[00:00:00]

Transition: Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.

Promo: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I wanna give you a quick heads up that this next conversation on our show dives into some very intense topics—including addiction, cancer, sex, suicide, death, and violence. So, if you or someone you're listening with might be sensitive to that, we wanted to let you know.

Our conversation is with Elizabeth Gilbert. And if you know Elizabeth Gilbert's name, it might be for her 2006 book, *Eat, Pray, Love*: a memoir about self-discovery and finding love that was later made into a movie starring Julia Roberts and Javier Bardem. Earlier this month, Gilbert published her third memoir, *All the Way to the River: Love, Loss, and Liberation*. In it, Gilbert recounts the decline, death, and addiction experienced by her late partner, writer Rayya Elias.

Gilbert and Elias started dating in 2016. They became partners the next year. During that time, Elias was diagnosed with cancer. Doctors gave her a grim prognosis: six months, at best. So, Elias—a recovering addict—figured she had nothing to lose. She dove headfirst back into using hard drugs. What's the big deal if it's another six months? Then six months came and went. Elias hadn't passed. Then another six months. Then another. Elias survived for a year and a half after her diagnosis. For Gilbert, those 18 months were some of the rockiest of her life. She and Elias fought frequently. She contemplated taking her own life. And she contemplated taking the life of Elias. After Elias passed, alone with her thoughts, Elizabeth Gilbert says she realized she was a sex and love addict.

As I said, it is an intense and harrowing book. It's both raw and beautiful. I'm so glad to welcome Liz back onto the show. She is an old friend and, despite all this rawness, a very fun and funny one. I'm always happy to see her.

Elizabeth Gilbert.

Transition: Thumpy synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: Elizabeth Gilbert, welcome back to *Bullseye*. It's nice to see you.

Elizabeth Gilbert: It is always so good to see you. Thanks for having me back.

Jesse Thorn: There's this part in the book where you talk about your late partner going up to people, punching them gently in the sternum and saying, “How are you doing in here?” Which—the thought terrified me, as a feelings-avoidant person.

(They chuckle.)

But how are you doing in there?

Elizabeth Gilbert: Oh, are we just gonna start the interview with me crying? *(Laughs.)* I'm okay. I often think I'm okay and find out later that I wasn't as okay as I thought I was. I recently went to visit my friend, Martha Beck. And I walked into her house, and she said, "How you doing?"

I'm like, "I'm doing great!"

And she said, "Liz, you always say that. And then later, we find out awful was happening."

And I said, "Yeah, but I find out at the same time you do. I'm not hiding anything! I just don't know it yet, you know?"

(Jesse laughs.)

So, right now I would say that I'm really good, and I'm happy in this moment to be sitting here with you.

Jesse Thorn: And it's not because you're running headlong down the street, escaping unseen hellhounds on your trail?

Elizabeth Gilbert: I'm not saying yes or no to that.

(Jesse laughs.)

Because I don't typically know until the Hellhounds have me, and I'm like, "I didn't even notice them." But no, I should give myself a little bit more credit than that. I feel good in my life right at this moment.

Jesse Thorn: Well, I'm happy to hear that. How long did it take you to write this book?

Elizabeth Gilbert: Over seven years and a couple iterations. So.

Jesse Thorn: How many times did you start?

Elizabeth Gilbert: Three times. I wrote three different books. So, the first one I wrote a year after Rayya died. I wrote a novella that was sort of a fictional kind of account called *Nobody Leaves*—a sort of a ghost story. I was like, "Maybe I can write this as a ghost story, as fiction."

And I like that book. But it wasn't— After I wrote it and sent it to my agent, I was like, "I want you to read this, but I don't want anyone else to read this. And I don't know why, but I don't want anybody to see this. But I needed to do this." And then it was three years/four years later, I wrote a book of poetry called *Aftermath* that was about addiction and recovery and grief. And that was nice, 'cause it was deeply emotional, but I didn't have to specifically

talk about anything. And I was like, “I like this book too. This also is not the book.” And then it was… I'd say six years after Rayya died when it became evident that I needed to do was just say what happened.

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Which is, ironically, the advice I always give to everybody when they're writing nonfiction is to just say what happened. Just say what happened. Start at the beginning, go to the middle, and then end, and just say everything that happened. That's how you write a nonfiction book that's good and straightforward. It had elements of the other two in it, little pieces that I sort of poached from the earlier two books. But this was the thing; I kind of didn't want the assignment to have to directly say what happened. And I also think it took me six years to figure out what happened. Because what happened in that story between me and Rayya was so very different from what I thought was going to happen that I think it was almost like I had a concussion after she died—trying to align what happened at the end of her life with who I knew her to be prior to that and how did we get there?

It was so hard to untangle. And I think if I had written the book as a direct work of nonfiction right after she died, it would've been a story about what a nice person I am and what a terrible thing happened to me. And I’ve come too far intelligently to know that's ever true, you know? So, it took me a long time to figure out like, “How did I create this?”

Jesse Thorn: To what extent did you start by writing fiction, because it was a way for you to engage with it—the feeling—semi-directly rather than directly? To what extent were you not sure that you could write another direct book about yourself and your experiences for the world?

Elizabeth Gilbert: I'm thinking of that Emily Dickinson line. “Tell the truth, but tell it slant.” You know, like I think the fictional novella version of this book was me looking at it—or maybe the way you look at an eclipse with glasses on. I think that's as close as I could look at it at that point. But I also— There was a lot of drama around the end of Rayya's life. And that drama didn't only involve the two of us. And like, I didn't know how to tell that story. I didn't wanna kick up a bunch of drama again with a lot of other people who were involved in her death. I wanted to be sort of away from all of that.

And so, I think the telling of it as a novella was a way for me create a deliberate amount of space between not just me and those sort of—that furnace of emotion, but also I don't wanna bring anybody back into this. *(Chuckles.)* Like, I just got out of this drama maelstrom. I don't wanna stir it up with anyone. And I actually am grateful now that it took me so long to create this book, because it also gave all those people seven years to heal. And even people who I don't directly write about in the book but who are involved with the story, or who I write about in a very slight way out of protection to them—like, we all got to catch our breath.

Jesse Thorn: So, you can send a manuscript to people that knew Rayya. And you can decide how to represent your own story. How do you decide what is okay to tell about the story of someone who's not here anymore?

Elizabeth Gilbert: Weirdly, that's the easiest part.

Jesse Thorn: *(Surprised.)* Okay! *(Chuckles.)*

Elizabeth Gilbert: *(Chuckling.)* Because Rayya was the most open person I think I've ever known. And she wrote her own memoir about her heroin addiction, which also really helped me. Because I was like—she already represented herself. And I love directing people to her memoir and being like, "If you wanna know Rayya's version of Rayya, she had the opportunity in her life to express that in three different ways." She wrote music about her experience. She made short films about her experience. And she wrote a memoir about her experience. And she talked about her experience all the time.

I mean, her identification as "junkie" and "recovered junkie" and "proud recovered junkie" was a really enormous part of her existence. And she also had that— You know, when she was in her sanity and when she was in her sobriety, there was no one who loved the truth more. That was the thing I fell in love with about Rayya was that capacity she had to cut right to the center of the heart of the middle of the thing that nobody else wanted to talk about and just say like, "Hey, I'm noticing this is going on. How about we just start talking about this thing right now? And why don't we do it right now? And why don't we do it right here?" And so, she would not have wanted to be shielded any of this.

She also felt even more than I think I do—like, when she wrote her memoir, her intention for her memoir was, "I hope this really helps people." Whereas I think as a writer, I think a lot more about like, "How do I tell this story well and in an interesting way?" Like, helping people isn't my foremost motive. But for her, as somebody who had 13 years in the rooms, service is such a big part of telling her story. So. And she—you know, she wanted me to see her journals, and she left them for me.

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She also— There was a documentary filmmaker following us around. Like, she was like, *(chuckling)* "Look at me!" You know, always she wanted to be known. And the book begins with essentially a visitation on my birthday of Rayya. I wake up and feel Rayya in the room saying like, "You better sit down and write this book now, and tell the people everything, and hold nothing back." So, in a way, she was the simplest part of it. The harder part was do I wanna go back and relive all of this again? Can my nervous system stand this? For a long time, the answer to that was no.

Jesse Thorn: We've got so much more to get into with Elizabeth Gilbert. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Elizabeth Gilbert. She's a novelist, as well as the author of the classic, beloved memoir *Eat, Pray, Love*, which was made into a film in 2010. Earlier this month, Gilbert published her third memoir, *All the Way to the River: Love, Loss, and Liberation*. In it, Gilbert recounts the decline, death, and addiction experienced by her partner, writer Rayya Elias.

For a memoirist—a professional memoirist, which is a significant portion of your job, lo these past 20 to 25 years—a big part of this book is you *(chuckling)* finding the courage to know yourself.

Elizabeth Gilbert: I know. That was harder. *(Laughs.)*

Jesse Thorn: Like, there is a funny part like 4/5^{ths} of the way through this book where you're quoting yourself from 20 years ago and realizing that you're describing yourself when you may or may not have realized it at the time. But tell me what you had to come to terms with about yourself in order to write this book and do it frankly.

Elizabeth Gilbert: There's a line in the book that says, "What Rayya was, I also am." And that's what I had to get to. So, I—in the years since Rayya had died—have come to the rooms of 12-step recovery, not as a drug addict and not as a substance abuser, but as somebody who identifies as a skid row sex and love addict, a blackout codependent. Somebody who is always looking for an opportunity to abandon herself into someone else, to make somebody else the center of my life and then pour every single resource I've got into them. Like, just assault them with my love. *(Laughs.)* Make them into my higher power, which also means trying to control them.

And the way that I describe what that feels like emotionally for me is this terribly bad mathematical equation, which is like because I am lacking in a certain baseline sense of security and esteem and a sense of my own preciousness, I am going to take all the love and resources and power and energy that I have, and I'm going to—I'm just gonna like pin you down like a foie gras goose and stuff it into you. Everything that I have. And then I'm gonna beg you to give a little of it back to me.

And I did the math when I started to really awaken to this, that from the age of 15 to 50, when I came into the rooms of recovery and the relationship programs, it's 35 uninterrupted years. I just did that and did that and did that from one person to another to another to another. Losing every time, but still convinced *(laughing)* that somehow if I could get the right person to give me the right amount of love, I would be able to be okay.

Jesse Thorn: I think people imagine—not least because it is a story publicly told most often by men who identify themselves as sex addicts—that it's like, "Oh yeah, bro. You're terminally horny, huh?" So, what is the practical meaning of what sex and love addiction is? You describe being in a room, being in a 12-step meeting, and having a pamphlet being read at the beginning of the meeting.

(Elizabeth laughs.)

What are the basic things that are on the pamphlet?

Elizabeth Gilbert: Well, I wanna be careful not to present myself as a spokesperson for a particular program, but I would say that what it looks like is— I could boil it down to using other people to alter your own mood and mind the way that some other kind of addict might use substances to alter your mood and mind, or gambling, or cigarettes, or shopping, or

eating. But my fixation would be on a partner or a series of partners from whom I try to exact a feeling of my own wellbeing and my own security at any cost.

[00:15:00]

To the point of my—the exact opposite of my own wellbeing. To the point of my own destruction.

Jesse Thorn: You write about this a little bit in the book, but one of the things that I was thinking about as I was reading it was, you know, last couple times you've been here, you wrote a beautiful book about creativity called *Big Magic*. And we worked together on a podcast about creativity. And one of the things we talked about was the extent to which and how frequently women need a hand to be given permission to be creative and often need a hand to be given permission to define themselves outside of their families and relationships.

And your story—in addition to your sort of more prescriptive, "this is how to do creativity" part—but your own story is a great inspiration for a lot of people. It's also a relationship story.

(They laugh.)

You know what I mean? You've written two memoirs that, while they are about defining yourself outside of relationships, are also essentially romantic. Did you have to think about that as you were writing this book and dealing with this?

Elizabeth Gilbert: That's such a good question, Jesse. You know, as long as I can remember—let's just casually say for at least three decades—a thought that I have had is "I wish that I could approach romantic and sexual relationships with the same spirit that I approach creative projects. Why is this thing—creativity—so easy for me? And why is this other thing—relationship—so excruciatingly difficult for me? And creativity's hard for a lot of people, and it's not hard for me."

Jesse Thorn: I've been dancing around the actual story here. So, let's talk about the actual story here. You had been really close friends with Rayya for years. You went to get a haircut from her in an apartment building, immediately liked her but were pals, then really intimate BFF pals. But truly pals, right?

(Elizabeth confirms.)

For years. Not secretly something else?

Elizabeth Gilbert: Not secretly something else. For a long time. For the first probably eight or nine years that we knew each other, just I loved her the way I love 100 other people in my life.

Jesse Thorn: What circumstance changed or feeling changed?

Elizabeth Gilbert: When I got to know her better— I actually invited her not knowing her all that well. I mean, we were sort of remote pals, slightly. I heard she was going through a hard time. She was going through a divorce. I had this old church that I owned. I had this dream of turning it into an artist residency for people and a retreat center for people. And I was like, "Come and live in my church in New Jersey!"

Jesse Thorn: It was like a house church, to be clear.

Elizabeth Gilbert: It was a house church.

Jesse Thorn: It was a church that had house stuff in it.

Elizabeth Gilbert: That had been turned into a house. It had house stuff in it. And I was like, "Come and live out there and, you know, work on your creativity, recover from your divorce." The deal originally was that she was gonna stay for summer. And over the course of that summer, I came to start seeing her every single day. And what I noticed, and what I talk about in the book is: the impact that her physical and emotional presence had on my nervous system was an experience I had never before had, which is a feeling of a deep abiding safety when she was in the room. And I don't think I knew, before that feeling was absent, how unsafe had always felt. Always. I vibrate with a sort of vigilance of "People are scary and unpredictable." I kind of look like I'm good with people, but I'm good with people 'cause I need to be good with people to make sure that they don't act out in some—

Jesse Thorn: Right. You're making— You came into this room today and handed everyone stickers that said, "You are loved."

Elizabeth Gilbert: Yeah. That's my thing.

(They laugh.)

Jesse Thorn: Right? So, you step into a room, and by—

Elizabeth Gilbert: Yeah. And also, they are. *(Laughs.)*

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, that's true. And you also wanna do something nice for every single person sitting there, just in case, to make sure that they're cool and chill. Make sure that they're not gonna make any sudden moves.

Elizabeth Gilbert: Yes. And it's a tricky line, 'cause I also—

Jesse Thorn: Also, 'cause you sincerely are a nice person.

Elizabeth Gilbert: I sincerely am a kind person, and I'm a sincerely generous person, but I'm also—for good reason—jumpy. You know? And that's just been such a part of my existence for as long as I can remember. And the feeling that like, "I've gotta manage everyone in here," or else—like, "Nobody moves, nobody gets hurt." Like, there could be—

[00:20:00]

Jesse Thorn: And the reverse feeling was what you felt when you were with Rayya?

Elizabeth Gilbert: She walked in and managed it. Rayya was the alpha in every room she walked into, and she did it effortlessly. She had this— She was so strong and grounded in herself, and she was also so unafraid of people's chaos in a way that I am so afraid of people's chaos. When somebody's chaos happened, she could just walk right into the— It's like those Japanese engineers who went right into the middle of the nuclear reactor so fearlessly, those guys in their 80s who were like, "I know how to do this." Like, she could walk right into the middle of anybody's nuclear reactor and come out and be like, *(casually)* "Yeah, that was interesting." You know? And the radiation didn't seem to get her like the way that it did for me. *(Laughs.)*

Jesse Thorn: That feels to me—and tell me if I'm wrong—like a junkie/recovering junkie superpower.

(Elizabeth agrees.)

Like, having been— My father was in recovery most of my life. He's not with us anymore, but he was in recovery most of my life. And I knew that he had experienced things and was close with people who had experienced things that were far outside of the, you know, *(chuckles)* the boundaries of my, you know, emotional meter.

Elizabeth Gilbert: The deep end of the harrowing pool, right? Like, the deep-deep end of the harrowing. And had seen things that you and I haven't seen.

Jesse Thorn: And was like familiar and comfortable with them in a way that I could never be. I mean, he also— Those same things about him, that he was an addict and in recovery, also could make him scary though. And it's not like the Rayya in this story is not also scary.

Elizabeth Gilbert: She's terrifying. I mean that same power when it's governed by darkness, rather than being governed by a spirit of light and service, now you have the most powerful person in the room as a danger to you. And that was what made me feel concussed after she died, was like, "Wait, how did this foundational, anchoring person who had this seemingly magical quality of being the only person in the world who I could ever feel safe when she was in the room, then became the person who is the most dangerous person I've ever been around?"

Jesse Thorn: Okay. So, you became romantically, rather than sororally, involved with her essentially just as she was learning that her days were numbered. What was the prognosis when she found out?

Elizabeth Gilbert: Six months to live. So, she was diagnosed with advanced pancreatic and liver cancer, and they said essentially that it would be a miracle if she lived six months.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, for you—sex and relationship addict, Elizabeth Gilbert—do you see, looking backwards, the excitement that you felt being able to go full-tilt on a binge of sex and relationship addiction enactment without, in your mind or in your heart, having to worry about what comes at the end of it? 'Cause you already know what comes at the end of it?

Elizabeth Gilbert: Yeah. And consequence-free living is something that addicts dream of. You know? And interestingly, Rayya and I both had that idea. Hers was like, "Well, I'm a hospice patient. There's no reason not to do cocaine again." *(Laughs.)* You know? Like, what possible consequences are there gonna be? It's gonna kill me? Great. I'm already dying. Like, let's roll. Let's bring this thing back in that— And she wasn't the kind of addict in recovery who never missed her drug. She missed her drug, I think, every day of her life. I mean, I'd heard her say for years, "If I ever knew I was dying, I would go out and get the biggest speedball of heroin and cocaine, and I would shoot it right into my arm for one last ride."

She actually ended up getting to do that for many months before she died. But that was sort of her dream was like consequence-free drug use to get to the place she'd always wanted to go: to the height of as high as she always wanted to be, but which had always brought such terrible consequences to her life.

Jesse Thorn: We're gonna take a break. When we return, we will finish up with Elizabeth Gilbert, author of the new book *All the Way to the River: Love, Loss, and Liberation*. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Promo:

> **Music**: Playful, exciting synth.
>
> **Ellen Weatherford**: Hi, everybody. It's Ellen Weatherford.
>
> **Christian Weatherford**: And Christian Weatherford.
>
> **Ellen**: People say not to judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree.
>
> **Christian**: But we can judge a snake by its ability to fly or a spider by its ability to dive.
>
> **Ellen**: Or a dung beetle by its ability to navigate with the starlight of the Milky Way galaxy.
>
> **Christian**: On *Just the Zoo of Us*, we rate our favorite animals out of ten in the categories of physical effectiveness, behavioral ingenuity, and—of course—aesthetics.

Ellen: Guest experts like biologists, ecologists, musicians, comedians and more join us to share their unique insights into the animal kingdom.

Christian: Listen with the whole family on MaximumFun.org. Or wherever you get your podcasts.

(Music ends.)

[00:25:00]

Promo: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: I'm Jesse Thorn. You're listening to *Bullseye*. With me is writer Elizabeth Gilbert.

So, the two of you had months of… going ape.

(Elizabeth confirms.)

And going ape within a… relatively healthy context. Which is to say, doing things like karaoke. You know, extra karaoke. *(Chuckles.)*

Elizabeth Gilbert: Traveling, bucket list adventures.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. And also, she was like into Rolexes, right? So, you get her a Rolex. You know? But even then, she had been drinking, which you knew about but didn't understand, really. And she started using. It's an abrupt turn in your book when we go from, "It was pretty great having all our friends hang around and going to karaoke bars every night" to "our apartment was full of fat rails." To what extent did you see it coming and feel it coming, and to what extent were you lost and afloat on a current?

Elizabeth Gilbert: I'm hearing in my head the words—F Scott Fitzgerald's words, they get re-quoted all the time, which was, "At first slowly, and then quickly." And I'm also hearing in the big book of AA that like "sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly." Rayya had been drinking for probably seven years before that point and had just left the rooms of recovery and decided she wasn't— She graduated herself and said, "I'm not an addict anymore."

Jesse Thorn: Without finishing the steps and among other things.

Elizabeth Gilbert: Yeah. Just—you know, it's a program that you're meant to kind of always work and not just like you do it, and then you graduate. *(Laughs.)* So, she just was like, "I'm not an addict anymore. I'm good, and I can drink." And when I look back on it with the benefit of hindsight, it's so clear there was like a slippery slope happening that I couldn't have seen. And also, I was so blinded by infatuation and by the idea that this person always knows what they're doing and is never wrong.

And the shock came when she started taking opioids for the pain and then pretty quickly was like, “Well, if I'm gonna be doped out morphine, and I hate this feeling, I actually know the thing that will make this feeling not feel like this.”

And within a minute of her sort of announcing that— I mean, it was probably a half an hour later that she figured out how to get some cocaine. And I was so used to doing everything she said. You know? 'Cause she was so confident and so reassuring that I was like, “Okay, that's a good idea.” Like, every—Rayya’s ideas always seemed like good ideas. *(Laughs.)* You know what I’m saying? Like, you know what's best. You understand drugs. I don't. I’ve never been a drug user. I get it. What could possibly be the harm? Here's $600. Let's go get some cocaine for you.

And I remember looking at her two days into that cocaine idea and sort of taking her aside and saying like, “I'm having this memory right now, Rayya, of something you told me once where you said, ‘Don't ever let me be in a room with cocaine in it.’”

And she's like, “It’s cool, it’s cool, it’s cool, it's cool. Like, this is a different situation.” You know? Like, she was very reassuring. *(Laughs.)*

And I was like, “I feel like maybe this isn't a great idea.” And by that time it was… she was gone.

Jesse Thorn: So, when she was really sick—and I mean, she obviously was very sick with cancer, but I'm talking about in her addiction—you were profoundly out of your depth and couldn't quite figure out how to get help for a significant period of time. And both of your lives were so miserable that at one point you literally made a plan to murder her.

Elizabeth Gilbert: Yeah. It seemed like such a good idea. Because I couldn’t see any other way out. She wasn't dying. *(Chuckles awkwardly.)* Like, she was supposed to die. She lived 18 months on a six-month diagnosis. I also think that calculation of her thinking she had six months to live was part of the unfettered like, “Let's open up the drugs again.”

Jesse Thorn: Right. And then it turns out there's another year on the other end.

Elizabeth Gilbert: Yeah. Where she just sort of became Sid Vicious for a year. You know?

Jesse Thorn: She had it timed out.

Elizabeth Gilbert: And that didn't work out according to plan. Which is also just, again, life being like, “You actually don't get to plan everything.”

[00:30:00]

Jesse Thorn: So, all you had was misery in your life, living with this person who's constantly telling you how awful you are and how much they hate you, while also trying to work you for

drugs. She's miserable, because she's at the lowest point of addiction. Death that was supposed to be, at least for her, her way out of this—I'm sure when she started, anyway—is—

Elizabeth Gilbert: Isn't coming.

Jesse Thorn: Has become indefinite. Right?

Elizabeth Gilbert: *(Chuckles.)* And she was so tough. I'm like, "Is she gonna—? Like, is she gonna live forever with pancreatic cancer?" I mean, it doesn't seem possible that somebody could, but if anyone could. And she's gonna burn the house down, because she's smoking constantly indoors, in bed, dripping.

Jesse Thorn: And like nodding out while smoking.

Elizabeth Gilbert: Nodding out while dropping lit cigarettes everywhere. I can't sleep, because she's refusing to sleep. And in my exhaustion and also my despair, it's like, "Let me just kill her." It was the only idea I could come up with for how to get out of it. *(Chuckles dryly.)* And I say in the book like, "Let me make this really clear. This wasn't like it crossed my mind that it would be easier if she died. It was like, what must I now do to hasten this along." And not necessarily to put her out of her misery, but to put me out of mine.

And there's a stack of boxes full of Fentanyl patches that the nice hospice people left. And if I can just figure out how to get her to sleep—because she was such a cracked-out cocaine head at that point and so paranoid, how can I figure out how to knock her out long enough that I can put a bunch of Fentanyl patches on her? And she can die, and then I can call oncologist who had said, "When she dies, call me." Because she was, you know, on a death watch at that point. "And I'll write the death certificate, and there'll be no examination."

So, it just— I was like, "This is obviously what I need to do." And—

Jesse Thorn: Why did you call people?

Elizabeth Gilbert: Because I had—and the only way I can express this is as a spiritual salvation moment. *(Chuckling.)* She actually kind of smelled it out. Like, Rayya was such a good survivor. I came up with this plan and walked back into the house, and she took one look at me and said, "Don't start plotting against me now."

And I'm like, "How do you know that I'm planning to kill you?! You're a witch!" You know, like she smelled it.

Jesse Thorn: And I mean, she was also in a state of extreme paranoia and resentful and angry towards you in general. So, it was her natural state to say, "Don't you start plotting against me." It served her in that moment.

Elizabeth Gilbert: But it felt pretty specific, the timing of it.

Jesse Thorn: So, I went out for a walk, and I had a thought of like, "Oh, I'll just kill me." Like, I have all the sleeping pills and fentanyl patches for me too. And that was like, "Oh, that's more efficient. I don't have to kill her. I can just kill me."

And in the next moment, I heard a voice that I call God that I've heard before in my life say, "If you've reached a point in your life where you are seriously contemplating killing yourself or another human being, there's a very strong chance that you've reached the end of your power. And that being the case, it might be a good idea for you to call someone."

Jesse Thorn: Was it hard to finish the book knowing that the end of the book couldn't be Rayya dying?

Elizabeth Gilbert: Say more about that?

Jesse Thorn: I mean, there's not really a version of this book as it sits where the last thing that happens is your beloved partner leaving this earth.

Elizabeth Gilbert: Right.

Jesse Thorn: Which is how stories end. And what comes after that isn't just a denouement. It's more than that. You know.

Elizabeth Gilbert: Yeah, it's the last *(unclear)*.

Jesse Thorn: It's more than just like everyone talking at the funeral about how much they loved her or something.

Elizabeth Gilbert: Well, the way I describe it in the book is if this was just a story about Rayya, we'd be done now. *(Laughs.)* Like, this would be the end. She died. You know, we loved her. We miss her. But this isn't just a story about Rayya, and I think that's why it's so important that it took me so long to write this story. This is a story about me trying to take complete self-accountability for my role in not just this story with Rayya, but in a long history of very intense, dramatic, and chaotic relationships.

And as I said in the book, after Rayya died, we still had me to deal with. Like, I didn't get to sort of vanish into the ether and have all my sorrows and pains be gone. I got to still be here in Earth School, an unrecovered addict with unhealed trauma, with even more trauma now, trying to figure out how to navigate life on Earth in ways that I've never known how to do. And so, the last part of the book is that reckoning.

[00:35:00]

Jesse Thorn: Liz, you're a novelist and a memoirist and an author of what could loosely be called a self-help book in *Big Magic*. And you're in part also a professional people helper/inspirer. How does your career in establishing intimacy with strangers to give of yourself to help them achieve their dreams or leave their wives or husbands or—

(They laugh.)

You know, go to Bali, whatever. Right? How does that fit with this new understanding that you have of yourself and your own maintenance of your version of sobriety?

Elizabeth Gilbert: I believe—and this is my belief system—that the highest use of my… I would like to be of service. It's a pleasure to be of service in a way that is sober. It's not always easy for me to know where that line is between sober, loving service—which I think is my soul's true calling, and I get a great deal of satisfaction from helping people and from sharing. Sharing is something that's very easy for me to do. And I also have an attachment wound that can latch onto that behavior and use it as a way hotwire intimacy.

I would be lying if I sat here and said, "I've got that thing decoded and solved, and I'm never gonna get myself into any trouble with that again." *(Laughs.)* And I actually think I don't know where that line is, and I don't think that my mind can know where that line is. But I do, as part of my recovery and also as the way I like to live, I do live my life one day at a time these days. And I do live my life in deep connection with a higher power who I call God. And I say that word very respectfully of people who are very triggered by that word, knowing that they're triggering from that word is very real, and a lot of the pain that people have around that word is real. But I don't know a better word for this presence that I can access if I get quiet that I believe loves me and wants me to be well and offers me opportunities to be of service. But it's best when I check with that source first, *(laughs)* rather than acting out of impulse.

Jesse Thorn: Well, thank you for being here and talking to me. And thanks for the book.

Elizabeth Gilbert: Thanks, Jesse.

Jesse Thorn: Elizabeth Gilbert. Her new memoir is *All the Way to the River: Love, Loss, and Liberation*. You can get it at your local bookstore or on Bookshop.org.

Transition: Upbeat, thumpy synth.

Jesse Thorn: That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye. Bullseye,* created in the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, as well as at Maximum Fun HQ—overlooking MacArthur Park in Los Angeles, California. It's getting swampy here in Los Angeles, and my office keeps being invaded by mosquitoes.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun, Hannah Moroz. Our video producer is Daniel Speer. We get booking help on *Bullseye* from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music comes from our pal, Dan Wally, also known as DJW. You can find his music at DJWsounds.bandcamp.com. Our theme music was written and recorded by The Go! Team. It's called "Huddle Formation". Thanks to The Go! Team. Thanks to their label, Memphis Industries.

You can follow *Bullseye* on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, where you will find video from all our interviews, including the ones that you heard this week. And hey, why not take the opportunity to share them with a pal? YouTube's great way to do that.

I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

Promo: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

(Music fades out.)