

# PRESUMED INNOCENT

Directed by Alan J. Pakula  
Produced by Sydney Pollack and Mark Rosenberg  
Distributed by Warner Brothers Pictures  
Released in 1990

The wrongs we do cannot be contained. Others suffer in sympathy with the sinner or suffer because of him.

The choice or predilection to do wrong—lie, cheat, kill, whatever—is the product of many factors. It is a cruel cycle endlessly repeated—wrongs inspiring wrongs, never to be undone. Parents ruin children, friends betray friends, and spouses tire of the necessary sacrifice, eschewing love for hate. And those in the right, watching with restraint, denying their fear and anger, get sucked into the vortex as well. It's only a matter of time. All have failed; all will fall.

Watching *Presumed Innocent* is like watching two movies at the same time—one where Harrison Ford's Rusty Sabich is the killer, the other where it's Bonny Bedelia's Barbara Sabich. Barbara is a perfectly positioned character. In no thriller/who-dunnit can the culprit be some non-entity revealed in the last five minutes. Despite what is tossed about as a suggestion between the investigators, no anonymous ex-con could come back and kill the prosecutor who put him away. It would be dramatically intolerable. But the spouse of the lead character would have some role in the story regardless, so she's never a suspect for the audience.

The whole film we're simply thinking, Who did it? (Any deeper message is reserved for the end). Brian Dennehy's Raymond Horgan seems a reasonable choice. He's strong enough and had a sexual history with Polhemus. But nothing comes of it. Maybe Harrison Ford is actually the bad guy. (He wouldn't be until *What Lies Beneath*).

Meanwhile it seems Bonny Bedelia is getting awfully good screen time, but to what end? Her character, the longsuffering, dutiful wife, is going nowhere....

Carolyn Polhemus is an enigma. Her tireless work to convict a child abuser is admirable and seems an unlikely complement to her man-eater personality. But the movie establishes everything we need. When she first joins the D.A. office she asks for the toughest, ugliest crimes—she wants to fight the sex fiends and child exploiters. Horgan thinks he's got another idealist like Rusty. But Rusty is loyal and shuns power. Working from the shabbiest office imaginable, he holds this massive unnamed city together. (The contrast between Rusty's office and that of his defense attorney is one of the greatest commentaries on justice, money, and power in a movie loaded with them.) No, Polhemus is an opportunist. She wants the toughest cases because they are her ticket to advancement.

Thinking Rusty's got the same cold ambition she does, she lures him to his doom.

Usually sex scenes are gratuitous, providing mere titillation, advancing nothing but an awareness of our dormant lusts.

However, *Presumed Innocent* gets it right. Critically, we see her initiate things. Rusty, by locking the door and approaching her eager, nubile form, reciprocates. He does not seem happy, but transfixed, like he realizes he's already fallen into a trap and there's no way out—*so why not enjoy it?* They strip and grope and get down to business.

Meanwhile, John Williams, delivering the defining moment of another excellent score, provides all the necessary commentary on the scene. What's the message here? What's important? Is it the pleasure, the escape, the delight in dangerous wrongs? The scene concludes with a close-up of Polhemus in ecstasy as the music, grinding out brooding arpeggios, goes bizarrely dissonant, explicitly contradicting the image; instead of sharing her bliss, we are made to see that tragedy is all that will result. Her joy is less sexual release and more cruel satisfaction, for another man necessary for her ascension has been bagged. As Rusty tearfully remarks later, "It was never love."

The movie provides plenty of evidence for the thesis that Rusty killed Carolyn. She is the kind of woman who, with her cruel sexual powers, can reduce a man of strength to quivering impotence, he but lost to any hope of escape save for a fit of blind rage. For every time Rusty denies killing, he admits to it (facetiously?). And the physical and circumstantial evidence points only to him. So it's a set-up, right? Sure, his persecutors are unlikable, but Rusty burns the incriminating note from Carolyn (which we learn was her admonition for him to stop calling her) and asks his investigator buddy to lay off the (incriminating?) phone records. Most important, he doesn't call in a fingerprint analysis on the bar glass and wants to run a narrow check on possible matches. Could he be guilty?, we wonder.

The best moment between Ford and Greta Scacchi's Polhemus is when he says he just wants to be with her, and she tries to leave and he grabs her and yanks her around to face him. This violent gesture is capped, surprisingly, with a plaintive lament: "What do I have to *do*?"

Her scornful reply: "Grow up." That's cold. Yes, he's the one who's married, but she lured him in, only to dismiss him and jump to Horgan when the affair was no longer politically advantageous. Here we see his anger and physical power (ability) and broken spirit (motive). Everything points to his guilt.

Meanwhile a pattern of reciprocated and inverted wrongs is establishing itself. Lipranzer aides Rusty in avoiding the murder rap, stretching the law with the phone records, the glass, and Leon. Lipranzer thinks Rusty is guilty, but apparently decides Carolyn deserved it. After all, "Polhemus was bad news."

Judge Lyttle has now reformed himself into an excellent jurist, but remains imprisoned by the threat of having his past wrongs exposed. He cannot allow the case to fall to the jury, lest the story behind the B-file get out.

Rusty's attorney, played by the debonair Raul Julia, uses the judge's past predilection for bribes to serve a higher goal—freeing his client. For Sandy Stern, there is no Justice, only victory and defeat.

Horgan allows the pressure of the campaign to permit the politicization of his underling's death. He wants an answer before the election (presumably even if it's the wrong one). He values re-election above all else, which could be justified on the grounds that the ends justify the means. Maybe he believes he's really the best man for the job. But he subsequently admits that he's powerless and can merely "fill the potholes."

Compromise, deception, and corruption is everywhere.

We think that Della Guardia and Molto and the coroner are up to no good, but they were actually on the right track. They just never had a chance. A succession of miracles ensured that Rusty would not face punishment, at least not at the hands of his peers.

There's no holes in the film, no cheats. Sure, there's a few distractions to throw us off the scent, but everything we needed to solve the murder was made available. Like everyone in the story, we were fooled. Finally it all comes into focus—the investigation, the election, the trial are all just ancillary. The whole movie's about Mr. and Mrs. Sabich. When the trial ends, the music and the editing give us the false sensation that the story has climaxed, Harrison Ford's still a good guy and it's time to celebrate and, maybe, get revenge on Della Guardia and Horgan.

But first he's got to fix that fence....

His face devoid of emotion, Rusty remorselessly destroys the evidence of Carolyn's blood and hair, the camera recoiling from this shadow-shrouded killer in the basement. We think how dumb we are—Rusty did it all along! Earlier in the film, sifting through clues in Carolyn's apartment, Rusty admitted to responsibility for the crime and observed that he wasn't thinking too clearly at the time. Also established earlier was the fact that the police wouldn't dare search Rusty's house for a weapon, lest they find nothing and have egg on their face at the trial. So it makes sense that the bloodied tool would be waiting, still unclean, in the basement.

But there's one more shock to go. Barbara did it. And when Rusty ascends the stairs to confront the woman who killed his sultry paramour, he still brandishes the weapon. Will he complete the tragedy and kill the killer? No, he sets it down to hear the worst story of his life, as we discover that the entire movie has been a bizarre study of marriage and a meditation on justice.

In his closing monologue, Rusty takes responsibility for everything. In choosing to succumb to Carolyn, he set off his wife. So as much as he is responsible for adultery he is responsible for murder—it was the inexorable consequence. And since his wife can't be punished—no one can know the truth and if they did, nothing could be done about it—Rusty must live with the pain; the loss of Carolyn, the guilt of his adultery. He is locked into a marriage that was, first, saved with Carolyn's death, and then irredeemably destroyed by it. Was it Rusty's adultery with Carolyn or Barbara's murder of Carolyn that killed their marriage? In the end, the two wrongs are inseparable.

We end where we began, in an empty courtroom, reflecting on the law that aspires to hold us accountable. Rusty had told us that the jury's role is to determine what really happened. "If they cannot find the truth, what is our hope of justice?"

This jury never got a say.

If justice is punishment proportionate to the crime, meted out on the guilty party, then at the movie's end, Rusty thinks he's serving time. He feels the weight of justice. In one sense that's true. For there is the law of the land, external, subjective, riddled with compromise; and then there is the law of our hearts, reflecting something greater. Unlike man's justice, the justice

of the heart cannot be dodged, denied, stymied, or obstructed. It may be slow, but it will have its day.

A guilty conscience is hard to shake, and merely the sign of worse to come. Perfect justice awaits to settle every score. A foreboding of it resides in our hearts, reminding us all to look ahead.

So there is some comfort that, while our system of earthly justice is deeply flawed, anyone escaping the justice of man will not escape the justice hereafter. But can any of us eagerly await perfect justice? None of us will evade that verdict.