The Twelve Lives of Alfred Hitchcock, White
THE FAT MAN

"I don't know who you employ to time your scripts, but whoever did it is misleading you horribly. I will even go so far as to say disgracefully." In August 1943, Hitchcock found himself immersed in one of his least favorite activities: repelling the encroachments of a Hollywood producer. Several months earlier, Selznick had loaned his star director to Twentieth Century- Fox, who were keen on Hitchcock's bold idea of making a wartime movie set entirely in a lifeboat. The scripting process for *Lifeboat* (1944), involving John Steinbeck, had been challenging; now, with filming already under way, Darryl F. Zanuck was insisting that Hitchcock's finished script was fifty percent too long. Hitchcock was infuriated by this eleventh- hour intervention, especially as he knew Zanuck was incorrect; meticulous in his planning for every movie, Hitchcock had a very firm grasp of schedules and timings. When Zanuck saw a hastily assembled rough cut of the first reel, his tune changed completely: "It has tempo, interest, and a feeling of being very much on the level."
Despite garnering Hitchcock his second Oscar nomination, the film did not do well at the box office, and was criticized by those who thought Hitchcock had made the American characters look lazy and chaotic in comparison to the steely, resourceful German U- boat commander played by Walter Slezak. Slezak raved about the experience of working with Hitchcock: "Hitch knows more about the mechanics and the physical technique of acting than any man I know." He was less complimentary about his fellow cast member Tallulah Bankhead— he thought she was a narcissistic fool; she referred to him as a Nazi— and morale among the actors was rarely high. Filming lasted nearly three months, during which the cast was confined to a small boat floating in a huge water tank.When they weren't feeling seasick, they were drenched, freezing, and struggling with colds. Hitchcock had limited sympathy. As he told one cast member during the production of a previous film, "there's no law that says actors have to be comfortable."
In such circumstances, it was not immediately obvious how Hitchcock would perform his customary cameo. The solution he hit on was pure Hitchcock: clever, funny, and in the service of his personal mythology. Twenty- four minutes into the movie, the character Gus reads aloud from a newspaper; on the page facing the camera is an advertisement for a fictional weight- loss product, the Reduco Obesity Slayer, with photographs of two Alfred Hitchcocks, one his familiar three- hundred- pound self, the other a much slimmer man. This was life intruding on art. Since January 1943, Hitchcock had been on a severe diet, and he used *Lifeboat* as a way of advertising that fact to the public. The world knew Hitchcock as "a fat man," and he often played the role for them; he'd been debasing himself by putting fat gags in his publicity articles for years. In an industry filled with the slender and the chiseled, his appearance made him memorable, a way of distinguishing himself from the crowd. It could also act as a masking agent, obscuring the person beneath the flesh. Both had their advantages and disadvantages. Neither gave him what he really craved: control of his own body, materialization of the Alfred Hitchcock who lived inside his head.
Within the shifted reality of the Hitchcock universe, it takes a brave or foolish person to trust the evidence of their own senses. Observable truth is a false friend; there is no steady fact of existence that cannot be undermined. The treachery extends even to food and drink. In

Notorious, Ingrid Bergman's heroine is poisoned to the verge of death by a cup of coffee; homebodies in *Rich and Strange* (1931) and *The Man Who Knew Too Much* feel their discomfort in foreign lands because of the exotic food they are fed. In mid- twentieth- century America, nothing could be more wholesome and nourishing than a glass of milk— except when it's handed to an unwitting guest at the Bates Motel as part of her final meal. In Hitchcock's initial design for *Suspicion*, another glass of milk, glowing like lily- white kryptonite, was delivered by Cary Grant to Joan Fontaine not as a restorative tonic but as a poison- laced murder weapon.

Maybe the best episode of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*— his favorite, and one he directed— has a woman serving the leg of lamb with which she killed her husband to the policemen investigating his disappearance. As the cops blithely dispose of the murder weapon, a delicious home-cooked meal doubles as the execution of the perfect crime.[1]

For most of his eighty years, Hitchcock felt the same unease about comestibles, which were both friend and foe, the source of joy and companionship, disgust and shame. The moral and physical complications of eating and drinking were subjects of daily contemplation for him, and oozed into his work as plot points, potent thematic symbols, and vital insights into character. He resented the impact that consumption had on his body, that unruly mass of flesh that could not be compelled to do his bidding. He could "accidentally swallow a cashew nut and put on thirty pounds right away," he explained on his struggles to make himself the size and shape he longed to be. When the cameras rolled, lissome bodies were prone to follow his every command; a shift of Tippi Hedren's eyebrow, or a flick of Eva Marie Saint's hair, would happen only if he desired it. Even some obstinate method actor like Montgomery Clift could be made to tilt his head in the way his director said it should. No amount of self- denial or wishful thinking ever gave Hitchcock the same control over his own form. As he was reminded incessantly throughout his adult life, he was "fat," a term that denoted not simply a physical characteristic but a way of being in the world. The distress his weight caused him— or, more important, his inability to control it— can hardly be overstated.

"I don't feel comfortable in my fat," he admitted to a journalist in 1964. Not one friend or colleague believed he had ever been anything other than profoundly unhappy about his appearance since childhood.

He spoke of his relationship with his body in Kafkaesque terms, a hostage within a captor's grotesque shell. "I have all the feelings of everyone encased in an armor of fat," he complained, convinced that his weight made others see him as something less than fully human.

Hitchcock being Hitchcock, he found a way to profit from his grievance, by pouring his appearance into his personal mythology and making it a marketable commodity. And, as people uncomfortable in their own skin often do, he pretended to find the whole subject hilariously funny, making a joke of himself before anybody else had the chance. In a speech he recycled on several occasions in the sixties and seventies, he addressed the question interviewers had asked for decades: "Who is the real Alfred Hitchcock?" First, he told his audience, the "real Hitchcock" is not the person your eyes tell you he is; that fat man is an impostor. In a characteristically deadpan riff, he said the confusion initially arose when

[1] "Lamb to the Slaughter," written by Roald Dahl.

he'd asked for a stunt double to perform his first cameo. "The casting department, with an unusual lack of perception, hired this fat man! The rest is history. He became the public image of Hitchcock." The misconception lingered until some years later he gave "an accurate and detailed description of my true self," and the casting department hired Cary Grant, although the public still considered him to be the short, tubby man with a bald head and dour, emotionless face.

As sensitive as he was about his appearance, Hitchcock had a deepseated desire to be seen; he invested creative effort in publicizing his face and body, and appreciated that his distinctive looks could be made to work to his advantage. On one level, the jigsaw of his silhouette that hedispatched as Christmas gifts in 1927 (the year in which he first became a celebrated public entity) might be read as a self- deprecating joke; in nine strokes of a pen, he rendered himself— the round- shouldered blob that he saw, and despised, every time he looked in the mirror— worthy of artistic reproduction. Yet it was also a revealing display of selfpromotion. From that moment, Hitchcock commandeered his body to help curate his public image, creating for himself a new, semi- fictional persona, a character more layered and complex than most of those that appeared in his films. At the peak of his celebrity, he dashed off the silhouette when approached by autograph hunters— including Andy Warhol, who had him draw his profile on a batch of Polaroid photos when the two met for lunch in April 1974. Warhol, like Hitchcock a former ad man, would have appreciated the savviness with which Hitchcock reproduced and exploited his silhouette, which was also used to publicize many of his Hollywood films and was seen at the start of every episode of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*.

He was pained not only by his size but also by his shape, the "cottage loaf" body that he said he inherited from his mother. A photograph of one of the Hitchcock boys shows in all likelihood his brother, William, on a horse next to his father outside the family shop; it displays the same physique Hitchcock lamented: stocky, large head, round torso, and limbs just a little less than proportionately long. The boy in the photo is perhaps eight or nine, roughly the same age at which Hitchcock would relish the aroma of the local bakery, where he'd be given free biscuits, a treasured memory he retrieved as an old man. It was also around this time that a schoolmate told him he was "funny- looking." Whether or not the child meant to cause harm, it lanced right to the bone. Hitchcock never developed the emotional robustness that would allow him to brush negative comments aside. Iffy reviews, rejections, and sleights— real or imagined— burrowed their way inside and stayed there, even at the height of his success. On this occasion, young Alfred went home and stared into the mirror, turning his head to one side to inspect the contours of his face. When his mother came up to him, he asked her whether she agreed that he looked odd. "You'll grow out of it," was her simple, devastating response.

The sense of existing within a body that was not truly his might have emanated from this exchange, as did his fixation with his profile. The habitual drawing and redrawing of the silhouette was an attempt to bring this disruptive impostor under control, and an inversion of the Hollywood cliché of being photographed only on one's "good side." He publicized his "funny- looking" profile relentlessly, even though he could be cutting when those around him expressed a similar fixation with their appearance. One of the anecdotes he enjoyed sharing with journalists was of the time a young actress, knowingly beautiful, asked which he thought was her best side. "You're sitting on it," Hitchcock replied.

Sometimes, he tried to convince Americans— and perhaps himself— that it was only Hollywood's unattainable standards of beauty that made him seem physically unusual. There had never been a time in his life when he could have been described as slim, but "in England, everyone looks as I do, and no one would remark on it," he said in 1979. That was a characteristic exaggeration, provably false but resting on an important kernel of truth. The England of Hitchcock's infancy was a place and time that cast larger bodies as models of good health. "Plumpness" was the word; in the East End of 1899, razor- sharp cheekbones and catwalk builds were generally associated with poverty and tuberculosis. Both Queen Victoria and her son Edward VII were renowned for their heft and their gargantuan appetites. Like Hitchcock, who "was not one to toy with his food," Victoria chomped her way through meals at an astounding clip, and she and Edward both gorged on rich multicourse meals.