination of rigor, humor, and gentle encouragement motivate Liz to work harder and, eventually, win acceptance to Harvard University.

**Grandma** – Jean Murray's mother and Liz's Grandma, she is a notable influence in Liz's early life. Though Liz only meets her grandmother a handful of times, she's struck by Grandma's gentleness and attentiveness: unlike Liz's own parents, Grandma listens patiently to everything Liz says, and answers every one of her questions. By this point in her life, Grandma is suffering from serious mental health problems, and exhibits symptoms of schizophrenia as well as senility. From Liz's perspective, however, she's just a gentle old woman.

**Ron** – Although Ron only appears in one chapter of the memoir, his presence looms over the rest of the book. Ron is a friend of Jean Murray's: he gives her free drugs, and often invites her and her children to stay with him in Queens. Despite his superficially friendly behavior, however, Ron is a sexual predator, and at one point he orders Liz and Lisa to remove their clothes and show him their genitalia. Liz also implies that there have been many other occasions during which Ron sexually abuses her.

**Rick Hernandez** – One of Liz's oldest friends, Rick Hernandez is a friendly boy who, along with his brother Danny Hernandez, spends lots of time with Liz in the late '80s and early '90s (i.e., when Liz is an adolescent). The three friends explore New York City, have lots of fun, and, at times, get into trouble.

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**Brick** – New Yorker and security guard with whom Jean Murray, Liz, and Lisa go to live in the mid-1990s. Liz doesn't provide a tremendous amount of detail about Brick's life or personality, but she suggests that he's an irrationally angry, occasionally violent man. Though he's unusually responsible (he's one of the few adults in the entire book with a reliable job), he resembles Liz's parents in that he seems dependent on drugs to get through life, even if the drug in question is alcohol instead of cocaine or heroin.

**Bobby** – Bobby is another good friend of Liz's; as with Sam, he meets Liz when Liz begins going to a new school. While Liz doesn't provide much detail about Bobby's personality, she writes that she often crashed at Bobby's house during her teen years. In general, Bobby comes across as a cheerful, incredibly generous young man. At the end of the memoir, Liz reports that he's studying to be a nurse—a career path which makes sense, considering his kind, giving nature.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Meredith** – Meredith is Peter Finnerty's child from another relationship. Peter abandons Meredith when Meredith is only two years old. Though Liz only sees Meredith once, the encounter leaves her frightened that her father will abandon her too, just as he's done with Meredith.

**Leonard Mohn** – An addict who befriends Jean Murray and encourages her to abandon her husband. Liz describes Leonard Mohn as a singularly unpleasant person—especially because he goes through the motions of being polite to Daddy, even though he says nasty things about Daddy in private.

**Tara** – A friend of Jean Murray's who shares Jean's fondness for cocaine, Tara is instrumental in introducing Jean to Ron.

**Matt** – An Encyclopedia Britannica salesman.

**Kevin** – A friend of Rick Hernandez and Danny Hernandez, who helps the young Liz find work.

**Doctor Eva Morales** – A condescending doctor with whom Liz meets during her time at the Saint Anne’s Residence for troubled children.

**Auntie** – A gruff, severe woman who runs the Saint Anne’s Residence for troubled children, where Liz briefly stays.

**Talesha** – A teenage girl who befriends Liz during their time together at Saint Anne’s.

**Oscar** – Sam’s boyfriend during middle school and high school.

**Jamie** – A high school friend of Liz’s.

**Paige** – A friend of one of Liz’s friends, who encourages Liz to go back to high school or get her GED.

**Ken** – A handsome, confident young man with whom Liz works the summer before she begins her high school education at the Humanities Preparatory Academy.

**Susan** – One of Liz’s teachers at the Humanities Preparatory Academy.

**Doug** – One of Liz’s teachers at the Humanities Preparatory Academy.

**Caleb** – One of Liz’s teachers at the Humanities Preparatory Academy.

**Elijah** – One of Liz’s teachers at the Humanities Preparatory Academy.

**Eva** – A close friend of Liz’s at the Humanities Preparatory Academy, Eva is a thoughtful, creative student. She and Liz work on school projects together, and she (along with other top HPA students) accompanies Liz on the trip to Boston that eventually inspires Liz to apply to Harvard.

**James** – Liz’s boyfriend during her time at the Humanities Preparatory Academy.

**Jessie Klein** – Liz’s high school guidance counselor, who encourages her to apply to great schools but also to prioritize scholarship applications.

**Liz Hernandez** – The kind, loving mother of Rick Hernandez and Danny Hernandez.

**Ms. Cole** – Truancy officer who threatens to send the twelve-year-old Liz to a state-run home.

**Dalai Lama** – The spiritual leader of the Tibetan people, whose cryptic reply to Liz Murray’s question is discussed in the memoir’s epilogue.

occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



## WILLPOWER AND INDEPENDENCE

Elizabeth “Liz” Murray, the writer, narrator, and protagonist of the memoir *Breaking Night*, has a hard life. She grows up in a poverty-stricken

household in the Bronx in the 1980s, at a time when New York City is experiencing historic levels of violent crime. Her parents are drug addicts, and as a result they ignore her for long stretches of time and sometimes don’t even remember to buy her food. And yet, by the time she completes her high school education, Liz has made some important changes in her life. She decides that she has the ability to carve out a life for herself. Furthermore, she refuses to be constrained by her poverty, her parents, or, in general, her circumstances. Instead, she decides that her life will be determined by her own “willingness to put one foot in front of the other.” Seen in this way, *Breaking Night* is about the battle between Liz’s circumstances and her willpower—and in the end, her willpower seems to prove stronger and leads her to win acceptance to Harvard University.

In the first half of Liz’s memoir, she depicts herself as a product, and, in some ways, a victim, of her circumstances. Her parents, Jean Murray and Peter Finnerty, are shockingly neglectful. Because neither one of them has a reliable job, they depend on government welfare checks. Yet they’ll often spend their relief money on more drugs instead of food, clothing, or other necessities for their kids. In a word, they take care of themselves instead of taking care of their family. Arguably even more disturbingly, Liz has to live with the fear that her parents might abandon her. When she’s still young, she learns from her old sister, Lisa Murray, that her father had another daughter in an earlier relationship, and abandoned her when she was just two years old. As a result, Liz grows up thinking of the world as a cruel, unpredictable place. The streets are dangerous, food is scarce, and her own parents often force her to fend for herself.

Liz turns to her friends for emotional and material support. But her friends can be volatile and untrustworthy, too. Her friend and sometimes boyfriend, Carlos Marcano, gives her both emotional support (by treating her kindly and saying that he loves her) and material support (buying her food, drinks, and shelter). But even Carlos becomes neglectful, abandoning Liz for days or weeks at a time. Liz’s experiences with Carlos bring the memoir to a turning point. Though she’s always been an unusually independent person, Liz decides that from now on, she will refuse to be dependent on others at all. Instead, she aspires to take control over her own life: finding her own work, making her own money, and providing her own emotional support.

Throughout *Breaking Night*, but particularly as Liz enters her



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes

late teen years, she works hard with the goal of taking care of herself. Desperate for food, she finds various ways of earning money: “panhandling” in Greenwich Village, pumping gas, and even bagging groceries. While most people of Liz’s age rely on their parents to take care of them, Liz quite often takes care of her parents. She gives them money she’s earned and, when they become emotionally unstable, she treats them kindly. Because she never really has the “luxury” of feeling insecure, Liz trains herself to act mature beyond her years. She develops the confidence she needs to survive on her own. This culminates in her decision to get her high school degree at the Humanities Preparatory Academy (HPA) in New York.

During her time at HPA, Liz works exceptionally hard, graduating in two years instead of the usual four despite having to make money, sleep at friends’ houses, and carry her textbooks with her wherever she goes. Not surprisingly, Liz dislikes being dependent on other people during her time at HPA. She’s learned to rely on herself and distrust other people’s support since, time and time again, other people have disappointed her. Liz rises to the challenge of graduating from HPA in two years, the memoir suggests, because she’s possessed of an innate willpower. Both because of the circumstances of her early life and because of her own innate abilities, she knows how to push herself to succeed. Put another way, Liz graduates from HPA and wins acceptance to Harvard partly because of a strong negative motivation—her desire to avoid becoming dependent on others—and partly because of a strong positive motivation—her willpower and ambition.

Throughout *Breaking Night*, Liz rightly celebrates her successes; she’s overcome the most adverse of circumstances. At the same time, it’s important to keep in mind that she doesn’t succeed all by herself. Her friends and her friends’ families give her food and shelter, and her teachers at HPA play a huge role in inspiring her to become a great student. In particular, Perry Weiner, the founder of HPA, works closely with Liz and motivates her to work hard. And of course, Liz’s enrollment to Harvard is incumbent on a scholarship from *The New York Times*, not just her own academic abilities. (Though one could certainly argue that it’s unfair that Liz should have to apply for scholarships just to pay Harvard’s astronomically high tuition.) One could even argue that Liz, for all her emphasis on hard work and willpower, is incredibly lucky: lucky to have been born with enough intelligence, health, and physical endurance to graduate high school while getting little to no sleep; and lucky to have been taken off the waitlist at a competitive school like Harvard, beating out thousands of other extremely qualified people.

In some ways, the structure and pace of *Breaking Night* serves to downplay the role of chance and mentorship in Liz’s life. A recurring criticism of Liz’s memoir is that she describes her two years at HPA—the pivotal time when she found the willpower

to succeed—in just one chapter. Not only is this chapter unusually fast-paced, but it opens by announcing that Liz ended up accomplishing her goals. The result is that readers only get a limited look at *how*, precisely, Liz succeeded at HPA; furthermore, Liz’s successes are presented as much more of a foregone conclusion than they are in earlier chapters. By abruptly fast-forwarding in this way, *Breaking Night* would seem to give the impression that Liz’s success is an inevitable product of her willpower, plain and simple, when in reality it’s a product of willpower as well as innate ability, luck, and other people’s help. As *The Guardian* put it, the book’s “unqualified happy ending, with its American insistence on the omnipotence of positive thinking, makes one uneasy. Don’t tell me Liz Murray’s story – or anyone else’s – is that simple.” But even if its view of a one-to-one relationship between willpower and success is somewhat simplistic, *Breaking Night* has inspired many of its readers with its powerful true story.



## POVERTY

Liz Murray grows up in extreme poverty. Often, she has no idea when her next meal is going to come, or where she’s going to sleep. Poverty shapes her behavior and her character in many ways, and over the course of her memoir, Liz discusses the influence that extreme poverty has had on her life. At the same time, she acknowledges that different people respond to poverty differently and, furthermore, that she’s an outlier in many respects.

One of the more noticeable effects that poverty has on Liz’s life is to force her to act spontaneously and take risks. Without reliable parents, reliable sources of food, or even reliable knowledge of where she’s going to stay at night, Liz often finds herself in a desperate position. Because she needs food and shelter, she’s sometimes forced to break the law or do somewhat ethically questionable things. For example, she shoplifts from grocery stores on more than one occasion. She also learns how to “guilt” drivers into giving her money, pumping their gas for them without asking, and then standing by their cars until they pay her something. At other times, she’s forced to rely too heavily on (or sometimes, by her own admission, take advantage of) other people’s generosity, sleeping on their couches and accepting their food for a far longer time than even she feels comfortable with. There’s a famous philosophical problem about whether it’s right for a starving person to steal a loaf of bread. Liz is that starving person: even at a young age, she senses that she’s doing something wrong by shoplifting, but her need for food—a product of her extreme poverty—wins out. Put another way, her own moral compass, and the risk of being arrested for her actions, are trivial concerns in comparison to the need to survive. In a similar sense, *Breaking Night* takes a compassionate view of crime, suggesting that in many cases, it’s motivated by genuine need rather than malice.

Poverty also has a subtler, more abstract influence on Liz's personality. From an early age, it trains her to be self-controlled and at times emotionally detached. As Liz explains, she quickly learns not to expect food every day, even if her parents have promised it to her. She's so used to disappointments, and going hungry as a result, that she learns to expect nothing—this way, any food, shelter, or kindness from her family will come as a pleasant surprise. It's illuminating to contrast Liz's behavior with that of her older sister, Lisa Murray, who briefly lived in a wealthy foster home before returning to her biological parents. Even a few months spent outside of poverty, Liz suggests, are enough to make a lasting impact on her sister's personality. In situations where Liz is calm, Lisa is often furious: as Liz puts it, she raises a fuss when she doesn't receive what she believes is due to her. Liz further suggests that Lisa, having lived in a house where there's always plenty of food (i.e., beyond the grips of poverty), is wounded by short-term setbacks in a way that Liz, never having experienced anything better, is not. The experience of receiving abundant food, shelter, and love creates the expectation of *more* food, shelter, and love, and discourages the hard work that's sometimes necessary to earn those things oneself. Of course, in an ideal world those things *should* be expected, and children shouldn't have to work hard to receive basic necessities—but a life of poverty is the reality for Liz and many others like her.

Somewhat counterintuitively, Liz suggests that her calmness and self-control—brought on by poverty—actually encourage her to escape from poverty rather than simply accepting it. Liz grows up understanding how to swallow her pride and accept what she's given. But she also seems to be born with an innate ambition to succeed. When put together, these two qualities prove to be an effective combination. Because she knows how to move past adversity, she's adept at staying focused on her long-term goals: finding employment, completing high school, and going to an elite college.

It's worth emphasizing that Liz never suggests that this is everyone's experience with poverty. She speaks for herself, but for the most part doesn't presume to say how poverty has shaped others—put another way, she's writing a memoir, not a treatise on the psychology of poverty. However, Liz does acknowledge that, in some cases, poverty renders other people incapable of focusing on *any* long-term goals: living day-to-day is all they can afford to do. (And this isn't simply because Liz is more talented or superior to her peers in any way. Rather, it's because Liz has different ambitions and ideas of happiness—for example, getting accepted to Harvard.) Ultimately, *Breaking Night's* portrayal of poverty is limited in scope but still incisive: it shows how one person, Liz herself, rises to the challenges of poverty by learning to be hard-working and self-controlled, achieving her goals in the process.



## DRUGS AND ADDICTION

Even while she's still a small child, Liz Murray is surrounded by drug addicts. Her parents use various painkillers, as well as cocaine, marijuana, and heroin. Furthermore, most of their friends use drugs of some kind almost every day. Some of these friends (such as Ma's boyfriend Brick, who drinks heavily but also has a job) seem relatively high-functioning. Others seem to do nothing but get high. When she's still young, Liz doesn't fully understand what these adults are doing. From her perspective, being surrounded by drug addiction is a basic part of her life. As she grows older, however, she begins to understand the horrors of drug addiction more clearly.

Above all, Liz comes to realize that drugs can make addicts sacrifice their loyalty to their friends and their love for their families. At times, Liz's own parents treat her with love and care. But far more often, because their need to get high seems more urgent than their desire to raise a family, they neglect her or, even worse, make choices that actively hurt her. There are many times when Ma and Daddy don't buy food for their children. At one point, Ma attempts to exchange Liz's winter coat for drug money. Underlying these decisions—which, one would think, no human being could possibly make—is the brutal logic of addiction. Ma and Daddy, as addicts, now have a psychological and biological *need* to get high—so they feel compelled to buy more drugs. Every dollar Ma and Daddy spend on their children is a dollar they're *not* spending on drugs. And so, for this reason, there are many times when the young Liz goes cold or hungry.

Even as a child, Liz recognizes that drugs can make decent people do callous and even despicable things. But as she grows into a teenager, she begins to understand the broader consequences of drug use, in a way that she didn't when she was a child. First, Liz's own parents begin to grow apart, an event that has many causes but which is in no small part the result of their increased drug use. They begin using cocaine and other drugs more often, becoming more emotionally volatile and fighting with each other. This in turn motivates Daddy and Ma to use *more* drugs, perpetuating the cycle of drug use and the deterioration of their marriage.

But Liz also comes to understand the destructive role of drugs in her own life, not just her parents' lives. She begins dating a young, charismatic man named Carlos Marcano. Over time, Carlos becomes louder, more aggressive, and less emotionally available. Gradually, Liz comes to realize that Carlos is a drug dealer and addict. Liz's relationship with Carlos arguably teaches an even bleaker lesson about addiction than the one she's already learned from her parents. In the former case, Liz witnesses every stage in Carlos's decline, which makes his final cruel, violent state especially wrenching to see. Liz's feelings about Carlos mirror her feelings about drug use itself: he's fun and even glamorous, but in the end he hurts people and hurts

himself.

There are many children of addicts who grow up to become addicts themselves, whether because of inherited addictions or because they're taught that drugs are the easiest or even *only* way to find pleasure or escape in life. An obvious question that Liz never directly answers, then, is why doesn't Liz herself grow up to use drugs? To a certain extent, *Breaking Night* suggests that Liz steers clear of drugs because she's lived with the consequences of addiction for her entire life. She's numb to drugs' glamor but especially attuned to the pain they cause. But moreover, she avoids drugs because of her extraordinary willpower and innate sense of ambition and self-control.



## FAMILY

Throughout the book, Liz Murray has a difficult relationship with her family. Her parents ignore her for drugs, and sometimes disappear for days when they should be taking care of their daughter. In return, Liz is often put in the position where she has to take care of her parents, instead of the other way around: in particular, she comforts Ma when Daddy isn't around (which is quite often). Liz also has a tough relationship with her older sister, Lisa Murray. In one of the few memories of Lisa that Liz shares in her memoir, Lisa treats Liz unkindly, pulling a cruel prank on her. Though this memory takes place when both girls are very young, it seems to stand in for Liz's generally strained relationship with Lisa.

For the majority of *Breaking Night*, Liz struggles to replace her biological family with a kinder, more supportive "surrogate family," made up of friends, teachers, and other people she believes she can trust. Some of these people, such as Liz's close friend Sam, come to play an important role in her life, and for all intents and purposes become a part of her family. Liz and Sam comfort each other in times of grief, and enjoy spending time with each other, in much the way two close sisters might do. In this way, Liz comes to think of "family" elastically: she can make her own family, picking and choosing the people to whom she feels closest. Furthermore, she believes that she can abandon her biological family—quite understandably, she wants nothing to do with her bullying sister or her unstable absentee mother and father.

Liz's attempts to find a surrogate family prove successful at times. But even these surrogate family members can be unreliable. She places her trust in Carlos Marcano, a charismatic, seemingly sensitive young man who turns out to be a manipulative, cruel drug dealer. Liz fantasizes about moving away with Carlos and, in effect, starting a family with him—but within a few years of meeting him, she comes to realize that Carlos is in many ways as neglectful and unreliable as her own biological parents. Moreover, Liz comes to realize that, by abandoning her biological family, she's acted just like her own mother or father, both of whom ran away from their

parents. Liz sees herself as being trapped in a vicious cycle: just like Ma, she runs away from her biological parents and falls for a handsome, charismatic drug addict who turns out to be less reliable than she'd thought. Unlike Ma, however, Liz goes on to leave Carlos, recognizing that it's better for her to surround herself with many supportive people rather than pin her hopes on one unpredictable individual.

In the end, Liz manages to succeed in life while balancing her loyalty to her biological family with her love for her teachers, friends, and other role models. She graduates from the Humanities Preparatory Academy in just two years, thanks to a network of supportive teachers and sensitive friends who, for all intents and purposes, function as mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters (and she also keeps in touch with her old, good friend, Sam). At the same time, Liz tries to make peace with her parents and sister. After her mother's death from AIDS, Liz writes her mother a long, emotional letter in which she expresses her desire to reconcile with Ma. In high school, Liz begins living with her sister, and later she spends more time with her father.

In part, Liz reconciles with her family members because, in spite of everything they've done to hurt her, she still cares about them. The death of her mother—a woman for whom Liz nursed strong negative feelings for much of her life—reminds her of her deep-seated love for her parents and sister. By the same token, she realizes that it's better to try to get along with Daddy and Lisa than it is to try to run away from them. By fleeing from her biological family, she had repressed her bitterness and rage without ever fully surmounting these feelings. But because she finally comes to (somewhat) reconcile with her family, by the time she's accepted to Harvard, Liz seems to have built a fairly stable relationship with her parents and sister. She doesn't forgive them for their neglect, but she's still grateful to them for the positive things they did for her—for example, she's grateful to Daddy for leaving books around the house and, in effect, helping her learn how to read. In short, Liz gets love, wisdom, and inspiration from her friends, without turning her back on her biological family altogether. She appears to have made a truce with her family, and with her tumultuous past, so that she can proceed with her life.



## SEX AND POWER

From a very young age, Liz Murray is hyperaware of sex and sexuality all around her. Each stage of her life reflects a different view of sexuality, and indeed, her coming-of-age can be interpreted in terms of her changing relationship to sexuality.

While Liz is still young, she's aware of sex, but she sees it in an almost entirely negative light. Sex symbolizes danger: the dangers of sexual predation and, a little later, the dangers of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. As a child, Liz (along with her sister, Lisa Murray) is sexually abused by a man



named Ron, a friend of her mother. While Liz doesn't discuss her abuse at great length in her memoir, she grows up associating sex with cruelty and the abuse of power. At the time when the book is set, furthermore, the AIDS crisis had already claimed many thousands of lives. Tragically, the open-minded culture of "free love," a staple of the Greenwich Village scene at the time when Ma and Daddy met, made young, sexually adventurous New Yorkers particularly at-risk for this deadly disease. (See Background Info.) Liz doesn't clarify, or even know, how her parents contracted AIDS—whether it came from drug use or unprotected sex. But because of the looming threat of AIDS, she grows up unusually aware of sex, and thinks of it as a dangerous, even deadly thing.

One of the most disturbing things to which Liz is exposed as a child is the concept of sex as a kind of currency. During the time when Ron abuses her, for example, Liz hesitates to tell her mother the truth for a simple, painful reason: Ron "made things better" for Liz and her family. Even as a child, she senses that she is receiving something in "exchange" for her sexuality, in this case the food, shelter, and money Ron provides. Liz suffers sickening abuse at Ron's hands. But, tragically, she has conflicted feelings about this abuse: she despises Ron but she likes the material support he gives her and her family.

As Liz grows older, she sees echoes of this disturbing, coercive arrangement in the way her mother interacts with other men and, later, the way Liz herself interacts with her boyfriends. While Liz is in middle school, for example, her mother begins living with a man named Brick. Ma and Brick fight but, as Liz notices even at the time, Ma never leaves Brick because she's financially dependent on him—her economic security is bound up with her sexuality, leading to a drastic power imbalance in the relationship. Later, when Liz begins dating Carlos Marcano, she becomes accustomed to Carlos paying for her food and lodgings. Even after Carlos becomes neglectful and frightening, Liz feels trapped in the relationship. When she's lonely or depressed, she turns to Carlos for comfort, even though Carlos is one of the causes of her loneliness. In both of these cases, a woman becomes financially dependent on a man and is pressured into preserving the relationship because of financial concerns, rather than her feelings. For many years, this is the only kind of sexual relationship Liz is aware of.

The turning point in *Breaking Night* comes when Liz begins to strive for independence in her own life, with her own money, and—not at all coincidentally—her own sexuality. No longer willing to enter into coercive relationships with men, she strives to make a living, get an education, and support herself materially and emotionally. During her time at the Humanities Preparatory Academy, Liz alludes to the boyfriends she has, but she also emphasizes that they don't preclude her from pursuing success or limit her freedom in any way. Because she doesn't rely on them for any material thing, she avoids confusing emotional dependence with economic dependence, as people

do throughout her memoir. Because of her overall independence, furthermore, her view of sexuality has grown to the point where she sees it as a pleasurable thing, rather than something inherently dangerous or coercive. In sum, sexuality is a particularly important aspect of Liz's struggle for independence. By taking control over her own sexuality and relationships, she takes control over her own life.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## THE PHOTOGRAPH OF MA

While there aren't many symbols in *Breaking Night*, the photograph of Liz Murray's mother, Jean Murray—which Liz keeps throughout her teen years, even when she's run away from home—is a notable exception. In many ways, Liz despises her mother, and not without reason. At one point in the memoir, Liz's mother tries to sell Liz's winter coat to pay for drugs—just one of the many, many examples of how Ma sacrifices her child's well-being in order to feed her addiction. And yet, when Liz chooses to leave her family behind and live with friends, she takes only a few souvenirs of her old life, one of which is a faded, black-and-white photograph of her mother as a teenager.

The fact that Liz takes the photograph communicates two very important ideas. First, whatever Liz says, she loves her mother, even if this love is tempered by disgust for her behavior as a drug addict. But second, Liz seems to see a lot of her mother in herself. Indeed, Liz is running away from her parents to live on her own in New York City, just as her mother did before her. In all, the photograph symbolizes Liz's youthful ambitions, but also her close connection with her family.



## QUOTES


Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Hachette Books edition of *Breaking Night* published in 2011.

### Prologue Quotes

●● 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.

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth "Liz" Murray (speaker), Ma / Jean Murray

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 2

### Explanation and Analysis

In the Prologue, Liz Murray conveys the “rhythm” of her life at the age of seventeen. She goes to high school at the Humanities Preparatory Academy, but doesn’t come home—because, in fact, she has no home to return to. Instead, Liz spends nights at her friends’ houses, sleeping in bathtubs, on floors, or on couches. Remarkably, she manages to juggle a full high school schedule along with the challenges of finding a place to sleep and enough food to survive.

But the passage doesn’t just touch on the logistical challenges of being a homeless high school student. It also conveys some of the emotional difficulties. Liz works hard, but late at night she often gets lonely. She misses her family, especially her mother—indeed, the only record of her mother that she keeps is an old photograph showing her mother as a young woman. Liz misses her mother, it’s strongly implied, but she also knows that she can’t dwell on the past. She doesn’t really have the luxury of doing so, because she’s so focused on the day-to-day aspects of her life. In all, the passage vividly conveys the logistical and emotional challenges that Liz surmounts during her two years in high school, leading up to her acceptance to Harvard.



## Chapter 1 Quotes

☝ I raised my arms into the air, and gave a singsong, ‘A-I-I done.’

Taken off guard, Ma paused, leaned in and asked disbelievingly, “What did you say, pumpkin?”

“A-I-I done,” I repeated, delighted at Ma’s sudden interest. She yelled for Daddy. “Peter, she knows! Look at her, she understands!”

**Related Characters:** Ma / Jean Murray, Elizabeth “Liz” Murray (speaker), Daddy / Peter Finnerty

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 13-14

### Explanation and Analysis

Liz Murray grows up surrounded by drug addiction. Her parents, Ma and Daddy (real names Jean and Peter), are addicted to cocaine, painkillers, and other drugs, and they’re not shy about shooting up around their young daughter. In this passage, for instance, Liz notices that her parents have retreated into a room, taking with them a mysterious “spoon” (which, presumably, they use to liquidate a drug, most likely cocaine, and then inject it into their veins). Liz doesn’t really understand what her parents are doing, but she does recognize that when they’re “all done,” they come out of the room.

Liz, in other words, grows up thinking of drug addiction as a completely banal thing, no more unusual than watching TV or eating a meal. It’s only later that Liz comes to recognize the horrors of drug addiction, and the way it can tear apart families.

☝ Lisa and I dined on Happy Meals in front of the black-and-white TV, to the sound of spoons clanking on the nearby table, chairs being pulled in—and those elongated moments of silence when we knew what they were concentrating on. Daddy had to do it for Ma because with her bad eyesight she could never find a vein.

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth “Liz” Murray (speaker), Daddy / Peter Finnerty, Lisa Murray, Ma / Jean Murray

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 18

### Explanation and Analysis

In this disturbing passage, Liz describes what it was like to witness her parents doing drugs while she was still a young child. Liz and her sister would eat their food (paid for with government relief money, most of which went to drugs for Daddy and Ma) while their parents would shoot up. Though Liz didn’t know what, precisely, her parents were doing, she was perceptive enough to grasp some of the details: they’d heat up a spoon (dissolving the drugs), inject the drugs into their veins, and then sit back and wait for the drugs to take effect. Liz was also perceptive enough to notice the effect of these drugs: sometimes, they’d make her parents happy, but often, they’d make her parents relive painful memories, depressing them in the long run. For the time being, it would seem, Liz continues to regard drug use as a banal part of her life. The passage is also interesting because it parallels Liz’s passive consumption of junk food with her parents’ consumption of drugs: they’re equally childish and equally dependent on the money their family receives from the



government every month.

## Chapter 2 Quotes

☞ When she returned home half an hour later with a nickel bag, I was furious with her. I demanded that she give me my money, and I shouted mean words at her that are hard for me to think about now. Ma said nothing back. She snatched up her works—syringe and cocaine—from the kitchen table and stormed to the bathroom. I trailed behind her, shouting harsh things. I assumed that she was running away from me to get high in privacy, but I was wrong. Instead, from the bathroom doorway, I saw Ma throw something into the toilet. Then I realized she was crying, and what she had flushed down the toilet was her coke.

She'd thrown away the entire hit—despite her desperation. She looked at me with tears in her eyes, "I'm not a monster, Lizzy," she said. "I can't stop. Forgive me, pumpkin!"

**Related Characters:** Ma / Jean Murray, Elizabeth "Liz" Murray (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 50



### Explanation and Analysis

In this wrenching scene, Liz's own mother has stolen money from her and used it to buy drugs. Ma is so dependent on drugs that she can't stand being without them for an extended period of time—and, in fact, she's willing to sacrifice her own child's happiness (and her own dignity) to get high once again.

It's easy to criticize Ma for her behavior—and, pretty obviously, Liz is still angry with her mother, more than ten years later. But Liz is also compassionate enough to recognize that her mother committed a horrible misdeed because, in effect, she had a disease, not because she was an innately bad person. Even Liz's mother herself recognizes this at the end of the passage, when she tearfully apologizes to Liz and begs for her forgiveness. Liz's mother wants to be a good parent, but her addiction to drugs prevents her from becoming one. Notice, also, that Liz's mother begs her own child for forgiveness: an interesting reversal of roles that continues later in the book, as Liz becomes increasingly mature and stable, while Ma becomes increasingly childish.

☞ The fun part of the night would always come when Ma's past occurred to her as a positive thing, a sort of adventure. But I knew this was temporary, a side effect of her anticipation of shooting up. Later—on the other side of her high, when she was coming down and the drug had begun to lose its effect—the very same thoughts would depress her. I'd be there for the letdown, too. If I didn't listen when she needed to confide in someone, then who would?

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth "Liz" Murray (speaker), Ma / Jean Murray

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 54

### Explanation and Analysis

As Liz grows up, she becomes especially attuned to her mother's mood swings. She watches her mother at every stage of the process of getting high: anticipation, shooting up, euphoria, and, inevitably, depression. Furthermore, Liz comes to understand her own role in the proceedings: when her mother becomes depressed while "coming down" from a good high, Liz knows that she's supposed to comfort her. No child should have to take care of a parent high on cocaine—let alone one as young as Liz is in this scene. At the same time, it's undeniable that Liz becomes a more mature person as a consequence of having to take care of her parents so often. In a way, she becomes Ma's parent whenever Ma shoots up, providing Ma with the emotional support that her mother should be giving her.

☞ I told Ma all but one detail—the fact that I knew it was wrong. I knew that all I had to do to end it was to call out for her. But I didn't, because Ron made things better for Ma, for Lisa and me. I didn't want to ruin that, so I failed to call out.

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth "Liz" Murray (speaker), Lisa Murray, Ron, Ma / Jean Murray

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 69

### Explanation and Analysis

In this disturbing passage, Liz reveals that she has been molested by a friend of Ma's named Ron. Ron provides Ma with drugs, and also gives Liz and her sister Lisa candy and a place to sleep. But when Liz and Lisa are alone in his house, Ron forces the children to show him their genitalia, and even physically assaults them. Liz finally reveals the

horrifying truth to her mother, but she leaves out one crucial piece of information: Liz knew the abuse was wrong, but she kept quiet about it because she wanted to preserve the good relationship between Ma and Ron. Even as a small child, Liz recognized that Ron “made things better for Ma,” and wanted to keep it that way, even if it meant sacrificing herself in the process.

It’s truly horrific to imagine a small child enduring sexual abuse for the sake of her mother. Disturbing though the passage is, however, it establishes a pattern that echoes throughout the memoir. Many of the women in the book are pressured to be sexually subservient to men because they lack any kind of financial independence: they have to make lose-lose decisions that wealthier people never even have to consider. When seen in this way, Liz’s coming-of-age can be seen as a struggle to take full control over her money and, by extension, her body.

## Chapter 3 Quotes

“ I don’t recall Daddy ever talking about Meredith at home or in front of Ma. She never came to visit. Sometimes it felt as though I made up the memory of her, but I knew I hadn’t. And every now and then Lisa and I would talk about how we wanted to meet Meredith again, and get to know our big sister. But no one talked about Daddy’s other life before us, or our other sister.

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth “Liz” Murray (speaker), Ma / Jean Murray, Daddy / Peter Finnerty, Lisa Murray, Meredith

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 74

### Explanation and Analysis


In this passage, Liz discusses Meredith, her half-sister. As a younger man, Daddy had a child with another woman; however, he abandoned this child when she was only two years old. When Liz learns the truth about Meredith, she begins to distrust her father, and wonders what other secrets he’s hiding from her—or even if he’s going to abandon *her* as well.

It’s interesting to compare Liz’s relationship with her father with her relationship with her mother. Liz tends to portray her mother in more vivid, immediate terms: for example, she describes her mother’s appearance, the way her mother waits in line with her every month, and the night that her mother steals money from her to buy drugs. There aren’t

nearly as many of these vivid moments with Liz’s father. As this passage suggests, Daddy is more of a mysterious, unpredictable presence in Liz’s life: even when he’s in the room, Liz feels that she doesn’t really know him.

“ When Ma was plastered to the couch, flies buzzing over her head, cigarette butts floating in her nearby bottle of beer, it just didn’t seem right to tell her that I’d spent my day at a picnic or at the pool, playing in the sun, eating home-cooked meals with Rick and Danny’s family. The same went for Daddy and Lisa. Any joy I managed outside of our home felt, to me, like a form of betrayal.

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth “Liz” Murray (speaker), Daddy / Peter Finnerty, Lisa Murray, Danny Hernandez, Rick Hernandez, Liz Hernandez, Ma / Jean Murray

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 77



### Explanation and Analysis

As Liz grows up, she makes friends. These friends, including two local boys named Rick and Danny, introduce Liz to their mother—a woman who’s unlike Liz’s own mother in just about every conceivable way (she’s warm, friendly, active energetic, etc.). Instinctively, even as a young girl, Liz feels that there’s something “wrong” about spending lots of time with Rick and Danny’s mother, rather than her own. She feels that she’s betraying her own mother, implicitly suggesting that Rick and Danny’s mother is more fun, kinder, and generally better than Ma. More broadly, Liz seems to think that there’s something insulting about her playing outside and enjoying herself while her family suffers—it seems wrong and even treacherous.

Liz’s thought process might seem a little hyperbolic: just because she gets along with her friends’ mom doesn’t necessarily mean that she hates her own family, after all. But, on some level, Liz seems to feel guilty because she really *does* prefer Rick and Danny’s family (and not just in the innocent way that many young children complain that their friends’ parents are “cooler” than their own). From a very early age, Liz believes that she needs to compartmentalize her life, isolating the time she spends with her family from her time with her friends. And as the year advances, this compartmentalization becomes more extreme, to the point where Liz abandons her biological family altogether to live with her friends.

●● Though he wasn't my friend, I admired how Kevin had found a way to do things on his own, how he looked at not having money—a situation that most people would see as fixed—as something he could overcome. What else wasn't set in stone? I wondered what other opportunities were out there for me.

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth “Liz” Murray (speaker), Kevin

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 88



### Explanation and Analysis

As an adolescent, Liz spends lots of time out of the house. Even during the week, she skips school and wanders through the South Bronx (even though at the time it's one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in New York City, and in fact the whole country). During her time away from home and school, however, Liz learns some valuable skills. With the help of a friend-of-a-friend, Kevin, she learns how to make some money for herself. Kevin shows her how to pump gas at gas stations. More importantly, he shows her how to “guilt” passersby into giving her a small tip for her services. While pumping gas for the drivers isn't technically allowed, many of them take pity on Liz and give her money.

In turn, Liz's experiences pumping gas teach her an important psychological lesson. She realizes that she has the intelligence and wherewithal to take more control of her life—she has far more agency and power than she had previously imagined. She doesn't have to spend her time lazing around the house, like her parents: instead, she can choose to be more active and ambitious.

●● There were countless times I still gave Ma my tips from packing bags or the dollars taped inside my birthday cards sent from Long Island. It hit me then, like a hammer to my chest, that maybe I'd driven her crazy and paid for the needle that infected her with AIDS, too. “Idiot,” I said out loud. “Moron.” I hurled a pillow across the room, smashing the pieces of my diorama. The Popsicle stick fence, still glued together, clacked onto the floor, snapping in half.

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth “Liz” Murray (speaker), Ma / Jean Murray

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 107

### Explanation and Analysis


In this emotional scene, Liz learns that her mother has been diagnosed with AIDS. In the early 1990s, AIDS was an even more terrifying disease than it is today: the medical community knew very little about what caused it, let alone how to treat it. Outside the medical community, there were many misconceptions about how AIDS was spread. In the absence of good, scientific information, people reacted to the AIDS epidemic with fear, anger, and self-loathing. In this passage, Liz exhibits all these emotions. Irrationally, she blames herself for her mother's infection, even blaming herself for funding her mother's drug habit (which, quite likely, is what caused her mother to contract AIDS in the first place). Furious, she destroys the diorama she's been working on for her school project.

It's a mark of Liz's maturity that she would blame herself for her mother's disease. Even though Liz is still young, she supports her mother financially, in an abstract sense buying her mother's drugs for her. While the notion that Liz is to blame for her mother's AIDS is absurd, Liz is too upset to think clearly. The passage is also notable because it suggests the tension between Liz's home life and her academic performance. She doesn't have the motivation or the concentration to do well in school, the passage suggests, because her tumultuous family life distracts her.

## Chapter 4 Quotes

●● I stared at Meredith's face as a baby and compared it to Daddy's. Taking in her complete vulnerability as an infant, I wondered where she was now, and how Daddy could have left her behind, and why we never talked about her. It filled me with a deeply unsettling feeling to wonder what else he was capable of doing.

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth “Liz” Murray (speaker), Daddy / Peter Finnerty, Meredith

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 128

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage is similar to another passage from Chapter Three, but with one important difference: this time, Liz's feelings for her father are more strongly negative. Liz contemplates her half-sister, Meredith, whom Daddy (Meredith's father as well) abandoned when Meredith was



only two years old. Though Liz has known about Meredith for several years at this point, she's startled to come across an old photograph of Meredith among her father's things. The sight of Meredith as a little girl is intensely moving for Liz, and she begins to become even more suspicious of her father than she was before; she even wonders if her father might one day abandon her, just as he's done with his older child.

In short, the passage shows Liz maturing as she learns more about her parents' past behavior. And interestingly, it raises the possibility that Daddy will walk out on Liz, even though, very soon, the exact opposite will happen: Liz will abandon her family and try to get by on her own.

## Chapter 5 Quotes

☝☝ At night, under my bed, sometimes I could hear her crying softly. But whenever I asked her what was wrong, she'd brush it off, say it was just her allergies or that I was hearing things. But I knew better. Sometimes, when she snored in her sleep—a cute little whistle—I'd reach down and touch a piece of her hair, run it through my fingers, stare at how, in the darkness of our room, the moonlight turned it glossy as polished onyx. I will keep her safe, I told myself.

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth "Liz" Murray (speaker), Samantha / Sam

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 155

### Explanation and Analysis

As Liz begins middle school, she becomes close with another student named Sam. Sam is a confident young woman, and Liz looks up to her. However, Liz notices that Sam can be gentle and sensitive, too: beneath the façade of confidence, Sam is lonely, and sometimes cries herself to sleep.

The passage is moving because it shows Liz developing a close, loving relationship with her friend—in many ways, a closer relationship than she's ever had with her sister or her parents. Liz is a sad child in many ways, but she's always lacked parents who'll listen to her problems and give her love and attention. Now, Liz has found a friend with whom she can share her feelings. The passage also emphasizes Liz's maturity: notice that she feels an immediate, almost maternal need to care for Sam (perhaps because by this point in the memoir she's been taking care of her own

mother for years).

☝☝ "Liz, shut up," she answered. "You know I love your white ass, don't even sweat it."

**Related Characters:** Samantha / Sam (speaker), Elizabeth "Liz" Murray

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 161

### Explanation and Analysis

In the previous passage, Liz offers emotional support to her close friend, Sam. In this passage, Sam returns the favor. Liz has taken Sam to her former apartment (where Daddy now lives alone), thinking that she'll be able to pick up some of her old things. Liz is very nervous about taking her friend to her old home, because she's embarrassed about having lived in such an ugly, derelict place. Sam, sensing that Liz is nervous, tells Liz that she'll love her no matter what.

Sam's words establish one of the most important themes in the book: Liz should be judged for the quality of her character, not her "circumstances" in life. In other words, she shouldn't be ridiculed or condemned because she's the child of drug addicts. Liz seems to take Sam's words to heart; indeed, all the hard work that she does in the time discussed in the rest of her memoir is premised on the idea that she can transcend her circumstances with the help of her friends.

☝☝ If he was tap-dancing his end of the conversation, so would I. Why tell him I was absent all the time from school? Why confront him? If he couldn't do anything about our problems, then what would be the point in venting at Daddy? It would only stress him more, and I didn't want to do that to him. It felt mean. So I decided to censor my life from my father, and to have him think everything was just great.

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth "Liz" Murray (speaker), Daddy / Peter Finnerty

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 166

### Explanation and Analysis



In this scene, Liz pays a visit to Daddy, who's currently living


in a homeless shelter. Daddy and Liz are civil with each other, but, as the passage makes clear, Liz doesn't feel comfortable opening up to her father about what's been going on in her life. She doesn't want to discuss her absences from school, or the fact that she doesn't like living with Ma and Ma's new boyfriend, Brick. The passage also makes it very clear that Daddy is responding in kind: in other words, Liz is hiding things from her father because she can tell that her father is doing the same. And in this sense, the passage is a microcosm for Liz and Daddy's relationship. Liz is so used to her father's deception and neglect that she doesn't feel comfortable being honest with him, either.

## Chapter 6 Quotes

☝☝ "Okay, just one more thing," I told her. "Hold on." I slid a chair over to reach the top shelf of my closet, where I'd hidden Ma's NA coin and that one photo of her, the black-and-white one from when she was a teenager, living on the streets. Opening my journal, I slipped the picture carefully inside and snapped the book shut. "Now I can go," I said. "Let's just go."

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth "Liz" Murray (speaker), Samantha / Sam, Ma / Jean Murray

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 183

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Liz prepares to leave Ma and Lisa, who've been living with Ma's boyfriend, Brick. Liz is fed up with Brick, who she regards as a tyrannical, abusive man. She believes that she'll have better luck living on the streets, or sleeping in friends' houses, accompanied by her close friend Sam. Before leaving the apartment, however, Liz packs a few possessions. One of these is an old photograph of her mother (the same photograph she mentions in the Prologue).

It's interesting that Liz would pack an old photograph of her mother, even after she decides to run away from home, and, by extension, her mother. Even though Liz wants to live on her own, she clearly has some affection for her mother (even if this affection is tempered by anger). Liz hates her mother for neglecting her, stealing her money and food, and forcing her to beg or steal. But Liz also, in spite of herself, cares about her mother and views her sympathetically. She

also sees a lot of herself in her mother—indeed, Liz, just like her mother before her, is fleeing from her family and trying to survive on her own in Greenwich Village. It's also possible that Liz wants to preserve a more idealized, positive image of her mother—captured in the photo of Ma as a teenager—even as she runs away from Ma in her present state.

## Chapter 7 Quotes

☝☝ "Who was that?" I'd do my best not to sound accusing. Always it was a cousin, a neighbor, or a friend's girlfriend. "My friend's girl, ain't she a sweetheart," he'd explain. "I might check them for dinner, she just gave me the address." And always, the explanation was a concrete wall that I could not penetrate. The more I persisted, the more I might draw attention to myself. Better to let it slide; he cared about me, I was certain.

**Related Characters:** Carlos Marcano, Elizabeth "Liz" Murray (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 189


### Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter Seven, Liz begins spending all her time with a charming young man named Carlos Marcano. Carlos is charismatic, and he makes Liz feel special; he also gives the impression that he and Liz have a lot in common (specifically, he suggests that he's lost family members to AIDS, and has addicts for parents). But Liz slowly becomes disillusioned with Carlos. She notices that he flirts with other women and disappears for days at a time, showing up as unexpectedly as he vanishes. Liz decides to ignore all these warning signs and continue hanging out with Carlos. As she admits, she does so in part because she's genuinely attracted to Carlos and partly because she's impressed that he supports her financially, buying her meals and paying for her lodgings. For not the first time in the memoir, a woman is pressured into being subservient to a man because she lacks the man's financial independence. Partly for this reason, Liz continues to downplay her own doubts and suspicions about Carlos.

## Chapter 8 Quotes

☝ There was no pain involved, only the weight of his heavy body, the strong smell of latex and of his hot breath. To my surprise, my first thought was that being with him was emptier than I'd expected, more function than joy.

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth "Liz" Murray (speaker), Carlos Marcano

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 204

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Liz loses her virginity to Carlos Marcano, the charming drug dealer with whom she's been living for a while. But the experience isn't what she hoped it would be. Instead of making her feel closer with Carlos, it makes her feel lonely and isolated, not just from her boyfriend but from everyone else, too.

The passage foreshadows Liz's decision to abandon Carlos and make her own way in life. For now, Liz believes that her best course of action is to remain with Carlos, trying to ignore the signs that he's growing dependent on drugs and also dating other women. However, the anticlimactic experience of losing her virginity to Carlos helps her see, a little more clearly, that Carlos is pressuring her into staying with him. The passage is an especially clear example of how Liz's struggle for emotional and financial independence is closely linked to her struggle for sexual independence.


☝ In the center of the foil, ever so faint and small, I found tiny specks of white powder.

"Sam! Sam."

"Yeah."

"Don't flush. Be quiet and look at this. . . . He's on coke."

**Related Characters:** Samantha / Sam, Elizabeth "Liz" Murray (speaker), Carlos Marcano

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 224

### Explanation and Analysis

Carlos Marcano has just returned to Liz and Sam after abandoning them for a few days without warning. Carlos is visibly unstable, and seems to be high on drugs. Sam and Liz realizes that Carlos has been using cocaine heavily, and they further deduce that he's probably a drug dealer, whose

money comes from selling cocaine to addicts like Liz's own parents.

This is an important realization for Liz. Liz ran away from her family in part to escape the world of drug addiction, but now, she realizes that she's stumbled into a similar situation. Carlos is, in many ways, just as unstable, untrustworthy, and volatile as her mother and father.

## Chapter 10 Quotes

☝ Turns out people could just vanish. I couldn't help but sit there and think about the woman who'd been murdered a few feet from my room. How had she gotten there, in a seedy motel room with a violent man who claimed he loved her? And was I really any different?

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth "Liz" Murray (speaker), Carlos Marcano

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 238



### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Liz is staying in a motel, far from the center of New York City. She's entirely dependent on Carlos Marcano, her boyfriend: because she doesn't have a car, or even money of her own, she has no convenient way of leaving the motel, which is located by the freeway. Liz then learns that a woman has been murdered just outside her motel room. She finds herself wondering about this woman's life, and puts herself in the woman's shoes. This proves to be an important, if harrowing exercise: Liz comes to realize that she too could end up dead, the victim of an angry, aggressive male partner—just like the woman whose body was found at the motel. Liz also draws a connection between Carlos and the woman's murderer: she senses that Carlos, apparently a cocaine addict, might soon become capable of hurting her. And so, because of her epiphany, Liz decides to leave Carlos and take care of herself from now on, rather than relying on the support of charismatic but unreliable men.



☛ For Perry, Prep was a labor of love; he was dedicated to seeing his second- chance students win. His belief was that if the mainstream school system had failed, then it would require something different for these students to succeed. Prep would be that difference. In this way, the students were not looked at as dysfunctional; the system was dysfunctional. The concept of "failure" incorporated within the system's very design was not in any stage of the planning of Humanities Prep. By design, Prep was made to facilitate for its students what was possible.

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth "Liz" Murray (speaker), Perry Weiner

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 254



### Explanation and Analysis

At the end of this chapter, Liz pays a visit to an experimental New York school called the Humanities Preparatory Academy (HPA). The visit proves to be life-changing for Liz. She goes to HPA to interview for a position at the school, but shows up late for the interview. Frightened that she's going to lose her chance to go to the school, Liz talks to Perry Weiner, the director of HPA. Weiner, Liz explains in this passage, is a wise, intelligent, idealistic man. He believes in the value of liberal arts education, and maintains that all students, no matter their background or level of intelligence, can benefit from a good education. Liz clearly reveres Weiner, and knows firsthand that he takes education very seriously—if he didn't, then Liz would never have graduated from HPA and been accepted to Harvard.

## Chapter 11 Quotes

☛ Covertly, I zipped open my book bag—full of dingy clothes and the wad of rubber-banded hundred-dollar bills I'd saved up over the summer—and I began stuffing muffins, bagels, bananas, and oranges into my bag. I threw in a whole loaf of bread, too. Why not? These things would be mine to keep.

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth "Liz" Murray (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 278

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Liz goes to a sleepover at a friend's house. The friend's name is Ken, and Liz meets him at her summer job, which involves canvassing for political causes around

New York. Liz is attracted to Ken, but she's also intimidated by him: he's older than she, and comes from a wealthier family. Indeed, life for Ken and his friends is different from Liz's life in almost every way. Ken has kind, dedicated parents, and he's used to receiving abundant food, love, and attention—the very things that Liz has lacked for most of her life. During the sleepover, Liz gets an unpleasant reminder of how different she is from Ken and his friends: she doesn't understand their conversations, and finds it hard to feel at ease around them.

At the end of the sleepover, Liz decides to take some of the extra food and juice that Ken's mother offers the guests. The passage is a poignant reminder that Liz's poverty isolates her from many of her peers. And yet, there's something impressive, or even heroic, about the way Liz never gives up. Unlike Ken (who seemingly hasn't had to work very hard for what he has), Liz does whatever it takes to survive, even if it involves breaking the rules of decorum and taking the extra food.

## Chapter 12 Quotes

☛ Figuring out high school while homeless meant handling details that never would have occurred to me until I was actually living in the situation. For one, who knew schoolbooks were so heavy? By itself, that's already something. But when I carried the heavy things around while also navigating several different living situations with no predictability whatsoever of where I could stay on a given night, while also trying to follow an assignment schedule that dictated exactly which books I would need and when, I kept slipping up.

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth "Liz" Murray (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 280



### Explanation and Analysis

As Chapter Twelve begins, Liz explains that she managed to graduate from HPA (the Humanities Preparatory Academy) in just two years. In order to do so, however, she had to navigate a lot of challenges. Most of these challenges had nothing to do with the content of her classes; instead, Liz had to devote a lot of thought and energy to things like how she'd carry her heavy textbooks. Because Liz didn't have a stable home for two years of high school (she slept at various friends' houses), she was often placed in a position where she didn't know where she'd be sleeping. As a result, her only way of completing her homework every night was

to carry her textbooks with her wherever she went. Liz had to deal with many different logistical challenges of this kind, and put together, they make Liz's achievement seem almost miraculous: she graduated from high school in half the usual time, facing all kinds of obstacles that many high school students never have to worry about.

So I let go of my hurt. I let go years of frustration between us. Most of all, I let go of any desire to change my father and I accepted him for who he was. I took all of my anguish and released it like a fistful of helium balloons to the sky, and I chose to forgive him.

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth "Liz" Murray (speaker), Daddy / Peter Finnerty

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 295

### Explanation and Analysis

In this moving passage, Liz makes the difficult decision to move past her frustration with her father. Liz has always had a tough relationship with her parents, but when she learns that Daddy has been diagnosed with HIV, she decides not to make the same mistake that she made with her mother (who was similarly diagnosed, and later died of AIDS). Instead of abandoning her family, Liz decides to support her father, both emotionally and financially.

It's important to clarify that Liz isn't *forgetting* all the horrible things Daddy did to her. Liz hasn't forgotten that Daddy neglected her, and sometimes forgot to feed her. At the same time, Liz recognizes that Daddy has been struggling with a serious drug addiction for most of his life, and she has a lot of sympathy for him. Instead of trying to run from her past, or repress it altogether, Liz tries to come to terms with her father. In the process, she becomes a more mature person and finds a way of moving forward with her life.

However things unfolded from here on, whatever the next chapter was, my life could never be the sum of one circumstance. It would be determined, as it had always been, by my willingness to put one foot in front of the other, moving forward, come what may.

**Related Characters:** Elizabeth "Liz" Murray (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 321

### Explanation and Analysis

At the end of this chapter, Liz is waiting on her Harvard acceptance letter. She doesn't know if she'll be taken off the waitlist and admitted to Harvard, or if she'll be denied a place there. For weeks, Liz has been unable to think about anything other than her admission to Harvard. But after speaking with Perry Weiner, the teacher who accepted her to HPA and worked closely with her for two years, Liz develops a different point of view. She realizes that, whether or not she's accepted to Harvard (she is, by the way), she'll be fine. Years of self-reliance, and two years of a great education at HPA have given her the intellectual tools and willpower she needs to do well in life. And just as importantly, Liz's experiences at HPA have given her the emotional tools she needs to live a happy, fulfilling life.

The passage is an eloquent and surprisingly moving description of the importance of a liberal arts education as Perry Weiner sees it. Education is partly about helping students attain material success—i.e., getting accepted to a prestigious school like Harvard. But it's equally about helping students like Liz develop the wisdom and self-confidence they need to be happy, and by all appearances, Perry Weiner has helped Liz attain these things.

Finally, the passage is also an effective "thesis statement" for Liz's philosophy of motivation and self-determination. No matter what her situation, she confidently declares here that she has faith in her own drive and will to improve her circumstances and her self.

### Epilogue Quotes

"Lizzy, I left any dreams behind a long time ago, but I know now that they are safe with you. Thank you for making us a family again."

**Related Characters:** Daddy / Peter Finnerty (speaker), Elizabeth "Liz" Murray

**Related Themes:**     

**Page Number:** 326

### Explanation and Analysis

In the Epilogue, Liz discusses her life since being accepted to Harvard University. During her time at Harvard (from which she graduates in 2009), Liz gets a visit from Lisa and

Daddy. At the end of the visit, Daddy leaves Liz a note, in which he thanks Liz for keeping his dreams “safe.” One way to interpret this would be to say that Liz has accomplished all the things that Daddy himself once dreamed of. Daddy was once a successful college student, and, briefly, a graduate student. But he dropped out to become a drug dealer—a decision that arguably ruined his life. Daddy recognizes his mistakes, even if he’s too addicted to cocaine and sick with AIDS to try to be better now. Thus, he’s proud of Liz for becoming so successful and avoiding the temptations of drugs.

Daddy also thanks Liz for bringing the family together again. And this suggests that Liz’s attempts to become closer with her sister and father haven’t gone unnoticed. After the tragic death of her mother from AIDS, Liz reconnects with Daddy and Lisa, recognizing that, even if she has conflicted emotions about both of them, she still cares about them and they’re important parts of her life. Liz’s attempts at reconciliation inspire Daddy and Lisa to become closer with each other, too. In short, Liz’s maturity and hard work inspire other people—her father, her sister, and numerous people who read her memoir—to be better.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## PROLOGUE

The book begins, “I have just one picture left of my mother.” The narrator, a young woman named Liz Murray, keeps a small, creased, black-and-white **photograph** of her mother, taken when Liz’s mother was sixteen. Liz sees that she, Liz, looks a little like her mother (though Liz thinks she’s not as pretty as her mother).

*Liz Murray clearly feels a close connection with her mother: she notices the resemblance between the two of them, and seems to admire her mother’s beauty. But for reasons we don’t yet understand, Liz is also alienated from her mother: her closest connection to seems to be a decades-old photograph.*



Late at night, Liz will sometimes look in the mirror and compare her face with her mother’s. She hasn’t had a home in years, and she usually sleeps in friends’ apartments. She often wonders where she’ll sleep tomorrow, and she longs for the warmth of her mother’s embrace. But whenever she feels this way, usually late at night, she tries to bury her emotions: otherwise, she’ll never be able to fall asleep.

*The prologue hammers home some of the memoir’s key themes. Liz is homeless, meaning that she typically sleeps at friends’ houses for a few nights at a time. She also thinks about her family constantly, but, for reasons not yet explained, she’s far away from them. Finally, Liz has a lot of strong emotions, especially about her parents, but during her time as a homeless teenager she’s unable to “wallow” in these emotions, for fear of becoming overwhelmed. In the memoir that follows, Liz discusses the feelings she’s bottled up for so long.*



## CHAPTER 1: UNIVERSITY AVENUE

Liz’s mother, or Ma, tells Liz’s father (named Peter Finnerty, but referred to throughout as Daddy) that she is pregnant. At this time, Daddy is in prison. Ma snorts lots of cocaine, and has done so ever since she was a teenager. Ma hates her mother, and her father is a drunken, abusive man. At the age of thirteen, Ma leaves her parents and begins living on the streets of New York. Liz now knows that Ma was a prostitute during her earliest years on the streets.

*Liz begins by jumping back in time to tell her “origin story,” and discusses her parents’ histories. Ma runs away from home to avoid her abusive, alcoholic parents. But, as with so many troubled youths who run away from their parents, she goes out of the frying pan and into the fire: she winds up becoming increasingly addicted to drugs and working as a prostitute in a dangerous city.*



Ma meets Daddy in the mid-1970s. At the time, Daddy is witty and charming. His parents are middle-class Irish people, and his father, just like Ma’s, is a violent, drunken man. Daddy’s parents divorced (even though they were Catholic) when Daddy was still a child, and Daddy grew up lonely and sensitive. He doesn’t know his father well, and his mother is cold and emotionless. However, she takes good care of Daddy, and works hard to send him to a good school. In high school, Daddy reads a lot. He also becomes a drug addict.

*Daddy and Ma have a lot in common: mostly they both leave their parents, with whom they have deeply conflicted relationships, to move to New York City. And both Ma and Daddy have serious problems with addiction.*



Daddy graduates from college “in the heart of New York City.” He begins getting high more often, and becomes a top drug dealer in Greenwich Village. After a few more years, he abandons a graduate degree in social work and begins dealing full-time. Around this time, he meets Ma.

*Daddy has a college degree, but believes that it would be more lucrative to sell drugs than it would be to pursue a conventional career. And for at least a few years, it seems, he’s right. The problem is that this “career choice” doesn’t have many long-term options.*



Daddy and Ma love each other, but they express their love by doing drugs together, including cocaine, amphetamines, and heroin. In 1978, Ma gives birth to Lisa, Liz’s older sister. Around this time, Daddy begins selling painkillers to old graduate school friends. The scheme is clever: Daddy poses as a doctor in order to pick up large quantities of free painkillers, and then sells the pills for a big profit.

*Daddy uses his intelligence to mastermind a highly lucrative painkiller scheme. For the time being, he has enough discipline to execute the plan successfully; however, he and Ma are becoming increasingly addicted to drugs, meaning that, as Liz shows, they slowly lose the ability to function as responsible adults.*



The scheme ends when Ma—by this time addicted to painkillers—shows up at a pharmacist’s office and gets arrested. First, the pharmacist is suspicious of Ma’s appearance and tells her to wait for twenty minutes. Partly because she’s addicted, Ma ignores the obvious red flags and stays in the pharmacy, and soon the police come to take her jail. Shortly afterwards the police arrest Daddy, confiscate his drug supply, and send him to jail on numerous counts of fraud. At the time, Ma is pregnant with Liz. Daddy is sentenced to three years in jail, but Ma is allowed to go free.

*By the time Ma gets arrested while buying painkillers, it’s clear that addiction has significantly damaged her life. Most people would have the wherewithal to run out of the pharmacy when the pharmacist disappeared for a full twenty minutes. But Ma has become so desperate for painkillers (she’s using them, not just picking them up) that she lets her addiction blind her to reality. While three years is, quite arguably, an excessive sentence for Daddy’s crime, the mandatory minimum sentences for drug dealing increased markedly in the 1980s, during the heyday of the War on Drugs—meaning that, had Daddy been caught a few years later, he probably would have served even more time.*



With Daddy in prison, Ma rents an apartment in the Bronx, at the time one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in New York City. She calls Daddy in prison on the day Liz is born. Ma goes on to support her children with money her own mother sends her. Because Ma and Daddy aren’t legally married, Liz is given her mother’s surname, Murray.

*For the time being, Ma manages to support herself and her children in spite of her drug addiction. In the late 1970s and early ‘80s, the Bronx was experiencing record levels of crime (1981 was the most violent year in the borough’s history).*



Daddy returns from jail when Liz is three years old. In the following months, Ma becomes more neglectful and she and Daddy begin going into the kitchen to use mysterious “spoons.” One night, when Liz is still a little girl, she sees Ma and Daddy walk into the kitchen and close the door. When Ma walks out, Liz cries, “All done!” Ma laughs and tells Daddy, “She knows!”

*Liz grows up surrounded by drug addiction: the sight of adults using drugs is as normal to her as watching TV. Liz doesn’t say what kind of drugs her parents are using (most likely it’s either heroin or cocaine, both of which can be dissolved in a spoon and injected into the veins). Instead, the scene is presented from a child’s point of view, which makes it more disturbing.*



By the time Liz is five, her family is almost entirely dependent on welfare. Every month, government checks arrive in the mail. Ma qualifies for relief because she's legally blind, due to a degenerative eye disease. She and Daddy spend their relief money on drugs, electricity for their apartment, and food. Narrating in the present, Liz says she can still remember waiting in line to cash government checks with her mother and, sometimes, Lisa. She sees all kinds of people waiting for their money—some of whom seem able-bodied and perfectly capable of working.

There are many times during Liz's childhood when Ma disappears suddenly. One day, for instance, the family goes to see the film *Alice in Wonderland*. Ma leaves halfway through the film, and Liz later finds her waiting at home. But when Liz and Ma stand together in the check-cashing line, Liz knows Ma will never leave.

Whenever the government sends a check, Liz and her family have a great day. She and Lisa feast on Happy Meals from McDonald's, and Ma and Daddy inject drugs into their veins using their "spoons."

Lisa is older than Liz, and sometimes, she plays tricks on Liz. But Liz also enjoys being the younger sister: thanks to Lisa, she approaches new experiences with "a kind of borrowed knowledge." Whenever Lisa makes a wrong move, Liz knows what *not* to do.

Daddy supports his family partly by going through other people's trash. He travels into Manhattan and finds wonderful things that wealthy people are about to throw away—for example, he once finds a brand-new keyboard.

As Liz grows up she learns how to behave around her father. Daddy likes to ridicule things for being too weak and "girly," and as a result Liz trains herself to sound strong and confident.

Liz also notices that her parents smoke strange, smelly cigarettes. Often, Liz and Lisa don't have anything to eat because their parents spend too much on drugs. Lisa gets mad at her parents for not buying more food, but Liz usually tries to be more agreeable. Even though she doesn't like her food (mostly eggs), she knows there's no point in complaining about it.

*Ma and Daddy have become so dependent on drugs that they spend a large portion of their welfare money on them, and seem unable to prioritize their children's needs. (Notice, also, that Liz implies that many welfare recipients are "scamming the system"—i.e., pretending to have some kind of disability in order to get free money from the government. This is a highly controversial argument, often associated with a conservative viewpoint.)*



*From a very early age, Liz is able to understand what makes her mother tick. Liz recognizes that Ma is dependent on drugs and, by extension, the money needed to buy drugs. This means that Ma is more dependable in situations involving getting money or drugs than she is in situations involving taking care of her children.*



*Liz's parents spend at least some of their money on food for their children, even if they blow the rest of it on drugs for themselves.*



*Liz is a thoughtful, cautious child who understands the importance of looking before she leaps. The passage also stresses that Liz and Lisa have a tough relationship, and rarely get along as children.*



*Daddy is still a resourceful, inventive man, which arguably makes his drug addiction even more tragic. He's smart and talented, but drugs prevent him from leading a fulfilling life.*



*Liz knows how to act tough around her father—a skill that helps her for the rest of her life, but one that also indoctrinates her with harmful ideas of femininity as being inferior to masculinity.*



*The strange cigarettes are probably joints (i.e., marijuana cigarettes). It seems that Liz had extraordinary willpower and self-control even at a young age, while Lisa acts more like a "normal" kid would.*



While pregnant with Liz, Ma had a nervous breakdown, and during this period, Lisa went to live with a wealthy foster family. Ma often says that Lisa is tough to please because she's gotten so much attention, food, and toys during her time with the foster family. Unlike Liz, Lisa expects "what was owed to her," and nothing else.

*Notice that Lisa becomes more upset with her parents' because she's experienced an alternative: during her time in a foster home, she's seen that not all parents are as negligent as her own—and, furthermore, that not all households are as poor. Liz, who's only ever lived with Ma and Daddy, didn't have this experience, and so she has an easier time accepting the status quo.*



Ma's mother lives in Riverdale, and Liz sometimes visits her. Otherwise, Grandma would visit Liz and her family in the Bronx. She's deeply Christian, and is also growing senile in her old age. Ma claims that Liz will lose interest in Grandma when she (Liz) gets older, but as a child, Liz loves Grandma—Grandma pays attention to her and answers her questions. When Liz tells Grandma that she wants to be a comedian when she grows up, Grandma tells her that nobody will laugh at her, and advises her to be a live-in maid instead.

*Although Liz is more cautious than her sister, she's also endlessly curious, which explains why she delights in asking her grandmother questions. The passage is especially poignant because it suggests that Liz, like most kids, is desperate for attention from adults—attention that her drug-addicted parents rarely give her. Also notice that Liz aspires to have an exciting, somewhat unusual job that requires her to think quickly, whereas Grandma wants her to take a servile, domestic, and traditionally feminine job.*



Ma often tells Liz about how, when Ma was a child, Grandma would beat her for being even a few seconds late. Ma claims that she and Grandma have the same mental health problems: the difference is that Ma takes care of her mental "issues," while Grandma didn't address them until it was too late, and as a result she (Grandma) "wasn't all there" anymore. Ma spent a few months in a psychiatric ward before Liz was born, because she kept hearing voices.

*Although Liz first meets her grandmother as a senile but gentle old woman, Liz's mother knows Grandma as a fierce, abusive parent. Liz's family clearly has a history of mental illness, further suggesting that Ma's excessive drug use might exacerbate a preexisting psychiatric condition (or also be her attempt at self-medicating for it).*



Ma often takes Lisa and Liz to get free lunch at the local school. Sometimes, Lisa and Liz have to wake up Ma because she's overslept. By the time they arrived at the cafeteria, the food is usually cold. While the cafeteria food is for kids only, Ma sometimes makes her kids sneak her food for later.

*This is one of the many passages in which Ma takes a passive, childish role, while her children seem more mature and responsible—they're feeding their mother instead of the other way around.*



Ma disappears at unusual times. She often claims she is going to a local bar, but Liz doesn't always believe her. On the night of the 4th of July while Liz is still young, Ma steps out of the house. She comes back hours later, waving a sparkler and a bag of fireworks. On their stoop outside, the family sets off every firework Ma has brought. It's the summer of 1985, just before Liz starts school. It's also the last time Liz can remember being happy with her whole family.

*While Liz clearly has a conflicted relationship with her parents, she never denies that there were some good times; indeed, Liz seems nostalgic for many aspects of her childhood.*



The night before Liz starts school, Ma takes drugs and becomes manic. She insists that she has to give Liz a haircut, even though she only has an old, rusty pair of scissors. In the end, Ma cuts Liz's hair much too short. She tells Liz, "It's just hair, pumpkin, it'll grow back."

*Here again, Ma's behavior is immature and even childish (plenty of kids give themselves bad haircuts, and their parents are usually the ones who get upset about it, not the other way around), and her actions seem destined to affect how Liz interacts with her peers.*



## CHAPTER 2: MIDDLE OF EVERYTHING

Lisa bullies Liz when Ma and Daddy aren't around. She pulls pranks on Liz, and tells elaborate lies about what Liz should expect in school.

*Liz and Lisa don't really get along: like many older siblings, Lisa exploits the fact that she's older and has more authority and experience.*



In the first grade, Liz discovers that she has lice, and Lisa makes fun of her. Later, Lisa offers to help Liz. She braids Liz's hair and tells her to put "anything red" in her hair, because this will scare away the lice. Liz finds flowers, beads, and fabric, which she rubs all over her hair. After a while, she scratches her hair and "bugs wriggled" out.

*This is one of the only times in the memoir when Liz details a specific interaction between herself and her sister, Lisa. This lack would suggest that the two of them aren't particularly close (even though many children who play tricks on their younger siblings end up becoming close with them).*



The narration now jumps to a time slightly before the lice incident, and Liz explains how, when she first started school, she felt like an outcast, partly because of the bizarre haircut Ma gave her. Then, just after the beginning of the first grade, is when she gets lice, and that makes her feel like even *more* of an outcast. Liz learns that she has lice in the middle of a spelling test. During the test she scratches her hair and bugs come crawling out, disgusting the other children.

*From the beginning, Liz doesn't like school, but she suggests that this isn't really her fault, and is mostly a symptom of her circumstances. But this antipathy towards school will be a major obstacle she must overcome later.*



Lisa's lice cure, of course, turns out to be yet another one of her practical jokes—it does nothing to help Liz. Liz cries after she realizes that Lisa is tricking her.

*Liz takes Lisa's prank very seriously, and is wounded when she realizes that Lisa was just fooling her.*



Liz tries hard in school, but she isn't a good student. In part this is because she doesn't get much sleep, and in part it's because she barely gets any food. Once, Ma steals five dollars from Liz to buy drugs. The five dollars were a gift from Liz's grandmother (Daddy's mother). Liz sees Ma take her money, and screams at her to give it back. Ma ignores her. Later, weeping, Ma throws her drugs down the toilet and tells Liz, "Forgive me."

*Liz doesn't do well in school for reasons largely beyond her control. She has to deal with things that nobody—certainly no children—should have to deal with, such as a parent stealing money. And yet the passage emphasizes that Ma does love Liz and regrets her actions. By now Ma is suffering from the disease of addiction—her physical and psychological need for drugs prevents her from having a happy, normal relationship with her child.*





Ma is attacked in her neighborhood several times, and once a man with a knife robs her. She struggles to find work because she's legally blind. At one point, she gets a job as a bike courier, but has to quit after she gets into not one but two accidents. Daddy is also robbed or mugged many times. He risks his safety to go to dangerous neighborhoods to buy drugs.

Sometimes, Ma talks to Liz while she, Ma, uses drugs. She tells Liz stories about life in Greenwich Village in the 1970s, adding details about how people have tried to have sex with her or get high with her. Liz watches her parents get high, and notices that the drugs will sometimes make them feel great. At other times, she notices that the drugs make her parents relive painful memories and become seriously depressed.

Liz hates getting up in the mornings. Lisa often yells at her to get out of bed and get ready for school. In school, Liz does well in English class: she has already taught herself to read, and she can already do Lisa's assignments easily. But Liz doesn't like school, and hopes that she'll get sick and be sent home early.

By December of first grade, Ma has begun allowing Liz to stay home from school most days. They watch TV together and eat sandwiches on the couch. After many weeks of this, the house gets a letter from the truancy officer. However, Liz is able to destroy the letter before Ma sees it.

Ma begins spending time with a woman named Tara. They get high together, and Ma often brings Liz and Lisa to Tara's apartment. Ma and Tara talk about cocaine, their drug of choice, over and over again. Tara tells Ma about a man named Ron who "takes care of me." The next Sunday, Ma takes Liz and Lisa so that they can all meet Ron together. Ron turns out to be a thin man in his mid-sixties. Lisa hates him right away, even though he smiles and offers the children candy. Tara later tells Ma that Ron buys most of her drugs, and could do the same for Ma.

Eventually, Ron starts picking up Lisa, Liz, and Ma at Tara's apartment every Sunday. Instinctively, Liz knows not to talk about Ron while Daddy is around. Liz also notices that Ron will look "up and down Ma's and Tara's T-shirts."

*In the 1980s, the Bronx is one of the most dangerous places in the entire country, let alone New York. Liz's parents are willing to risk their safety in order to support their drug habits—a sign of how addicted they've become.*



*Ma shares all kinds of stories that aren't appropriate for Liz's ears. Although Liz remains quiet and seemingly passive, she learns a great deal about her parents and, by extension, drug use: above all, she recognizes that drugs don't necessarily bring happiness. She sees past the glamor of drug use to the depression and pain that they often cause.*



*Liz is clearly an intelligent child, but for various reasons that have nothing to do with her abilities (her loneliness, her lice, her bad haircut, etc.), she hates school from the very start.*



*Liz further shows her intelligence by managing to destroy all letters from the truancy officer before her parents read them. Unfortunately, she's using her intelligence for entirely destructive means at this point.*



*Two things to notice here. First, even as a young child, Liz gets a sense for the boredom and repetitiveness of drug addiction: Ma just talks about cocaine all day long. Second, Ma's friends are dependent on other people to fund their drug habits. They're so addicted to cocaine and other drugs that they're willing to do anything to please the people who support their habit.*



*Even though she's still young, Liz seems to understand the sexual component of Ma's relationship with Ron: Ron gives Ma drugs, and in return, it's loosely suggested, Ma sleeps with Ron, or at least allows him to behave lecherously around her.*



One day, Ron drives Liz, Lisa, and Ma out to his house in Queens. For the rest of the day, Lisa and Liz watch TV. Then, at night, Ron wakes up Liz and Lisa and tells them that Ma has left the house. He claims that he's supposed to give Ma's kids a bath immediately. Liz and Lisa strip and get in the bathtub, and Ron orders them to clean their "privates" so that he can see. However, Lisa yells at Ron and tells him to get out of the room. Ron leaves.

Five weeks later, Ma has a mental breakdown, the first in more than six years. Liz has never told anybody, but she believes that Ma's breakdown was her, Liz's, fault. Liz tells Ma about the incident in the bathroom, and Ma later hits Ron in the face. Furious, Ma asks Liz to tell her about "every time Ron made you feel bad." Liz explains that there have been many times when Ron "thrust his fingers inside me." However, when Liz tells Ma about all these times, she omits one key piece of information: she didn't tell Ma because Ron "made things better" for the family.

Following Ma's breakdown—caused, the doctors claim, from Ma's failure to take her "schizophrenia medicine"—Liz and Lisa are taken to the doctor as well. There, Liz remembers a nurse saying, "You should have heard what their mother had to say about their father." The doctors examine Liz and Lisa in the place "no one should touch." Liz adds that this place was one "where, even if no one believed it, Daddy had never touched me." Afterwards, Liz bleeds from between her legs, and she cries, "unable to imagine ever feeling normal again."

## CHAPTER 3: TSUNAMI

After her mental breakdown in 1986, Ma experiences six schizophrenic bouts in four years. She is hospitalized each time, sometimes for several months. Her breakdowns become more frequent and severe as her drug use increases. Ma always returns from the hospital healthier and more energetic than she'd been before her hospitalization. But each time, Ma resumes using drugs and, soon enough, has another relapse.

In Ma's absence, Daddy does a good job of taking care of his children. He learns how to stretch the monthly relief checks as far as possible. He even gives Liz and Lisa a small allowance—although Ma later steals Liz's savings to buy cocaine.

*Ron's presence in the memoir is relatively brief, but it is also probably the most disturbing part of the book, and looms over the rest of Liz's life. Ron is clearly a pedophile, and Liz and Lisa feel helpless against him, since even their own mother depends on him for money and drugs.*



*Perhaps the most tragic passage of the book. Though Liz hasn't discussed it until now, she's aware that Ron raped and abused her multiple times. But the passage also suggests that Liz, even as a little girl, believes that there's an "exchange" going on: she believes that, in return for abusing her, Ron will make her family happy by giving Ma drugs. It is heartbreaking, and disturbing, that a child would be pressured to think in such terms. But throughout the memoir, Liz encounters many different versions of the same scenario, in which a financially independent man supports a woman with food, money, shelter, or drugs, in return for a degree of sexual "ownership."*



*While describing the aftermath of Ma's mental breakdown, Liz specifically denies that her father ever abused her. Liz projects an overwhelming sense of guilt in this passage: even though she's done absolutely nothing wrong, she—like so many victims of sexual abuse—blames herself for her own pain, and even for her mother's mental breakdown. Crucially, her first period also comes during this time of incredible trauma, forever associating her growing sexuality with abuse and suffering.*



*Ma falls into an endless pattern of drug use, breakdown, recovery, and relapse. (It's worth emphasizing that this cycle is fueled by her own excessive use of drugs, rather than by Liz and her report of Ron's abuse, as Liz seems on some level to fear.)*



*Although Daddy is addicted to drugs, he still has the intelligence and motivation to take care of his family. At the most basic level, Daddy seems to be a talented man and a good father, whose addiction keeps getting in the way of his potential.*



In 1990, Ma and Daddy are at a low point in their relationship—not coincidentally, a time when they’re using more drugs than usual. They shout at each other, and Ma accuses Daddy of being “conniving.” Liz doesn’t know whether or not to believe Ma: maybe she’s right, but maybe she’s just sick.

Liz says that she still thinks about a faint memory of Daddy. In this memory, Liz is about six years old. Daddy is walking by a park with Liz and Lisa when, suddenly, he turns away. Daddy tells Lisa to take Liz into the park, where he’s noticed a teenaged girl named Meredith. Lisa leads Liz by this teenager without saying anything. Daddy never talks about Meredith again, but Lisa later tells Liz that Meredith is Daddy’s daughter from a previous relationship, who Daddy abandoned when she was only two years old. Moving forward, Liz often feels that Daddy is “mysterious.”

In 1990, Ma begins sleeping on the couch instead of with Daddy. Sometimes, when Ma and Daddy fight, Lisa and Liz lock themselves in their separate rooms. Liz reads her father’s detective books, and in this way she becomes a good reader. Even though she isn’t going to school, she finds she can pass her year-end exams and thus qualify to move on to the next grade.

With home life so repetitive, Liz looks for distractions outside the home. Since 1987, Liz has been friends with two brothers named Rick Hernandez and Danny Hernandez. Rick and Danny sometimes invite Liz to their house. Their mother is a kind woman, also named Liz (to keep things straight, we’ll call her Liz Hernandez). Instinctively, Liz knows not to tell her parents much about her friendships, and especially about her relationship with Liz Hernandez. Getting joy from someone else’s family always feels like “a betrayal.”

One day, Liz, Rick, and Danny make a “torch” for themselves by lighting a branch on fire, and then go into an old shed near the local nursing home. They accidentally set fire to the shed, and within a few minutes, the fire department arrives to put out the blaze.

Liz loves horsing around with Rick and Danny, and she’s always lonely when she returns to her own home. One night when Liz returns, Ma tells her that Daddy is “not a caring man.” Liz tries to convince Ma that Daddy loves her, but nothing works. Privately, Liz guesses that it won’t be long before Ma returns to the hospital.

*Liz draws a clear connection between drug use and the breakdown of her parents’ relationship, suggesting that drugs both cause and exacerbate ill feelings between Ma and Daddy.*



*As Liz learns more about her father, she begins to distrust him and even become afraid of him. That Daddy would have a child and then abandon her suggests that he’s an unreliable person, and not the kind of father with whom Liz can have a close, loving relationship.*



*Miraculously, Liz continues to educate herself even while her parents are fighting and, presumably, barely taking care of her. While she’s set back by her poverty, malnutrition, and lack of sleep, Liz is obviously a highly intelligent girl.*



*It’s interesting that Liz keeps quiet about her friendship with the Hernandezes: at least for now, she senses that she has an obligation to remain loyal to her biological family, rather than seeking out a new maternal figure in Liz Hernandez.*



*Liz and her friends get into trouble in the neighborhood, although, it would seem, they’re never punished for burning down a shed. (It’s worth noting that, at this time, there were lots of larger buildings burning down in the Bronx, since many desperate people tried to collect fire insurance by burning down their own property).*



*In another reversal of parental roles, Liz, the young child, comforts her own mother, not the other way around. Even though she’s still young, Liz seems preternaturally wise. Years of taking care of herself and other people have made her unusually mature.*



One day, Liz hears a knock on the door. Ma opens it and finds a young man standing outside. To Liz's surprise, Lisa greets the man, Matt, by name and invited him into the living room. Liz realizes that this man is a representative from the Encyclopedia Britannica company—a few weeks ago, Lisa saw a commercial advertising two free volumes of the encyclopedia, and it appears that she called the company. Matt proceeds to give a lengthy presentation to the entire family. Liz is baffled—why would their family need to learn about history or science when it can't even find food every day? In the end, the family never even receives its two free volumes of the encyclopedia.

Shortly afterwards, Ma is committed to the hospital yet again. Bored and desperate for food, Liz meets up with a friend of Rick and Danny's named Kevin, who claims he could find Liz some "odd jobs." Liz learns that the job involves pumping gas for customers near the Bronx Zoo, and then begging for a tip. Over the course of the day, Liz learns how to pump gas and ends up making twenty dollars—a lot of money for her. She learns how to be confident and look the drivers right in the eye until they agree to give her money. She wonders "what other opportunities were out there for me."

The next day, Liz goes out to Fordham, hoping to find more work. She walks down the Grand Concourse, asking for jobs at the different stores. Each time, the owners turn her away, pointing out that she's far too young. Eventually, she returns to pumping gas. By afternoon, she's made another twenty dollars. She begins to feel invincible—she imagines buying her own bus ticket and traveling far away.

At the end of the day, Liz goes into a grocery store and decided to "take things," as she's done many times before with Rick and Danny. But then she notices the checkout area. After watching carefully, she realizes that she can stand behind a cash register and collect tips from the customers. She takes her place, and nobody stops her. She works quickly to bag customers' groceries, and collects tips in return. She feels very proud of herself. At the end of the day, however, she slips a small container of cheese and crackers into her pocket and walks out with it.

Liz gets a call from Ma, who's currently in the hospital. Ma complains that the hospital is harsh—she hates not being able to smoke or use drugs. When visiting Ma in the hospital, Liz hates the nurses for the way they speak to Ma—as if she were a small child.

*It's a mark of Liz's changing view of education that, in this passage, she can't yet see the purpose of owning a set of free encyclopedias (when later she comes to work incredibly hard to get into Harvard). It's not that Liz isn't interested in learning about the world; rather, she believes that the most practical and, ultimately, most interesting knowledge isn't found in a textbook. Liz is obviously a highly intelligent kid, but for the time being she doesn't grasp the point of a formal education—she's too busy focusing on survival.*



*Instead of continuing to depend on her parents' money (i.e., government relief checks, which her parents blow on drugs), Liz empowers herself by finding her own "job." As the passage shows, she develops self-confidence as a result of her work, and begins to realize that she has more agency and opportunity than she previously believed.*



*Liz encounters some adversity while trying to make money, but she doesn't give up; instead, she keeps searching, and, when she can't find a better job indoors, returns to the job she did before. A combination of curiosity, desperation, and innate ambition inspires her to make her own money.*



*One interesting thing to notice about this passage is that Liz behaves responsibly and irresponsibly at the same time: she does honest work in return for money, but she also breaks the law by stealing food. In a way, Liz is "dipping her toe" into making an honest living: she works hard but also commits a minor crime (and she's committed similar minor crimes in previous chapters).*



*Liz is concerned for her mother and tries to respect her dignity—although, arguably, Liz herself has treated mother like a small child earlier in this very chapter.*



Liz sometimes watches Lisa put on a bra. This fascinates Liz: Liz is young and boyish, and sometimes people call her a tomboy. She doesn't feel like a boy, but she doesn't feel she has anything in common with "girls who wore frilly dresses," either.

*Echoing some of the stereotypes that her father brought up in the previous chapter, Liz focuses on being independent, hard-working, and tough—characteristics that are sometimes coded male, hence her reputation for being a tomboy.*



One night shortly after Ma returns from the hospital, she comes back to the apartment late at night, waking up Liz. She complains to Liz that "this guy," a local drug dealer, has refused to take Lisa's winter coat in return for some drugs, instead telling her, "Go back to your kids." Ma begins going to Narcotics Anonymous meetings. But she keeps selling her children's things for cocaine.

*This is arguably the low-point in Ma's relationship with Liz: she's so desperate for cocaine that she's willing to endanger her child (you can't get by without a warm coat in New York City) just to have something to sell for drugs. Even Ma's drug dealer feels that he can't accept such a payment, and shames Ma for her behavior.*



Money continues to be scarce for the family. Liz tries to go back to the grocery store again, but she always finds that the checkout stands are full. One night, Liz stays up late working on a diorama for school. In the middle of the night, she wakes up to the sound of Ma crying. Liz begins to hug Ma and comfort her, which she's used to doing. Suddenly, Ma tells her, "I'm sick, I have AIDS." Even after Ma insists that she'll be fine, Liz knows the truth: Ma is going to die soon. Furious, she smashes her beautiful diorama to pieces.

*Echoing her behavior in previous chapters, Liz seems preternaturally wise: she grasps that her mother is going to die without her mother explicitly saying so. Additionally, the passage emphasizes the conflict between Liz's home life and her academic career: she can't flourish in school because her home situation is so stressful and unreliable.*



## CHAPTER 4: UNRAVELING

By the time Liz turns twelve, she and the rest of her family have learned to live "on entirely different continents ... detached and floating so independently from one another that I worried we might never come together again." Liz spends most of her time pumping gas or hanging out with her friends.

*Liz continues to be strong and independent, but her independence comes at a price: she spends barely any time with her family, and, furthermore, doesn't seem to miss them much.*



Ma begins spending more time with a man named Leonard Mohn. He and Ma pop pills, which Leonard procures with the money Ma and Daddy give him. Liz despises Leonard, and Leonard seems to hate her in return. Once, Liz overhears Leonard telling Ma, "The good years are all gone before forty anyway," to which Ma tearfully replies, "I know [...] We'll never be old." After Leonard enters the picture, Ma begins getting high more often, to the point where her entire body becomes covered in needle marks.

*The passage suggests that Ma, recognizing that she's going to die soon, begins using drugs even more often than she did before her diagnosis: she thinks AIDS gives her license to "live life to the fullest," which, in her mind, means ingesting lots of cocaine.*



Liz barely goes to school. But she reads Daddy's books, and is smart enough to pass her year-end exams without going to class. More often she spends her weekdays hanging out with Rick and Danny, riding the subway across New York.

*Liz is clearly intelligent, as evidenced by her reading habits, but she decided early on that school isn't worth her time, so she spends her days having fun in the streets and on the subway.*



One day, the truancy officer, Ms. Cole, visits Liz’s home and asks her why she hasn’t been going to school. Liz is confused: she wonders why Ms. Cole doesn’t ask Liz parents some other questions—why there’s no food in the house, why Ma is on drugs, etc. The officer tells Liz that if she doesn’t start attending school, she’ll have to go to another home—a harsh, lonely place.

*As Liz suggests, the truancy officer is so limited in her view—or doesn’t care much about the situations her job takes her into—that she can’t appreciate the root cause of Liz’s truancy: in other words, she can’t appreciate that Liz has little interest in school because her family life is in ruins.*



That night, Leonard Mohn comes by and he and Ma stay up late, getting high and talking. Liz overhears Ma talking about a man named Brick who she is sleeping with. Leonard encourages Ma to spend time with this other man, saying, “You deserve better.” Liz is furious: Leonard smiles in Daddy’s face and yet behind his back tells Ma to find someone better. In the two years since Ma was diagnosed with AIDS, things haven’t been the same between Liz and Ma: Liz finds it harder to love her.

*Although Liz has a conflicted relationship with her father, she despises Leonard for acting hypocritically around Daddy. Notice also, that Liz seems to blame herself for not loving her mother after her AIDS diagnosis. But, based on what Liz has already written, it would seem that Ma is distancing herself from her daughter just as quickly as Liz is distancing herself from her mother: she’s using more drugs and seems to neglect her children more often.*



A month later, Ma takes Liz to meet Brick. Brick is a former officer in the Navy, Ma claims, and he works in a “fancy Manhattan art gallery.” Brick turns out to be a big, bald, quiet man. He’s clearly attracted to Ma, and Liz doesn’t trust him—she’s always suspicious of strange men, since they remind her of Ron.

*Liz’s traumatic experiences with Ron have clearly left their mark on her view of the world: she regards men as menacing.*



Ma and Liz spend the day with Brick. From time to time, Brick goes into an alleyway to drink from a large bottle of beer. Ma explains that Brick needs the beer to calm his nerves. Liz sees Ma running her hands over Brick, and realizes that in her entire life, she’s only seen Ma and Daddy kiss twice.

*Although Brick doesn’t seem to be a cocaine addict like Ma, Liz suggests that he’s an alcoholic (which is itself a drug addiction). Also, Liz is exposed to the uncomfortable sight of her mother flirting with another man—which is disorienting not simply because Liz hasn’t seen Ma and Daddy show much physical affection, but also because Ma and Daddy are still living together.*



After saying goodbye to Brick, Liz tells Ma that she doesn’t want to see Brick anymore. Ma hesitates and then tells Liz that she’s been trying to get off drugs. Liz wonders if Ma is “serious this time.” She tells Ma not to bring drugs into the house, adding, “It’s simple if you really want that.” Ma points out that Daddy will continue bringing drugs to the house, but adds that she’s thinking of leaving him for good. Liz protests that she doesn’t want to leave Daddy, and Ma replies that she’ll give Daddy a chance to get clean, adding that she hopes Daddy will stop using drugs one day. But secretly, both Liz and Ma know that Daddy will never stop using.

*Liz desperately wants to believe that her mother will get clean, especially since, on the surface, this should be as simple as no longer bringing drugs home. But Liz has seen Ma try and fail to “get clean” too many times to be one hundred percent convinced. Liz knows that Daddy will continue using drugs around Ma. This would mean that, as Ma herself suggests, Ma will continue using drugs, too. By the same token, Ma’s claim that she’ll give Daddy a chance to get clean suggests that she’s not all that serious about getting clean herself—instead, she’s passing on that responsibility to her partner. That’s what’s so heartbreaking about this section: Liz wants Ma to stop using drugs, but even as a child she seems to intuit how unlikely this is.*



Liz passes the sixth grade and proceeds to junior high, much to her surprise. Liz's family doesn't attend her graduation. A few weeks later, Ma calls to tell Liz that she's moving in with Brick, and that she wants Liz to come with her. Lisa goes with Ma, but Liz chooses to stay with Daddy.

*It's another sign of the distance between Liz and her family that they don't attend her graduation. Also, it's in character for Lisa to move in with Brick before Liz does so: Liz has usually accepted what's given to her without complaint, whereas Lisa has usually been more interested in finding something better.*



Soon after starting junior high, Liz gets a call from Ma, explaining that she hasn't been using cocaine and that she loves Brick's apartment. Meanwhile, Liz's life with Daddy is sad. Daddy doesn't complain about Ma leaving, but he continues to use drugs every day. Liz finds an old photograph of her parents kissing—"the single greatest act of affection I had ever witnessed between my parents."

*Even after years of living with Ma, Daddy seems strangely indifferent to Ma's departure: his priority, as it has been for a long time, is getting high. Liz underscores this point by contrasting Daddy's indifference with the affection for Ma he shows in the photograph: it would seem that Ma and Daddy did love each other at one point, even if they don't anymore.*



Liz finds old photographs of her father from when he lived in San Francisco. In the photographs, he looks very serious and intelligent. She also finds old letters from her grandmother, informing Daddy that she's wondering how long he'll be in California. Finally, she finds a photograph of a little girl in a pink dress, with the name "Meredith" scrawled on the back. Liz is terrified by the idea that her father could abandon one of his own children. Liz finds one more photograph, which shows Daddy kissing a man—the name "Walter" is scrawled on the back. Liz begins to cry. She wonders if Daddy ever loved Ma, and if he gave Ma AIDS. In the following days, Liz begins avoiding Daddy whenever possible.

*Liz accepts some harsh truths about Daddy in this scene. Though she already knew about Daddy's abandoned child, she seems to realize, as if for the first time, that Daddy could easily abandon her, too. Liz also raises the possibility that Daddy was gay or bisexual, which might in turn suggest that he contracted AIDS (a disease whose victims at the time were predominately gay—AIDS was even termed the "gay plague" in the early 1980s) and gave it to Ma. But of course, these are only possibilities: Ma easily could have gotten AIDS from sharing infected needles with other addicts, or through heterosexual sex.*



Shortly after Liz turns thirteen, Child Protective Services finally takes her into custody for her truancy. Daddy signs the papers turning Liz over to the state of New York. Authorities take Liz to a hospital, where doctors examine her. The doctors find bruises on Liz's body, and ask her how she got them. Liz honestly explains that she got them while playing.

*For the second time in the book, authorities loosely raise the possibility that Daddy physically abused Liz, only to have Liz fervently deny that such a thing ever happened. Liz appears to include these two passages in her memoir in order to emphasize that Daddy, for all his other faults, never hurt his children. (Although it's worth noting that victims of child abuse often repress their experiences.)*



The authorities take Liz to a building called Saint Anne's Residence, a "diagnostic residential center." In reality, it's a place where girls with a history of "behavior problems" are taken to be evaluated before they're sent off to foster homes. Liz is miserable during her time at Saint Anne's. On her first night, she experiences a searing pain in her abdomen, and the other girls laugh at her.

*As much as Liz dislikes her home, Saint Anne's is much worse. She receives no sympathy from the other children, even when she's in great pain—at least Daddy and Ma sometimes tried to take care of their daughter.*



A doctor named Eva Morales meets with Liz and asks her about her life. Morales gives Liz condescending advice, saying, “Consistency brings progress.” Liz learns to act responsive and agreeable around Morales, knowing that if she plays along, she’ll be able to leave sooner.

*Liz doesn’t seem to get much out of her talks with Dr. Morales: Morales speaks in buzzwords and empty slogans. However, Liz does become adept at telling her mentor what she wants to hear—a skill that later serves her well.*



Over the next week, Liz gets in trouble with Auntie, the woman who runs Saint Anne’s. The other girls blame Liz for putting bleach in a girl’s shampoo bottle—something Liz would never do—and Auntie punishes her by sending her to the “quiet room,” which is basically solitary confinement. Later, she’s moved to a room with Talesha, a fifteen-year-old girl who quickly opens up to Liz about her baby son. Late at night, Talesha cries in her sleep and tells Liz that she misses her child. When Talesha is fast asleep, Liz cries, too, and thinks that she misses her home and family.

*Although Liz endures a lot of pain and unfairness during her time at Saint Anne’s, she makes one friend: Talesha. Like Liz, Talesha has been exposed to sex at an unusually young age. Although Liz and Talesha are different in many ways, they form a strong emotional bond, and Liz seems sympathetic to Talesha’s situation. However, Liz herself doesn’t open up to Talesha: she’s still a private person and she guards her emotions very carefully.*



Liz is discharged from Saint Anne’s in the spring. On her last day, she embraces Talesha, and they wish each other good luck. Liz is about to be taken to live with Ma, Lisa, and Brick, but she’s worried that this home will turn out to be “another place I didn’t want to be.”

*Liz looks to the future with great concern: she doesn’t want to be in Saint Anne’s, but nothing about Brick’s home makes her think she’ll be happy there, either.*



## CHAPTER 5: STUCK

Liz arrives at Brick’s apartment, where Ma embraces her. The truancy officers tell Liz that she’s been sent to live with Ma as a test—Liz needs to go to school from now on, or she’ll have to go back to Saint Anne’s. Liz is scheduled to start the eighth grade soon.

*Liz has a new, negative incentive to attend school: she needs to show up so that she doesn’t get sent back to a cruel place like Saint Anne’s.*



Liz’s new school is divided into different “segments,” based on academic ability. Ma has instructed the counselors to place Liz in the most advanced classes, but the counselors instead place Liz in a class that she describes as “solid.” Afterwards, Liz and Ma walk through the park near school. Liz offers Ma a dandelion and tells her to make a wish. Ma laughs and does so. Secretly, Liz wishes for Ma to get well again—she never learns what Ma wished for.

*Liz isn’t placed in the most advanced class: even though she’s smart, her counselors think that she’d be better off in an easier class (and they might be right, given that Liz has missed a lot of school). The passage also emphasizes the emotional gap between Liz and her mother: Liz clearly cares about Ma, but Ma’s own thoughts and feelings remain somewhat mysterious to Liz.*



Liz’s new middle school class is made up of many students who’ve been together since the sixth grade. Liz is an outsider. However, a Latina girl named Samantha and her friend, Bobby, are nice to her. Over the next few weeks, Samantha, or Sam, shows Liz around the school. Liz admires Sam for her adventurousness and her confidence. She also notices that lots of boys flirt with Sam. For the first time in her life, Liz begins to look forward to going to school.

*Liz’s earliest experiences in middle school emphasize how her life is changing. She’s making new friends and, for the first time in her life, pushing herself to go to school. She’s also becoming more aware of other students’ sexuality and attractiveness—and, presumably, of her own.*





Back at home, Brick goes to work every day while Ma spends much of her time drinking at a local bar. Lisa becomes increasingly irritable around Liz. Liz notices that her sister spends a lot of time trying to look pretty, putting on makeup and trying on various outfits.

Sam introduces Liz to MTV: they watch footage of Kurt Cobain, and Liz gradually becomes more comfortable saying things like, “I would so do him.” The two friends spend almost every day together, and promise to remain friends until they’re both old ladies. They plan elaborate road trips for after they graduate high school, and talk about becoming Hollywood screenwriters. Liz notices that Sam, while adventurous and wild, can also be sweet and gentle. During sleepovers, Liz sometimes hears Sam quietly crying.

One day, Brick and Ma get in a fight because all the forks are dirty. Brick becomes so furious that he hits Ma in the face with a roll of paper towels. Then, Brick pushes Liz out of the room and slams the door on her foot. Liz begins to see the truth: Brick is almost as crazy as Grandma. He becomes furious over minuscule things like dirty forks.

Ma gets sicker every day, and grows weak and quiet. Sometimes, she bursts into tears for no apparent reason. Liz finds it hard to know how to deal with her mother in these situations: she has no idea what to say. Instead, she spends more time away from home, with Sam and Bobby. She also stops going to school, but manages to erase any voicemails from the truancy officer, so that neither Brick nor Ma know that she’s been cutting class.

Liz learns that Daddy is going to lose his apartment. Liz and Sam go to the apartment, looking to retrieve some of Liz’s old things. Liz is ashamed to show Sam her apartment, since it’s so filthy, but Sam tells her, “You know I love your white ass, don’t even sweat it.”

Liz and Sam arrive at the apartment, only to find that it’s been boarded up. She wonders where Daddy has gone, or if he’s even alive—she’s visited only once since being moved to live with Brick and Ma. Later on, Liz learns that Daddy had fallen behind on rent and gone to live in a homeless shelter. All of Liz’s stuff was thrown into a dumpster.

*Liz continues to feel alienated from the other members of her family: she’s uncomfortable opening up to them or being vulnerable in any way.*



*Sam, Liz’s best friend, is an important influence on Liz in many ways. Here, Sam helps Liz become more comfortable talking and thinking about sexual matters. (Kurt Cobain was the lead singer of the ‘90s grunge band Nirvana, and a major sex symbol at the time.) Sam is confident but also curiously vulnerable, and Liz seems to appreciate this about Sam, perhaps because she, Liz, is similar.*



*Liz finds it impossible to get along with Brick—the man who, for all intents and purposes, has become her father. He’s violent and uncontrollable, and quite understandably, she doesn’t feel safe around him.*



*While Liz is becoming more mature and confident, Ma grows increasingly weak and unstable as a result of the onset of AIDS. However, Liz also seems to “regress” here too—in order to spend more time with her new friends, she cuts class again, even though she’s risking being sent back to Saint Anne’s.*



*Liz and Sam have an important bonding moment: Sam shows that she’ll never judge Liz for her impoverished family. One of the memoir’s recurring themes is Liz’s desire to be treated as her own person, so it makes sense that Liz would be grateful to Sam for loving her no matter what.*



*Liz has grown so disconnected from her father that she doesn’t even know where he’s living or what’s become of their old possessions.*



In the spring, Liz graduates from junior high, having gone to school just enough to pass her classes. Ma attends Liz's graduation, and—much to Liz's surprise—she seems genuinely happy and proud of her daughter.

*Liz continues to scrape by in school, proving that she's a bright kid, even if she rarely attends. Ma seems to making more of an effort to involve herself in Liz's life, perhaps because she senses that she won't be around much longer.*



Liz starts high school and Ma's health deteriorates ever further, to the point where she vomits many times a day. One day, Liz visits Daddy at his homeless shelter. He seems pretty cheerful, explaining that he gets three meals a day. He also brags about watching *Jeopardy!* and knowing all the answers. Liz doesn't give Daddy much information about her life: at this point, she doesn't feel comfortable opening up to him.

*Liz takes the first steps toward having a relationship with her father. She's not close with Daddy, but she's making an effort to spend some time with him. The passage also reiterates that Daddy, for all his faults, is an exceptionally smart man, and might have had a successful career had he not become an addict.*



Liz continues skipping school. She intends to go to high school for the first two weeks, but quickly gives in and starts cutting class every day. She breaks Brick's answering machine to ensure that the truancy officer never gets in touch with him. On her own time, however, Liz learns a lot about the world. She makes new friends, including a girl named Jamie, at whose house she sometimes crashes. She, Bobby, and Sam perform a strange "experiment"—they microwave a light bulb, and learn that this results in an explosion of bright neon lights.

*Although Liz doesn't go to school, she never stops learning. Every day she spends with Bobby and Sam is full of new "lessons"—even if these lessons are usually pretty unconventional. More importantly, Liz learns the social skills that she later uses to survive: in particular, she makes friends, and later relies on them for housing.*



Liz spends her days exploring New York and having fun with her friends. But sooner or later, Ma's illness pulls her back to earth.

*Liz explores New York in part because she loves her friends but in part because she's trying to forget about her mother's illness.*



## CHAPTER 6: BOYS

Sam and Liz make a new friend: a boy named Carlos Marcano. Carlos is handsome and confident, and the first time he ever meets Liz, he tells her that he's taking her "out to eat." Liz is flattered, and invites Sam along, too.

*Liz is attracted to Carlos because of his looks and confidence, but also, it would seem, because of his generosity and financial independence.*



Carlos turns out to be a funny, charming boy. He tells elaborate stories about his adventures on the streets, and claims to have been in lots of fights. He also admits that his father died of AIDS, something that makes Liz feel close to him. Carlos claims that his mother is an addict who never really cared about him.

*Liz senses that she and Carlos have a special connection because they both have family members who've suffered from AIDS and drug addiction.*



Liz is infatuated with Carlos, and for the next few months she tries to pursue him by any means necessary. One night, Carlos tells Liz that she's not like the other girls he's met—he feels that he can trust her. They hug, but nothing else happens.

*Liz likes Carlos a lot, and in return, Carlos seems to think that Liz is special, too. But it's unclear how much of a connection they really have; Liz doesn't seem to know all that much about Carlos.*



Looking back, Liz often wonders how she managed to compartmentalize her life during her late teen years. She had to deal with a mother who was dying of AIDS, the truancy officer, and her infatuation with Carlos.

One night, Carlos visits Liz at her apartment, and sees Ma suffering from the symptoms of AIDS. Instead of being repulsed by Ma's condition, or going blank, as Liz often does, Carlos takes Ma's hand and explains that he's going to "help Liz help you." Carlos tells Ma that Liz cares about her, and adds that he wished he'd cared about his own mother as much as Liz cares about hers. Ma begins with weep. She says, "I love Liz, she's my baby." Later that night, Liz and Carlos kiss, and they admit that they love each other.

Soon after Liz starts dating Carlos, Sam starts dating a twenty-year-old named Oscar. Carlos talks about inheriting money after his mother dies, and he suggests that the four of them move away somewhere. Sam also begins spending more time at Liz's apartment, even though Brick sometimes catches her sleeping over and kicks her out in the middle of the night. Other times, the friends spend the night at Bobby's house.

One night, after Brick yells at Sam for sleeping over with Liz, Liz and Sam decide to leave their homes for good. Liz packs some clothes and the **photograph** of Ma as a teenager. She's ready to leave Brick forever.

*For Liz, simply getting through her teen years is a major achievement, even if it doesn't feel that way at the time: she has to juggle her friends, school, emotions, and more.*



*Liz portrays Carlos as a sensitive, compassionate individual who helps her express her sincere love for her mother. In no small part, Liz loves Carlos for this reason: unlike many of the other men she's met, Carlos seems genuinely concerned for her well-being. He also seems to uniquely understand her situation and doesn't judge her for it.*



*As Liz gravitates toward Carlos, she also distances herself from Brick and Brick's home. She feels that she can be independent and get by perfectly well without Brick's support. The problem is, she's just transferring her dependence onto other people instead.*



*The fact that Liz packs her mother's photograph suggests that she's turning her back on Brick, but not her entire family. Even if Liz is leaving Ma as she is right now, she still wants to remember Ma as she was before, and to retain a connection to her.*



## CHAPTER 7: BREAKING NIGHT

Immediately after the events of the last chapter, Sam and Liz walk down Bedford Park Boulevard late at night. They spend their first night sleeping in the park by the New York Botanical Garden.

The next morning, Liz and Sam go to Bobby's house. Bobby lets them inside and tells them to be out by three-thirty, when his mother gets home. The girls shower and nap. They talk about moving out to California sometime soon. In the meantime, Carlos promises to stick with them until his "money came through."

*At times, Sam and Liz have to sleep outside in the city of New York—a dangerous thing to do in the Bronx in the early 1990s.*



*For the most part, Sam and Liz manage to persuade their many friends to let them sleep over, so that they don't have to spend the night in parks. Carlos's insistence on his coming inheritance starts to seem increasingly suspicious.*



Liz and Sam spend their nights in the Village (a neighborhood in Manhattan). Sometimes they steal food from diners and sometimes they ask strangers for money. Carlos introduces the girls to people in the Village, who give them food and advice for free. However, Liz notices that many of Carlos's friends are beautiful women, and the more beautiful they are, the less likely Carlos is to introduce them to her.

Liz and Sam spend time in the New York Public Library, and Liz enjoys reading the books. She sleeps in friends' apartments. However, some of her friendships become strained when her friends realize that she only wants to hang out when she needs a place to sleep.

Liz turns sixteen, and her friends buy her an ice cream cake to celebrate. That night, Liz can't stop thinking about her parents and Lisa. She also begins to worry when Carlos spends longer amounts of time away from her. Sam advises her to give Carlos some space. Liz begins to worry that, without Carlos, she and Sam will be helpless.

Late at night, Liz calls Brick's home. Lisa answers the phone and explains that Liz should come home: Ma "doesn't have that long."

The next night, Liz sees Carlos for the first time in a while. Carlos is wearing new clothes, and he has a lot of money. He orders food for Liz and Sam, and kisses Liz as Liz chews her meal. "The taste," Liz writes, "mingled uncomfortably with his words."

## CHAPTER 8: THE MOTELS

Liz, Sam, and Carlos leave the city and check into a motel. The weather is getting cold, so they enjoy taking hot showers. However, when Carlos is talking on his new cell phone, Liz tells Sam that they need to be careful: "This whole thing feels shaky."

*Not unlike her own mother before her, Liz runs away from her family and winds up spending most of her time with her friends in Greenwich Village. Liz begins to grow suspicious of Carlos, who perhaps isn't as compassionate and sincere as he'd originally seemed.*



*Liz continues to show signs of great intelligence: she reads, even if she doesn't go to her English classes. But she also relies too heavily on her friends, showing that she's still largely dependent on others for her food and shelter.*



*Liz begins to distrust Carlos even more, and partly as a result, she becomes nostalgic for her family. She also becomes uneasy with being so dependent on Carlos (or anyone else)—Liz has always tried to be an independent person, and she doesn't like that Carlos has power over her because he buys her meals.*



*Notice that Liz doesn't record her own reaction to Lisa's call: she seems hesitant to return to see her mother.*



*Liz seems to be turning her back on her family, even though she's uneasy with Carlos, too. Her description of her kiss suggests that there's something wrong in their relationship: the reality of being his girlfriend doesn't measure up to her hopes and wishes.*



*Liz becomes increasingly skeptical of Carlos, both because she's noticed his behavior around other women and because she doesn't like being so dependent on him.*



Liz asks Carlos why he disappeared for so long. Carlos explains that he needed to clear his head after collecting his father's inheritance. He promises that he, Liz, and Sam will get an apartment soon, and shows Liz a newspaper on which he's scrawled some phone numbers, supposedly for real estate leads. Liz begins to feel guilty for doubting Carlos's intentions.

*Liz grew up around parents who disappeared for long periods of time, and so she has no trouble seeing some of the red flags with Carlos: he, too, disappears for long periods, always making strange excuses. However, Liz also begins to doubt her own doubts, since she's still attracted to Carlos.*



The three friends go out for a night on the town, and Carlos charms Liz and Sam by ordering them expensive food from a local dim sum restaurant. Late at night, Sam goes to visit Oscar. Alone, Liz loses her virginity to Carlos. Afterwards, however, she realizes that "being with him was emptier than I'd expected, more function than joy."

*Liz and Carlos's relationship becomes more serious, but it doesn't bring Liz any greater sense of emotional closeness: instead, she continues to doubt him and suspect that he's hiding something from her.*



Over the next few weeks, Carlos becomes the leader of his group, in large part because he's newly wealthy. He makes long, secretive phone calls, and women, including Liz's friend Jamie, flirt with him. Liz begins to suspect that Carlos's money comes from dealing drugs. She also begins to suspect that he's cheating on her.

*As time goes on, Carlos's behavior becomes increasingly erratic. Partly because Liz begins to doubt Carlos's romantic intentions, she also begins to doubt some other aspects of his story, such as his claim that he's inherited lots of money.*



Once, Liz calls Brick's home, and Ma picks up the phone. Her voice is faint and confused, suggesting that she has dementia from the final stages of AIDS. Lisa takes the phone and angrily tells Liz that she should spend more time with Ma.

*Although Liz is becoming more and more distanced from Carlos, she continues to also distance herself from her biological family, even her dying mother.*



Suspicious, Liz calls one of the real estate numbers Carlos wrote down. When she does, a woman picks up the phone: she says that she's a waitress at a pool hall. Liz begins to cry. The next day, Liz thinks about confronting Carlos. But when he smiles at her, she decides to ignore her anger and "go with the flow."

*Finally, Liz has concrete proof that Carlos has lied to her. Even now, however, she continues lying to herself, hoping that everything will work out all right. It's devastating to accept yet another disappointment and betrayal in her life.*



Carlos, Liz, and Sam go to a nearby café. As they eat, Liz notices her own grandmother walk into the café. Frantic, she tells everyone at the table to duck down—if Grandma sees Liz, she'll report her as a runaway. But as Liz peeks at Grandma, she realizes that Grandma is confused and frail-looking. The sight makes her deeply sad. Depressingly, Sam points out that today is Thanksgiving.

*Grandma's presence in the café offers a symbolic reminder that Liz can never outrun her past or her family. Although she tries to create a new "family," which includes Carlos and Sam, some part of her will always miss her real family (especially on a day like Thanksgiving, a holiday traditionally associated with family celebration).*



Liz calls Lisa, who informs her that Ma is in the hospital. Liz decides to go to the hospital. There, the nurses force her to wear a mask while she visits her mother. This makes Liz think of all the times she watched her mother vomit and cough. In the hospital, Liz greets Ma, who's weak and horribly emaciated. Liz tries to apologize for not visiting earlier, but Ma doesn't respond, and it's unclear if she even knows Liz is there. Lisa walks in, and suddenly, Ma begins to speak "gibberish." Liz tells Ma, "We'll get you all fixed up," and Ma replies, "Okay, Lizzy."

After Ma falls back asleep, Liz leaves the hospital. Lisa can't believe that Liz would leave so abruptly, and begins to sob. Liz just says, "People deal differently," and leaves.

Later that night, Carlos decides to take Liz out to cheer her up. They go to a fancy restaurant, dressed only in their underwear. Carlos has so much money that the servers allow them to stay and order an expensive meal. Liz has a wonderful time laughing with Carlos, but she has to keep telling herself, "He does love you."

For the next three weeks, Liz puts off visiting Ma again. She, Carlos, and Sam stay in a hotel while they look for an apartment. One day, Carlos doesn't come home in the evening. This concerns Liz, because payment is due the next day: she wonders what'll happen if Carlos doesn't show up. The next morning, the hotelkeeper threatens to kick Sam and Liz out of the building unless they come up with some money. Because they have no money of their own, they give the hotelkeeper one of Carlos's gold watches to cover rent for another day.

The next day, Sam and Liz wake up early to the sound of Carlos entering the room. Carlos greets them, but doesn't make eye contact with Sam. Liz demands to know where Carlos was, and he claims he was at a friend's house. When he discovers that Liz and Sam gave away his watch, he becomes furious, kicking the trashcan and punching the wall. Then he passes out on the floor. Sam and Liz notice some white powder in the bathroom, suggesting that Carlos is "on coke."

*Liz finally decides to visit her mother, suggesting that she's no longer trying to run from her past. Tragically, Liz realizes that she's missed out on spending lots of time with her mother, and now Ma is so sick that she doesn't always know who she's talking to.*



*Liz feels compassion for her mother, but she also has mixed feelings. She doesn't want to be around her sister or mother for too long, presumably because she has so many bad memories of them both and wants to escape the toxic environment that she associates with them. Once again Liz appears detached and almost unfeeling, while Lisa is emotional and sentimental.*



*Liz tries to forget about her family and enjoy herself with Carlos. But even when she's having a great time and laughing, she seems to sense that her loving relationship with Carlos is something of an illusion.*



*As Carlos becomes increasingly unpredictable, Liz and Sam become concerned: they have no way of supporting themselves without their benefactor.*



*Carlos clearly knows that he's done something wrong, and seems to feel guilty for doing so. But he's also become less emotionally stable (which, even setting aside the white powder, suggests that he's using a lot of drugs). Clearly, Carlos isn't the charming, gentle man he once was: drugs are ruining his life, and he's even growing violent.*



For the next few days, Liz avoids Carlos whenever possible. She's been trying to escape her drug-addicted parents, only to end up with another drug addict.

*Here, Liz sums up her problem: she's gone out of the frying pan and into the fire, trying to avoid her family only to end up with an arguably more dangerous surrogate family, headed by the volatile Carlos Marcano.*



Then, one morning, Liz gets a call from Lisa: Ma has died. Liz rushes to the hospital, where she finds Daddy. The two of them cry together and feel their "hearts breaking." Liz leaves the hospital and goes to meet Lisa at a diner. When she arrives at the diner and sees her sister, her heart breaks "all over again."

*Liz continues to have conflicted feelings about her mother and her family, but she also loves them, and feels guilty for having spent so much time away from them. Ma's death marks a turning point in Liz's life: she begins to rethink her relationship with her friends and rebuild her relationship with her remaining family members.*



## CHAPTER 9: PEARLS

The chapter begins with a letter Liz writes to Ma after her death. Liz explains that Ma's death prevented Liz from telling her all the things she wanted to say.

*At the time of her mother's death, Liz still has many conflicted feelings: tragically, she never gets a chance to express those feelings out loud.*



Liz compares her relationship with Ma to "how pearls are made." A pearl begins with a small, painful grain of sand that an oyster turns into a beautiful gem in order to protect itself. Liz has done a similar thing: she's buried her painful memories of her family under layers of happiness. Even when Ma died, Liz was far away, enjoying herself.

*Liz has enough self-awareness to acknowledge that she's been trying to run away from her problems. Liz is plainly struggling with her guilt at having been far away during her mother's death.*



Liz feels guilty for being absent when Ma died. She wonders if Ma was afraid as she approached the end of her life: being in a strange place, surrounded by strange people, must have been terrifying.

*Liz's deep compassion for her mother is plain: she imagines herself in her mother's position, and seems to understand the kind of fear and confusion Ma must have experienced.*



Liz tells Ma that Daddy kissed her on the mouth just before Ma's death—then, the nurses scolded him for doing so, since Ma posed a "health hazard." Liz notes that people have always been treated Ma "like something they needed to back away from."

*Where other people see Ma as "just another addict" or "just another AIDS victim," Liz sees her as a gentle, lovable human being—albeit one for whom Liz had other, more complex feelings as well.*



The family buries Ma the day after Christmas. At the funeral, Liz sees Lisa and realizes that her sister has grown into a beautiful woman, just like their mother. Liz wishes that she and Lisa were closer, so that Liz could hug Lisa. And she wishes she could hold Ma.

*In the aftermath of her mother's death, Liz realizes that she's missed out on having a good relationship with her sister, and expresses a desire to strengthen their connection.*



## CHAPTER 10: THE WALL

The week after Liz and her family bury Ma, Liz stops sleeping. She has horrible nightmares. Furthermore, Carlos has begun calling other women on the phone within earshot of Liz, which makes Liz jealous and uncomfortable.

Liz, Carlos, and Sam celebrate New Year's Eve together. The next day—the first day of 1997—Carlos disappears. Afraid that they'll be kicked out, Sam and Liz pack their belongings and leave. Liz goes to stay with her friend Jamie, and that afternoon, Carlos shows up. He looks tired and unshaven, but he claims that he's found a new room where Liz can stay.

Carlos and Liz drive to their new home, a “crash place” motel. Liz suggests that they pick up Sam, but Carlos, who appears to be high on cocaine, claims that he'll get Sam later. The motel is located off the highway, far from the rest of the city, meaning that Liz doesn't have any easy way of leaving the motel without Carlos's car. A few days after moving to the motel, however, Liz learns that a woman has been stabbed outside. Liz realizes, “people could just vanish.” She wonders if something similar could happen to her. She even wonders if Carlos could be capable of hurting her.

Disturbed by the news of the stabbing, Liz walks out of Carlos's motel room and finds a payphone. She calls her friend Jamie and asks if she can stay with her again. She spends the next few days staying with Jamie. During this time, she learns that Sam has been staying at a “group home” in the Bronx. Liz next goes to stay with Bobby, and spends the next few days bouncing between various friends' houses. At Bobby's house, she enjoys spending time with her old friend, as well as the good food. She can't help but notice the contrast between Bobby's healthy, happy face and her own gaunt, despairing face.

In the coming weeks, Liz survives by staying with friends and eating their food. She'll sometimes “panhandle” in Greenwich Village to make her own money. Because she's been taking care of herself for so long, Liz never feels overwhelmed: instead, she's smart and confident. However, she hates being homeless because it proves “how needy I was.” She hates being a burden on her friends and their parents, and she also wonders when she'll wear out her welcome for good.

*Although Liz has become increasingly skeptical of Carlos, she's still living with him. Carlos seems to be growing bolder with his deceptions, almost as if he's trying to see how much he can get away with.*



*Carlos's behavior becomes more erratic, perhaps suggesting that he's doing more cocaine, or simply that he's becoming less interested in taking care of Sam and Liz.*



*In this important section, Liz finally accepts that Carlos can't be trusted. He's getting high constantly, abandons Liz and Sam for days at a time without warning, and experiences sudden mood swings. Liz wonders if, one day, Carlos could become so erratic that he'd try to hurt her. Rather than stick around to find out, she decides to leave Carlos for good on the same day she finds out about the stabbing. It's important to remember that Liz has witnessed first-hand the way that drugs can turn people into monsters: she has no intention of making the same mistake twice.*



*Liz has decided that she can't live with Carlos any longer (in fact, this is the last time she mentions Carlos's name). After moving out of Carlos's motel room, Liz sees more clearly how harmful her time with Carlos had become. She's experienced a lot of pain lately, both from her family and from Carlos, but she seems unwilling to give up. She's also willing to accept help from her friends in order to stay away from toxic environments. The contrast in Liz and Bobby's appearance shows another tragic side effect of a life of poverty—malnourishment, health problems, and depression.*



*Notice, first, that Liz never gives up, even though she's in the particularly unpleasant situation of having to beg for food (after months of eating whatever she liked). Second, Liz doesn't feel comfortable relying on other people—indeed, that's partly the reason why she abandoned Carlos in the first place. She accepts charity because she believes she has no choice, but she wants to achieve financial independence for herself.*





Liz crashes with a friend-of-a-friend named Paige. Paige asks Liz about her plans for the future, and suggests that Liz get her GED (the equivalent of a high school diploma). She also mentions an alternative high school that she attended—"a place like a private school, but for anyone who is really motivated to go, even if they don't have the money."

*Liz's ambition is plain: she wants to achieve a high school degree so that she can live a more successful life. She's finally breaking free of dependence on others and toxic environments, and wants to keep building her independence.*



Liz can see the financial advantage of having a high school diploma. On the other hand, she's seventeen years old and doesn't want to be in school for years. Yet the last time Liz attended school seriously, she scored an 81 percent on a history exam without any kind of studying, and the teacher told Liz that she was a smart girl and could be successful in life. Liz's teachers have often given her this kind of encouragement, but she's never wanted to do the work.

*Liz weighs her options and decides that, as onerous as it would be to still be in high school at the age of 21, her best option is to achieve a high school diploma. She also recognizes that, even if she hasn't done well in school, she's smart, suggesting that she's possessed of a practical kind of self-confidence.*



With Paige's help, Liz calls the number for Paige's school and says that she'd like to come in for an interview. It takes a lot of courage even to do this: Liz has spent her entire life thinking of herself and her friends and family as "different" from rich, smart people. She can't even understand how some people have a savings account, a stable job, or a college degree.

*Attending high school feels strange to Liz, and not just because she's always skipped school. Liz senses that she's going to be living in a different kind of world, in which many of her classmates won't have dealt with the problems Liz has experienced, such as poverty, homelessness, and abuse.*



Liz goes to the school for an interview, sensing that she's going to "the other side of wall," where a totally different group of people lives. Her interview is short and uncomfortable, and the interviewer curtly tells her, "Our spots are limited, thank you for applying."

*Even for Liz to attend an interview for this private high school is a courageous act: she's uncomfortable being around wealthy, privileged people who are utterly unlike her, but she knows that doing so is her best chance at getting a degree.*



Immediately after her interview, Liz weighs her options. She decides to visit another school, the Humanities Preparatory Academy, for another interview. Even though she's tired and just wants to go back to the Bronx, she decides to try another interview.

*Liz pushes herself to succeed, attending another high school interview in spite of the fact that she's so tired. (As we'll see, this split-second decision changes the course of Liz's life, emphasizing the importance of personal motivation.)*



At the time, the Bayard Rustin High School for the Humanities is overcrowded, and the teachers have extremely low morale. However, an English teacher named Perry Weiner is working with other teachers and union organizers to build a smaller school within the school. This school, the Humanities Preparatory Academy (HPA), is designed for troubled students who seem to be on the verge of dropping out. The courses are rigorous, featuring works by famous authors such as Dante and Kafka, and they reflect Weiner's love for teaching and his belief that all students benefit from a great education.

*Liz clearly respects Perry Weiner, and regards his mission—to provide free education to people of all backgrounds and demographics—as very noble.*



Liz is late for her interview at HPA. She sees that all interviewees have been asked to write an essay on one of three words: diversity, community, or leadership. Liz quickly writes a long essay on the theme of diversity, discussing the way people have assumed things about her because of her appearance and her whiteness.

After completing her essay, Liz notices a jovial middle-aged man, who turns out to be Perry Weiner himself. Liz explains to Weiner that she was late to her interview, and apologizes. At first Weiner tells her that she'll need to reschedule, since she missed the essay component of the interview process. But Liz shows Weiner her completed essay. Impressed, Weiner invites Liz to speak to him for ten minutes before he begins teaching.

In Liz's "interview" with Perry Weiner, Weiner barely speaks. For one of the few times in her life, Liz gets a chance to talk without being interrupted or silenced. She becomes emotional and energetic, and Weiner listens closely, asking good questions. At the end of their time, Weiner tells Liz that she should be aware of the realities of HPA: it'll take her years to graduate, and she might not want to be in high school at the age of twenty-one. To her own surprise, Liz tells Perry, "I want to graduate high school. It's just something I have to do." Perry pauses and then says, "Can you get here on time?" Liz smiles and begins to cry. "Absolutely," she says.

Liz brings Daddy to register her for classes at HPA. She hasn't seen her father since Ma's funeral. To hide the fact that she's homeless, Liz decides to concoct a story about how her father is a truck driver who's often away from home, and plans to use a friend's address as her own. Daddy agrees to go along with this story, and he signs all the proper documents at HPA. Liz notices that his hands are shaky. He also forgets his "address," and Liz has to remind him.

After Daddy comes in to HPA, he and Liz catch up. He tells Liz that he's been living in a shelter for a while, and that he gets plenty of food. However, he also asks Liz for some money. She gives him money that she's borrowed from Bobby.

*Liz gets through the HPA interview in typical "Liz" fashion: she doesn't attend the entire interview, but because of her innate intelligence and motivation, she does well enough on the section she does show up for.*



*Perry Weiner is a kind, understanding man, who genuinely believes in the importance of giving anyone a chance. Where Liz's previous interviewer of the day was curt, cold, and inflexible, Perry is compassionate and willing to bend some rules in order to give Liz a good education. At the same time, this scene shows the importance of luck and other people's help in Liz's journey to success—if Perry had rejected Liz for her lateness (a totally understandable reaction for an interviewer), all her hard work would have been for naught.*



*Liz is very grateful to Perry Weiner: even though he could have dismissed Liz for being late to the interview, he gives her a chance to express herself. Liz has always been adept at concealing her feelings—it's a skillset that's sometimes served her well and sometimes gotten her in trouble. But here, seemingly for the first time in years, Liz gets an opportunity to express her thoughts and feelings, culminating in a simple but moving statement.*



*It's interesting that Liz still has to rely on her father for certain things: because she's still a minor, she's not entirely independent of him yet. The passage also suggests that Daddy is now using drugs near-constantly, as evidenced by his shaking hands (often a symptom of people who use a lot of heroin or cocaine, and then stop abruptly).*



*Liz continues taking care of her parents, just as she's done since she was a child.*



In the coming months, Liz tries to prepare for her high school education by getting her official transcript from her old high school. Seeing her old transcript makes her realize that her new transcript, from HPA, is blank. She has a chance to start over again. She remembers waiting in line outside the welfare office with Ma and Lisa. Ma had to prepare the perfect set of documents in order to qualify for welfare; otherwise, she'd be sent home with nothing. Now, Liz sees that she's not so different: all she has to do is get a high school transcript with the right grades. For the first time in her life, she aims to go to school on time, every day.

*In this passage, Liz describes the mindset that will get her through the next two years. Although she's faced with an enormous challenge, she summons the concentration and sheer willpower necessary to achieve her goal. It's also interesting that she summons this willpower by putting herself in her mother's position. For all Liz's frustration with her mother, Ma is one of the most important inspirations in her life (something apparent even in the Prologue).*



## CHAPTER 11: THE VISIT(OR)

Liz looks through the classified ads in the local paper, hoping to find work. She also pays visits to a youth organization in Manhattan called "The Door." The Door is a nonprofit designed to meet "young people's needs." Liz goes there to get food and, sometimes, rest.

*As she begins her high school career for the second time, Liz has to rely on certain charities and nonprofits (another example of how hard work and willpower alone can't always manifest success). Liz visits The Door with the goal of eventually becoming financially independent, but still needs the resources The Door provides to keep going in the present.*



That summer, Liz gets a job working for the New York Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG). Her job is to go door-to-door raising money for environmental causes, of which she earns a small commission. She works alongside a young man named Ken. Ken is very handsome and confident, and Liz has a crush on him.

*Liz goes out of her way to find herself a job. This job allows her to use a skillset she's developed over the last ten years: working quickly, improvising, persuading strangers to part with money, etc.*



On her first day, Liz surprises herself by raising \$240. After that, she's assigned to wealthier neighborhoods, where donations are much bigger. She earns a lot of money, for a very simple reason: unlike most of her fellow canvassers, she depends on this job for her food and her shelter. Canvassing in wealthy neighborhoods also exposes Liz to the lives of "other people"—people who go to college, have savings accounts, etc. Liz also gets to spend more time with Ken, and they enjoy goofing off and making each other laugh.

*Liz succeeds as a canvasser because she doesn't give up—and she doesn't give up because, quite simply, she can't (otherwise, she wouldn't have food or a roof over her head). But the job also exposes her to people who come from a very different socioeconomic background. To her surprise, she finds that she can get along with these people—they're not as different as she'd believed. And this realization makes Liz's ambitions of graduating from high school and pursuing a successful career seem less daunting and more realistic.*



One day in August, Liz runs into Sam on the subway by accident. The two friends hug tearfully, and Liz notices that Sam seems much healthier and happier than she did last year. Liz tells Sam about her job, and Sam seems genuinely proud of her. Sam tells Liz that she's going to marry Oscar someday soon, and promises that Liz will be at the wedding. They hug each other goodbye and go their separate ways, promising to call each other soon.

*Liz and Sam don't spend as much time together as they once did, but they're still firm friends. While Liz doesn't say this explicitly, it's suggested that she spends less time with Sam because Sam is less interested in going to school than Liz is (remember that it was Sam who convinced Liz to cut class back in junior high school).*



One day, Ken's mother drives Liz and Ken from work. Liz notices that Ken's mother is a kind, affectionate woman. Ken invites Liz to spend the night at his house, along with some other friends. Liz is excited by the possibility of spending more time with Ken, but she's also terrified that she'll blow her cover—i.e., being “a normal high school senior readying myself for college applications.”

That night, Liz and Ken's other friends spend time together. Liz notices that Ken's friends are mostly from well-off families, and they talk about topics that are utterly foreign to Liz. Liz places her sleeping bag right next to Ken's, but that night nothing happens between them—Ken falls fast asleep.

The next morning, Liz feels foolish for thinking that Ken was ever interested in her as more than a friend. Ken's mother brings the friends a huge basket of delicious pastries, and they sit together drinking orange juice. The morning is so happy and perfect that it strikes Liz as “over-the-top funny.” But as she laughs, she becomes sad: soon enough, Liz will be back to living in the Bronx. Before leaving Ken's home, Liz packs her bag with extra pastries and muffins, knowing it'll be quite some time before she eats like this again.

## CHAPTER 12: POSSIBILITY

Liz ends up graduating from HPA in two years, a task that takes “everything I had.” She takes night classes, early-morning math classes, and spends a lot of time with her teachers during independent study. Because she's homeless, she has to deal with certain issues that her fellow students never have to think about, such as lifting heavy textbooks. Not knowing where she'll be spending the night, Liz has no choice but to carry all her books wherever she goes, which gives her serious back pain. She also struggles to get enough sleep to be able to summon the concentration necessary to get good grades.

From time to time, Liz is on the verge of giving up on her goal of graduating high school. Usually, this happens early in the morning, after a long night of working on homework. Too many times to count, Liz considers going back to sleep and skipping school. But she forces herself to remember her transcript, and the importance of filling it up with good grades. She imagines herself as a runner, jumping over hurdle after hurdle. Every day, Liz struggles to go to school, but in the end she always does.

*Although Liz finds that she can get along with kids from a different socioeconomic background, there are still times when she feels utterly out of place. Here, for example, she seems desperate to fit in with Ken and frightened that she won't be able to, and feels like she has to hide a part of herself or put up an act.*



*In this passage, Liz has the disappointing experience that almost every teenager has sooner or later: the person she has a crush on doesn't feel the same way about her. But Liz's experience also has an additional, socioeconomic element: she's looking for acceptance from Ken and his other well-off friends. Thus, the fact that Ken doesn't seem interested in her is particularly hurtful.*



*The chapter ends by emphasizing the divide between Liz and other, more privileged people who work as canvassers. Liz shows every sign of wanting to get along with these people, but she's also conscious of being different from them. And, quite understandably, she's saddened by the prospect of having to work so hard just to achieve the same things that Ken enjoys for free.*



*This chapter covers arguably the two most important years of Liz's life, during which she graduates high school. By writing about this period in relatively little space or detail, Liz limits the suspense of the chapter: there's never a point in which readers don't know that Liz ends up achieving her goal. However, Liz emphasizes the various hardships that she had to deal with in order to get her degree—hardships that people with homes, supportive families, and money to spare might not even be aware of.*



*Liz continues to struggle with motivating herself to go to school—she wants to succumb to temptation and give up, as she's done with Sam and Carlos in prior years. But because of her willpower (and, poignantly, the memory of Ma attempting to get welfare), she remains focused on “the prize”—a high school transcript with good grades.*



Liz loves many of her teachers. A woman named Susan teaches her math, but spends more time talking about literature. She also gets along well with Caleb, Doug, and Elijah, three young teachers who've all graduated from excellent schools. Caleb is tough but clearly devoted to his students, and he teaches Liz that a teacher can both be "compassionate *and* [hold] a student to a higher standard." Very slowly, Liz comes to love school. Her teachers are always her role models.

*Liz doesn't graduate from high school simply because of her willpower; dedicated teachers also help her and encourage her to succeed. Liz is particularly impressed with the combination of rigor and kindness that her teachers offer her: they express support and compassion without ever going easy on her.*



In after-school science class, Liz learns about HIV and AIDS prevention. Her teachers stress that she needs to "steer the ship" in her relationships with men, and that she should treat her body like a "temple."

*Liz finally "officially" learns about sexually transmitted diseases, of the kind that ended her mother's life. By the same token, she learns about the importance of sexual independence and loving herself (albeit in religious terms). Just as she begins taking care of her own education and her own finances, she also begins taking care of her own body.*



In her after-school class, Liz meets a young woman named Eva. Eva lives with her father, who is a painter and Holocaust survivor. Liz begins spending more time with Eva, and often eats dinner with her. She also spends time with another student, James. James is a tall, handsome student, and Liz begins dating him. She sleeps over at his house, and she always feels very secure around him. Slowly, Liz is building a new family to replace the one she's lost.

*It's interesting that Liz characterizes herself as "building a new family." Liz doesn't abandon her old family altogether, but she does nurture relationships with people such as Eva, who share her interests. These people not only give her the support she needs; they also motivate her to keep working hard, because they share her ambitions and drive.*



Liz occasionally sees her family, but it's always very uncomfortable. She spends some holidays and birthdays with Daddy and Lisa, and stresses over even the smallest details of these celebrations—for example, what kind of card to buy her sister for her birthday. At one of these celebrations, Daddy tells Liz that he's HIV positive. He also begs her not to tell Lisa. Liz is shocked, but she decides to treat her father with compassion, rather than running away from him. She finds the courage to "let go of my hurt" and forgive him for everything he's done to her.

*It's a mark of Liz's maturity that she treats her father with respect and compassion after learning about his diagnosis. Whereas the old Liz ran away from her mother, the new, more mature Liz recognizes that it's important to respect her family members, even if she's not exactly close with them. Instead of repressing her feelings or running away from them, Liz tries to make peace with Daddy.*



Liz begins to think of school as a sanctuary from the rest of her life. She enjoys studying for her classes because it involves spending time with her new friends. She also takes pride in having a good summer job with NYPIRG.

*Previously, Liz's family was a constant distraction from school; now, in an interesting reversal, Liz has begun to think of school as a welcome distraction from her family.*



Liz continues to feel the temptation to misbehave. At one point, she tries to shoplift some groceries. However, as she's about to leave the store, she remembers something Perry Weiner said. After a student's wallet was stolen, Perry told the student body, "It's a hurt to our community." Standing in the store, Liz begins to understand what Perry meant. Stealing from the store would raise prices on groceries, hurting other families or even putting the store out of business. She swallows hard and pays for her groceries.

*In the past, Liz shoplifted to make money. She was so desperate for cash, and so used to taking the law into her own hands, that she didn't think twice about it. With Perry Weiner's help, however, Liz begins to think of shoplifting in more "global," compassionate terms: she recognizes that she's actively hurting other people whenever she steals (though to be fair, probably not to the degree that she guiltily imagines here). This is a crucial moment in Liz's education, because it impresses upon her the importance of responsibility and taking other people's perspectives into consideration.*



In class, Liz and Eva are assigned a presentation on HIV/AIDS. They come up with an idea to structure the presentation as a fight between two gangs, the Crips and the Bloods. Their presentation is informative and entertaining, and Liz genuinely enjoys learning about the disease. As she presents, however, she begins to think about Ma. Strangely, she pictures Ma as a beautiful young woman, not an exhausted, emaciated victim.

*Remember that in previous chapters, Liz thought of formal education as useless and impractical. But, as this passage suggests, Liz's high school education is extremely practical and relevant to the "real world": it helps her understand the disease that claimed her mother's life, and, on a more personal level, it helps her make sense of the tragedy of her mother's death.*



After a year and a half at HPA, Liz has racked up near-perfect grades, and is on track to graduate in just one more semester. It's time for her to consider scholarship applications. Her guidance counselor, Jessie Klein, tells her that she's in "great shape" for going to college, though she needs to be careful about planning for funding.

*It's interesting that Liz barely writes about the content of her high school classes, beyond a few examples (such as the HIV skit). The implication would seem to be that the high school courses themselves were relatively easy compared to the extracurricular challenges that Liz faced, such as finding housing or paying for college.*



Liz slowly realizes that most scholarships are "barely enough to cover food at top colleges," let alone tuition. Then, she learns about *The New York Times* College Scholarship Program, which provides \$12,000 a year for students who write excellent essays on their experiences with adversity. Liz applies for this scholarship, and many others.

*Liz struggles to find enough scholarship money to attend a prestigious college. In doing so, she implicitly criticizes the modern college admissions process, which appears heavily biased against low-income students like Liz, even if they're brilliant and hard-working.*



At the end of her time at HPA, Liz wins many school awards for her academic excellence. She, along with Eva and other exceptional HPA students, wins a free trip to Boston. Liz and Eva visit Boston College and enjoy the beauty of the town. On the trip, Liz peppers Perry Weiner with questions about what college is like. Perry takes the students to Harvard Yard for a group picture. During the excursion, Perry suggests that Liz apply to Harvard.

*Liz's trip to Boston College represents the farthest she's ever been from New York City, and therefore it's an eye-opening experience for her. Perry Weiner was responsible for accepting Liz into high school, and now he plays a major role in convincing her to go to Harvard for college. It seems that she's finally found a consistently supportive parent figure in Perry.*



A few months later, Liz goes in to *The New York Times* building for her scholarship interview. She's one of the twenty-one finalists for the scholarship, out of many thousands of applicants. By this time, Lisa is living with Liz in a one-bedroom apartment in Bedford Park. Lisa, who works at the Gap, pays the bills while Liz finishes high school. A few days before Liz's interview, however, Lisa loses her job. For months, Liz has been working as hard as she can to finish her classes and apply to colleges. She and Lisa visit the welfare office to apply for help, but they're turned down for unclear reasons.

Liz goes in for her *Times* interview, knowing that if she doesn't get this scholarship, she probably won't be able to go to college. Until this moment, she's never fully realized how influential and famous *The New York Times* is: she's never seen anybody reading it, except on the subway. During her interview, Liz tells her interviewers about her life: her relationship with her parents, her struggles to support herself, all the hard work she's done to graduate from high school in two years. She finishes her interview with a simple statement: "I need the scholarship."

A few days later, Liz gets a call explaining that she's been awarded a *Times* scholarship. The next few weeks are a "whirlwind." She's interviewed by dozens of reporters, visits *The New York Times* Building many more times, and has the surreal experience of seeing her name and picture in one of the most famous newspapers in the world. Perry Weiner and the other teachers are overjoyed. But Perry is also very concerned about how Liz is going to pay for her rent, food, and other expenses at Harvard.

Then, something amazing happens. Friends, well-wishers, and people Liz has never even heard of begin to send her money and support. One man pays all of Lisa and Liz's rent for the year. Liz never sleeps on the streets again. Another woman offers to do Liz's laundry from now on.

In the spring, Liz learns that she's been wait-listed for Harvard. Secretly, she's terrified by the uncertainty. Liz has been dealing with uncertainty throughout her life, whether regarding her family, her job, or her home. Every Friday, she calls the Harvard admissions office to ask if a decision has been reached, and every Friday she gets the same answer: not yet.

*There's a lot of information in this passage: over the last two years, for example, Liz has grown much closer with her sister, Lisa. Liz doesn't write much about how she came to reconcile with her sister, or what it was like living with her after so many years apart. There are many other similar points in this chapter, which is surprisingly (even disappointingly) short considering that it covers such a lengthy, important period in Liz's life.*



*Liz implies an interesting point: the fact that she grew up in an impoverished home, totally unaware of the prestige surrounding *The New York Times*, actually helped her succeed. Had she been from a middle- or upper-class background (and therefore fully aware of the elite nature of the NYT scholarship), she might have gotten intimidated and not even applied. Instead, she pursued her dream of winning the scholarship with the same dogged determination with which she pursued graduating from high school or getting a summer job.*



*By winning the NYT scholarship, one of the most prestigious scholarships in the country, Liz proves that she has the talent and drive to do whatever she wants. It's a mark of Perry Weiner's experience as an educator, however, that he encourages Liz to remain focused on the logistics of paying for college, rather than merely basking in her success.*



*Liz is able to go to Harvard not simply because of her hard work and intelligence, but also because of the help of hundreds of friends and well-wishers, who give her all kinds of material support thanks to her public exposure in the Times.*



*Liz, it's clear, now desperately wants to go to Harvard, and so she's terrified when she's wait-listed. After so much work and sudden success, it would be distinctly anticlimactic if she were to be denied now.*



One day, Liz calls the admissions office and learns that Harvard has mailed her decision letter. She tells Perry Weiner that, in no more than a couple days, she's going to find out if she's been accepted to Harvard. Perry smiles gently and tells her, "No matter where you go to school, you'll always be you. Wherever you go, college, job interviews, relationships, all of it [...] You really will be fine either way."

On the train ride home, Liz thinks carefully about Perry Weiner's words, and realizes that Perry is right. That night, as she falls asleep, she relaxes and manages to focus on "something other than my admission letter" for the first time in months.

The next day, Liz waits for the mailman, sure that her admission letter is coming soon. As she waits, she realizes that the admissions letter "already stated whatever it stated," and there's nothing she could do to change it. Instead, she decides, she should focus on the things she *can* change: she can treat other people with kindness and compassion, and she can enjoy her freedom and "carve out a life for myself." And in this moment, she realizes that her life will not be determined by her circumstances, or her past tragedies. It'll be determined by her "willingness to put one foot in front of the other."

## EPILOGUE

Liz sits in a conference center in Argentina, listening to a man speak. The man is the Dalai Lama.

The Dalai Lama concludes his speech, and begins to take questions from his audience, made up mostly of CEOs and other powerful businesspeople. Liz asks a question—but before she explains what this question is, she offers "a little explanation of how that day came to be."

In the last few years, Liz's life has changed in almost every way. She's been the subject of magazine articles and a TV movie, and she's received countless awards. She's also graduated from Harvard in 2009.

*In accordance with his liberal arts philosophy, Perry Weiner takes a more measured view of Liz's Harvard acceptance: he allows that it would be a wonderful thing for Liz to go to Harvard, but he also stresses that getting into Harvard isn't the be-all, end-all. Instead, he encourages Liz to focus on growing as a person and maintaining the same confidence and self-reliance that brought her to HPA in the first place.*



*Liz takes Perry's advice to heart: whether or not she's admitted to Harvard, she's proud of herself for working hard and achieving her goals, and she'll continue to do so moving forward, no matter what happens.*



*In the end, Liz synthesizes her own life experiences with Perry's wise philosophy. She recognizes that the purpose of education isn't simply to help her get a job or get into a good college (although it's done both); more broadly, education is important because it gives her the confidence and wisdom to live self-reliantly. Education doesn't just provide Liz with the financial independence she's always wanted; it also offers her a kind of emotional and intellectual independence that is arguably just as important.*



*The epilogue takes place several years after the previous chapter, and shows that Liz has been doing well, given that she's now meeting with some of the world's most influential people.*



*The epilogue begins and ends with Liz's question to the Dalai Lama, so that the epilogue comes "full circle" in a satisfying way.*



*Instead of basking in her success after being admitted to Harvard, Liz has continued to work hard, graduating on time and inspiring people around the world with her heroic life story.*





During Liz's time in college, Daddy quits drugs, but HIV continues to ravage his body. One day freshman year, Liz gets a call from New York and rushes back home to be with her father. The call turns out to be a false alarm, and Daddy survives. However, death is a "constant possibility" for him. Liz spends more time with her father during her college years than she has previously, even though she's working hard and traveling internationally to give motivational speeches.

Today, Sam is happily married and living in Wisconsin. Lisa is a college graduate and works as a schoolteacher for autistic kids. Bobby is studying to be a nurse; he's the father of two children. Liz is close with Lisa and with her Bronx friends.

Daddy visits Liz at Harvard and leaves a card for her. The card reads, "Lizzy, I left my dreams behind a long time ago, but I know now that they are safe with you. Thank you for making us a family again." After graduating from college, Liz celebrates with her friends and family.

Liz's question for the Dalai Lama is simple: "Your Holiness, you inspire so many people, but what inspires you?" He replies, "I don't know, I am just a simple monk." Liz is a little confused by this answer, and she's not alone. Some of the other guests interpret the Dalai Lama's reply as an expression of Zen wisdom, while others just say he didn't understand the question. Liz realizes that the Dalai Lama's reply can be interpreted in almost any way: it has whatever meaning the audience members give it.

Liz prepares to give her own speech in the same conference center. As she steps out onto the stage to speak to executives from around the world, she draws a conclusion inspired by the Dalai Lama: "Homeless person or business person, doctor or teacher, whatever your background may be, the same holds true for each of us: life takes on the meaning that you give it."

*Notice that, rather than fleeing from her father (as she did with her mother), Liz makes sure to take care of Daddy, giving him emotional and at times financial support while he deals with his disease. Amazingly, Liz manages to do all this even while she also works hard and travels around the world. The concentration and willpower that she developed at HPA have continued to serve her well.*



*Liz keeps in touch with many of her old friends, showing that even though her life has changed in many ways, she hasn't lost touch with her past.*



*In many ways, Liz achieves the same things that Daddy wanted to achieve before his life was derailed by drug addiction. And this is the meaning of Daddy's message to Liz: he's proud of his daughter in part because he recognizes in her the same qualities that brought him success in his early life. It's also clear from Daddy's letter that Liz has made an effort to become closer with her father and sister, rather than turning her back on them, as she's done before.*



*The Dalai Lama's response has a Zen-like quality: it's a short, cryptic phrase like a "koan" (a famous example is "What is the sound of one hand clapping?"), which can be interpreted in a virtually infinite number of ways.*



*Taking her cues from the Dalai Lama (a pretty good role model), Liz makes a speech, the theme of which is that each human being makes their own meaning: thus people have the power to overcome adversity through hard work and a positive attitude. Liz's own life seems like the perfect example of this idea: through hard work, she overcomes adversity and achieves something that seems almost impossible: acceptance to Harvard University. Yet one could also argue that Liz's philosophy of life, as presented here, is a little too idealistic—Liz succeeded, but she did so partly because of innate ability, luck, and the help of other people, not just because she was determined to make her own meaning. However, there's no doubt that Liz's life story is extraordinary, and she continues to inspire people around the world.*





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