

Before the Fact is a 1932 novel by Anthony Berkeley, published under the pen name Francis Iles. The novel follows the characters of Lina and the man she marries, Johnnie. Johnnie slowly reveals himself to be a thief, embezzler, and an adulterer, over the course of their ten year marriage. Eventually his wife also begins to suspect him of murder, until the marriage finally ends when Johnnie poisons Lina and she, still so in love, willingly allows him to do so.

Suspicion is the 1941 movie adaptation, starring Joan Fontaine and Cary Grant as Lina and Johnnie, respectively. Johnnie, like in the novel, quickly reveals his true self when Lina discovers they have been living on borrowed money and that Johnnie has sold her antiques in order to gamble. This is where the similarities end. Though Lina suspects Johnnie of murder and we are given multiple reasons to believe she is right, the last scene of the movie reveals that Johnnie was actually intending to commit suicide and after he decides this would be the coward's way out the two drive off into the sunset.

Why such a drastic change? Surely a book with such an ending shouldn't be made into a movie at all if the point of the original story is going to be ignored in favour of a happy ending.

Well, the ending of the movie that was released certainly isn't the first that was considered, so it's fair to say that the studio did not acquire the rights to the movie with this as their original intention. Actually, the movie floated around for quite some years before finally being picked up by director Alfred Hitchcock.

The Endings

The ending Hitchcock claims to have wanted in an interview with French filmmaker François Truffaut is the one that stays truest to the book. In this ending Lina is correct in her suspicions and writes a letter to her mother telling her that she knows Johnnie is going to murder her and she intends to let him do so. Later, after Johnnie brings Lina the poisoned milk and she drinks from the glass, she gives him the letter and asks him to mail it before laying down knowing she will never wake again.

The last scene would be of Johnnie, whistling happily, placing the letter into a mail box with no idea he had just incriminated himself.

Despite this being Hitchcock's preferred ending it was never actually filmed. Though Johnnie being a murderer would have past the Production Code (a list of censorship guidelines that governed United States motion picture releases between 1930 and 1968) Lina willingly accepting poison would not. Criminals were the only characters allowed to commit suicide when the code was in effect, and Lina, the heroine of the story, allowing herself to be poisoned would count as suicide.

This ending could have perhaps still gone ahead with Lina unaware she was about to accept poison, but the casting of Cary Grant left film company RKO reluctant. They did not want Grant portraying a murderer, and didn't believe the audience would accept the heroic leading man of the day as a villain.

Despite the ending being thrown out before it was even scripted, there are still a lot of hints towards it in the existing film. At the opening of the film, after paying a train fare with a postage stamp, Johnnie shouts at the annoyed conductor "write to your mother!" This clearly foreshadows the letter Lina would send in the original ending. Letters are also used various times through the film, and Hitchcock himself makes a cameo in which he is seen dropping a letter into a mailbox.

Unfortunately this, what I consider the true ending to the movie, was one we were never allowed to see because of restrictions put on cinema at the time. Had these not been in place today we might be enjoying a movie called *A Letter to Mail*, *Yours to Remember*, or even *Letters from a Dead Lady*, all suggested titles found in a letter from producer Harry Edington.

This next ending features in the original script, and seems like quite a strange choice.

Once again Johnnie climbs the stairs and gives a glass of milk to Lina, who believes he's there to poison her. She drinks the milk and holds Johnnie, telling him

she forgives him. When Johnnie realizes what Lina thinks he's done he leaves. When Lina goes to look for him we get a reflection of the beginning of the film, with Lina on a train when she sees an Illustrated News photograph of Johnnie wearing an RAF uniform, though he is now using the name James Allen.

Lina goes to the base and talks to the commodore, who tells her Johnnie is their best pilot and a true hero. Johnnie has turned his life around and their future together looks hopeful. Lina watches as Johnnie leaves for a mission over Berlin, and sees 'Monkey-face' written on the side of his plane, same as the nickname he uses for her.

Following the unsuccessfully previews of the film, Hitchcock wanted a new ending and George J. Schaefer, president of RKO, had a suggestion.

The ending he proposed also had Lina convinced Johnnie has brought the milk to kill her, though this time she speaks before drinking and tells him she will willingly die for him. Johnnie, realizing how far he has sunk, drinks the milk himself and falls unconscious upon the bed.

Lina, in a panic, calls the writer that Johnnie previously got his poison information from. The writer explains that of course she didn't really tell Johnnie about poisons, and that he will awaken unharmed in a few hours time. She also tells Lina that she never shared this information with her before because she wanted to bring things to a climax. Lina hangs up the phone and takes Johnnie's head in her lap, looking into the camera with an expression of hope.

The ending we have today is rather a let down, even compared to the ending where Johnnie doesn't try to poison Lina, because of how the sequence with the milk is treated. The milk is simply left, untouched, on Lina's bedside table, and is of no real consequence at all. The climax of the movie doesn't hinge on the milk in any way, and so there is no reason for the iconic shot of Johnnie climbing the stairs.

How the ending changes the movie

The endings themselves change the rest of the movie and how we view it completely, which has become more interesting than the final result we were given.

The original idea of Johnnie poisoning Lina would give us the story of a sly man and a smart woman that fell in love with him but was not easily fooled. She was smart enough to work out his plan and courageous enough to die in order for him to be caught.

But that changes completely when Johnnie being a murderer is taken away, especially with the ending we were finally given, because now Lina isn't right. Instead of being smart she instead comes across as a frantic and paranoid woman, one that accuses her innocent husband of something as horrible as murder. Yes, he gambles and isn't completely honest, but does he really deserve to be accused of something so terrible? Does Lina become the one that should be viewed negatively now, for not trusting in her husband?

My opinion is that the movie became so far removed from the source material that I'm not quite sure why they bothered, because the film seems caught between being two stories, neither of which are written in full. It's a murder movie with no murder, and it's a movie about a paranoid woman with a little too much evidence for her to just be paranoid.

Suspicion is sparking interest again in Hollywood and is about to be remade. Now all that's left is to see if the original ending is restored, or if we are once again treated to two halves of two very different movies.

