

THE SOUL THIEF

CHARLES BAXTER



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*For Michael Scrivener and Mary Ann Simmons
and for Ross Pudaloff*

I dreamed I *had* my wish:

— I seemed to see
the conditions of my life, upon
a luminous stage: how I could change,
how I could not: the root of necessity,
and choice.

—FRANK BIDART, "GOLDEN STATE"

PART ONE

1

HE WAS INSUFFERABLE, one of those boy geniuses, all nerve and brain.

Before I encountered him in person, I heard the stories. They told me he was aberrant ("abnormal" is too plain an adjective to apply to him), a whiz-kid sage with a wide range of affectations. He was given to public performative thinking. When his college friends lounged in the rathskeller, drinking coffee and debating Nietzsche, he sipped tea through a sugar cube and undermined their arguments with quotations from Fichte. The quotations were not to be found, however, in the volumes where he said they were. They were not anywhere.

He performed intellectual surgery using hairsplitting distinctions. At the age of nineteen, during spring break, he took up strolling through Prospect Park with a walking stick and a fedora. Even the pigeons stared at him. Not for him the beaches in Florida, or nudity in its physical form, or the vulgarity of joy. He did not often change clothes, preferring to wear the same shirt until it had become ostentatiously threadbare. He carried around the old-fashioned odor of

bohemia. He was homely. His teachers feared him. Sometimes, while thinking, he appeared to daven like an Orthodox Jew.

He was an adept in both classical and popular cultures. For example, he had argued that after the shower scene in Hitchcock's *Psycho*, Marion Crane isn't dead, but she isn't not-dead either, because the iris in her eyeball is constricted in that gigantic close-up matching the close-up of the shower drain. The irises of the dead are dilated. Hers are not. So, in some sense, she's still alive, though the blood is pouring out of her wounds.

When Norman Bates carries Marion Crane's body, wrapped in a shower curtain, to deposit in the trunk of her car for disposal, they cross the threshold together like a newly married couple, but in a backwards form, in reverse, a psychotic transvestite (as cross-dressers were then called) and a murdered woman leaving the room, having consummated something. The boy genius wouldn't stop to explain what a backwards-form marriage might consist of with such a couple, what its shared mortal occasion might have been. With him, you had to consider such categories carefully and conjure them up for yourself, alone, later, lying in bed, sleepless.

Here I have to perform a tricky maneuver, because I am implicated in everything that happened. The maneuver's logic may become clear before my story is over. I must turn myself into a "he" and give myself a bland Anglo-Saxon Protestant name. Any one of them will do as long as the name recedes into a kind of anonymity. The surname that I will therefore give myself is "Mason." An equally inconspicuous given name is also required. Here it is: "Nathaniel." So that is who I am: Nathaniel Mason. He once said that the name "Nathaniel" was cursed, as "Ahab" and "Judas" and

"Lee Harvey" were cursed, and that my imagination had been poisoned at its source by what people called me. "Or else it could be, you know, that your imagination heaves about like a broken algorithm," he said, "and *that* wouldn't be so bad, if you could find another algorithm at the horizon of your, um, limitations."

He himself was Jerome Coolberg. A preposterous moniker, nonfictional, uninvented by him, an old man's name, someone who totters through Prospect Park stabilized with a cane. No one ever called him "Jerry." It was always "Jerome" or "Coolberg." He insisted on both for visibility and because as names they were as dowdy as a soiled woolen overcoat. Still, like the coat, the name seemed borrowed from somewhere. All his appearances had an illusionary but powerful electrical charge. But the electricity was static electricity and went nowhere, though it could maim and injure. By "illusionary" I mean to say that he was a thief. And what he tried to do was to steal souls, including mine. He appeared to have no identity of his own. From this wound, he bled to death, like Marion Crane, although for him death was not fatal.

2

ON A COOL autumn night in Buffalo, New York, the rain has diminished to a mere streetlight-hallucinating drizzle, and Nathaniel Mason has taken off his sandals and carries them in one hand, the other hand holding a six-pack of Iroquois Beer sheltered against his stomach like a marsupial's pouch. He advances across an anonymous park toward a party whose address was given to him over the phone an hour ago by genially drunk would-be scholars. On Richmond? Somewhere near Richmond. Or Chenango. These young people his own age, graduate students like himself, have gathered to drink and to socialize in one of this neighborhood's gigantic old houses now subdivided into apartments. It is the early 1970s, days of ecstatic bitterness and joyfully articulated rage, along with fear, which is unarticulated. *Life Against Death* stands upright on every bookshelf.

The spokes of the impossibly laid-out streets defy logic. Maps are no help. Nathaniel is lost, being new to the baroque brokenness of this city. He holds the address of the apartment on a sopping piece of paper in his right hand, the hand that is also holding the beer, as he tries to read the directions

and the street names. The building (or house—he doesn't know which it is) he searches for is somewhere near Kleinhans Music Hall—north or south, the directions being contradictory. His long hair falls over his eyes as he peers down at the nonsensical address.

The city, as a local wit has said, gives off the phosphorescence of decay. Buffalo runs on spare parts. Zoning is a joke; residential housing finds itself next to machine shops and factories for windshield wipers, and, given even the mildest wind, the mephitic air smells of burnt wiring and sweat. Rubbish piles up in plain view. What is apparent everywhere here is the noble shabbiness of industrial decline. The old apartment buildings huddle against one another, their bricks collapsing together companionably. Nathaniel, walking barefoot through the tiny park as he clutches his beer, his sandals, and the address, imagines a city of this sort abandoned by the common folk and taken over by radicals and students and intellectuals like himself—Melvillians, Hawthornians, Shakespeareans, young Hegelians—all of whom understand the mysteries and metaphors of finality, the poetry of lastness, ultimaticity—the architecture here is unusually *fin de* something, though not *siècle*, certainly not that—who are capable, these youths, of turning ruination inside out. Their young minds, subtly productive, might convert anything, including this city, into brilliance. The poison turns as if by magic into the antidote. From the resources of imagination, decline, and night, they will build a new economy, these youths, never before seen.

The criminal naïveté of these ideas amuses him. Why not be criminally naïve? Ambition *requires* hubris. So does idealism. Why not live in a state of historical contradiction? What possible harm can there be in such intellectual narcissism, in the Faustian overreaching of radical reform?

Even the upstate New York place-names seem designed for transformative pathos and comedy: "Parkside" where there is no real park, streets and cemeteries in honor of the thirteenth president, Millard Fillmore, best known for having introduced the flush toilet into the White House, and . . . ah, here is a young woman, dressed as he himself is, in jeans and t-shirt, though she is also wearing an Army surplus flak jacket, which fits her rather well and is accessorized with Soviet medals probably picked up from a European student black market. Near the curb, she holds her hand to her forehead as she checks the street addresses. She is, fortunately, also lost, and gorgeous in an intellectual manner, with delicate features and piercing eyes. Her brown hair is held back in a sort of Ph.D. ponytail.

They introduce themselves. They are both graduate students, both looking for the same mal-addressed party, a party in hiding. In homage to his gesture, she takes off her footwear and puts her arm in his. This is the epoch of bare feet in public life; it is also the epoch of instantaneous bondings. Nathaniel quickly reminds her—her name is Theresa, which she pronounces *Teraysa*, as if she were French, or otherwise foreign—that they have met before here in Buffalo, at a political meeting whose agenda had to do with resistance to the draft and the war. But with her flashing eyes, she has no interest in his drabby small talk, and she playfully mocks his Midwestern accent, particularly the nasalized vowels. This is an odd strategy, because her Midwestern accent is as broad and flat as his own. She presents herself with enthusiasm; she has made her banality exotic. She has met everyone; she knows everyone. Her anarchy is perfectly balanced with her hyperacuity about tone and timbre and atmosphere and drift. With her, the time of day is

either high noon or midnight. But right now, she simply wants to find the locale of this damn party.

Again the rain starts.

Nathaniel and Theresa pass a park bench. "Let's sit down here for a sec," she says, pointing. She grins. Maybe she doesn't want to find the party after all. "Let's sit down in the rain. We'll get soaked. You'll be the Yin and I'll be . . . the other one. The Yang." She points her index finger at him, assigning him a role.

"What? Why?" Nathaniel has no idea what she is talking about.

"Why? Because it's so Gene Kelly, that's why. Because it's not done. No *sensible* person sits down in the rain." She salts the word "sensible" with cheerful derision. "It's not, I don't know, *wise*. There's the possibility of viral pneumonia, right? You'd have to be a character in a Hollywood musical to sit down in the rain. Anyway, we'll arrive at the party soaking wet. Our clothes will be attached to our skin, and we'll be *visible*." She seems to inflect all her adjectives unnecessarily. Also, she has a habit of laughing subvocally after every other sentence, as if she were monitoring her own conversation and found herself wickedly amusing. Together they do as she suggests, and she takes his hand in a moment of what seems to be spontaneous fellow feeling. "I can stand a little rain," she says quietly, fingering his fingers, quoting from somewhere. She leans back on the park bench to let the droplets fall into her eyes. To see her is heaven, Nathaniel thinks. No wonder she wears a flak jacket. They wait there. A minute passes. "Boompadoop-boom ba da boompadoopboom," she sings, Comden-and-Greenishly.

"Look at that," he says, pointing to a building opposite them. Through the second-floor window of a huge run-

down house, the party that they have been seeking is visible. The nondifferentiated uproar of conversation floods out onto the street and makes its way to them in the drizzle. To his left, he sees a bum standing under a diseased elm, eyeing them. "That's it. That's us. There's the party. We found it."

Theresa straightens, squints, wiping water from her eyes. "Yes. You're right. There's the place. What a wreck. I hope it has a fire escape. Hey, I think I see that kid, Coolberg," she says. "Right there. Near the second window. On the right. See him?"

"Who?"

"Coolberg? Oh, he's a . . . something. Nobody knows what he is, actually. He hangs out. He has some grand destiny, he says, which he's trying to discover. On Tuesday last week he was going around saying that *art is the pond scum on the stream of commerce*, but on Thursday he was saying that *art is not superstructural but constitutes the base*. Well, he'd better decide which it is. He changes his mind a lot. He's a genius but very queer."

"Queer how?"

"Well, in the *good* way," Theresa says. She thoughtlessly puts her hand on his thigh and strokes it. "Maybe he'll tell you how he's being blackmailed. That's one of his best stories. Come on," she says.

After standing up, she twirls around a lamppost and then dances barefoot into the street, neatly avoiding a car before managing a splashing two-step into a puddle, holding out her sandals as props, a serious Marxist hoofer, this girl, and Nathaniel, who can't match her steps with his own, is stricken, as who would not be, by love-lightning for her. He follows her. The bum stays outside under the elm, watching them go.

In the apartment doorway everyone gets it. "You're soaked! That is so cool. This is very MGM, you two. Did you just kiss out there? Standing up or sitting down? Do you even *know* each other? Did you just meet? Are you guys in a Stanley Donen movie or a Vincente Minnelli movie? Have you been introduced? Do you need to be? Do you want to dry off or is that soaked look a thing that you'd like to keep going for a while? Want a joint, want a beer? The beer's in the kitchen and there's more out on the fire escape unless someone stole it or squirreled it away. Why not sit down right here, on this floor? There's whiskey if you want it. Is Marcuse correct about repressive tolerance or is 'repressive tolerance' another example of the collapse of that particular and once viable Frankfurt Institut für Sozialforschung nonsense? Buying off the masses with material goods? Well, everyone knows the answer to *that* question. Don't stand out there. Come in. Dry off. Join the party."

They do come in, they do attempt to dry off with kitchen rags, they drop their sandals in a pile of sneakers and boots and sandals by the door. Almost immediately, while Nathaniel is recalibrating his emotions in relation to the woman he has just partnered across the street, she disappears into another room. Holding a beer bottle (he has misplaced the six-pack that he himself had brought—perhaps it is still out on the bench in the park and is now being consumed by the elm-bum), he damply threads his way through the corridors of the party, long dreamlike hallways of grouped couples, trios, and quartets. His clothes stick to his skin. The smell of dope and cigarette smoke, the pollution produced by thought, mingles with the aroma of whatever is cooking in

the tiny kitchen, where a whitish semi-liquid chive dip has been laid out on a gouged table, bread crusts of some sort piled on a plate nearby, and after he leans over for a bite of whatever it is, Nathaniel stops, pauses, before a disembodied conversation about Joseph Conrad's Eastern gaze on Western eyes—the novelist is treated with friendly condescension for writing a variety of Polish in English that mistakes particularity for substance—a conversation that transitions into the weekend's football game and the prospects of the Buffalo Bills. Someone in another room is singing "Which Side Are You On?" in a good tenor voice. Soon, having wandered in front of a phonograph, he hears, first, Joe Cocker, and quickly after that, Edith Piaf, the turntable being of the old-fashioned type with a spindle and a stack of LPs slapping down, one after the other, a vinyl collage, "*Non, je ne regrette rien*," followed several minutes later by the Mahavishnu Orchestra, out of tune as usual, playing "Open Country Joy."

The party carries with it a mood of heady desperation held in check by the usual energies of youth. When Nathaniel looks at his friends, they remind him of puppies in a cardboard box. What is Nixon, what is Vietnam, what is double-digit inflation and mounting unemployment and a life with no prospects compared to a woman sitting on a broken sofa with a guy whose beard hair is still unassertively spawning, the two of them arguing about *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*? Can the middle class fall outside of history, and, if it does, will actors take over public roles? Sure they will. They already have.

Nathaniel moves away from this group and finds himself in the hallway, where a student composer in the music school—he has been identified as somebody's boyfriend—is describing his latest composition, an overture for strings, clarinets, and percussion entitled *Holiday in Israel*.