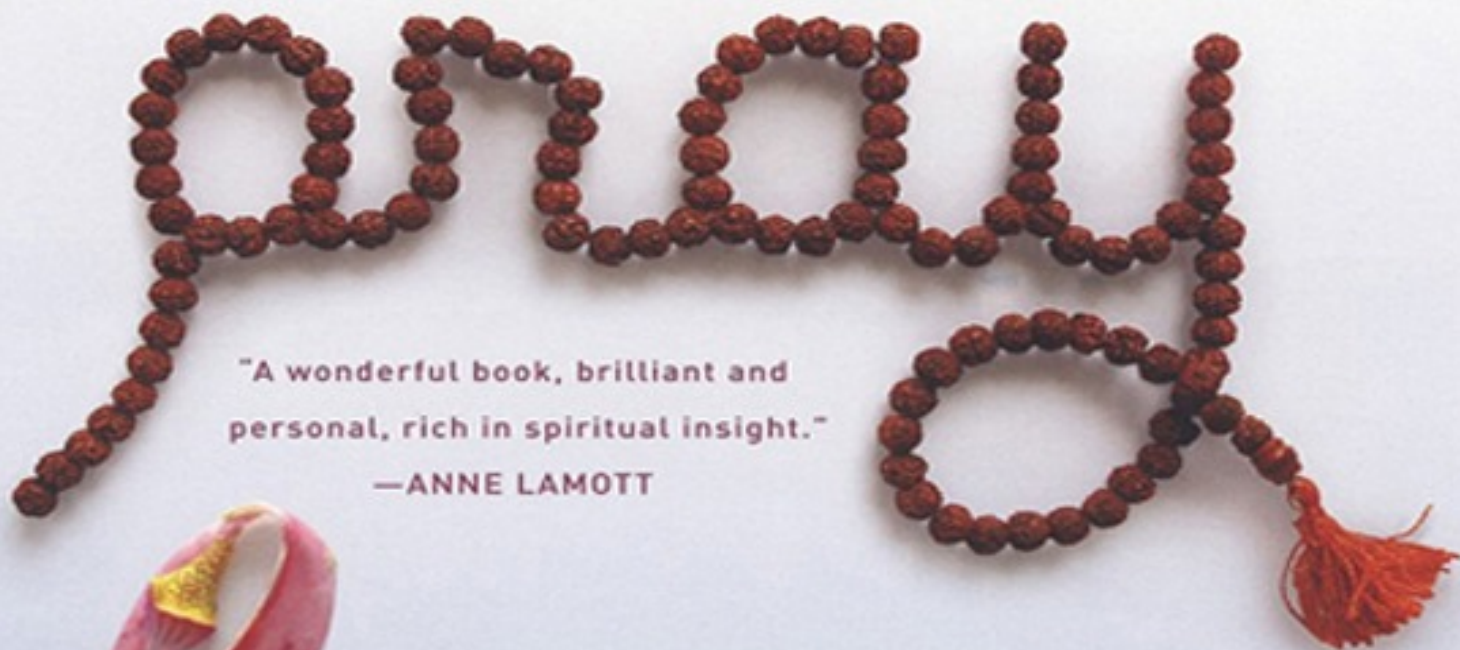


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ELIZABETH GILBERT



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*One Woman's Search for Everything
Across Italy, India and Indonesia*





Eat, Pray, Love



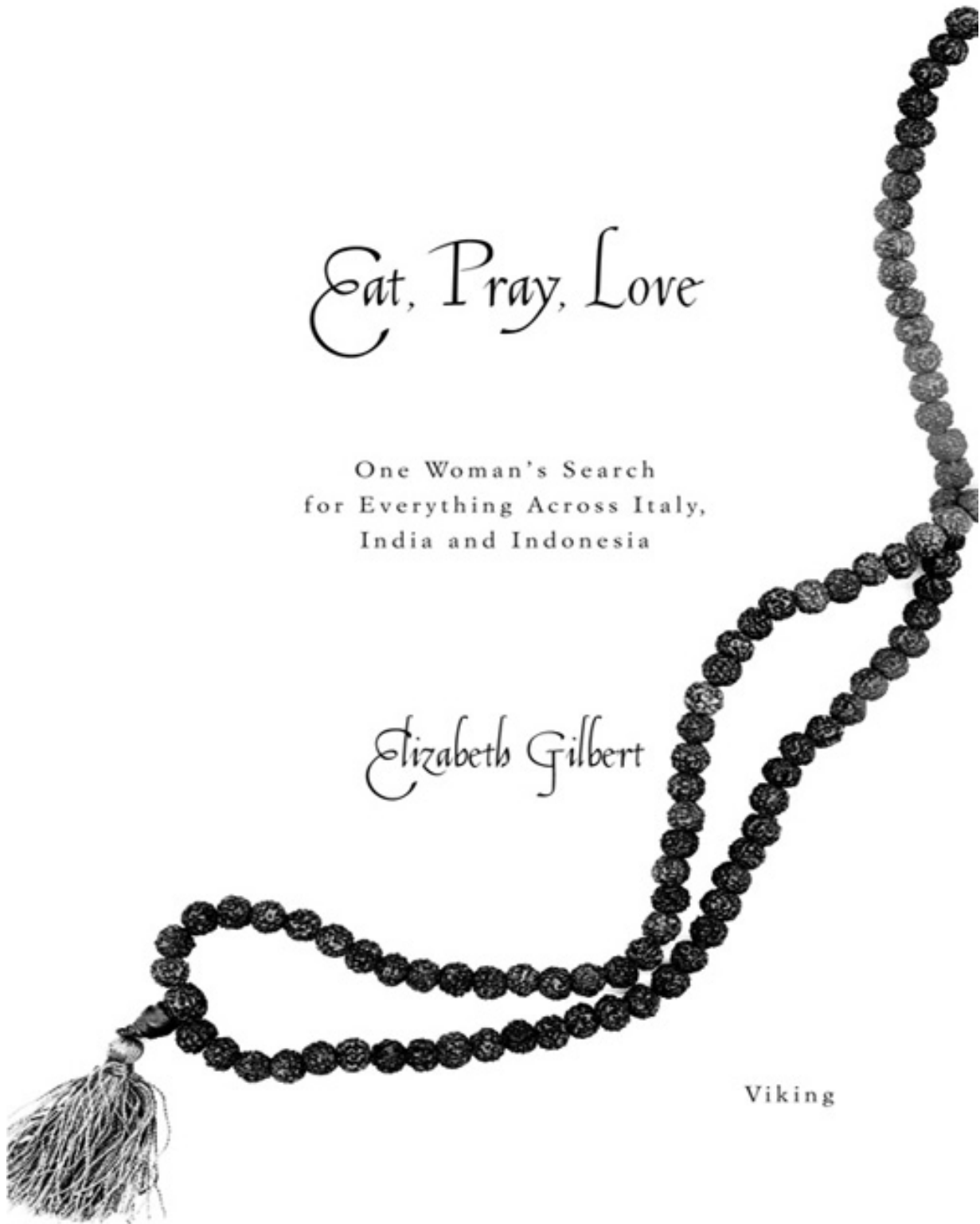
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One Woman's Search
for Everything Across Italy,
India and Indonesia

Elizabeth Gilbert



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For Susan Bowen—

*who provided refuge
even from 12,000 miles away*

Tell the truth, tell the truth, tell the truth.*

—Sheryl Louise Moller

** Except when attempting to solve emergency Balinese real estate transactions, such as described in Book 3.*

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Eat, Pray, Love

Introduction

or
How This Book Works
or
The 109th Bead

When you're traveling in India—especially through holy sites and Ashrams—you see a lot of people wearing beads around their necks. You also see a lot of old photographs of naked, skinny and intimidating Yogis (or sometimes even plump, kindly and radiant Yogis) wearing beads, too. These strings of beads are called *japa malas*. They have been used in India for centuries to assist devout Hindus and Buddhists in staying focused during prayerful meditation. The necklace is held in one hand and fingered in a circle—one bead touched for every repetition of mantra. When the medieval Crusaders drove East for the holy wars, they witnessed worshippers praying with these *japa malas*, admired the technique, and brought the idea home to Europe as rosary.

The traditional *japa mala* is strung with 108 beads. Amid the more esoteric circles of Eastern philosophers, the number 108 is held to be most auspicious, a perfect three-digit multiple of three, its components adding up to nine, which is three threes. And three, of course, is the number representing supreme balance, as anyone who has ever studied either the Holy Trinity or a simple barstool can plainly see. Being as this whole book is about my efforts to find balance, I have decided to structure it like a *japa mala*, dividing my story into 108 tales, or beads. This string of 108 tales is further divided into three sections about Italy, India and Indonesia—the three countries I visited during this year of self-inquiry. This division means that there are 36 tales in each section, which appeals to me on a personal level because I am writing all this during my thirty-sixth year.

Now before I get too Louis Farrakhan here with this numerology business, let me conclude by saying that I also like the idea of stringing these stories along the structure of a *japa mala* because it is so . . . structured. Sincere spiritual investigation is, and always has been, an endeavor of methodical discipline. Looking for Truth is not some kind of spazzy free-for-all, not even during this, the great age of the spazzy free-for-all. As both a seeker and a writer, I find it helpful to hang on to the beads as much as possible, the better to keep my attention focused on what it is I'm trying to accomplish.

In any case, every *japa mala* has a special, extra bead—the 109th bead—which dangles outside that balanced circle of 108 like a pendant. I used to think the 109th bead was an emergency spare, like the extra button on a fancy sweater, or the youngest son in a royal family. But apparently there is an even higher purpose. When your fingers reach this marker during prayer, you are meant to pause from your absorption in meditation and thank your

teachers. So here, at my own 109th bead, I pause before I even begin. I offer thanks to all my teachers, who have appeared before me this year in so many curious forms.

But most especially I thank my Guru, who is compassion's very heartbeat, and who so generously permitted me to study at her Ashram while I was in India. This is also the moment where I would like to clarify that I write about my experiences in India purely from a personal standpoint and not as a theological scholar or as anybody's official spokesperson. This is why I will not be using my Guru's name throughout this book—because I cannot speak for her. Her teachings speak best for themselves. Nor will I reveal either the name or the location of her Ashram, thereby sparing that fine institution publicity which it may have neither the interest in nor the resources for managing.

One final expression of gratitude: While scattered names throughout this book have been changed for various reasons, I've elected to change the names of every single person I met—both Indian and Western—at this Ashram in India. This is out of respect for the fact that most people don't go on a spiritual pilgrimage in order to appear later as a character in a book. (Unless, of course, they are me.) I've made only one exception to this self-imposed policy of anonymity. Richard from Texas really is named Richard, and he really is from Texas. I wanted to use his real name because he was so important to me when I was in India.

One last thing—when I asked Richard if it was OK with him if I mentioned in my book that he used to be a junkie and a drunk, he said that would be totally fine.

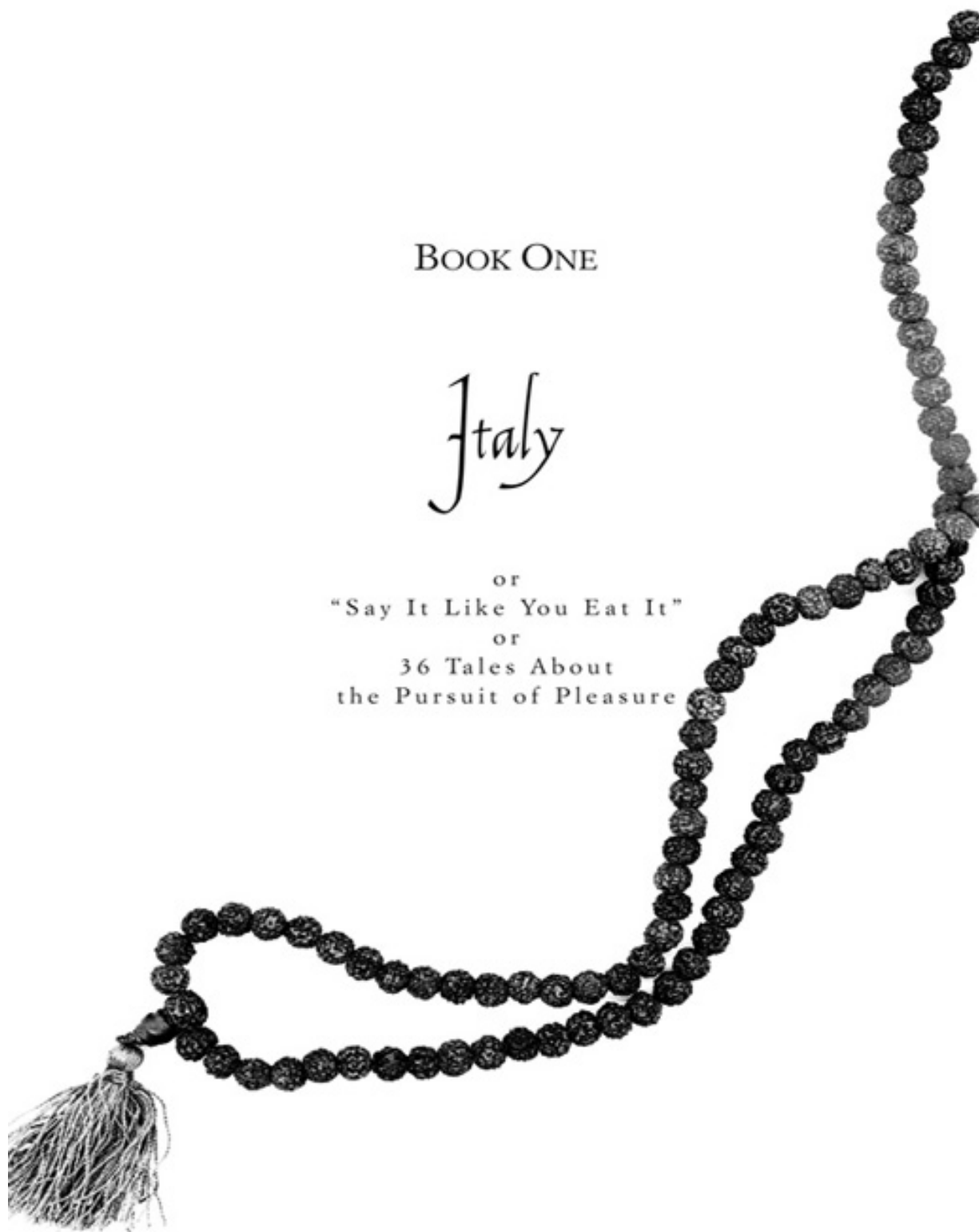
He said, "I'd been trying to figure out how to get the word out about that, anyhow."

But first—Italy . . .

BOOK ONE

Italy

or
"Say It Like You Eat It"
or
36 Tales About
the Pursuit of Pleasure



1



I wish Giovanni would kiss me.

Oh, but there are so many reasons why this would be a terrible idea. To begin with, Giovanni is ten years younger than I am, and—like most Italian guys in their twenties—he still lives with his mother. These facts alone make him an unlikely romantic partner for me, given that I am a professional American woman in my mid-thirties, who has just come through a failed marriage and a devastating, interminable divorce, followed immediately by a passionate love affair that ended in sickening heartbreak. This loss upon loss has left me feeling sad and brittle and about seven thousand years old. Purely as a matter of principle I wouldn't inflict my sorry, busted-up old self on the lovely, unsullied Giovanni. Not to mention that I have finally arrived at that age where a woman starts to question whether the wisest way to get over the loss of one beautiful brown-eyed young man is indeed to promptly invite another one into her bed. This is why I have been alone for many months now. This is why, in fact, I have decided to spend this entire year in celibacy.

To which the savvy observer might inquire: “Then why did you come to *Italy*?”

To which I can only reply—especially when looking across the table at handsome Giovanni—“Excellent question.”

Giovanni is my Tandem Exchange Partner. That sounds like an innuendo, but unfortunately it's not. All it really means is that we meet a few evenings a week here in Rome to practice each other's languages. We speak first in Italian, and he is patient with me; then we speak in English, and I am patient with him. I discovered Giovanni a few weeks after I'd arrived in Rome, thanks to that big Internet café at the Piazza Barbarini, across the street from that fountain with the sculpture of that sexy merman blowing into his conch shell. He (Giovanni, that is—not the merman) had posted a flier on the bulletin board explaining that a native Italian speaker was seeking a native English speaker for conversational language practice. Right beside his appeal was another flier with the same request, word-for-word identical in every way, right down to the typeface. The only difference was the contact information. One flier listed an e-mail address for somebody named Giovanni; the other introduced somebody named Dario. But even the home phone number was the same.

Using my keen intuitive powers, I e-mailed both men at the same time, asking in Italian, “Are you perhaps brothers?”

It was Giovanni who wrote back this very *provocativo* message: “Even better. Twins!”

Yes—much better. Tall, dark and handsome identical twenty-five-year-old twins, as it turned out, with those giant brown liquid-center Italian eyes that just unstitch me. After meeting the boys in person, I began to wonder if perhaps I should adjust my rule somewhat about remaining celibate this year. For instance, perhaps I could remain totally celibate *except* for keeping a pair of handsome twenty-five-year-old Italian twin brothers as lovers. Which was

slightly reminiscent of a friend of mine who is vegetarian except for bacon, but nonetheless . . . I was already composing my letter to *Penthouse*:

In the flickering, candlelit shadows of the Roman café, it was impossible to tell whose hands were caress—

But, no.

No and no.

I chopped the fantasy off in mid-word. This was not my moment to be seeking romance and (as day follows night) to further complicate my already knotty life. This was my moment to look for the kind of healing and peace that can only come from solitude.

Anyway, by now, by the middle of November, the shy, studious Giovanni and I have become dear buddies. As for Dario—the more razzle-dazzle swinger brother of the two—I have introduced him to my adorable little Swedish friend Sofie, and how they've been sharing *their* evenings in Rome is another kind of Tandem Exchange altogether. But Giovanni and I, we only talk. Well, we eat and we talk. We have been eating and talking for many pleasant weeks now, sharing pizzas and gentle grammatical corrections, and tonight has been no exception. A lovely evening of new idioms and fresh mozzarella.

Now it is midnight and foggy, and Giovanni is walking me home to my apartment through these back streets of Rome, which meander organically around the ancient buildings like bayou streams snaking around shadowy clumps of cypress groves. Now we are at my door. We face each other. He gives me a warm hug. This is an improvement; for the first few weeks, he would only shake my hand. I think if I were to stay in Italy for another three years, he might actually get up the juice to kiss me. On the other hand, he might just kiss me right now, tonight, right here by my door . . . there's still a chance . . . I mean we're pressed up against each other's bodies beneath this moonlight . . . and of course it would be a *terrible* mistake . . . but it's still such a wonderful possibility that he might actually do it right now . . . that he might just bend down . . . and . . . and . . .

Nope.

He separates himself from the embrace.

“Good night, my dear Liz,” he says.

“*Buona notte, caro mio,*” I reply.

I walk up the stairs to my fourth-floor apartment, all alone. I let myself into my tiny little studio, all alone. I shut the door behind me. Another solitary bedtime in Rome. Another long night's sleep ahead of me, with nobody and nothing in my bed except a pile of Italian phrasebooks and dictionaries.

I am alone, I am all alone, I am completely alone.

Grasping this reality, I let go of my bag, drop to my knees and press my forehead against the floor. There, I offer up to the universe a fervent prayer of thanks.

First in English.

Then in Italian.

And then—just to get the point across—in Sanskrit.