



NEIL BISSOONDATH THE WORLDS WITHIN HER

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CORMORANT BOOKS INC.
215 SPADINA AVENUE, STUDIO 230, TORONTO, ON CANADA M5T 2C7
www.cormorantbooks.com

*for
Anne
and
Élyssa
who make it all worthwhile*

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE

Serafino shows me the little blue shack where Che supposedly lived. There was a photo of him on the wall inside for many years, but they had to take it down in the 1970s. Yes, I say sympathetically, it wasn't safe to keep a photo of Che during those reactionary times. "No," Serafino says, "they had to paint the place."

— Patrick Symmes, "Ten Thousand Revolutions"

Harper's, June 1997

PROLOGUE

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE

I



SOME SILENCES VIBRATE with a voiceless chaos, felt but unheard.

It is into such a silence that Jim says, “You can still change your mind, Yas.”

And it is because of that silence that she replies, “You won’t forget to water the plants?”

“Yas —”

“You worry too much. It’s only three days, not much can happen. My father’s relatives’ll take care of me.”

“Just the same, I wish you weren’t staying alone, in a hotel. If your mother’s family were still here ...”

“What difference would that make?” Yasmin turns away from his quiet fervour, her hands tucking with fruitless busyness into the suitcase. She is, at this moment, unwilling to engage the old discussion: his accusation that choice is, for her, the possibility of redemption; her accusation that choice is, for him, the avoidance of possibility. A discussion that has failed to find resolution through fifteen years of marriage.

She is forty, Jim seven years older. And yet his fears make him wish for the impossible. Yasmin’s grandparents are long gone, and her mother’s only brother, Yasmin’s uncle Sonny, lives in Belleville, where he taught school for many years before sliding into a lonely Alzheimer’s twilight. There are cousins perhaps, but too distant in blood and time to be sought out. Her mother never spoke of them, and so Yasmin has no memory — has been given no sense — of having known them. She is unlikely even to

recognize their names. And a knowledge of common maternal blood is insufficient.

Jim says, "I could still come with you, you know. It wouldn't be too difficult to rearrange things —"

She busies herself at the closet, shuffling through clothes, rejecting, selecting. "I haven't changed my mind." She tosses a pair of slacks onto the bed.

He picks up the slacks, folds them neatly into the suitcase. "But why do you have to go alone? I still don't —"

"Neither do I, Jim. I just know I have to." She sees his hands clench. "It doesn't have anything to do with you, I swear. Really."

"Really?" he echoes. His tone is skeptical, but after a moment his fists unfold, and she watches his palm reach into the suitcase to smooth out the slacks: hands that have not lost their gentleness but have, even so, grown subtly inadequate over the years.

He forces a smile through his melancholy, offers a decisive nod of the head. "Okay," he says. "Just don't forget to call. I want to know you're okay."

When the packing is done, she sits, weary, on the edge of the bed as Jim locks and belts the suitcase. Checking the name tag, he hefts it into the living room. She follows his stockinged feet as they flop silently across the carpet.

And she wonders with a start when it was, and why, that this peculiarity of his walk — the large feet turned outwards, once endearing, long unremarked, now seen afresh — became disagreeable to her. She has not misled him in insisting that her going alone has nothing to do with him, but now, as she feels herself grow queasy with tension, she is no longer sure.

Jim says, "You all right?"

Yasmin nods. "The Aspirins are helping."

“You have your ticket and passport?”

“It’s a little late to ask, isn’t it?”

“We’re early. There’s time.”

Yasmin reaches into her purse for her sunglasses. It is a bright, lucid morning, traffic heavy but flowing.

Jim says, “Your father must’ve been a strange man.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Your mom must’ve mentioned him once or twice, no more. And you’ve never really talked about him.”

“There’s not much to talk about. I know it must seem strange, Jim, but I’ve never been all that curious about him. If I had any memory of him, it might’ve been different, maybe I’d have wanted to know more, about him and the island. But you can’t miss someone you don’t remember knowing. And I had Mom, you see. She was enough.”

“But she must have told you *something* about your father.”

Beside the highway, in the railway marshalling yard, a locomotive tugs at its sluggish tail of metal containers.

“Oh, sure. He was a politician. A hard worker for his people. He might have ended up prime minister if he hadn’t been shot.”

Quickly, the train is gone, left behind.

“But didn’t she ever talk about the man? Did he read books or play cards? What’d he do in his downtime?”

“She didn’t tell many stories about him. They seem to have had pretty separate lives. As far as she was concerned, he played politics all the time.”

“Do you think they were happy together?”

“I think my mom admired him.”

“But were they happy?”

“The way she spoke about him, yes, I’d say so. She once said he was extremely devoted.”

“To her?”

“She didn’t say.” Yasmin looks away. On the other side of the highway, the rush hour proceeds lugubriously towards downtown. “She never really wanted to talk about him, I don’t think. And you know my mom — she’s good at keeping her mouth shut when she wants to.”

“Was, you mean,” Jim says gently.

“Yes. Was.”

“Are you nervous?”

“A bit apprehensive. Yes.”

An ambulance flashes by, cars ahead weaving out of the way. Jim concentrates on his driving.

When the flow settles down, Yasmin says, “I know it’s what Mom would’ve wanted.”

“But does it really matter?”

“Doesn’t matter if it matters or not. It just feels like the right thing to do.”

“For her or for you?”

A sliver of pain knits a passage across her eyebrows, and she turns away from the cars halted now on the other side of the highway, sunlight glinting off their glass and chrome.

She says, “There was a movie on TV many years ago, I’ve forgotten the title. About a white woman who’d married a Japanese-American man just before Pearl Harbor. He was interned, I think, and he ended up dying. I don’t remember how. But the last scene, it was very quiet, very moving. The woman was washing her husband’s body, gently, in total silence. Tears running down her cheeks.” Her voice trembles and she pauses to swallow the tightness away.

On the railway tracks, a commuter train buzzes by. She glimpses heads in the windows, people heading from the suburbs to downtown office towers. And she senses a growing disconnection from them, as if she were already being lifted out

of the context they share. But she feels no sense of liberation.

“It wasn’t her immediate tragedy, it wasn’t what had happened, wasn’t the loss of someone she loved that was so moving. Or maybe it was all of that. Mostly it was the derailment of possibility. The life they should have lived. Together.”

“You can’t guess at what might have been, Yas. Might-have-beens don’t get you anywhere. They’re useless.”

“It’s not what might have been, that’s not the point.”

“So what is the point?”

“When I find out I’ll let you know.”

2

IS THE TEA too strong, Mrs. Livingston? Shall I brew another pot? Are you sure? Well, if you’re sure. Here’s your lemon wedge, I don’t know how you stand it. Upbringing explains a lot, I suppose. Sugar and milk. I don’t think I could bear the taste of tea any other way. Ahh, that’s good.

Now, to get back to your question — why don’t I call you Dorothy? As you say, we are neighbours. We have known one another for some years, and we are both of an age that prompts either politeness or impatience. But, as I say, upbringing explains a lot. Do you know, Mrs. Livingston, that not once did I call my husband by his first name? Others called him Vern or Vernon. Those were the ones who didn’t know him very well. People in the diplomatic corps or the cabinet. Those who knew him less called him Mr. Ramessar. But those who knew him best called him Ram. For me, he was Mister Ramessar before we were married. He became nameless for a while after our marriage, and

finally he became, for me too, just Ram. Never, ever, Vernon. You know, after a while, Vernon hardly seemed to be his name. It didn't suit him.

Now, why don't I call you Dorothy? Well, my dear, as with Ram, you do not strike me as a Dorothy. Blame it on *The Wizard of Oz*. Dorothys live in places called Kansas, and they get swept up by things called twisters. They are tossed hither and yon — why do you laugh? “Hither and yon” may no longer be part of the vernacular but the phrase still serves admirably. Now Dorothys — Dorothys have their lives turned upside down by these twisters. They find themselves in situations that make no sense in *your* world. They meet, and must accept, tin men and cowardly lions. They encounter beings both good and evil, and sometimes they triumph, sometimes not. And sometimes, when the twister has returned them to their world, they have no idea which way things have gone. My dear Mrs. Livingston, if I do not call you Dorothy, it is because you are less a Dorothy than I. Do you see what I mean? Yes, of course you do.

You must not hold it against me, calling you “Mrs. Livingston.” You must know that even my son-in-law James remains Mr. Summerhayes to me. And I do have a great affection for him. He's a good man. Yasmin is Yasmin. She has been Yasmin from the moment of her birth. But she is the only one.

Now then, another cup perhaps?

3

THE INSTRUCTIONS THEMSELVES do not interest her. She has already heard them in English, in French, countless times over

the years. Her luggage is safely stowed under the seat in front of her; she knows how to buckle her seat belt, how the oxygen mask will tumble, how to brace herself in case of emergency — not that it would help much, she always thinks.

She averts her eyes from the flight attendant's vaguely embarrassing pantomime, but she finds herself listening to the pipe-in speech, to its cadences leavened by the rhythms of elsewhere. She hears, not for the first time but with a new clarity, aspects of her mother's speech patterns heightened, a syllable elongated here, a conjunction attenuated there.

Only as the aircraft gathers speed, only as its nose lifts from the tarmac like an animal alerted does it occur to her that she has hardly thought of Jim since the hug, the kiss, the enforced smiles two hours ago.

When the aircraft levels off above the clouds, when bolts of sunlight file unfiltered down the cabin, the pages of a childhood book of Greek myths come to her and she thinks of Icarus, condemned for the arrogance of overweening ambition when his only fault had been inadequate preparation. The pages turn in her mind to sky and sun and sea below, and Icarus, youthful and brown-limbed, looking back aghast at feathers falling away from the wax melting on his arms.

4

FRIENDS, MRS. LIVINGSTON? But you *are* my friend, I like to think. I suppose it all comes down to the meaning of the word, if you see what I mean. There are people who have countless friends, people who collect friends the way some people collect

matchboxes, with a glorious indiscriminateness. They count as friends people they do business with, people with whom they regularly chat about the weather ... It may have something to do with the debasement of language, don't you think? The word "acquaintance" is such a good one, precise in its way.

To me, friends are people who come back, despite everything. Do you see what I mean? That brooch you are wearing, for instance. A gift from your son, if I'm not mistaken? Last Christmas, no, two Christmases ago. Well, that brooch, my dear Mrs. Livingston, of which you are evidently so fond, you wear it so often, is one of the most hideous pieces of jewellery I have ever seen. It is simply dreadful. It looks like a squashed cockroach. It sits like a stain on your chest.

Oh, dear, have I offended you? Such was not my intention. Or maybe it was, to be perfectly honest. But it was not gratuitous. I am making a point. My judgment of your brooch is not a judgment of you. It is a judgment of the brooch, and of your son's taste in jewellery. But my point is — would you hold this against me? Would you allow that ugly thing to get in the way of our friendship?

There! I thought not. You will come back, won't you? Despite my opinion of your brooch. My comment is not something an acquaintance could get away with, though. Your brooch, and its emotional weight, are worth more to you than mere acquaintanceship. And our friendship is worth more to you than your brooch. Or so I hope. You see what I mean? Yes, of course you do.

A friend, in my opinion, Mrs. Livingston, is someone who will bury you not out of obligation but out of a profound sense of comradeship. You see, it is not always easy being a friend.

Now, do be a dear and put that horrid thing into your purse ...

Thank you ever so much. Now then, shall we have a cuppa?

A Governor General's Literary Award Finalist
Nominated for the Hugh MacLennan Prize for Fiction

Praise for Neil Bissoondath

"The cadence of Bissoondath's novel is seductive. It reads as an antiphon between knowing and hiding, between intimacy and distance ... Bissoondath's skilful narration pilots the reader through the complexities of family mythology in counterpoint with real issues of race and power." — *The Edmonton Journal*

"Powerful and stylistically rich ... His best book yet ... Yasmin, in her attempts to blend the very different worlds within her into a satisfying sense of self, is as good a symbol of this country as we could ask for." — *The Montreal Gazette*

"Heart-wrenching ... with a searing intensity and a powerful sensitivity that sweeps aside the politics of identity and lays bare the painful and beautiful human condition." — *The Vancouver Sun*

Set in Canada and the Caribbean, *The Worlds Within Her* tells the sweeping story of Shakti Ramessar and her daughter Yasmin as they attempt to come to terms with their tragic pasts. When Yasmin returns to the Caribbean island of her birth to spread her mother's ashes, she finds a home and a family she has not considered her own. There she discovers her long-dead father's history and her mother's struggles with his climb to power. The personal and the political, the past and the present intertwine in this powerful novel.



NEIL BISSOONDATH is the author of *Digging Up the Mountains* and *On the Eve of Uncertain Tomorrows* (short stories), *A Casual Brutality*, *The Innocence of Age*, *Doing the Heart Good*, and *The Unyielding Clamour of the Night*. His fiction has been nominated for many prizes, including *The Guardian Fiction Prize*, the *Books In Canada First Novel Award*, and the Governor General's Literary Award. He has twice won the Hugh MacLennan Prize. Originally from Trinidad, Neil now lives in Quebec City with his wife and daughter.

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