

BURNING VALLEY

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A novel by PHILLIP BONOSKY



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*For my sisters, Barbara and Toni
... and for Faith*



PART ONE

I.

"I will be a saint," Benedict said. "I will live humbly all my life. I will be poor."

In his pocket he carried a rosary; around his neck, tapping lightly like a leaf against his heart, always hung his scapular, the image of St. Benedict on it old and faded.

This was not the first time Benedict had made this vow. He felt as though he had always believed it; that somehow it had been in him since he was born, for he had never had to struggle to his belief: it was there waiting for him when he found the words to say it.

For two years it had seemed very simple to him to be a saint. It was harder now that he was almost fifteen, but his determination was only more stubborn. "I *will* be a saint!" he said.

On top of Honey Bee Hill, as it had originally been named, Hunky Hill as the people in the City called it, Hungry Hill as they in the Hollow called it, he stood and gazed over Hunky Hollow. He often looked down at the Hollow from that point—coming home from school or from a quick dangerous visit to the City: because it seemed like a little town spread out before him, small enough, snug and safe enough for his eyes to encompass, and his saintly authority to cover. It was the diocese of his inner dream. Unlike the City which spread out in all directions and wandered finally away into remote little patches of miners' houses and steelworkers' shacks, the Hollow was cupped in by Honey Bee Hill on this side, and some three miles across the valley by the slag flats and the Northern Railroad: then to the west by the incinerator, with its big brick chimney, its steaming dump; and finally to the east by the railroad bridge and the Mill.

There were four main streets, curving like lines of wonder around the base of the Hill: Highland Avenue, Washington Avenue, Vanderbilt Street, and Kuckuck Alley. Running at right angles to them, more or less, and down to the Ditch, were Shady Avenue, Carnegie Avenue and Mellon Avenue; and then a couple of alleys which were called Toe Alley and Rosy Lane.

From this high point he could see *their* house, Grammar School—that is, *public* school—then St. Joseph's, with parochial school beside it, then the parish house, then the convent: all at the foot of Honey Bee Hill where Highland Avenue ran into it.

It looked like a world: there was the Ditch, full of mine water coming out of the hills back of the Flue Dust; there was the slag hill, and the Northern Railroad running on it, bringing cone-shaped hot-metal cars from the Mill to dump here. There was the Flue Dust Mill, with the Flue Dust pond behind it; and behind the pond the woods going Benedict didn't know how far back, the burnt-out and worked-out mines, filled now with eerie dripping water and bottomless pits.

Benedict smiled seriously and began to descend the hill down its long wooden stairs. He knew exactly how many steps were in those stairs. He'd counted them hundreds of times. There were three hundred and forty-eight. He counted them now, slowly, with his tongue clicking them off, as he descended: sometimes confusing the counting with the beads he fingered. When he had decided to make it a praying stairs, it had taken him 10 seconds to say a Hail Mary; it had taken him exactly an hour to reach the top. Then he had gone down again saying Our Fathers. "In the Name of the Father, and of the Son. . . ."

As penance for lying he had made Joey climb the steps saying Hail Marys.

No one should be poor, but it was a sin to wish riches. *He* was poor, but this did not count: he *wanted* to be poor. A priest had no need for wealth.

He felt as though sunshine had come inside him and illumined his body.

On the midway landing he found Mr. Donkas who was lying on his back with his red mouth open, drunk. There was a ragged gash

on his forehead, and Benedict leaned over him and murmured a prayer. As he crossed himself, Mr. Donkas' eyes suddenly flew open, his hand jerked out, and Benedict was caught by the wrist.

"You try rob?" Mr. Donkas cried.

He twisted Benedict's hand until he gasped and tears came burning into his eyes. When it seemed impossible to endure it any longer without crying, Mr. Donkas' hand suddenly fell away.

"I'll pray for you," Benedict mumbled and staggered down the steps. Mr. Donkas roared after him and then rolled off the platform and went back to sleep among the dandelions.

All the sunshine was gone.

He wept, struggling with himself against humiliation, against pain.

"Oh, God," he beseeched between clenched teeth, "test me! Make me suffer more, God; test me. Test me even more, God!"

For even now he felt stronger than the humiliation of the encounter. By the time he reached the bottom of the steps he would feel serene again.

A great sewer pipe jutted out of the hill and over the steps and a thick stream of gray water arched over the alley and into the ditch that ran down the hill. Benedict held his breath, without knowing that he did, and then walked quickly down the back alley to St. Joseph's. It was Saturday. He was on his way to confession. Reluctantly on his way, however, and so he dawdled a little as he went down through the dirt alley behind the board-fenced yards. Women in shawls were digging up the black earth, and the steamy smell of manure filled the air. He passed cow sheds, in which cows heavy with calf moored dreamily. The pleasant green smell of fresh cow dung hung over his passage like an arbor.

The steeple of St. Joseph's was like a compass point to him. From it and the incinerator stack he estimated distances, for they could be seen from almost any point for miles around, deep in the woods behind the Flue Dust, from on top of Honey Bee Hill, from the slag dump, even from as far away as the burnt-out tipple of the old Robbins mine, if one climbed the charred boards up to the rusty wheel.

From it he really estimated his life.

He entered the mossy gate of the parish house yard, and passed through the yard where Mrs. Romyer, like the women along the way, was digging in Father Dahr's garden.

"Hello, Mrs. Romyer," Benedict said politely.

She was startled and jumped painfully when he spoke.

"Is he coming tomorrow?" Benedict asked.

Mrs. Romyer turned back to her work, stuck a pitch-fork into the ground, and didn't answer.

Benedict passed through the red-stone walk, through the closed-in garden, with its wooden wall and pergola of scuppernong that hung over it. The walk led past the back porch of the parish house to the sacristy of the church. Once inside the door, he stood with his back against it as though listening. No matter what he had been thinking of on his way to church, whether he was happy or sad, or dreaming only, the moment he entered through the door it seemed as though he stepped into an air that was entirely separate from the air on the outside. Here was a different realm. He stood still always for a moment, composing himself, returning his thoughts to piety. The odor of incense and wax candles, the ancient odor of dust and of human grease which clung to the backs of the pews, rubbed over and over by new generations until the wood shone—this, mixed with the aroma of dead lilies from the altar—never failed to make his heart beat faster, his skin to tingle. He shuddered and suppressed his joy. A silence that seemed almost tangible surrounded him; as though it was the same cocooned silence that had come down to him through the Catholic ages, existed in every church in the world, the almost-material flesh of religion, separated and united in time and space. He felt as though from this he could step into Rome's St. Peter's as though he had not moved an inch.

Tomorrow he would be here again, directing the altar boys, preparing for both Low and High Mass—here he would be at five a.m., again at seven, then at noon, serving at all masses.

He passed through the sacristy into the church. From the top step he looked over the shadowed interior. He surveyed it critically, as though he were the priest in charge, testing the atmosphere and silence, the smell and look. Paint peeling from the ceiling hung in long faded streamers, scarring a depiction of Christ's miracle of

the loaves: and the sight of this hurt him like an immoral thought.

But the walls were beautiful—everything in place, the Stations of the Cross, the windows through which the sun was shining, casting a rosy bar of light as though from heaven itself. A few women and children sat in the back pews; others were kneeling. Still others were preparing to enter the confessional.

He took his place humbly at the end of the line, conscious of his humility, bowing his head. "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us, sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen."

"It has been one week since I last confessed, Father," he said.

The little gate separating him from Father Dahr clattered open. A rank smell of bad teeth, mixed with a faint sting of whisky, filled the cubicle, and he bowed his head. Anguish gripped his heart.

"I have no sins to confess, Father," he said.

Father Dahr turned his profile like a coin and asked hoarsely: "Who are you?"

"Benedict," he answered, flushing.

"Ah, yes." Father Dahr peered at him through the gloom. "How was that, son?" he said.

"I have no sins to confess," Benedict repeated, with stubborn pride.

There was a silence. He waited, suddenly feeling as though the old man's thoughts prickled him, so that he could sense their skepticism. He bowed his head lower.

"Why did you come, then?" finally the old man asked.

Again Benedict flushed. He felt the weariness in the priest's voice.

"I come every week," he murmured. "I—was born in sin. . . ."

Again there was silence.

As though dreaming, the priest repeated: "Nothing? No sin all week? Not even a thought—you have been pure both in thought and deed all week?" he asked.

"Yes, Father," Benedict replied.

"Perhaps," the old priest said, leaning toward him, "you are guilty of the sin of pride?"

"I don't understand what you mean," Benedict said.

The priest wiped his eye, as though a secret beam had sud-

denly troubled it. "None of us," he said through a thick voice, "is without sin. You—I—" He waited for a moment, which stretched into a long silence, until Benedict could hear the silence rise and shudder. In sudden fear he began to pray. It was only as the words separated from his prayers that he heard the priest's voice again: ". . . and he'll be my assistant, you understand. *Assistant* pastor: my curate. A very young man, I'm told. Here with you, tomorrow, of course. Low Mass, and I want you to be sure. . . ."

"The new pastor, Father?"

Father Dahr's head jerked up.

"*Assistant!*" he cried. Benedict lowered his head. "Yes," the old man added, finally, in a softer tone, "I want you to be sure to—"

"Yes, Father?"

"Sure to—"

Benedict waited. Moments passed. He had not raised his head. He could hear, as though the church were a huge ear, the sound of day, of the eternity beyond life in which he believed; as though in this cubicle he had placed his ear against a shell and were listening to a distant religious sea.

"Father!" he whispered urgently. He poked his finger through the mesh separating them and touched his shoulder. "Father!"

Soft snores came through. He poked harder. The old man started and cried: "Yes?"

"I'm still here, Father," Benedict said, in a low tormented voice. He added: "You fell asleep."

The priest coughed.

"How many more are waiting?"

"I'm the last," Benedict said.

"Go now, son," the old man said. "Try not to think impurely and practice impure deeds on thyself. Ten Our Fathers and 20 Hail Marys."

"But, Father—" Benedict cried, flushing.

The old man made a tired sign of the cross blindly at him and clattered the door shut between them. Burning like a torch from head to foot, Benedict felt the darkness whistle around him.

He stumbled out of the confessional, his eyes almost clenched together, and sank to his knees. His prayer now was so secret

almost he was not aware of it. His heart seemed to hold its beat. He prayed without words: that God would hear him, even him, and help the Church, and somehow restore Father Dahr, or take him mercifully back, now that he was so old, for he no longer knew what he did, nor how his disgrace had made Benedict suffer, how deeply. . . .

He ignored Father Dahr's instructions, and rose to his feet. For a moment he felt impelled to go into the confessional and wake Father Dahr, who would now be asleep, and take him. . . . But Father Dahr would no longer know him: he would sleep till late this night, or morning. . . .

Instead, he left the church, again by the rear door, and crossed through the little yard to the back porch of the priest's house. He knocked. Mrs. Rумыer, the housekeeper, opened the door.

"Father Dahr—" Benedict began and abruptly stopped. Beyond Mrs. Rумыer, his back to the door, bending over a suitcase, stood a young priest. He had not even taken his topcoat off. He turned when he heard Benedict's voice; and when his eyes fell on Benedict, Benedict couldn't go on. His face burst into flame, and his throat became dry.

"Yes?" Mrs. Rумыer, her gray-streaked hair fallen over her face like a poodle's, confronted him. She turned to the new priest. "This is him," she said.

The priest's face lit up and he took a step forward.

"Oh, so you're Benedict!" he cried.

He held out his hands and took Benedict's into his own white ones, so soft Benedict barely felt their touch, and Benedict had to raise his taut eyes to meet those eyes now. They were profoundly blue eyes, almost indigo, under pale eyebrows, pale lashes. His face was almost marble white, with faint childish blue veins still visible in it; under thin golden hair almost too light to notice the skin was pink on his cheeks. His voice was musical, with tones Benedict had never heard before, an alien, sweet voice.

"I've already heard about you," he continued, slightly smiling at him. "From Mrs. Rумыer, from Father Dahr. I am Father Brumbaugh."

Benedict nodded.

"Where is Father Dahr?"

"I've just come—" Benedict began, his voice croaking. He pointed wordlessly back to the church.

"Confession, Father," Mrs. Rumyer explained, grabbing hold of her hair with both hands and parting it, her scalded-red face suddenly emerging.

"How long—?"

Benedict felt tears helplessly rise to his eyes. His head whirled and there was a buzzing in his ears. He stumbled.

The young priest's eyes rounded and he stretched out a hand, but Benedict recovered himself and giggled. Something knocked in his forehead like the knuckle of a hand.

"Are you feeling ill?" Father Brumbaugh asked with alarm.

Benedict shook his head stubbornly.

"I've fasted all day," he murmured.

Father Brumbaugh stared at him.

"But why?"

Benedict looked away. A tiny shadow of pride crept into his face. "Before Communion," he said softly, "I fast—from Friday midnight."

Mrs. Rumyer snorted.

"Don't believe it," she said. "More's likely there's no food at home. Work's been slow, Father. Work's been slow. Everybody's fasting, to tell the truth."

The young priest turned surprised eyes from one to the other.

He would never harm him, he thought deep in himself. It seemed as though God had heard even his most intimate thoughts, and this was his answer, his perfect answer. He thought of Father Dahr snoring in the confessional, sunk in a heap; and he wanted never, never to have to admit to *him*, standing there so pure, spiritual, with a hand so light its touch was almost unfelt, that this was so. He acknowledged that a duty to protect the young priest from such reality, somehow to cherish him, had fallen on his shoulders—as though only he understood the perfect gift of his coming.

Mrs. Rumyer extended a slice of bread with butter on it and, ashamed, he shook his head.

"Take it, take it!" she insisted. She put a bit of butter on her finger and suddenly buttered his lip. "There!" she said.

His eyes blazed at her. She stuck the bread in his hand and he let it hang at his side.

"Father Dahr will be busy for hours," he said.

"Are there so many——?"

He nodded dumbly.

"What shall I do, then?" the young priest asked, helplessly.

"I'll lay away your things," Mrs. Rumyer said, taking hold of the suitcase. "Why don't Benedict show you our parish," she added. "Show him!" She jerked her head at Benedict and her hair fell over her eyes.

Benedict turned to Father Brumbaugh. The priest hesitated, then shrugged.

"He won't be back for——?"

"An hour," Benedict said.

"Then I'll go."

He turned to Mrs. Rumyer, and his hand reached out toward her as if to part her hair. "Be sure to——" He didn't finish. Mrs. Rumyer was already out of the kitchen. His face reddened.

"Does she——" he began.

"Father Dahr likes her," Benedict said.

The young priest looked at him.

"She works hard, though," Benedict granted. "She knows how to take care of him."

They passed through the yard. Underneath the porch, there was a sudden squeal and from between the gaps in the lattice-work covering the bottom of the porch three tiny kittens darted out.

"Oh," Benedict cried. "I forgot about them!"

"What?" the other asked, surprised.

"Father Dahr told me to drown them," Benedict replied.

They passed through the gate, which was weighted by three old horseshoes hanging from a chain, out into the back alley.

It was unpaved, and a gutter ran through the middle of it; and a little boy was playing in the gutter. Benedict didn't notice this, but Father Brumbaugh said: "Tell him to get out of the gutter."