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A Verdict of Innocence

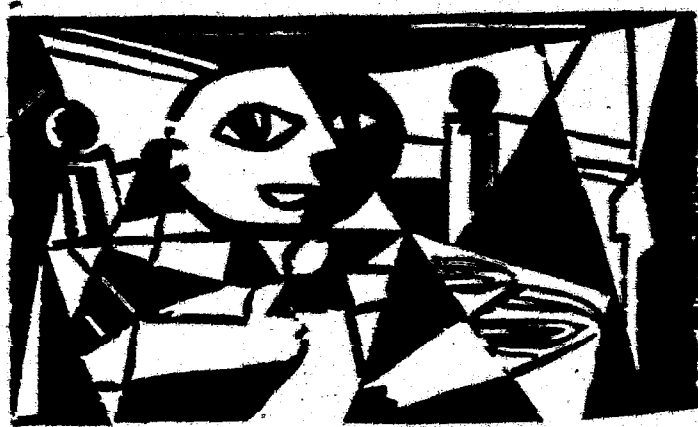
Warren Beck

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Warren Beck

A VERDICT OF INNOCENCE

GRAMPA BANCROFT shook the morning paper back into shape. He folded it evenly to take downstairs, in case his daughter-in-law had time for a glance at it. She probably wouldn't, though. She would be driving herself all the more severely after that clash with Paul at breakfast. The boy had done nothing really bad. He had only tipped his spoonful of oatmeal, while talking and gesturing, and let it dribble on the tablecloth. But Ruby hadn't scolded him just for that. She was exasperated by his forgetfulness of time and the ten long blocks between him and the junior high school. While he had been telling his grandfather about the shack he and Peter were building, Paul's entire concern was with where they could get any more old orange crates.

"Your spoon, Paul," Ruby had cried, too late.

Then she had dashed around the table to dab at the spilt cream with her napkin, going on more and more severely, asking Paul would he ever learn to pay attention to what he was doing and didn't he know he'd be late if he didn't hurry, and then branching into a many itemed lament over his faults, his

incurable, unendurable indifference and irresponsibility and his just plain sloppiness and laziness. Paul had murmured he was sorry, and lowering his head had spooned up his oatmeal as if doing strenuous penance. Ruby had gained too much momentum, though; in a rising voice she elaborated her critical review of his conduct—the mud he tracked into the house, the mess his desk was in, and why hadn't he taken back his library books that were overdue, and when his father came home from Chicago tomorrow what would he say about the rust on the good saw Paul had taken into the yard and left there overnight, and why was he wearing that dirty shirt when she'd laid out a clean one for him, and had he washed his face or combed his hair, and did he want to look like a pig?

"No'm," Paul had said meekly, "excuse me," and he had run upstairs to brush his teeth, which he didn't always remember to do without being told.

Coming up a minute later with the morning paper, Grampa Bancroft had stopped at the open door of the bathroom long enough to tell Paul that perhaps he could find some empty crates in the alley behind the A. & P., or he might even ask inside whether they had any, and if so, he and Peter could take their wagons and maybe bring back a good lot. Paul had turned his spattered face sideways, grinning.

"Gee, Grampa, thanks," he had said. "That's a swell idea."

"Well, you can try it, anyhow," Grampa Bancroft had told him.

The old man had not stayed to hear the dilatory boy harried out of the house. He had gone on into his own place, the big sitting room at the far end of the second floor, and there he had closed the door behind him. The house belonged to him, but only this room, with its connected bedroom and bath, seemed really his now that he had given over the rest of it. Those months alone after his wife died had been such a monotony of inaction and sad silence that when his son had gone into

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the army, Grampa Bancroft had invited Ruby and little Paul to come stay with him, for their common comfort. When John had returned after the war and couldn't find a suitable house for his family, it seemed best to continue the existing arrangement. It had been more than convenient for the old man, in fact. He acknowledged a godsend. This child who had christened him Grampa had drawn him back toward life, had somewhat revived the colors of a world his wife's death had left bleached, cold, hardly more habitable than a barren moon-landscape.

In the war years and since, he had seen his grandson go from kindergarten to seventh grade; he had read to him repeatedly of Winnie-the-Pooh, had promoted him to *Wind in the Willows*, and had lately presented him with *Treasure Island* and *Huckleberry Finn* at what seemed the first right entrancing moment. Little Paul had played with blocks and cars on the floor while his grandfather reread Conrad and Trollope; growing Paul had requested checker games on rainy days and had kept a habit of coming in with excited reports of affairs he and his comrade Peter were projecting. Increasingly Grampa Bancroft had centered his lonely mind upon the child. He had been careful, though, to make no claims. He had tried also to avoid indulging Paul; he had counseled him to speak politely, to take reasonable care of his toys and books, and to be patient in whatever he attempted. Their relations, he liked to think, had remained spontaneous and easy. He hoped he had been of some help to Paul, though he knew that could never compare with the consolation and the joy Paul had brought him.

Grampa Bancroft and Ruby had got along fairly well, too, but that was different, a matter of necessity and the product of calculation and tact. He had told her at once that she was to run the house as she saw fit; he would find what privacy he wanted in his own rooms, and she was to feel that the rest of the place was hers. The wholesome and tasty diet she conscientiously prepared for Paul at every meal pleased Grampa Ban-

croft too, so they made each other no trouble about that. He helped her in many little ways, to give himself some manual tasks when he tired of reading. He chopped kindling and kept wood ready-laid in the living room fireplace because he saw Ruby liked to have a cup of coffee there when her friends dropped in. He emptied wastebaskets daily. He always made his bed and dusted his rooms. He washed dishes too, frequently, but not quite regularly, not with any sense between them that he was committed to do so. And he had almost always been there in the house when Paul came in from school or if Ruby wanted to go out at night, which was no burden on him but a great convenience to her, he knew.



Things were going somewhat better, too, now that John was there at least part of the time. Ruby had relaxed a little from the tenseness of a long and fear-ridden separation. John was traveling a great deal these days, trying to get a sales force re-organized, and his departures and arrivals still echoed a poignancy from wartime, holding the family in a familiar mood. After being gone a week he would arrive with little presents for them all, and Ruby would have a special dinner. John would listen genially to Paul for five minutes at a time and would attempt some mild conversation with his father on the news. Husband and wife would look at each other intently in the candlelight at table, everyone would help with the dishes, and

then they'd sit eating some of the fine candy John had brought and hear about his trip and tell him what had happened at home and all get to bed rather early.

To the old man his son John's strong attachment to this strange woman was incomprehensible. Grampa Bancroft admitted that Ruby seemed strange to him only as all those whom one does not love remain strangers, whatever one's acquaintance and contact with them. He had realized too that his doing chores about the house was not only for diversion but so that he should owe Ruby nothing, and less than nothing, since a debt to one he could not love would be disquieting. He acknowledged further that a deep mutual affection was not probable in this most accidental of associations, the housing together of in-laws. It was well enough if they lived in peace. Ruby was consistently kind to him, of course, in her thorough, hurried, anxious way; and she was often telling her friends that she didn't know how she'd get along without Grampa Bancroft—especially she couldn't have got along without him during the war—and he was wonderful to Paul. But it was still a stranger—however familiar in her immaculate housedress and perfect coiffure, however predictable in her methods, nevertheless a stranger—whom Grampa Bancroft heard now rinsing and stacking the breakfast dishes in the kitchen, a stranger in deference to whose proclaimed implacable tastes he was refolding the paper before taking it downstairs, on his way to washing those dishes for her.

Entering the kitchen, he opened a drawer and took out his own apron. Ruby said what she always said, that he needn't help, and he replied as usual, that it would give him something to do. He realized more strongly than before how staying away this morning might have seemed too pointedly disapproving of what had happened at breakfast. She closed the drain in the sink, and as she sprinkled soap powder she sneezed delicately, but this time she omitted her routine jest about housemaid's

snuff; undoubtedly she was still depressed from that tiff. He ran hot water into the sink, she came with the drying rack and dish towel, and they were off like two robots. First the glasses, then the flat silver; that was Ruby's method. Whenever he had washed dishes for his wife on the maid's day out, he would grab things in any order, and in their talking often they'd forget pans still on the stove, which they'd laugh at, he remembered, and leave until after the next meal if they felt so inclined. Ruby's domestic procedures, however, were invariable and uncompromising. For the laundress there was a typed list of instructions, tacked up over the washing machine in the basement; the cleaning woman had a similar sheet of general orders mounted inside the door of the broom closet. In principle it was to be admired, he knew, but he wondered whether system had to come at the high price of anxious strain it seemed to cost Ruby. Or to go one step further, what relation was there between these fixed procedures and Ruby's disproportionate concern over one spilled spoonful of oatmeal, between those typed rules and the list of reserved grievances against her son which Ruby had uttered that morning so fluently and with such ready wrath? Not that he could mention anything so purely theoretical to Ruby; she avoided talk about abstractions. Perhaps she never even admitted into her consciousness any general reflections about her own motives and conduct; she looked to him like an Eliza on the ice, leaping from one floating detail to another, sighting each foothold just ahead and avoiding with instinctive fear any glance at the deep moving current that bore them all up, and her with them. When Ruby was troubled at heart it seemed she never examined her total situation; she was much more likely to houseclean a closet or declare particularly what some one else at fault had done or left undone. Grampa Bancroft had finished the silver and still Ruby hadn't spoken. He started on the cups and saucers, according to decree.

"Was there anything in the paper about that murder trial?"

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Ruby inquired suddenly. "You know, that woman who held her hand over the baby's mouth to keep it from crying?"

"Yes," he told her, "she's been acquitted, declared innocent. Jury brought in the verdict at seven o'clock last night. They were instructed to return one of three findings—guilty, innocent by reason of insanity, or innocent."

"Which was it," Ruby asked intently, "innocent because of insanity or just innocent?"

"Just innocent," said Grampa Bancroft.

"I should think it would have been because of insanity," Ruby murmured.

"No," he told her, "a jury has to keep the evidence in mind, and the experts had testified she was sane."

"Maybe she was sane when they examined her," said Ruby, "but she must have been insane when she did it. A thing like that, to hold your hand over a little baby's mouth. . . ."

She left off and turned to the cupboard with a stack of dried dishes. Grampa Bancroft was remembering how much more complicated it was than that—more complicated than he could say, or than Ruby would recognize, perhaps—no clear-cut case of temporary insanity, not even involuntary manslaughter, or babe-slaughter. "I felt as if I wanted to hurt him, but I didn't," the woman had said, according to the newspaper. And a jury had been asked to distinguish between feeling as if one wanted to yet not wanting to; a jury had been required to give one of three explicit names to that complexity. So it had pronounced her innocent. But the jury had not said what innocence is. Are we all innocent then, thought Grampa Bancroft, or are we all guilty, and most guilty in our grand connivances to declare each other innocent?

The way this murder case had stirred the whole town pointed, he felt, to a common confusion. Had it set up perturbing echoes, untranslatable, from unacknowledged depths in many minds? The woman, it had seemed to Grampa Bancroft, was parenthood

on trial. She had testified that her nerves had been riled something terrible by the baby's crying, and she had held her hand over the baby's mouth only to sort of keep him quiet. Her husband had said it seemed as though the baby was too much for her to handle; she hadn't known just how to go at it, that had been the big trouble; but after he would get home from work she would feel better. They had wanted a baby for a long time; she was happy it was a boy and healthy. "I tried to take care of it as well as I could," she had said in court. "My mother told me that; she used to say how well I took care of it. The baby was fussy at times and then again he was pretty nice." She had admitted too the persistence of deeper anxieties—"I dreamed the night before that I didn't know how to take care of the baby and nobody—it seemed as though I asked for help and nobody would help me." Then there had been that one terribly incisive question, as if out of a great book in a most searching judgment—"Did the child antagonize you?"—and she had confessed that it did. So, feeling that she wanted to hurt him and yet not wanting to, she had put her hand over his mouth to sort of keep him quiet. And a jury had found her innocent. A jury of her peers, presumably. As Grampa Bancroft saw it, no one had been ready to cast the first stone.

He and Ruby had just about finished the dishes. During their silence she had been thinking too, it seemed.

"I'm going to make a banana cream pie for lunch," she announced briskly. "That's Paul's favorite."

"It's certainly a very good pie, the way you make it," he told her. "And Paul always licks it up."

"He loves it," she said. "And I'm going to make him a nice one. It's good for him, too. Thanks for helping me, Grampa."

He told her she was welcome and started back to his room. As he plodded up the stairs, he thought of offerings, burnt offerings and the bleeding of lambs on remote stone altars, the pouring out of wine upon insatiable ground, the proffer of a

pipe in a circle of the reconciled, the ceremonious exchange of precious gifts among men everywhere. And now a propitiatory banana cream pie? Could it be that easy for Ruby, or was she moving with continued unrest into another repetitious unavailing phase of her fated circle? Grampa Bancroft sat down to read a new magazine, but he couldn't keep his mind on it. He couldn't dismiss the thought of children, innocent ardent children, at the mercy of their elders' partial and tired wisdom, or victims of their elders' obscure despair. As in that other awful newspaper story, just a few days ago, of the man who had made his two-year-old son stand holding to a table edge and had repeatedly beaten him with a leather belt until he had fallen to the floor, to cure him of wetting his clothes and "to make a man of him." It had so sickened and enraged Grampa Bancroft that he had wondered why there was no apparent fire left over from Sodom and Gomorrah for such a case and had muttered to himself of tar and feathers. Then he was forced to ask what the supposedly righteous would be tarring and feathering, an utterly abnormal brutality or merely an extravagant instance of a widespread human weakness, which only the burning up of whole cities could eradicate. Grampa Bancroft had never struck his own son, neither to sort of keep him quiet nor to make a man of him—never. In dealing with the boy John he had held that the larger and stronger should not treat the defenseless smaller one with violence, and that never is politeness more requisite than from an adult to a child, to acknowledge the grace of the child's status as a desired guest in the human family, and to secure to the child his rightful personal dignity all the more scrupulously while he was still a dependent. Grampa Bancroft as a father had honestly tried not to be overbearing, and believed he could claim never to have indulged the mean vice of taking satisfaction in authority. But while he had never raised his hand against his son, he had given the boy a tongue-lashing more than once, and sometimes out of sheer impatience

and exasperation—sometimes, like the woman with the crying baby, because momentarily it had been too much for him. He had sometimes spoken angrily, in a tone in which he would not permit his child to reply, in which the child would not have dared to answer; and he thought now how a parent can use a manner quite as well as a hand over the mouth to sort of keep a child quiet. His wife too, gentle and good-natured as she was, sometimes had scolded the boy not simply as discipline but in uncontrolled irritation. They hadn't descended to it often, but often enough so that afterwards they had first ruefully confessed a lapse but then had dismissed it fatalistically, even with a wry smile, acknowledging that all parents yell at their children now and then.

But now that he was old and exempt from the struggles of distractingly busy middle life, he no longer needed to brace himself with the mention of other men's like passions. Indeed, he admitted, he no longer could lay any such unction to his conscience. In his present detachment he perceived as mankind's chief solidarity a coincidence of blind misdemeanor, cloaked under similar self-deceptions. The more extreme certain men's folly and guile might be, the more clearly it seemed to illustrate a common shame. As for instance too that fanatic of the benighted religious cult, who had kept his grown daughter chained to her bed, to save her soul. In the newspaper photographs that father had stared as if out of incalculable dark ages—his face heavily bearded under the broad-brimmed hat of obsolete style that sect had prescribed, his long nose giving him a horse-like look of confirmed obstinacy, his large, deep-set but stupid eyes, resentful and lugubrious, seeming on the verge of self-righteous tears under troublings by the alleged ungodly. He had come into court in the sanctified plain black clothing of his religion, carrying his Bible ostentatiously against his breast, perhaps feeling himself another Abraham as he declared his unshakable conviction that to save his daugh-

ter from the snares of the devil who walked abroad it had been needful and in accordance with God's will that he keep her at home, in her bedroom. The woman, according to the newspapers, was emaciated and acutely depressed, and her manacles had worn the flesh raw. Wondering what analyst could strip off the disguises from that father's perverted mind, Grampa Bancroft thought too of other chains, scarcely less galling although invisible, with which many an unaccused parent held a growing or a grown child to a supposed salvation that nicely linked a sacred command and the parent's convenience.

All falling short, then, we escaped our consciences by fixing hatred upon the misdoings of others, Grampa Bancroft concluded, or we dispossessed conscience by declaring everyone guiltless. Which meant that we forgot what innocence was, had been. Innocence is not perfection, he reflected; children are not perfect, no, but they are innocent, as long as they remain simple, natural, not having learned self-questioning and frantic self-justification. So innocence becomes more haunting than perfection, for a perfection aspired to can still be approached, but innocence can only be lost, irretrievably, and by the time we learn its name, it has already been left behind. Then we counterfeit its echo through pronouncements in court or temple, and by insisting that we had meant well, and had done the best we could, and were no worse than anyone else. So when we cannot confront some others' worst behavior, that is so strangely awful and yet so terrifyingly like our own, we sometimes condemn and punish harshly, even with tar and feathers, but more often we say we pity, and with that alone for testimony we fabricate a verdict of innocence, not so much to spare another as to shield ourselves. Not that he now could declare Ruby innocent, nor ever love so cramped and obscurely deceptive a spirit. But he did pity her, with recollection of his own sorrow over lost innocence and his former connivances at self-exoneration. He could pity Ruby now as he need not yet pity Paul, he told him-

self. He filled and lit a pipe and began to read his magazine.

A little later Ruby came upstairs to tell him that the banana cream pie had turned out well. To him she seemed more than ever lost to herself and those around her, buried in isolated good works, coveting and scheming after a formal justification. So he even tried to cheer her, telling her that if she said a pie was good, it must be perfect.

"It's all right," she admitted, and paused, and then added, "I hope Paul will like it."

"Of course he will," said Grampa Bancroft. "Why shouldn't he?"

Ruby went back downstairs without answering, without thereby coming closer to admitting that this was not the real question. So here they were, thought Grampa Bancroft, both awaiting a twelve-year-old's return with concealed anxiety, depending on a child, by virtue of his innocence, to set things straight again. They waited with different expectations, though. She wanted a verdict of innocence, but still she did not want it pronounced, for that would imply she had been indicted, so she said she hoped he'd like the pie. All that Grampa Bancroft wanted, he thought, was that Paul, with a child's divine unconcern and invincibly recurrent good-spirits, should have come out from whatever shadow might have touched him that morning. If Ruby could be relieved, that was an added but only a minor benefit. Children first, while they were innocent.

Grampa Bancroft read again in his magazine and then looked at his watch. It was now nearly time for lunch, and Ruby liked to serve right on the dot, as she liked to say. He washed his hands and went downstairs. The table was neatly set; a casserole stood covered, hot and ready, and beside it the bowl of crisp salad. The fresh-baked pie had forwarded into the dining room a heavily sweet, a tropical odor. Ruby came and looked out the window, parting the curtains with her finger, bending slightly in an intent posture. Paul was late. Her morning's work and

her mood that had grown with it hung upon his entrance, and now he was going to be tardy. Grampa Bancroft stood waiting to see which way the weather would shift. It seemed Ruby was going to try hard to be patient. Something must have kept him, she said evenly, he was usually home by this time. She returned to the kitchen. Grampa Bancroft sat down on a chair in the corner of the dining room. He felt ashamed to be spying upon Ruby's contortions. Yet he could not look away, as with the physical eye. While he was here he must be aware, and the weight and weariness of age would be always upon everything that entered his mind.

Soon he heard Paul come in the back door. Seven minutes behind schedule, by Grampa Bancroft's watch. He heard the still childish treble voice say "Hi, Mom" cheerfully. It sounded free and easy, with the undemonstrative intimacy of boyhood that takes long-term alignments for granted and does not brood over interruptions after they are past. Apparently Paul would no more hold a grudge against his mother than against his pal Peter. Paul was innocent still, no one had made a man of him yet, or saved his soul, much less set him to saving others by a reserved wrath, nor had he yet learned to excuse himself by pitying others. And Ruby was calling him dear and telling him brightly to wash his hands in a hurry, she had a good lunch for him and he was a little late. With his attention called to the matter of food, he cried out "Oh boy, what is it? Banana cream pie, isn't it. Oh boy, Mom!" Grampa Bancroft heard Ruby's laughter, gratified, and it seemed as of one reprieved. Mother and son came smiling into the room.

"Hi, Grampa," said the boy, as they took their places. "I stopped at the store on the way home, and then I had to wait a minute to see the manager, and he had a whole stack of crates in the back room he said we could have after school. Boy, we'll have a bigger shack than any of the other kids."

His mother was looking at him intently, waiting pointedly.

Paul folded his hands, lowered his head, and voiced rapidly the set prayer that his food should be blessed to their use and they made ever mindful of the needs of others. Ruby lifted the casserole cover and began to spoon out the steaming food.

"That's good you got the crates," Grampa Bancroft told Paul as they spread their napkins. "But you shouldn't forget to be on time for lunch; your mother needs to have you here promptly."

"Uh huh," Paul replied, so agreeably as to carry no conviction except that he might already be forming the human habit of vast absolute commitments which must inevitably damn him to failure.

Lunch went off well. Between mouthfuls Paul gave a concrete but unintelligible description of their plans for the shack. He asked his mother whether he might have that old rag rug in the basement to put on the ground, the floor of the shack, and Ruby said she would see, and he should eat his salad too. The pie was a great success, in itself and in the sense of friendly feasting it created. Ruby promised to give Paul and Peter the rest of it after school, if Paul would drink a glass of milk with it then. Paul was so content that he began to dally over his pie, cutting it into little squares and triangles and then shoving the pieces back together, like bits in a picture puzzle.

"Paul," said Ruby warningly, "you'll be late if you dawdle. Just eat the pie, don't play with it."

"Yes'm," said Paul, and went steadily to work.

So they got through lunch, and this time Ruby didn't find it necessary to tell Paul that he spoiled everything, nor to enumerate all his other recent malefactions which made playing with his pie the last straw. They rose from the table in peace and all carried their dishes out to the kitchen. There Ruby gave Paul a brief hug, to which he submitted placidly.

As before in such moments of truce and kindness, when the boy seemed to breathe as freely as a young tree on a still

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morning with his provident mother beaming upon him like a mild spring sun, the old man felt that he had been too demanding of life, felt that Ruby and Paul did fairly well together, understood each other to a practicable degree, and knocked along through changing weather wholesomely enough, even almost happily. And I, thought Grampa Bancroft, am just an old man adrift, with that disenchantment which, if not the greatest sin of all, is the worldliest stain upon manhood, the mark of a fatal decline. And my only means to a merely negative virtue is to stay out of others' way, others still moving in the strenuous world where verdicts of innocence are to be had not only from courts but in the devious minds of moralizers, who can stomach the cloying honey of self-justification out of the carcass of their unacknowledged guilt. As he heard Ruby and Paul saying good-bye at the back door with more than ordinary liveliness and affection, Grampa Bancroft started up the stairs toward his room with a slower step than ever.