

**DORIT RABINYAN** is the bestselling author of the acclaimed *Persian Brides* and *Strand of a Thousand Pearls*. She is the recipient of the Itzhak Vinner Prize, the Prime Minister's Prize, The ACUM award and the *Jewish Quarterly* Wingate Award. *All the Rivers* was named as a book of the year by *Ha'aretz* and awarded the prestigious Bernstein Prize. In January 2016 *All the Rivers* became the centre of a political scandal in Israel when the Ministry of Education banned the book from high schools' curriculum. *All the Rivers* has been translated into seventeen languages.

### **Praise for *All the Rivers***

'I am impressed...Even the (asymmetrical) tragedy of the two peoples does not overwhelm this precise and elegant love story, drawn with the finest of lines. There are many astonishing things about this book' Amos Oz

'Rabinyan is a generous writer who puts her characters first... Rabinyan's writing reflects the honesty and modesty of a true artisan. She is meticulous, to be sure, but at the same time she doesn't appear to be straining, and this is what sets someone like her apart from those who merely practice the craft of writing' Dorit Shilo, *Ha'aretz*

'[A] brave story that maintains a delicate balance and is too smart to be didactic or priggish. Dorit Rabinyan's *All the Rivers* ought to be read like J.M. Coetzee or Toni Morrison – from a distance in order to get close. We might be born Montague or Capulet, but we can choose not to be part of the tragedy' Lilach Volach, *Walla!*

In *All the Rivers* Rabinyan juggles cultures, languages, art forms, places, times and seasons. Because of the novel's epic fullness, its realistic plot which takes place in three cities – New York, Tel-Aviv and Ramallah – whose symbolic weight within the current psychological and political reality is admirable, because the novel strikes the right balance between the personal and the political, and because of her ability to tell a suspenseful and satisfying story' From the 2015 Bernstein Prize judges' decision

'... Beautiful and sensitive... a human tale of rapprochement and separation... Rabinyan's ability to construct a complex situation in which stereotypes of weakness and strength are transcended and true connections are revealed behind that which divides us is a noteworthy human and literary achievement, grounded in sensitive, refined and non-derivative writing' Havatselet Farber, *Makor Rishon*

'Rabinyan's ability to create a rich realism alongside a firm, clear and convincing flow of emotional vacillations is evident in the novel and gives the work a literary momentum and makes the reading both compelling and enjoyable' Yotam Shwimmer, *YNET*

'A great novel of love and peace' *La Stampa*

'*All the Rivers* is a complicated journey, in many ways painful, into the complexity of the Middle Eastern identity' *L'Espresso*

'A poetic love story that seems painted by hand' *Famiglia Cristiana*

'More real and painful than a deep wound, a novel that truly speaks to the heart' *Corriere della Sera*

‘A novel full of life (and of pain as well) that the reader devours’ *Amica*

‘Dorit Rabinyan defuses the grandiosity of the story with her subtle, impressionist, and unpretentious style. A story about a couple of Levantine lovers wandering along frozen streets during a never-ending New York winter is truly touching’ Juliusz Kurkiewicz, *Gazeta Wyborcza*

‘Rabinyan does what a writer should do: shy tries to capture the complex reality without judging it. The fact that she describes it in erotic terms adds expressiveness and temperature to *All the Rivers*’ Krzysztof Cieřlik, *Magazyn Plus Minus*

‘The extraordinary seductiveness of this novel comes from the constantly maintained tension between intimacy and politics. The issues of identity and conflict give it more weight and at the same time are closely intertwined with what is most tangible and individual. As a result, the two levels are given importance they would never have if seen separately’ Maciej Jakubowiak, *Dwutygodnik*

# All the Rivers

DORIT RABINYAN

*Translated by Jessica Cohen*



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*part one*

AUTUMN

## *chapter 1*

Someone was at the door. I was vacuuming, with Nirvana on the stereo at full volume, and the polite doorbell chirps had failed to break through, rousing me only when they lost their patience and became long and aggressive. It was mid-November, early on a Saturday afternoon. I'd managed to get a few things done in the morning and was now busy cleaning. I vacuumed the couches and the hardwood floor, my ears bursting with the hollow roar of air and the reverberating music, a monotonous screen of white noise that somehow imbued me with calm. I was free of thoughts as I wielded the suction hose to root out dust and cat fur, entirely focused on the reds and blues of the rug. I snapped out of it when the vacuum's sigh subsided just as the song was whispering its last sounds. In the three- or four-second gap before the next track, I heard the sharp, insistent doorbell chime. Like a deaf person who suddenly regains her hearing, I had trouble finding language.

'*Rak...*' I stuttered in Hebrew at the door. '*Rak rega...*' Then I corrected myself as I glanced suspiciously at the clock: 'Just a minute.'

It was 1.30 in the afternoon, but the bleak greyness outside made evening seem near. Through the steamed-up windows looking out from the twelfth floor to the corner of Ninth Street and University Place, I could dimly make out the respectable

buildings of Fifth Avenue and a strip of low sky that gleamed like steel, squeezed in above the smoking chimneys.

The bell rang again but stopped a moment after I turned off the music. ‘One minute please...’ I quickly scanned my reflection in the hallway mirror – lopsided ponytail, dusty T-shirt and jogging bottoms, gym shoes – and flung open the door.

Two men in their forties wearing business suits and dark ties stood outside. The one on the right held a document case under his arm and was a head taller than the one on the left, who stood facing me like a cowboy about to draw, or as though he were holding an invisible suitcase in each hand. The impatience conveyed by the right one’s bony fingers tapping on his black leather case, and the relief on the cowboy’s fleshy face, testified to the long minutes they had been waiting at the door.

‘Hello,’ I said, so surprised I was almost voiceless.

‘Hello, ma’am. We’re very sorry to disturb you. My name is Agent Rogers, and this is my colleague, Agent Nelson. We’re from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. May we come in for a few moments to ask you some questions?’

It was the one on the left talking, the gunslinger. His suit looked two sizes too small for his dense, solid body, and he spoke with a smooth inflection that stretched out the words and elongated the ends of syllables as if he were chewing on his tongue. I was frozen, unable to take in the names and titles, nor did I understand the meaning of what he had said until his tall partner, with demonstrative impatience and an unreadably steely expression, reached into his inner coat pocket and pulled out something I had only ever seen in movies and TV series: a gilded, embossed police badge.

I must have murmured something – surprised, somewhat contrite – and blinked, and in light of my stunned deaf-mute response they assumed I had trouble speaking English. The tall



one looked over my head, surveying the apartment, and my momentary suspicion that they thought I was the cleaner was reinforced when the bully continued, louder this time: 'Just a few questions, please. We'd like to ask you a few questions.' He accentuated his words the way one might speak to a small child, unrolling each syllable. 'Is it all right for us to come in?'

My embarrassment, and perhaps my affront, roughened my voice. I could hear the tremor underscoring my accent: 'May I please know...' I cleared my throat. 'I'm sorry, but could you tell me why, please?'

I recognized a flash of relief in the cowboy's eyes. 'You'll understand very soon,' he said, resuming his authoritative tone. 'It won't take more than a few minutes, ma'am.'

In the kitchen I poured myself a glass of tepid water and gulped it down without stopping for air. There was no reason for me to be nervous, my visa was valid, but still, the fact that they were sitting there in the living room, waiting for me to come back so they could interrogate me, was enough to make me anxious. I took two more glasses from the cabinet and wondered whether to call Andrew or Joy. Andrew was a friend from back in Israel, from when we were nineteen, and I could ask him to come and confirm that he knew me. But even trying to figure out what I would tell him on the phone was enough to make me thirsty again.

By the time I got back to the living room they'd taken the chairs off the dining table, where I'd overturned them to clean the floor. The tall one had removed his coat and was sitting with his back to the kitchen. I saw the bully standing next to the vacuum cleaner, scanning the room.

'Do you live here alone?'

A spasm went through my hand and shook the glasses on the tray. 'Yes, it's my friends' apartment,' I said, and tilted my

head at Dudi and Charlene's wedding photo. 'They're in the Far East. On a long trip. I'm house-sitting and cat-sitting for them.' Franny and Zooey were nowhere to be seen.

His gaze lingered on the dishes of water and food under the bookshelf. 'And how do you know this couple?' He looked back at the photograph. 'Do they rent or own?'

'It's their apartment,' I said, still not moving. 'I've known Dudi for ages, from Israel, he's a childhood friend of mine, and his wife is American—'

He murmured something and glanced around. 'Are you from Israel?'

'Yes, sir.'

He wandered over to the windows. I watched him for a moment, then took advantage of the opening to approach the table.

'How long have you been living here?' he asked.

'About two months.' I set the tray down with relief. 'They're supposed to be back in the spring.' I remembered sadly that I was out of cigarettes. 'But I have another friend, he's from here,' I searched with my eyes for the cordless phone, intending to call Andrew, 'you can ask him—'

'Ask him?'

'I don't know...' My voice faltered. 'About me...'

He turned his back and was drawn to the windows again. 'That won't be necessary at this point.'

'Thank you very much.' The tall one surprised me with a deep, crisp, radio announcer's voice.

'Excuse me?'

'Thanks for the water.' He smiled over the bottle. He had perfect teeth, straight and white like in a teeth-whitening commercial.

I nodded nervously and held out my passport, which I'd retrieved from my handbag, open to the visa page. In the

kitchen, even though I knew the visa was valid for another six months, I had doubled-checked the dates.

He turned the passport over, glanced at the blue cover, and went back to the open page. 'So you're a citizen of the State of Israel, Ms Ben-ya-mi...'

'Benyamini,' I offered helpfully, as if it made any difference. 'Liat Benyamini.' I could clearly see the haloes of contact lenses in his alert, grey eyes as they roamed from the tense expression on my face to the one in my passport picture.

He gestured at the chair next to him.

'I'm Israeli,' I mumbled, obediently dragging the chair over. The feet screeched on the floor.

The interrogation really did last less than fifteen minutes. First of all the tall one took out a pad of forms watermarked with the pale green FBI emblem. On the upper left corner of the first one he wrote the date with a blue pen. He copied my name from the passport in big block letters, widely spaced. Then he meticulously recorded the six digits of my date of birth. His handwriting was handsome, fluent, as assured as the tone he used to ask me to repeat my address, the apartment phone number, and the owners' names. He wrote down some enigmatic acronyms and checked several boxes at the ends of lines. When he went on to the next sheet he suddenly looked up and studied my face. I avoided his eyes and looked down at the table. I could see that he wrote 'black' and another 'black' – probably my hair colour and eye colour – and that he described my skin tone as 'dark olive'.

Then the bully took over. 'I see you were born in Israel,' he said, flipping my passport back and forth until he figured out that it went from right to left. 'Nineteen seventy-three.'

'Yes.' I straightened up in my chair.

'Which would mean that you are now twenty—'

‘Nine.’

‘Married?’

My fingernails dug anxiously into my palms. ‘No.’

‘Kids?’

I shoved my hands deep under my thighs. ‘No.’

‘Where do you live?’

‘In Israel?’

‘Yes, ma’am, in Israel.’

‘Oh. In Tel Aviv.’

‘And what do you do?’

I extricated my hands and took a sip of water. ‘I’m studying for my master’s degree at Tel Aviv University.’

‘Master’s in what?’

I remembered that he had thought I was the maid. ‘I have a BA in English literature and linguistics. I translate research papers.’

‘Oh, linguistics... You’re a translator!’ he exclaimed. ‘That explains your excellent English.’

‘Thank you. I’m here on a Fulbright fellowship.’ I tried to keep my tone flat, businesslike. ‘They arranged my visa.’

He looked at the passport again. ‘For almost six months.’ He nodded at the document. ‘I see here that your visa is valid until May 2003.’

‘Yes.’ I tamped down my nervous foot that was fidgeting under the table and longed for a cigarette with all my being. ‘May 20th.’

‘Interesting. That’s interesting,’ he said after drinking half his glass of water. ‘You translate from English into Hebrew?’

I nodded drily. And regretted ever mentioning it. I could have just said I was a student from Israel and been done with it, but I must have felt the need to wave something around, to salvage my dignity in his eyes.

His expression remained unchanged. His pink fingernails

tapped lightly on his glass. 'I assume Hebrew is your mother tongue...'

'Yes. Um, no...' I forged ahead despondently. 'My parents are Iranian immigrants, but my sister and I grew up speaking Hebrew.'

The tapping stopped, replaced by a hum. 'Iranian immigrants?'

'My parents are Jews from Tehran, they emigrated to Israel in the mid-sixties.'

He made sure his partner was writing this down, then turned back to me. 'So both of them, both your parents, are Jewish.'

I nodded again. And for the tall one's sake, who looked up at me with a questioning expression, I repeated out loud in a clear voice: 'That's correct.'

'That is certainly interesting,' the bully went on, wrinkling his forehead. 'And your relatives, do any of them still live in Iran?'

'No,' I answered. This new direction the conversation was taking instilled me with confidence. 'They all emigrated to Israel, they've all been Israeli citizens since—'

'And you yourself, have you visited Iran recently?'

'Never.'

'You didn't perhaps take a trip there?' he tried again. 'To track down your roots or anything like that?'

'Iran is not a highly recommended destination if you have one of those.' I jerked my head at the passport. 'They might let me in, but I'm not sure I'd be able to get out...'

He liked my answer. He looked at the passport with a hint of a smile and opened it back to the page where he'd kept his finger. 'So you're saying you've never visited—' he examined the stamped pages 'Iran.'

'That's right.'

‘But judging by what I see here, you’ve made several visits to Egypt in the past few years.’

‘Egypt? Oh, yes, to Sinai. We used to go there a lot. But lately it’s become a little dangerous. For Israelis, I mean...’

He got to the end of the passport and removed a document that had been stuck there ever since I finished my army service.

‘That’s from the IDF,’ I explained. ‘It says I’m allowed to leave Israel as I wish.’ Before he could unleash another barrage of questions, I added: ‘Military service is compulsory in Israel. Women serve two years and men three. I served in a unit that takes care of soldiers’ social welfare. I enlisted in 1990 and finished in ’92.’

My sudden flow of speech, and particularly the effort I had made in the past few minutes to give my voice a measure of calm and an odd sort of levity – as though I were finding this situation increasingly amusing – had completely exhausted me.

‘Now tell me, please,’ his voice sounded light and carefree now, almost friendly, ‘how you write your translation work.’ He shut the passport and handed it to me. ‘Pen and paper, or on a computer?’

I certainly wasn’t expecting that. ‘Computer.’

‘A laptop?’

I couldn’t believe it was still going on. ‘Yes, I...’

He interlaced the fingers of both hands and put them on the table in front of him. ‘Here, at home?’

‘Either here, or at the university library.’

‘And in coffee shops? Do you work on your laptop at coffee shops?’

‘Yes. Sometimes.’

‘Is there a particular place you go to regularly?’

‘A particular place?’ I hesitated. I wasn’t sure what he was getting at. ‘I’m sorry, but I don’t understand...’

‘Ma’am, have you recently visited a café not far from here,

on the corner of Tenth Street and Sixth Avenue?’ His partner passed him the pen and he signed the bottom of the form. ‘Café Aquarium?’

‘The Aquarium, oh yes...’

‘Might you have been there last week? On Tuesday evening?’

‘Tuesday? I might have been. It’s—’

He closed his eyes for a second, looking gratified. ‘Thank you, ma’am.’