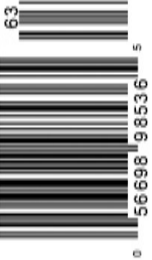


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I PUT A LIGHT IN THE MILK

Jeff Dolven

François Truffaut is ready to move on. He is halfway through his series of interviews with Alfred Hitchcock, which take up the British director's films in roughly chronological order. The two have been talking about *Suspicion*, from 1941, the casting of Joan Fontaine, the debates over the ending, the disappointing decision to shoot in a sound stage rather than on location. But Hitchcock detains him over a last detail:

A. H. *By the way, did you like the scene with the glass of milk?*

F. T. *When Cary Grant takes it upstairs? Yes, it was very good.*

A. H. *I put a light in the milk.*¹

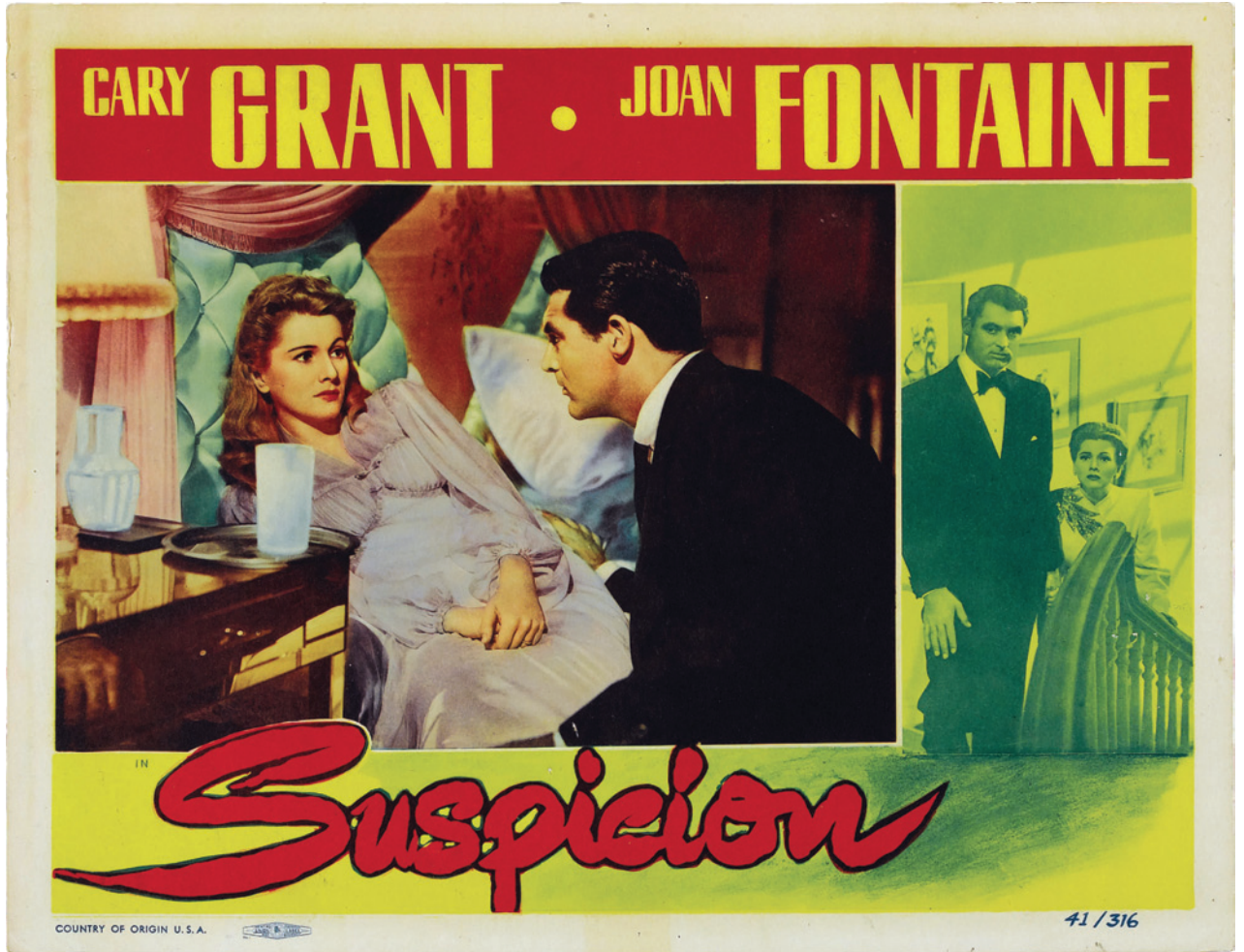
Anyone who has seen the film will have to agree with Truffaut's assessment. Cary Grant, playing the charming bounder Johnnie Aysgarth, enters a dark foyer in the grand house that he and his new wife Lina cannot afford. The camera follows him from above as he crosses the floor and mounts the stairs, carrying a tall glass of milk on a silver tray held casually, one-handed, just above his belt. He is lit from behind, his face in black shadow, but the milk—the milk glows like a torch, the moving center of the scene, and as he approaches the waiting camera its white glare almost fills the screen. It is a beacon, a sign. But the reader coming upon the still image for the first time, and the moviegoer who has been following the story for ninety minutes, will be equally unsure: a sign of what?

For the reader, a sketch of that story is in order. Grant's Johnnie meets Fontaine's Lina on a train, where he persuades her to help him through a little contretemps about having a third-class ticket in a first-class compartment. The next time they see each other, it is at a fox hunt, where Johnnie, in ascot and bowler, carries himself with reassuring *savoir faire*. Next, he is at her doorstep, in the company of her hunting friends; then he appears again, by himself; in short order, and against the wishes of her father, the upright General McLaidlaw, they are married. It does not take long for Lina to realize what the audience already well knows, that Johnnie has no money of his own, and their lavish new life is lived in expectation of her inheritance. At her urging, he does take a job ... but he

is soon discovered to be borrowing from the till. The general dies ... but when the will is read, they learn he has cut his daughter out. There is a scheme with Johnnie's friend Beaky to invest in a cliffside real estate development ... but Beaky dies mysteriously in Paris. Johann Strauss's "Wiener Blut" waltz, the leitmotif of the couple's infatuation, modulates from major to minor in the background. One morning, reading the mail while her husband is in the bath, Lina discovers that he has made inquiries into the terms of their common life insurance policy. Not long after, a mystery-writer neighbor tells that Johnnie has been asking about the relative merits and accessibility of undetectable poisons.

Such is the state of play when Johnnie climbs the stairs with that ostentatiously fateful glass of milk. Lina, undone by her doubts, has taken to her bed; the film's harsh chiaroscuro and canted camera angles are increasingly hers, as though Hitchcock had gradually ceded her the cinematographer's duties. The milk is the allegorical focus of this transformation. It is blameless, nourishing, the elixir of childhood. Its maternal benison ought by rights to promise fertility to the pair whose marriage is still unblest. But Hitchcock pushes this innocent milk-language too far for anyone's good. "You mean a spotlight on it?" asks Truffaut. "No," Hitchcock answers: "I put a light right inside the glass because I wanted it to be luminous. Cary Grant's walking up the stairs and everyone's attention had to be focused on that glass."² The almost sacramental insistence on the milk's purity has the effect of turning the moviegoer's mind, as milk left out on a hot day will turn; the effect is much stronger than introducing a foreign body, a fly or a strand of hair, or a creeping stain. The shining glass asks not just to be seen, but to be believed. There is considerable craft in that transubstantiation, and Hitchcock points proudly to it. But then, for all that, milk could be said to be the perfect object of suspicion already.

Already: but not for all that long, historically speaking. The milk of other animals has only been a dietary staple in Europe since the eighteenth century, and the fear that it might be poisoned has no prominent place in the Christian tradition or the classical myths. It is otherwise in India, where cow's milk has been consumed in quantity for millennia. When the



Heavy on the milk. Lobby card for Alfred Hitchcock's *Suspicion*, 1941.



Hindu gods stir the ocean of milk, hoping to decoct a nectar to restore their immortality, the poison they release turns Shiva blue; Krishna is almost killed by the poisoned milk of his foster-mother Putana.³ In the West, it takes the twin projects of expansion and industrialization to make widespread the suspicion that milk's honest complexion might protest too much.

The expansion story is American. The pattern of milk consumption among settlers at the beginning of the nineteenth century was traditional, households drinking the milk of their own cows, no far transport, no wide market. Still, the drink was important enough on the frontier that milk sickness could threaten the nation's very manifest destiny. "Milk sickness": its sufferers endured anorexia, nausea, listlessness, and acidosis, an unchecked acidity of the blood that could progress to coma or death. "Puking disease," "sick stomach," "the sloes" or "slows," "swamp sickness," "tires," "trembles"—by any name it was epidemic in the south, midwest, and southwest throughout the nineteenth century, blamed variously on arsenic, organisms in the soil, and baleful exhalations breathed from tilled land.⁴ Young towns collapsed where it hit hardest, leaving ruins to be found by the next wave of settlers. "It has been conjectured by many," reported *The Medical Repository* as early as 1811, "that this affection depended on poisoned milk,"⁵ but it would be another century before the cause was definitively identified as the white snakeroot, a woodland shade plant eaten by cows that strayed from their pasture. Once the etiology was clear, precautions were simple enough, and the disease is virtually unknown today. But in affected areas it was the century's chief cause of infant mortality, and perhaps even of disability and death among adults.

Milk sickness was a mystery that haunted the borders of settlement. "White poison" stabbed its centers. The phrase came to be used to describe the milk that was supplied to city dwellers during the rapid urbanization of the nineteenth century, brought to sale from the proliferating milk sheds around towns and cities. Milk was taken with coffee and tea; it was promoted as an alternative to breastfeeding, especially for working-class mothers; it was increasingly downed by the glassful. Milk was now a market. With new profits, and widespread competition, came the new cost-cutting strategies of an underregulated and unscrupulous industry. The sheds were punishing, unsanitary places, and the milk they produced would

sit at warm temperatures for hours or days. The cows were often fed on distillers' waste. ("I have distinctly tasted the *Whiskey* in milk of cows," wrote one William Cobbett in 1821.⁶) Tuberculosis bacilli flourished in the accommodating barrels, pails, and bottles. The techniques for making the stuff presentable were themselves often toxic, with boric acid added to delay souring, and snail shells and animal brains mixed in to inspire a robust froth. The headlines in British newspapers acquire a queasy familiarity: "Poisoned Milk at Greenock" (*Edinburgh Evening News*, 1876), "Typhoid Fever and Poisoned Milk" (*The Dundee Courier*, 1878), "Another Lesson from the Poisoned Milk Pail" (*The Cornishman*, 1884).⁷

Turn that key, "poison milk," in the lock of the Internet today, and a thousand barn doors spring open. Respectable sites warn responsibly of the danger posed by growth hormones often found in dairy milk; others speculate less scrupulously, but often more urgently, about leukemia, pancreatic cancer, pituitary and thyroid overdrive, and countless other ailments, specific and general. There are reports on scandals like the 2008 sickening of Chinese children by milk adulterated with melamine. (Melamine masks the protein depletion of watered milk to get it past the inspectors; fifty-four thousand babies were hospitalized.) There are freewheeling conspiracy theories that discover the dairy lobby's machinations behind every symptom of the modern malaise. Indeed, as explanations go, trouble with the milk is hard to better. Not just poisoned milk, the scourge of the nineteenth century, but poison milk, as though straight from the teat the stuff were snake-root itself. Who has not taken a suspicious sniff at the beak of a carton? And as religiously as you may check, you have already drunk it. Milk is the apple before the apple, each infant's original sin before ever choosing. If you suspect that something is wrong, basically wrong, and look back and back and back, back to the first thing that was ever put in you from outside, what have you got but milk?

Opposite: Cary Grant in publicity still for *Suspicion*. The film's script describes the scene: "LONG SHOT — FROM ABOVE — We see Johnnie on the stairs below. He comes up with measured tread, because he is carrying a glass of milk on a small plate. He comes on up and up. He turns the stairs, getting nearer and nearer towards the camera — so close that the glass of milk fills the screen."

Somewhere between the poisoned milks of Greenock and Shijiazhuang, milk enjoyed its golden age. The early twentieth century saw much more successful regulation of the industry; milk was safe, and between the wars it came to rival bread as a basic index of public nutrition. The period was captioned by Winston Churchill's famous proclamation, in the midst of the Battle of Britain, two years after *Suspicion* was made: "There is no finer investment for a community than putting milk into babies."⁸ Milk consumption had never been so widespread, nor would it be again. Hitchcock's intervention is timed to this high, white tide of public confidence. He added his soupçon of arsenic at just the moment when milk was (as the poet James Schuyler would put it, twenty years later) coming into its own.⁹

Or did he? For Johnnie's uncanny glass rests untouched by Lina's bedside; the bulb burning in its heart goes undiscovered, and the poison, if there is poison, unproven. The next morning Lina decides to take a few days at her mother's house, and Johnnie insists on driving her, at speed, along the narrow cliff-side roads of Dover. As his powerful 1936 Lagonda rounds a sharp bend, the passenger door springs open, and Johnnie reaches toward his wife—to pull her back into the car and to safety. When they come to a stop, he explains everything. The plot, the insurance and the poison research, was all to kill himself, to end his shame and secure his wife's future after his death. Was there then no poison in the glass? Do Johnnie's good intentions redeem that milk? The light, it seems, was true. We have all taken our fatal drink, long ago, but Hitchcock's milk turns out to be not so much a poison as a diagnosis, holding our suspicions before us in its plain, white, shadowless, and beneficent light. A diagnosis, and a cure, for Johnnie came in compassion, like a good milkman, with a glass to soothe our suspicious

natures. Milk, after all, is what the poison control hotline will tell you to drink if you have accidentally consumed something truly poisonous. If we doubt the milk, what can we trust? If we trust the milk, we can take it from there.

Or can we? Hitchcock had another ending in mind, one the studio rejected, but which he described, wistfully, to Truffaut:

The scene I wanted, but it was never shot, was for Cary Grant to bring her a glass of milk that's been poisoned and Joan Fontaine has just finished a letter to her mother: "Dear Mother, I'm desperately in love with him, but I don't want to live because he's a killer. Though I'd rather die, I think society should be protected from him." Then, Cary Grant comes in with the fatal glass and she says, "Will you mail this letter to Mother for me, dear?" She drinks the milk and dies. Fade out and fade in on one short shot: Cary Grant, whistling cheerfully, walks over to the mailbox and pops the letter in.¹⁰

There was poison in the milk after all. One could imagine reshooting the scene to make it plain, with the milk beginning to boil in the glass as Johnnie approaches the bedroom, or with a pitch-black, sinister twist of milk-smoke rising from its surface. Or perhaps the negative could be swapped in, putting Johnnie in a white suit, with a tall draft of viscous crude on his tray. Or another possibility, another ending, maybe more in Hitchcock's spirit. Johnnie takes his seat beside Lina's bed, just as he does in the version RKO sent out into the world in 1941, and offers her the glass; she takes a long draft, and hands it back; he finishes it. Then they sit side by side without speaking, waiting to see everything that has already happened.

Opposite: Page from working script of *Suspicion*, showing one of the cuts Hitchcock made to the milk scene.

1 François Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, rev. ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), p. 143. The image reproduced in Truffaut's volume is a publicity still: it shows Grant's face, which is in shadow in the film, and he holds the tray with two hands rather than one.

2 Ibid.

3 On milk in Indian mythology, see Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

1980), pp. 53–58.

4 Thomas Cone, "Milk Sickness (Tremetol Poisoning)," in *The Cambridge World History of Human Disease*, ed. Kenneth F. Kipper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 879–880.

5 "A Disease in Ohio, Ascribed to Some Deleterious Quality in the Milk of Cows," *The Medical Repository*, vol. 3, ed. Samuel Latham Mitchill and Edward Miller (New York: Collins and Co., 1812), p. 92.

6 Hannah Velten, *Milk: A Global History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), p. 60.

7 *Edinburgh Evening News* (Edinburgh, Scotland), 22 March 1876; *The Dundee Courier & Argus and Northern Warder* (Dundee, Scotland), 25 January 1878; *The Cornishman* (Penzance, England), 24 January 1884. On "white poison" generally, see Hannah Velten's account in *Milk: A Global History*, pp. 55–76.

8 Deborah Valenze, *Milk: A Local and Global History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 254.

9 At the end of his beautiful poem "Milk," Schuyler writes, "Trembling, milk is coming into its own." James Schuyler, *Collected Poems* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1993), p. 32.

10 François Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, p. 142.

(ALREADY
SHOT)437

SEMI-LONG SHOT - from Lina's eyeline - Johnnie stands framed in the doorway, holding the glass of milk.

JOHNNIE

I - I brought you something,
Monkeyface.

438- SEMI-CLOSEUP. Lina's eyes follow the progress of the
445 glass of milk. They travel in a complete semi-circle until she sees the glass and his hand enter the right hand side of the screen, and place it on the table. She looks up at Johnnie and the CAMERA PULLS BACK. Johnnie bends over her saying:

JOHNNIE

Good night, Lina.

He kisses her with a touch of fervency that surprises her a little.

The CAMERA PANS him away from the bed, across to his own room. He opens the door and switching the light on, enters. He closes the door softly.

446 SEMI-CLOSEUP of Lina. She looks down at the milk and then toward Johnnie's door. Her face showing visible signs of distress she's going through. Suddenly she makes a decision to face Johnnie. She rises from the bed and

CAMERA PANS her as she crosses in determination to his door. She hesitates at the door and then quietly turns the handle to enter. She stops suddenly as she sees:

INT. JOHNNIE'S DRESSING ROOM - NIGHT

447 SEMI-CLOSEUP from her viewpoint we see Johnnie's back. He is in the act of emptying some powder from a paper into a glass of water.

INT. AYSGARTH BEDROOM - NIGHT

448 CLOSEUP of Lina - she looks quickly back to her own milk and takes in the situation in a flash, realizing the mistake she has made. As she turns back quickly, she sees: