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Love Addict

Her memoir *Eat Pray Love* sold millions, became a hit movie and encouraged readers to embark on their own spiritual journeys. But for author Elizabeth Gilbert, it was the death of her partner that helped her find what she was looking for.

ELIZABETH GILBERT is the bestselling author of *Eat Pray Love* who, on first, second and third impressions, seems like the human embodiment of liquid sunshine: warm, magnanimous, vibrant and uplifting ... along with funny, kind, enthusiastic, curious, worldly, inspiring and self-effacing. “If a more likeable writer than Gilbert is currently in print, I haven’t found him or her,” gushed a *New York Times* review once.

Elizabeth Gilbert is also a self-confessed sex and love addict, an out-of-control, fantasy and adrenaline junkie who – in exhausted desperation a few years ago – hatched a plan to murder her dying partner and then, when that plan changed, kill herself by the same means. How, might you ask, could these opposing forces coexist in the one person? Easy. As the American poet Walt Whitman once noted of himself – and humanity in general, “Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself. (I am large, I contain multitudes).”

If ever there were a person to contain multitudes, it is Elizabeth Gilbert, the American writer who, for decades now, has been rousing millions of devoted readers with the details of her flaws, missteps and inconsistencies, matched only by a warrior-like courage to expose – and grow from – those same missteps.

Her fourth book, *Eat Pray Love*, was a stunning case in point, a book that 20 years ago catapulted her from the ranks of highly regarded journalist and author to global [and sometimes derided] literary phenomenon; the so-called queen of self-disclosure who, depending on your point of view, was everything from magical tour guide, relationship guru and mirror for the soul, to New Age narcissist and the cause of Bali’s ruination.

For those who’ve forgotten the story – or declined to ever get acquainted with it – *Eat Pray Love* was Gilbert’s 12-month spiritual travelogue through Italy (to eat), India (to pray) and Bali (to find a sweet spot between the earthly and the divine). The book ended up on the *New York Times* bestseller list for more than four years, selling more than 18 million copies worldwide,

and being translated into over 30 languages. It also saw Gilbert anointed as one of *Time* magazine’s “100 Most Influential People in the World”, and depicted by Julia Roberts in a film of the same name. Not only did she spawn a boom in Bali tourism, but a new network devoted to parodying her middle-class quest for peace and self-knowledge: “*Eat, Pray, Pay*”, “*Eat, Pay, Cliché*”, “*Drink, Play, F---*” ... were just some of the jibes directed her way.

Even though Gilbert was already an acclaimed writer – an “incandescent talent” according to American novelist Annie Proulx – *Eat Pray Love* turned her into catnip for those who loved to hate the memoir’s core raison d’être: self-reflection. (Or was it self-absorption?)

And that’s because Gilbert’s impulse was to take things as far as she could, laying almost everything on the line – and out on the page – for the world to see. In *Eat Pray Love*, she described herself as “the planet’s most affectionate life-form ... a cross between a golden retriever and a barnacle” who went looking for love in all the wrong places. At the age of 31, she spent 47 consecutive nights on her bathroom floor sobbing “great lakes of tears” over whether to leave the safe conventions of her six-year marriage and a husband who’d become both her “lighthouse and albatross”.

She did, of course, leave that marriage, while rebounding straight into the arms of a young New York actor who proved less albatross, more “kryptonite”. “Before my divorce agreement was even signed,” she later wrote in an article for the *New York Times*, “I was already breaking up with the guy I had broken up my marriage for. The article was headlined “Confessions of a Seduction Addict”. “You know you’ve got intimacy issues,” she wrote, “when, in the space of a few short months, you find yourself visiting two completely different couples’ counsellors, with two completely different men on your arm, in order to talk about two completely different emotional firestorms.”

Gilbert’s intimacy issues had begun early. Daughter of strait-laced, Calvinistic parents, she’d grown up on a

small Christmas-tree farm in Connecticut, without a television, a record player or neighbours. It delivered her into a world of reading and writing, but by the time she was 15, she was so desperate for love that for the next nearly two decades, until the time she left her first marriage, she was virtually never alone and almost always engulfed in emotional turmoil.

"I barely had an adolescence before I had my first boyfriend," she told her mainly female readers in *Eat Pray Love*, "and I have consistently had a boy or a man (or sometimes both) in my life ever since. I disappear into the person I love. I am the permeable membrane. If I love you, you can have everything. You can have my time, my devotion, my ass, my money, my family, my dog, my dog's money, my dog's time – everything.

"I will give you all this and more, until I get so exhausted and depleted that the only way I can recover my energy is by becoming infatuated with someone else ... [and so] it might be a generous public service for me to leave intimacy alone for a while."

Which is exactly what she did when – armed with a \$US200,000 publisher's advance – she took off on the solo journey that would ultimately bring her literary fame and fortune. She ate. She prayed. She forswore romance, but then found love among the rice paddies and temples with José Nunes, a Brazilian gem trader 17 years her senior, who would soon become known to her gazillion readers in *Eat Pray Love* as Felipe.

Gilbert had found her soulmate, her forever partner and – despite all her apprehensions about marrying again – she married Nunes in 2007; then, as a further act of love and fidelity, wrote about her unwavering commitment to him in a second memoir called *Committed*.

"I wrote that book so that I would be divorce-proof," she says. "I was like, 'I'm not having another relationship break up.' I spent three years basically studying enough to have earned a master's degree, maybe even a doctorate, [on] the history of marriage, the psychology of marriage, the sociology of marriage, the statistics about marriage.

"I was like, 'I'm going to arm myself' because I got married so casually when I was 24 and in such a devastatingly unthought-through way. 'I'm going to do the opposite of that this time. I'm going to become a scholar of this and, you know, knowledge is power.'"

Except all the knowledge in the world won't necessarily arm you against your own compulsive behaviours, which – as any addict knows – can rise from the shadowlands and engulf you all over again.

That's what happened to Elizabeth Gilbert. To paraphrase Mark Twain, she kept picking the cat up by the tail, again and again, repeating the same behaviour, thinking that love was going to be her salvation.

HELL-RIDE OF HER LIFE

And here she is now on my computer screen, at her desk in a little antechamber off her bedroom, in a refurbished 18th-century chapel in rural New Jersey on a hot summer's evening, greeting me with a smile that might light up, say, a Christmas-tree farm in Connecticut. She is wearing a pink, lacy linen top and large, salmon-coloured spectacles, and behind her stands a bookshelf lined with the works of black female authors, a carved Indonesian hornbill symbolising the safe passage of seafarers, and a monstera climbing vine that she's hoping will one day – *Jack and the Beanstalk*-like – take over the whole room.

In her bedroom, barking the dreams of the pure and just, is her little terrier mutt Pepita, whom she has



Top: Gilbert (left) and Rayya Elias' commitment ceremony in 2017. Above: in hospital, where Elias was dealing with her terminal diagnosis. Right: a young Gilbert with her parents; she was raised on a Christmas tree farm in Connecticut, in north-eastern US.

described as "my best friend, my child, my life partner, my confidante, my personal trainer, my meditation coach." As it turns out, her meditation coach is awake and wanting to sit on Gilbert's lap while her pupil talks to *Good Weekend* about her new book, *All the Way to the River: Love, Loss and Liberation*, and the multitude of ways she found herself on the most beautiful adventure – and worst hell-ride – of her life with the person who stole her heart.

That person was Rayya Elias, the Syrian-born, Detroit-raised musician, singer, filmmaker, writer, hairdresser, ex-junkie, ex-felon and "post-punk glamour-butch dyke", who started off as Gilbert's hairdresser in 2000 before graduating to best friend, lover and partner until her death in January 2018.

"Over time, we became really good friends," Gilbert says, "and then neighbours and then best friends, and then she became something that I no longer could figure out what to call, other than to say that she was my favourite person and my anchor. And that was both really beautiful and also extremely confusing because I was married to a man who I loved very much and Rayya was gay, and I'm not really, and I didn't know what to do with the fact that, as the years went by, I loved her and needed her more and more."

By 2010, when the *Eat Pray Love* movie was opening in London, Elias was walking the red carpet with Gilbert, declaring to Julia Roberts mid-hug, "Dude, you smell so f--ing good right now!" causing Roberts to howl with

delight. Elias had become Gilbert's plus one – trips to Mexico, Los Angeles, Detroit, Australia, New Zealand, a Beyoncé concert, a meeting with Oprah, shopping at Target, buying bras together ...

Elias was still dating other women, Gilbert was still married to Nunes, no lines were being crossed, but as Gilbert would eventually come to realise, both of them were living in denial. "I was steadily moving my love and loyalty away from one person and toward another," she would write, "just as surely as if I were moving a valuable set of silverware from one home to another, one spoon at a time, while nobody was looking. All the while pretending I was not doing that."

This secret life would persist for years, up until April 2016, when Elias informed Gilbert that doctors had found a mass of tumours in her liver and pancreas and given her six months to live.

"At that point," Gilbert says, "it was no longer possible for me ... to hide, or even want to hide, the true feelings that I had for her. And it just became untenable to not be her partner. The thought of her going to her death, never knowing how much I loved her, and also the thought of her going to her death without me being able to be there, and to be the person at her side ... as she walked – in her own words, all the way to the river – was just impossible.

"So in very short order, suddenly life went from seemingly not very dramatic to extremely dramatic. It was, 'I'm leaving my marriage, I have to go be with her, and we will spend the last months of her life together.' And what happened is that we had a few really incredible romantic, beautiful months and then a lot of horrible months. Not only because of the terminal cancer, but also Rayya, who was a speedball, heroin and cocaine addict with years of recovery behind her, relapsed during her time of cancer to being just as serious an addict as she had been when she was living on the streets, shooting heroin and cocaine in the '80s and '90s."

That would have been enough on its own except that, if Elias was a relapsing coke and heroin addict, Gilbert was an unacknowledged "sex and love addict" who had caused enormous harm to herself and others through decades of "famished yearning for love". She didn't have a label for this behaviour – that would come later – but she knew she'd been using people as a drug, both stimulant and sedative, for decades. She had inserted herself into other people's relationships, broken up families, lied, cheated, manipulated,

triangulated, seduced, discarded, crossed numerous boundaries, hurt countless people, treated her own body – and others – with disrespect, all with the aim of filling an unfillable hole inside herself.

"My addiction manifests as a sincere, yet deeply misguided belief, that somebody outside of myself will miraculously be able to heal me

on the inside," she writes with breathtaking candour in *All the Way to the River* – "thereby making me feel safe, cherished, and whole at last.

"In real-life terms, this translates as a desperate need to have my existence constantly authenticated and re-authenticated through a romantic partner's touch, eye contact, verbal reassurance, acts of love or mere physical presence."

In this pursuit of "Love, Attention, Validation and Approval" – LAVA in the parlance of the 12-step recovery program she would eventually enter – Gilbert says she'd spent most of her life looking for the "magical person" who could save her.

"You know what? We should just kill her. We've got fentanyl patches. We've got these sleeping pills."

Right: Gilbert with her terrier mutt, Pepita, whom she has described as “her best friend, my child, my life partner, my confidante”.

Rayya Elias became that magical person, the object of Gilbert’s love addiction long before she actually declared her love. “The darkness began,” she tells *Good Weekend*, “with my secrecy about the level of my dependency on her, and it began with the tremendous bribes that I was offering to her as a means of keeping her near.

“I put her up in a beautiful home, and this is when we were friends. I took her on these incredibly glamorous trips around the world. I promised her that I would introduce her to a publisher for her book [*Harley Loco*]. I promoted her music. I used everything that I had and I had a lot, as the person who wrote *Eat Pray Love* ... I was quite flush with money and influence and I used those things innocently [but also] in ways that [lacked] integrity, knowing what her longings were ... building up a dependency from her onto me.

“At the time, I would have defended that as generosity – and I am a really generous person – but the motive was, ‘I want to make sure that you don’t go anywhere.’”

And what fuelled Gilbert’s dependency was that, at her best, Elias was a “boisterous, candid, hilarious, affectionate, rock ‘n’ roll badass” who could talk to anyone. “When she was in the room,” Gilbert explains, “my fear levels dropped, because Rayya could handle anybody, and my deep-seated fear of people and their volatility and their danger was something I had carried my entire life. There was nobody that she could not manage, and there was no drama that she couldn’t diffuse. There was no bully that she couldn’t corner and shut down. I mean, she had this incredibly powerful, calming presence on me and I was like, ‘I need that.’”

Elias’ religion, her passion, was truth-telling, and she aimed her words with the precision of a “master archer”. This was a character trait diametrically opposite to Gilbert’s people-pleasing strategies, which she had cultivated since childhood. For Gilbert, it was always safer to please than to tell the truth.

“[Rayya] used to say, ‘The truth has legs no matter what else happens.’ When all the bullshit and the drama and the confusion and the manipulation are all gone, at the end of the day, there is one thing that will always just stand, and that’s the truth.”

AND THE truth soon began walking slowly in their direction. After Rayya Elias was told she had six months to live, she initially felt a wild exuberance over the certitude of her fate. Most people wonder how and when they’re going to die. Now Elias knew, and that meant she would “flame the f--- out” in the time left. “Let’s just blaze out,” she told Gilbert. “All the way to the river baby, all the way to the river.”

For the first few months, that’s exactly what they did. They drank. They took drugs. They made wild, passionate love. They made music and art, and wrote poems to each other. They laughed and cried. They barely slept. They ate like inmates on death row – steaks, french fries, fried chicken, popcorn, washed down with sugary drinks. They stopped going outside, drawing a curtain on the world.

And Gilbert, true to her still-unlabelled love addiction, began pouring every ounce of herself into her dying partner: “You want a Range Rover? Here is your Range

“The only thing anyone is ever trying to do is survive their minds, their histories, their dilemmas, their destinies, their days.”

Rover. You want a brand-new piano? Here is your brand-new piano. Do you want me to rent you a penthouse apartment on your favourite street in the East Village? Here you go my love – it is all yours.”

But then “the dragon of addiction” began roaring through Elias’ bloodstream. Whisky, beer, cigarettes,

marijuana, heroin, cocaine; thousands of dollars’ worth of cocaine that Elias would snort, freebase or shoot into her arms, hands, feet or neck, wherever she could find a vein. There was also the morphine she was taking for pain – one pill a day, then three, one every hour, then clusters, along with methadone and fentanyl ... and Xanax and trazodone, the latter two for depression and anxiety, along with Klonopin for preventing seizures.

Gilbert enabled it all by paying for it all, abandoning herself so completely that even when Elias began metamorphosing from protector to abuser, Gilbert endured it until she could endure it no more.

Then she hatched her plan.

“I was trapped in this hellscape that I didn’t feel I could get out of or survive,” she says. “And after the 19th, 20th completely sleepless night of being abused and just trapped with a junkie who was a monster, my brain was like ... ‘You know what? We should just kill her. We’ve got all these fentanyl patches. We’ve got all these sleeping pills. We’ve got all this morphine. I mean, we could kill the whole *building* with the amount of drugs that are in that house.’”

So in a state of “caregiver collapse”, Gilbert formulated her strategy: disguise the sleeping pills as morphine pills, knock Elias out with those, then stick a bunch of fentanyl patches on her back. That’ll surely kill her.

“I tell this story in all its honesty,” Gilbert writes, “because I want people to understand how insane codependency can make a person become. I mean, I’m the nice lady who wrote *Eat Pray Love*, and I came very



close to premeditatedly and cold-bloodedly murdering my partner because she had taken her affection away from me, and because I was extremely tired.”

But when Gilbert walked back into their apartment to carry out the plan, saying, “Hi honey, I’m here,” Elias looked at her through a cloud of cigarette smoke, rows of cocaine lined up on the coffee table, and replied unblinkingly, “Don’t you start plotting against me, now.”

“This was the kind of witchy power [she] had,” Gilbert says. “It’s probably how she had survived living on the streets, how she had survived being in jail. She could read the room. And she felt there was a disturbance in the force.” After a long silence, Elias said to Gilbert, “Think very carefully about what you’re about to do,” and that’s when Gilbert walked out of the apartment, back into the park, to contemplate her next best option – to take her own life.

“I thought I should just kill *me* because that’s actually much more efficient. That will end my suffering, and I’ve got all these pills in my pocket anyway. And that’s when I heard the voice that I call God, that some people would call their higher power, or their intuition, or their ancestors, or their angels.

“And that voice said, ‘If you have reached a point in your life where you are seriously considering murdering yourself or another person, it’s quite possible you’ve reached the end of your power. And that being the case, it’s probably a good idea for you to call somebody and ask for help.’”

THE FULL TRUTH

Late last year, I attended a two-day workshop hosted by Elizabeth Gilbert at Sydney

Town Hall with about 2000 women and nine other men. We were there to delve into some of the ideas contained in Gilbert’s seventh book, *Big Magic*, an exploration of the art of creative living and the ways in which ideas and inspiration sometimes work.

I loved every minute of it. I loved the way Gilbert talked about how a lifetime of sustained creativity didn’t have to come from anxiety or personal suffering, it could come from a sense of wonder and curiosity, even a place of calm and joyfulness. (Be damned, the German Romantics.)

I also loved the way she talked about how ideas were alive; entities almost, possessing a conscious will, requiring a human collaborator to find expression. Seize the idea and it’s yours. Let it go, and it will likely be made manifest in someone else.

Gilbert didn’t want to write this latest book of hers. She didn’t want to relive all the anguish and crazed behaviour that occurred. She didn’t want people to judge Elias harshly. Or herself. She wanted this to be a different love story, without its descent into “the ninth circle of hell”.

Except that would not have been the beautiful, terrible, noble, inglorious truth, with all the paradoxes that so often bedevil the human condition. Besides which, when she did finally sit down to write this book, she heard Elias’ voice say, “Don’t write in some half-ass way. Write the shit out of this thing. Go full punk rock with it, lay it out there. It doesn’t help anybody if it’s not the full truth.”

And, of course, isn’t that one of the main reasons Elizabeth Gilbert is so adored? Because in her writing and speaking engagements, she gives voice to many of the struggles of being here on this earth. “The only thing anyone is ever trying to do,” she notes, “is survive their minds, their histories, their dilemmas, their destinies, their days.”

Elias lived for 18 months after her diagnosis, becoming increasingly aggressive in the process, but

also magnificent and brave. She chose to return to her home state of Michigan to die, and help did eventually come in the form of family and friends, particularly from Elias’ ex-wife Gigi and ex-girlfriend Stacey.

Together with Gilbert, they tended Elias in her dying, even when it seemed like she would never die. One night, when the three of them were convinced this was the end, they lit candles, played Gregorian chants, then crawled into bed with Elias to hold her until she passed. “What are you guys doing?” Elias said, suddenly opening her eyes.

“Nothing,” Gilbert replied. “Why are Stacey and Gigi in our bed?” And, “What’s that music? What’s that smell? Are you guys burning f---ing candles in here?”

That was December 26, 2017 and now, Elias was wide awake, smoking in bed, and demanding to go to the local Lululemon store for the post-Christmas sales, which she did, trying on athleisure wear for an hour.

Just over a week later, she was dead. “I can only say that even at the time she was destroying all of our lives, we were all in this state of incredible admiration,” Gilbert says, laughing about it now. “And we were like, ‘She’s so badass, she’s a monster, but she’s *our* monster. How are you *alive*?’”

“There was going to be no surrender for her. There was going to be no hospice death. There was going to be no gentle walking into the light. I was there with her in the last 48 hours of her life, and when she went down, it was like a boxing match between her and God. And of course, eventually death wins. It always does.”

Elias died on January 4, 2018 and for the next 12 to 18 months, Gilbert entered a mania of productivity, recklessness, grief, sorrow and exhaustion. She wrote

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two novels [*City of Girls* and the still-unpublished *The Snow Forest*], she took a load of psychedelic drugs, she accepted numerous speaking engagements – acting like the “bright, shiny, public figure” she’s long been – and, once more, she became entangled in a relationship that soon flamed out.

“I just wanted love to save me again,” she confesses, “and I think that’s always my first, best idea. I was taught that by my culture, and I was taught that as a woman. I was taught that by my trauma, and I was taught that by the world. I just tried to do that again and it didn’t work, because it never works.”

What did work was committing herself to the 12-step recovery program she’d previously entered half-heartedly. She began listening to other addicts share their life experiences, hearing in the process her own life story revealed through multiple voices.

At the age of nine, Gilbert had considered how she might build a small cathedral in her bedroom, and it was the beginning of a lifelong spiritual journey that would express itself years later as she lay on that bathroom floor, sobbing and supplicating over her collapsing marriage: “Hello God. How are you? I’m Liz. It’s nice to meet you. I’m sorry to bother you so late at night, but I’m in serious trouble. And I’m sorry I haven’t ever spoken directly to you before.”

The 12-step program finally helped consolidate and refine this relationship with the numinous, as she came to understand more clearly how all the ways in which she and other addicts “binge, hoard, numb, act out, control and self-medicate” were just desperate attempts to mask a deep, spiritual pain. “Carl Jung [the Swiss psychiatrist] said that the addict’s hunger

for their substance is just a hunger for the divine,” Gilbert observes, which is why she now has a daily spiritual practice that includes silence, meditation, contemplation, prayer and the seeking of guidance in the form of the question: “Dear God, what would you have me know today?”

“I need [to do] that to be OK, and people who don’t need that, I think that’s great, good on you, but I don’t do well without it. The wound that I have in me, whether it’s karmic or psychological, I don’t care any more where it came from. I just know that it is a deep attachment wound. [So] I need a love that doesn’t go away. I need something that won’t take its gaze away, that won’t die, that won’t leave the room, that won’t change its mind about how it feels about me, that won’t fall in love with someone else, that won’t disapprove of me. I need something that is steady, that I can look to that is like, ‘I’m right here.’”

That was the love Elizabeth Gilbert was seeking 20 years ago when she embarked on her “Eat Pray Love” odyssey, and it is that love – self-love, divine love, forever love, call it what you will – that has now found its resting place within her, wherever she happens to be.

And today, six years into her celibacy, these are the words tattooed across her chest: *I’m right here.* ■

All the Way to the River: Love, Loss and Liberation by Elizabeth Gilbert (Bloomsbury, \$35) is out Tuesday.

PODCAST



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