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ALL  
THE WAY  
TO THE  
RIVER

*Love, Loss, and Liberation*

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B L O O M S B U R Y P U B L I S H I N G

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*Give in.*

*Give up.*

*Give over.*

## A VISITATION

**O**n the morning of my fifty-fourth birthday, I woke up at dawn and instantly realized that my partner, Rayya, was in the bedroom with me.

This was an extremely impressive accomplishment on her part, because at that point she had been dead for more than five years.

Yet here she was—a churning, energetic current of pure Rayyanness, roiling through my tiny New York City apartment in wave after unmistakable wave of *her*.

I was neither alarmed nor frightened (I would know her anywhere, I would love her anywhere), but I was surprised, for it had been awhile since she'd made such an appearance. And oh, how I'd missed her! She used to visit me like this all the time in the raw and bewildering months immediately following her death. Back then, she'd been so incredibly present, so consistently accessible, so funny and loving and demanding, that I used to joke: "Rayya is more vivid in death than most people are in life!"

It wasn't that I could see her in those long-ago visitations—she was not some spectral Victorian ghost bride—but I could feel her unmistakable presence, and I could distinctly hear her voice, speaking straight into my consciousness. The clarity of communication between us had been

extraordinary back then, right after she died. It was as though she'd rigged up a strikingly effective supernatural Dixie-cup telephone system, through which she could chat with me across the cosmos using a long, long strand of yarn. The effect had been so intimate as to be *sensual*. Sometimes it was even fun. I would be out there in public, smiling and nodding and trying to act like a normal person, but Rayya and I would be having private conversations inside my head the entire time.

At a party in Los Angeles about six months after Rayya passed away, a woman I'd never met before came up to me, placed her hand on my arm, and said, "I understand that your lover left her body recently, and I'm sorry for your loss. But I need to tell you something important. She's been coming to me lately in dreams. I'm a professional intuitive, and I have a sensitivity for such things. Rayya has instructed me to tell you that she misses you terribly, and that she longs to communicate with you."

*Tell this bitch she can fuck right off*, said Rayya, from inside my head.

"Thank you for your kindness," I told the stranger.

The woman pressed a business card into my hand. "Here's my number, if you ever want to speak with Rayya directly."

*Tell this idiot she can jump directly up my dead fucking ass*, said Rayya.

It had been so wild and glorious back then—to feel my Rayya still commanding the room, even from beyond the grave!

But her visitations had diminished as the years went by.

Two years had passed.

Then three years.

Four.

*Life moves on—*isn't that what people say?

Rayya's voice faded.

More than five years passed.

The world had changed in that time, and so had I. There had been a global pandemic. There were new wars, new emergencies, new deaths. Babies were born whom Rayya would never meet. I wrote books that Rayya

would never read. Everyone was talking about new TV shows that Rayya would never see. In a desperate bid to replace sorrow with infatuation, I had even dated someone for a while after Rayya died (“detonated myself upon them” might be a more accurate description of the encounter), but that relationship had ended in swift, shattering, predictable heartbreak.

I had not pursued anyone since.

Instead, I’d spent those years working on myself.

I had gotten sober—not only putting down alcohol and drugs but also stepping away from all sexual distraction and romantic entanglement. I’d let go of every substance or person that intoxicated me, numbed me, took control over me, or altered my mood or mind in any way. I’d been learning how to feel my feelings and process my emotions without reaching for anything or anyone to take the edge off. I’d been using my voice, setting new rules and boundaries, and living in my own integrity as guided by my own higher power. One day at a time, I was getting my inner house in order. And I’d made new friends—healthy friends from the rooms of twelve-step recovery. Friends who would never know Rayya.

Through it all, Rayya’s presence flickered and dimmed until the day arrived when I couldn’t hear her at all anymore—not even when I called out to her by name, not even when I asked for direct guidance or love. There came to be a great, boundaryless silence where her voice had once vibrated so powerfully. This was devastating and confusing to me. It was almost like a second death.

Where had she gone?

Had she moved on, or had I left her behind?

I could make no sense of it.

It was as if she’d stepped out of the universe for a pack of cigarettes and had never come back.

But now—on the morning of my fifty-fourth birthday—suddenly she was here.

I mean *really here*.

The room was humming with big Rayya energy, and I felt chills up my entire body. I started laughing and crying at the same time.

“Baby!” I said. “You’ve come to see me!”

I wanted to celebrate, but I could sense there was something she wanted to tell me—something that demanded my fullest attention. The sensation was one of being grabbed by the collar and shaken. Rayya had not traveled all this great distance for a casual visit, I gathered; she’d come to transmit a message of the highest importance. Words and information were pouring out of her and into my mind, almost too fast for me to gather. The inside of my head sounded like an arcade. I grabbed the journal that I always keep by my bed and started writing down everything she was saying—everything I could catch.

And here is what Rayya had to tell me:

*Happy birthday, Baby Dude!*

*I’m right here and I love you!*

*I LOVE YOU!*

*I’m so fucking proud of you!*

*Don’t worry about leaving me behind—I’ll be waiting for you at the river when all this is over, and then everything will make sense!*

*I know you still get pissed off at me sometimes for some of the shit that went down between us at the end, but that’s okay. Be mad if you need to be mad, babe. Just be honest about it, and write your way through it. But stay in your program, and don’t worry about how I did things, or what I would think of the way you’re doing things. I love you and I want this freedom for you! I’m so proud of your sobriety—you’re really fucking doing it! You’re going all the way, man! You’re a star, keep going! Don’t let me or anyone else ever hold you back!*

And stop worrying about people so much, okay? You think about other people way too fucking much! Don't ever babysit anyone again! Don't let anyone bullshit you, or pull you down into their drama, or make you take care of them. Let everyone find their own path—it's good for them and it's good for you. You have such good friends now, but they don't need you to carry them!

Breathe, baby, breathe . . .

I'm right here with you. I'm not fading out . . .

Breathe, baby, breathe . . .

Let me just look at you for a minute. Look at your little rainbow eyes! Look at your little sparkling tears! You're so beautiful!

There's something you need to understand, babe, and I'm gonna break it down for you, so listen up: The reason I don't come around here anymore is because you and I both want you to have your own journey—and that's what needs to happen now. I know you want me to say that I'm always here for you if you need me, but the reality is you don't need me anymore—and that's great fucking news. Why would you think I wouldn't celebrate that? I used to need to be needed, but I don't need that anymore—and neither do you. I want you to be free of all need—and you're finally getting there!

Breathe, baby, breathe . . .

You have everything you need now. Stay on your path. You're on the right track. You found your God—and your God is fucking awesome. Your God is lit! Your community's got you covered and you never need to be degraded by dependency of any kind, ever again. You're really gonna shine now! It's your time!

My mom says hi, by the way, and thanks you for everything you did for me. She knows what you did and wants me to tell you that she loves you!

But babe, listen: Between us and about us, shit got super fucked up at the end—and that wasn't your fault or my fault. It wasn't even wrong, how things went. It just had to be. There was a job we had to do in each other's stories—and we did it just right. Everything went down exactly the way it was supposed to—even all the bullshit and the insanity. But underneath all the stories, there was a truth: We loved each other so much. We just loved each other. We loved each other. We loved each other. We loved each other. We loved each other.

**WE LOVED EACH OTHER SO MUCH!**

When the day comes for you to leave this life, I'm gonna come get you, okay? You got that? I'll be waiting for you at the river, and you'll know my face. When I tell you to take my hand, just take it. I'll bring you over and show you around. That's my role in your life now, babe, and it is a sacred one. I'll carry it out with strength, honor, and compassion—were those our words? I forget. Fuck it, just know I'll be there . . .

But that won't be for a long time, and don't go busting your ass looking for me all over the universe before then! Just go live your life and make it fully yours. That's one of the things, the main thing, you came here to do—to learn how to live your own life without obsessing about anyone else. That's your path and you're on it—and you can't go searching for me and do that at the same time.

As for the book, just write the living shit out of that thing!!! Tell the people exactly what happened! Tell them every single thing that happened! Don't worry about

protecting my dignity or yours—just go full punk rock with it. Lay it all out there. What use do I have for dignity now? You don't need dignity, either, so fuck it. It's time for you to write a completely honest book about addiction—yours and mine. It'll help some people—so don't hold back!

I like the title "All the Way to the River"—but what do I know? I'm dead! You should probably ask someone who's still alive! HA!

Don't worry, my love—I don't mind being dead. I kind of dig it.

But I do miss grilling.

You know what else, babe? Looking at you right now, I wish I could get my hands up in your hair, because your roots are fucking hit!!! Next time you get a keratin treatment, be sure to get the real old-school Brazilian keratin with the formaldehyde in it, cuz it's the only thing that calms down your frizz and keeps your hair shiny. Don't worry about getting liver cancer from the formaldehyde—liver cancer was my thing, not your thing. HA!

Your world is so fucking beautiful! LOOK AT IT! No, really—look at it! It's so beautiful to behold, it'll break your heart—but that's what it's supposed to do. Let it break your heart. You know I always loved a good heartbreak.

My sunshine baby, you were always my baby—but don't stay a baby. Remember that I always loved you as a woman, too—as a beautiful, elegant, strong, creative woman with incredible power. And nobody can match you for spiritual flame. Keep chewing off your own legs to get out of any trap that tries to hold you back from freedom . . .

Be free, my love. Be free, be free! Stay on your path and stay sober!

*You can do this! You're not as fucked up as you think!  
You can do it! Now is your time to stand on your own two  
feet. So keep taking care of yourself. Let everyone around  
you take care of their own lives while you take care of yours.  
That's the assignment . . .*

*I love you and I know you love me, but don't hold on to  
me—don't ever hold on to anyone or anything again. Focus  
on yourself now. Live your own life! Keep going, my love.  
Keep going. You're going all the fucking way this time—all  
the way to the enlightenment, or whatever you used to call  
it. You've got everything you need. Your friends are cool,  
your program is cool, your heart is strong, and your God is  
rock-fucking-solid. Don't ever give yourself away again.  
You got this. You're beautiful. Don't come looking for  
me. Keep going. Stay focused. I love you. I love you.  
I love you—*

Then the pen died and Rayya was gone—as though sucked through an airplane door at six hundred miles an hour.

She always did know how to make a dramatic exit.

**I**n the silent and sudden aftermath of Rayya's visitation, my heart raced, then settled.

Tears swelled, then quieted.

And then I got to work.

This book, with its stories, prayers, poems, journal entries, photos, and drawings, is my very best effort to tell the truth about what happened between me and Rayya Elias—our friendship, our romance, our beauty, rage, and pain. It tells the story of Rayya's addiction, her relapse, and her death.

It also tells the story of my own addiction and my eventual surrender into recovery.

But this book is not only for people whose lives have been negatively impacted by their own addictions or by the addictions of others—although I do believe those two categories will include pretty much all of us, at some time or another. This book is also about the many ways that people—despite their best efforts at living sane and stable lives—can sometimes get swept into high-octane dramas and traumas, finding themselves washed up on shores that can feel very distant from their true natures.

*How the hell did I get here?* is a question that I believe everybody will have to face at some point during their passage through life. Perhaps even at multiple points. For who among us has never gotten lost, much to our own embarrassment? Who has not ended up in scenarios that are frightening, alienating, shameful, and spirit-crushing? Who has not kept secrets, or been betrayed, or tried to control the behavior of others? Who has not longed for escape from suffering? And who has not reached for substances, people, behaviors, or distractions that offer temporary respite from the built-in discomforts of existence itself?

What we commonly call an “addict,” I believe, is just an exaggerated version of *all of us*—just a person so desperately in search of relief from the sting of life that they will use anything (or anyone) to soothe it.

This book is about that search for relief, and how wild and depraved it can make us become.

Even the strongest of us.

Even the bravest.

I hope for your own sake that you have never fallen quite as low as Rayya and I fell at some points during our journey together. But even if your wheels have never *fully* come off, I suspect, at some level, that I might be you, and that you might be me, and that all of us might be Rayya.

I offer this book with love and respect, then, to anyone who might need it.

The part of me that still struggles with codependency would like to say that Rayya and I wrote it together, but the reality is that she wanted me to do it all by myself—and so I have.

As we say in the rooms of recovery: Take what you like and leave the rest.

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LEUCHTTURM 17

WHERE I CAN HEAL ME,  
SHOW ME HOW.  
WHERE I CAN HELP THEM,  
SHOW ME HOW.  
WHERE THEY CAN HOLD ME,  
SHOW THEM HOW.

STAY WITH ME

\$ REWARD IF FOUND \$

BITTE ZURÜCKGEBEN AN  
MEINER RETOURNÉ  
VEUILLEZ S.V.P. RETOURNER A

GILBERT

YOU DO  
NOT BEAT  
YOUR OWN  
HEART

HERZLICHEN DANK  
THANK YOU VERY MUCH  
MERCI BEAUCOUP

WHEN PEOPLE ASK ME,  
“WHO WAS RAYYA?”

**R**ayya Mokdessa Elias.

Born in Syria, raised in Detroit, forged on the Lower East Side of New York City.

Rayya: who came to America at the age of seven, from the beautiful, vibrant city of Aleppo—where her family had been affluent and glamorous and where, in her memory, there was always music and dancing, and flowers everywhere.

Rayya: who—after arriving in cold, foreign, winter-dark Michigan—never felt quite at home anywhere again.

Rayya: who always felt too Middle Eastern to be American and too American to be Middle Eastern. Who spoke just enough Arabic to argue with cab drivers, but whose only consistent nod to her background was always to preorder the halal meals on airplanes—despite having been raised as an Orthodox Christian. (“That shit’s just fresher, yo!”)

Rayya: whose traditional and hardworking immigrant parents could never make sense of this wild youngest child of theirs. Who was utterly ungovernable. Who hated to study, hated to work. Who was a loving and affectionate child but also the most disobedient. Who was a radiant

performer—a clown, a star—with a face that was always bathed in light. Who never stopped making her parents laugh and never stopped making them cry. Who, by the age of thirteen, was already skipping school to drive across state lines with older friends in order to see Led Zeppelin in concert. While high on acid. Which she was also selling.

Rayya: who described herself as an “ex-junkie, ex-felon, postpunk, glamour-butch dyke.” Who was closeted until her early twenties, because there was no place for her queerness in the Syrian Orthodox community of 1970s Detroit, where girls did not traditionally leave their parents’ homes until they were successfully married to doctors and lawyers from within the Arab émigré fold. Who, growing up, was considered too masculine to be beautiful by the standards of the day, but too female to be offered the freedoms that her brothers and boy cousins enjoyed. Who always felt shamed and excluded. Who didn’t know *what* she was till she started seeing people like Elton John, David Bowie, and Freddie Mercury on TV—and then wanted to become them.

Rayya: who was gorgeous. Who was *stunning*. Who identified as an androgyne. Who had the dark eyes and dramatic cheekbones of the heroes in Persian illuminated manuscripts. Whose haircut was always something between the punked-out skater do of a little boy in a Japanese anime adventure and a badass Keith Richards shag. Whose face changed from male to female, from wise to playful, from timeless to childish as the light shifted.

Rayya: whom I could stare at all day and never get bored.

Rayya: who was an outrageously talented musician, writer, filmmaker, and hairdresser. Who could make friends with any musical instrument. Who was an electrifying performer with a muscular, beautiful, three-octave-wide voice. Who struggled, however, with insecurity, addiction, shame, and creative paralysis, and never became as successful as she wanted to be. Who nonetheless made independent films that were shown at the Berlin International Film Festival, and who never stopped writing