

NEIL BISSOONDATH THE SOUL OF ALL GREAT DESIGNS

"A remarkable tale of obsession" — Carol Windley, author of *Home Schooling*



THE SOUL OF ALL GREAT DESIGNS

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE

THE SOUL OF ALL GREAT DESIGNS

A novel

Neil Bissoondath



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For Anne

who reminds me that life is an adventure

and

for Élyssa

who brings her own special sparkle to that adventure

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE

“Secrecy has been well termed the soul of all great designs. Perhaps more has been effected by concealing our own intentions, than by discovering those of our enemy.”

CALEB C. COLTON, ENGLISH CLERGYMAN, 1781–1832

Part One

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE

PREVIEW COPY FOR RESALE

Everybody has secrets. I have a secret. Don't you?
Deep down, in your heart of hearts, as they say?

Of course you do. That pack of gum you lifted from the corner store, the beer you guzzled one summer afternoon in a corner of the basement, the porn magazine you kept stashed under your mattress to brighten up your dull evenings. How about the income you never declared, the degree you bought over the Internet, the one-night stand you never told your spouse about?

Secrets. We all have them. They're our postcards from hell — postcards we never mail, souvenirs of dark trips we mount on the interior walls of our lives, part of the hidden tapestry, so to speak. Some secrets we create, others come to us. Small or big, they're secrets all the same and

we live in mortal fear of anyone ever finding them. The most important rule in life is: Don't get caught.

And yet there's something deeply unsatisfying, even sad, about having a secret that, if successfully kept, dies with you. It's as if it never existed. There's this strange urge to leave it behind, an unusual heritage. I get a thrill from imagining people reacting to the news: eyes widening in incredulity, lips parting in disbelief, perhaps the fall of a stunned *wow*.

Secrets make the world go round because, if they all came out, the world would fall apart.

Wouldn't it?

TO SEE ME you wouldn't think I have secrets of any consequence. Seeing that, in my late thirties, I dress well and have no one in my life, you might think that I lead a somewhat hermetic existence: books perhaps, classical music, a light-filled penthouse overlooking the lake, full of pastel walls and tasteful decorations. You might imagine sherry in a crystal decanter, a shiny espresso machine in the kitchen. You might throw in a Siamese cat. On a more intimate level, you might imagine the occasional bout of masturbation to keep the pipes in good working order, but nothing more passionate from this tall, bony man with slightly hunched shoulders, short brown hair and grey eyes too large for his oblong face. You might

think — seeing that my gestures and my speech and my finely manicured hands suggest a certain femininity — that my tastes do not run to women. Certainly, that's what most of my clients think.

You might presume all of this but you would be wrong — about the penthouse, the music, the books, the espresso machine, the masturbation, the sexual orientation, and especially the cat. Your overall impression, however, would not be wrong. My manner is meant to encourage trust on the part of my clients, the trust they must have in their interior decorator, a trust that arises from their own gently held prejudices. In my line of work, gayness — or what many conceive to be its manifestations — confers confidence. It is one of my secrets.

PEOPLE HAVE ALWAYS been wrong about me. Before I was ten, my mother, eyeing my hands, enrolled me in piano lessons at the conservatory, three years of agony until the teachers gently broke the news that pianist's hands do not a pianist make. Later on, seeing me grow into his height and my mother's slenderness, my father prevailed on the high-school coach to enrol me in high jumping. Towards the end of my first season, I was lucky enough to dislocate a shoulder and break a leg all in one go. My father silently gave up his dreams of world championships and Olympic glory.

During the weeks of convalescence that followed, my literature teacher kept supplying me with books — to help pass the time, she said. But I knew there was more to it than that. Earlier in the term, she'd given us a writing assignment, a short story. I copied out a story from one of my mother's old women's magazines about a boy who hated his mother for thinking he was a genius. The teacher knew the story of the piano lessons. She thought I was writing about myself. She read the story to the class. The books, which she would drop off on her way home from school, were to encourage my talent. I returned them unread and I remember her disappointment at the end of the year — the way the light in her eyes seemed to blink out, leaving them tired and discouraged — when I told her I was thinking of studying electrical engineering. It was a cruel thing to do but it taught me how important people's illusions are to them, it showed me how illusions make them vulnerable. They would be happier to have their money stolen.

It was during this time of restricted mobility that I discovered my interest in interior decorating, although I wouldn't have called it that at the time. I was already interested in cars, particularly in restoring old ones. A tv documentary had caught my eye, something about the quiet fervour of the restorers — something in the way the cars spoke to them, through shape, through touch. These

were not just pretty objects of machined metal. They were links to another era, when beauty was as important as efficiency and not just an aspect of marketing. Power and sensuality were reflected in the flawless body, the shiny chrome, the creamy leather seats. I was impressed by the before and after pictures: by how passion and judiciousness could resurrect elegance.

My attempts at hobbies had never survived long. For a while I built model airplanes. Spitfires and Hurricanes and Superfortresses competed for space on my bedroom bookshelves with Stukas and Heinkels and Messerschmitts, but after a time there was no tarmac space left and, worse, nothing to do with them besides dusting. I gave them up. Stamp collecting, promising for a while, ultimately failed me through its passiveness: buy, lick, stick. Then what? The television documentary offered me a new possibility: to take something that was old and rusted and broken down, bring it back to life with painstaking care, then use it. I was dazzled.

When my father came home from work I told him about what I had seen. Sitting wearily at the kitchen table, his unshaven cheeks bracketed in his hands, he said, “So, if I get this right, you want to buy some old jalopy, slap on a coat of paint, pump up the tires and fiddle with the engine.”

“There’s a lot more to it than that, Dad.”

“You’re not even old enough to drive.”

I was fourteen or fifteen at the time. “I will be.”

“And where do you plan on getting the money?”

“I have a job.”

“You think delivering papers will pay for all this? And where do you plan on putting this jalopy of yours? If you think I’m giving up the garage, you’ve got another think coming.”

“But Dad —”

“Don’t ‘But Dad’ your father,” my mother called from the stove where she was frying pork chops. “Go wash your hands for dinner.”

Furious, I went instead to my room. How could they be expected to understand? Dad spent long, sweaty shifts on an assembly line fitting passenger doors to the carcasses of new cars, one door after another on frames which, farther down the line, would become luxury sedans he couldn’t afford. Mom spent her days dusting, vacuuming and gossiping with her friends on the phone. I was amazed that they’d once shared enough passion to conceive me — or was it a matter of sheer horniness, a brief surrender to impulse that changes a life forever? My parents, it seemed to me, were people to whom life happened.

Stretched out on my bed, the last light of the setting summer sun streaming in through the window, I suddenly saw how ugly my room was. It was as if I’d never seen it

before, probably because it had always been my room, changes accruing slowly, with no rhyme or reason save my changing needs. Crib to bed, table to desk, small dresser to larger dresser. The bookshelves, planks of wood supported by metal brackets screwed into the wall, had been mounted when I began school. Apart from the model airplanes, they held only a stack of textbooks. The full-length mirror beside them was added sometime later — my mother hoping that I would take more care with the way I dressed if I could see how I looked — most useful to me in checking out the size of my penis when that became a worry.

It was the colours that I found most painful. The oily-green comforter, the brown arborite desk, the melamine dresser, the royal blue mirror frame, the bookshelves slathered in egg-yolk yellow left over from an abortive attempt to prettify some garden furniture acquired at a garage sale.

Eclectic would be one word to describe what I was seeing as if for the first time. Chaotic would be another.

On the floor, a threadbare pumpkin-coloured carpet stretched wall-to-wall. To the bare feet, it was like walking on stubble. As for the walls, they had drunk no fresh paint in years. The original sky blue had grown dull and acquired a hint of dinginess from ingrained dust. No attempt had been made to clean up scuff marks or touch up scrapes. Above my desk, the wall was pockmarked with white spots

where paint had peeled away with the adhesive tape I used to attach notes and photos of vintage cars. My room, I saw, resembled a rooming house for rubbies.

To be fair to my parents, I had been brought as a baby into an attractively decorated room. I've seen the photographs. But the years had brought dereliction in the way that neglect and time will slowly undo even the most exquisitely planned garden.

Almost idly, propped up on pillows on the bed, I began to speculate on how I could improve my room. Without knowing it, I had found my future.

DAYS LATER, I stripped the room clean. The desk, dresser and bookshelves were stacked on the sidewalk to await the truck from the Crips. The model airplanes were tossed into a box and donated to a home for retards. I repaired the damaged walls, sanded the baseboards, pulled up the carpet — which, to my delight, revealed a hardwood floor in decent condition. My mother, amused, agreed to sew a new cover for the comforter. My father, assured that any expenses would be paid for by my paper route, offered his tools and advice on how best to apply sandpaper, drywall compound and paint. The one thing he did himself, through fear of a botched job, was to change the light fixture on the ceiling, replacing the yellowed globe with a frosted-glass lozenge I'd picked up for a penny at a garage sale.

When it was done, my parents declared themselves impressed. I told my father that I was thinking of earning my living this way. He nodded, rubbing at his chin. “Home renovations,” he said. “There’s a future in that. But you have a lot to learn.”

I ventured that the local community college offered a certificate in the field.

“All right,” he said after a minute. “Finish high school and I’ll pay the fees.”

Later, my mother said, “He’s relieved you’ve found a way to make a living. He was very worried, you know. He thought you didn’t have any talent for real work.”

What I never told them, and what they never found out, was that my satisfaction had come less from the physical work than from the imagining that had preceded it. Rolling on the paint was far less thrilling than the hours spent studying paint samples, mounting a variety of the little squares on each wall, observing them at different times of day, in different light, pushing my imagination to see the walls in one colour or another or in a combination of them. Sanding the baseboards was arduous compared to finding, after endless searching of garage sales and second-hand furniture dealers, just the right mirror, just the right desk, just the right dresser, refinishing them in just the right shades and positioning them in just the right spot. I began picking up decorating magazines which I stacked beneath the automobile magazines to which I subscribed. *Car &*

Driver, *Architectural Digest* and *House & Garden* were my pornography.

There was one more thing I never told my parents. The certificate at the college, which my father paid for and which I eventually completed with distinction, was not in home renovation but in interior decorating. There's another one of my secrets.

MY FATHER FOUND me a decent-paying job at a large hardware store. After a few tough months in the lumber yard, I was transferred to the paint section on regular day-shift. Most evenings and weekends, I worked on little contracts that came my way from a teacher at the college who owned a small consulting company advising clients on colour schemes and decorating ideas. I told my parents I was doing painting jobs to earn extra cash. From there, it seemed a simple step to dispensing decorating advice on my own.

I began discreetly slipping business cards to clients at the hardware store, offering my services. No one took me up on it. Mostly they seemed amused that a twenty-something-year-old male store clerk should be offering interior-decorating advice. After my shift, I often wandered around the parking lot picking up discarded cards, throwing out those that were damaged and pocketing for reuse those that were not. I needed a gimmick, some-

thing like those guys on TV who went to embarrassing but successful lengths to advertise their car dealerships or discount stores. But I couldn't afford TV and whatever I did had to be discreet; my father would have had a heart attack seeing me hawking interior decorating in between hockey periods.

A good businessman listens to his clients: their needs point the way towards innovation. I learned, with difficulty, I admit, to listen to the comments of those who didn't become clients.

The first time I heard the comment that would change my life — or a variation of it — was soon after I'd begun slipping cards to prospective clients. I'd helped a couple with their purchase and was moving to the next when my ear caught a whispered conversation between the woman and her husband. The woman, who was uncertain about their colour scheme, glanced at my card. She showed it to her husband. "Maybe we should give it a shot." Her husband made a face, shook his head and said, "He doesn't even look like a fag, what could he know?"

My face burned. My fists actually clenched. An angry, foolish moment. Having never played organized hockey, I wouldn't have known what to do with clenched fists. I turned away. For the rest of the afternoon, my cards remained in my shirt pocket while I, shoulders thrown back, strutted around the store like some lost lumberjack.

Twice more in the following weeks, similar comments

sent my blood pressure skyrocketing. And finally, as I was stewing in the bus on the way home, it clicked: If gay was what they wanted, gay was what they would get — on a professional level, of course.

AT THAT POINT in my life, I hadn't been around many gay men. One guy had come out in high school to muted surprise — not so much that he was gay as that he'd actually made explicit what had long been comfortably implicit — but, on the whole, to general indifference. True, a few days later he turned up with a black eye and a busted lip, but he'd had that coming anyway: despite his gentleness, he could sometimes be an arrogant son-of-a-bitch. A few clients at the hardware store had aroused my suspicions, but none of them had lisped or pranced or flopped their wrists around.

As far as hints went, they were of no help. I thought I should do some research.

I wasn't all that familiar with the gay village. It covered a few downtown blocks east of the commercial core, a neighbourhood once known mostly for drugs and prostitution but which had been gentrified in recent years. Despite my nervousness, I couldn't help admiring the tastefully renovated row houses, the stylish bars and restaurants, the bookstores, the florist whose sweating windowpane revealed what appeared to be a tropical jungle.

I walked around for some time observing the neighbourhood, my hands stuck securely into my jeans pockets. I assumed that everyone around me was gay and was struck by how ordinary they all looked, how like everyone else: tall and short, fat and thin, clean-cut and scruffy, gregarious and reserved. Encouraged, I stopped in at a bar — bright and airy, red-brick walls adorned with bright paintings — and a little nervously ordered a beer. The man at the table beside me engaged me in a conversation about the fine, late-summer weather. His crewcut and form-fitting green T-shirt suggested the military. He stuck out his hand: “Craig,” he said. Then, with no more drama than as if asking to borrow a pen, he invited me back to his place.

Stammering slightly, I said I wasn’t gay.

“So what are you doing here then?”

“Having a beer.” It seemed a safer answer than “Doing research.”

“It’s a gay bar,” he said, with slight exasperation.

“Is it? I didn’t know. I’m from out-of-town.”

“Yeah, sure,” he sneered. “Amazing how many guys from out-of-town wander into a gay bar by accident.”

I guzzled my beer and stood up to go.

“Enjoy your visit, buddy,” Craig said.

“Thanks, I will.”

“If you change your mind ...”

The door closed behind me on the rest of his sentence.

On the subway home, once I'd got over the unsettling novelty of being the object of an attempted pick-up, I decided it was a good sign. There was hope. Sorting through my impressions, one fact stood out. The men I'd seen acting gay were fewer than those I'd seen acting macho. Reality, then, appeared to justify only one stereotype — and not the one seen most often in schoolyards, on TV and among young men eager to prove their heterosexual virility to each other. Curious how the limp wrist has become derisive shorthand for one but the gorilla grunt has not become so for the other.

This left me no further ahead, though. Slightly discouraged, I thought back on my classmate and on those clients at the store, and it seemed to me that the one quality they shared was a kind of gentleness. When I thought again about the men I'd seen and overheard in the village, even the horny, unsubtle Craig, it seemed to me that that gentleness — the gentleness of a shy person who has almost but not quite conquered his shyness — was a large part of the equation. Of course, I wasn't naive. I knew that the gay world, like the straight, had its dark corners. Graffiti sprayed onto one wall of the bar — *STRAIGHTS LIKE VINYL, GAYS LIKE ... LEATHER!!!* — had reminded me of that. But still, in both worlds, those remained dark corners.

In grade eleven I had done the set lighting for the theatre troupe at school. Sitting at the console, looking

down at the stage with my earphones clamped onto my ears, I heard the drama coach say time and again, “Less is more, guys, less is more. Get it into your heads.” He was talking to Romeo, whose expressions of love to Juliet were so overwrought you could see his spit showering her through the lights — and she was *above* him, on the balcony. The trick, then, was subtlety — which was well beyond our Romeo. Opening night was memorable mostly for the cry of “Jesus Christ, at last!” that rose from the back of the hall following his death scene. This need for lightness of touch also held for the lights: sunset so easily became midday with the lightest flutter of a finger. The lesson stuck with me.

By the time I kicked off my shoes at home that evening, I’d come up with a strategy: gentleness of voice, gentleness of gesture, and nothing more than that. Like the best of strategies, it was simple, straightforward and forgiving of the occasional slip-up. It’d be enough to establish suspicion without providing confirmation. All it called for was modulation, a kind of shading of my personality: trimming here, highlighting there, smoothing out the rough edges and getting the shadows — the fleeting gesture, a certain set of the lips — just right. It wasn’t a question of caricature, far from that. It was, above all, a matter of internalizing a tightly held dignity.

I gave little thought to what impact all this might have on my personal life. There was no girlfriend to worry

about, although I went out occasionally with some girl or other from the hardware store, usually to a movie or a student watering hole. True, it brought a level of anxiety that diminished only late at night when I was alone, with no risk of being caught out, but it was the anxiety of the game player, terrifying and exhilarating all at once. There was an art to this and, as someone, I forget who, once said, every artist is a gambler.

THE CALLS BEGAN to come, not in a great rush but with a certain regularity — choosing the new colour for a kitchen, refurbishing a den, brightening a basement, turning guest bedrooms into babies' nurseries. When my mother, noticing the increased phone traffic, remarked on all the calls I was getting, I told her they were from clients with painting jobs and from new friends I'd made at work. The next day I arranged for a phone line to be installed in my room — my dad didn't object, I was paying for it — and hooked up an answering machine that informed callers they had reached the offices of New World Design and that unfortunately all of our staff were busy at the moment but if they would be so kind as to leave a message ...

If I had any doubt as to the source of my modest success, it dissipated the day I went to visit a condominium in an

expensive building overlooking the water. My former teacher had recommended me to Ian, the owner — a fairly young man, from his voice on the message. He wanted to have it all redone and was looking for the right designer. Ian wanted me to look over his place and tell him what I would do with it. I would be competing with three others for the contract — which, if I got it, would be my most lucrative by far.

I dressed carefully for the consultation in an open-necked light blue shirt, grey trousers, a blue blazer and black loafers. Here, too, modulation: professional, expensive, carefree within reason. Despite my best efforts, my mother spotted me on the way out. She whistled in admiration. “Where are you off to, dressed to kill?” I said I had a date. “Who’s the lucky girl?” I told her she didn’t know her, she was someone I’d met at work. “An *afternoon* date?” Kerrie — the name came to me out of the air — worked the evening shift, I said, and was free only in the afternoons. By the time my mother began voicing the next question, I was out the door.

Ian turned out to be a man in his mid-thirties with thinning hair and a voice younger than his years. He let me in, shook my hand. “Look around,” he said. “Take your time and, when you’re ready, speak to me as if price were no object.”

“Is it?” I said.

“No.”

I poked around: living room, dining room, kitchen, powder room, master bedroom and guest bedroom ensuite, a den looking out on the lake, twelve storeys below. All the walls were painted the same uninspired cream and everywhere there were furnishings bought from an outlet owned by one of those guys on television I'd once envied. For someone with imagination and an unlimited budget, it was a decorator's playground.

“The French have a word for a place that looks like this,” I said. “*Affreux*.” I'd picked up the word from a French-speaking client who'd used it to describe the blood-red walls in her soon-to-be-born baby's room.

He looked unfazed back at me. “So what would you do?”

“Throw out everything.”

“Everything?”

“Everything.”

“Even the leather chair in the den? It belonged to my grandfather.”

“It doesn't go with the concept.”

“The concept.”

“Here, let me show you.” I slid a small sketch pad from my blazer pocket and led him to the dining table. Working quickly, I sketched out the ideas that were taking shape in my brain. “These are just preliminary, you understand,”

I said. “It’ll take me a few days to flesh them out. Things need time to jell.”

He nodded, clearly liking what he saw, never suspecting that, with a few modifications of my own, I was essentially offering him rooms I’d seen in my decorating magazines. The concept, I said, was Mediterranean, particularly the south of France — worrying, only after I’d said it, that perhaps the south of France wasn’t considered Mediterranean.

“Mediterranean,” he said, as if relishing the word. He offered me a drink. We chatted, sipping at shot glasses of tequila. Ian worked in financial services for some multinational. He travelled a great deal and had just got a big promotion, with big money. He’d decided to reward himself for all his hard work by redecorating. Then he said, “It’ll be a surprise for Manuel when he finally gets his visa.” Manuel worked for the Mexico City office of the multinational. They’d met at a company conference in Cancun and fallen in love. He’d been trying to get Manuel here for two years but there were immigration problems. A lawyer was working on it. Ian said, “Things other people take for granted become problems for people like us. You know what it’s like, eh?”

He looked to me for confirmation. And for the first time since I’d begun applying my strategy, I slipped up, big time. Perhaps the tequila had lowered my guard. “Ian,” I blurted. “I’m not gay.”

“Oh.” He put down his glass. “Are you sure?”

I nodded: all around me, invisible scaffolding collapsed in silence.

“I’m sorry. I thought ... You know, I thought you were family.”

I capped my pen. Game over.

After a moment, he picked up his glass again, shuffled through my sketches and said, “Tell me more about your concept.”

SOMETIMES, YOU’RE AWARE you’re being offered a big break — the music toiler suddenly offered a recording contract, the junior lawyer suddenly given the big case. Other times, you recognize the break only in retrospect, once an opportunity has blossomed and opened up others.

Ian was my big break — or at least a good one. We agreed the work would be done while he was away on a business trip. He would be gone for two weeks. I hired two guys from the hardware to do the painting — the store supplied everything on employee discount — while I ran around town searching out the furnishings I would need to make my concept real. It was an exhausting, exhilarating time and there were moments when I despaired of getting it all done. Late one evening, I returned to the condo toting an armload of purchases to find my painters engulfed in a cloud of smoke — they took toke breaks rather than coffee

breaks — and cobalt blue and sunset pink carefully applied to the wrong walls. They were not terribly concerned. When I pointed out that I'd decided on pink for the wall they'd painted blue because it was west facing and would catch the rays of the setting sun, they tried to convince me I'd mixed up my cardinal points. When one of them said with great earnestness "Who says the sun *has* to set in the fuckin' west anyways?" I understood that I'd be days fixing their mistake.

Ian returned from his trip on schedule. I was waiting anxiously for him in the condo when he arrived from the airport. He paused as he entered, set down his suitcase and peered around like a man suddenly disoriented. Then he straightened up, and his head swivelled slowly from side to side like a sunflower confused by a cloudy day. He took in the warm tones of the colours, the rustic furniture, the subtle use of wicker, the indirect lighting arranged so as to suggest the reflection of a raging sun, the handwoven rugs strewn across the parquet floors, the sprays of greenery from the potted tropical plants.

I couldn't read his expression.

Then a smile broke across his face and he said, "Manuel's going to love this."

IN THE COMING months, Ian directed several jobs my way. I redid his sister's basement, helped a couple of his friends

remodel their living rooms, advised some of his colleagues' wives on colour schemes. Within half a year, I had more work than I could comfortably handle. I told my father that with so many painting jobs coming in, I was considering quitting the hardware.

Stretched out on his La-Z-Boy, nursing his pre-dinner beer, he told me I was crazy. Going out on my own was uncertain, the supply of work was unpredictable, it could dry up at any moment. The hardware store was a sure thing. If I stuck with it I was certain to be given a department manager's position. "Don't be a fool," he said.

My mother, without looking away from the TV, said, "Listen to your father, Cal. Don't give up on a sure thing. You're only twenty-five. By the time you're fifty, who knows? You might be president of the company."

I wondered whether she'd said the same thing to my father thirty years before.

It was time to move out on my own, get an apartment midtown, closer to my client base. And it was time to incorporate, to make my business real, with an office and a desk and even a receptionist. I was determined to establish a full-service company, not just interior decorating but — with an eye to long-term growth and product excellence — the workmanship as well, with reliable carpenters and plasterers and electricians and painters to execute the plans I dreamed up.