

A close-up photograph of a cow's face, showing its white fur and dark patches. The background is a dark blue night sky filled with numerous small, bright stars. The cow's head is positioned in the upper left and center of the frame, looking towards the right.

**Manuscript
Found in a
Milkbottle**

by Neil Gaiman

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Introduction

Congratulations. You are about to read my worst short story.

At least, I'm pretty certain it's my worst. I've never reprinted it. Once, it occurred to me that I could give it to an anthology of humorous writing that was asking me for a reprint, and my assistant went and found it and photocopied it from the magazine it was in and faxed it to me wherever I was. I read the faxed story for the first time in twenty years, and told her to put the magazine back where she had found it, and not to bring it out again for any reason ever.

And now, for Humble Bundle and for Good Causes, I'm allowing people to read it. I'm still not putting it into an anthology, mind.

It was published thirty years ago, in Knave. It misfires in so many ways. However, it's also the only time I've ever created a wholly original faster than light drive. I think in retrospect I might have been trying to write an Avram Davidson story. Or possibly not.

Manuscript Found In a Milkbottle

Down the centuries, along the star lanes, across the light years — men will bless the name of *Neil Gaiman*. For here, in an almost throw-away aside, he comes up with the first feasible means of faster-than-light travel. *Scientific American* was full, *New Scientist* were out — so he flogged it to us instead . . .

Milkmen have secrets. Surely you have suspected that. Anybody who can be so bright and cheerful so early in the morning must have something to hide, some hidden source of amusement, you may be sure. I suppose that you thought — if you've thought about it at all — that the cheerful fellow in the white cap got his sardonic grin and whistle from a quick tumble in the kitchen with the busty blonde housewife at Number Twenty Seven.

But that's what they want you to believe. It's all a plot, a cunningly orchestrated international conspiracy. I am the only one who knows the truth. And I am locked up in this damned dairy, to prevent me from warning the world.

Let me introduce myself. My name is Pond. James Pond. I am a troubleshooter with the Ministry of Agriculture, code-name 546/b/TM9, licensed to leave London. Or at least I was at the time these horrifying events began — events that even now the world reels in ignorance of!

It was the Summer of '82 — 6th June to be precise — that it all started. I remember it as if it were yesterday. The Chief called me into his office. He gave me a cup of tea, a chocolate digestive biscuit; I knew it was going to be a big case.

"Something's come up I want you to check into," he began.

He opened a file on his desk, extracted a sheet of paper from it which he passed to me. "What do you make of that, then?"

I stared at it. It was a list of figures detailing milk production across Britain for the last three years.

"It's a sheet of figures detailing milk production in Britain for the last three years!" I told him.

He sighed. "I know that, Pond. But isn't there something about the figures that strikes you as a little odd?"

I examined the list more carefully. It broke down into Milk Produced (cows); Milk Used In Other Products (Dried and/or Skimmed); Milk used for the creation of dairy products, (cheeses, yoghurts etc.); Sundries (spillage, wastage and miscellaneous) and Milk Sold to the Consumer (bottled).

The oddity was immediate to my trained eye.

"Yoghurt!" I exclaimed. "Too many people are eating it. I know it promotes the growth of intestinal flora, but personally I can't stand the stuff!"

"It has nothing to do with yoghurt, Pond." He pointed to a set of figures, near the bottom of the sheet. "Check them."

I pulled out my pocket calculator and got to work. "Now you mention it, sir, there is something very strange about these figures! The totals don't match. Great Scott! There's almost a million gallons of milk a week destined for the consumer unaccounted for!"

"Right," said the Chief. "I want to know what's happened to those bottles of milk — there's something very fishy going on here."

“Righty-ho, Chief,” I said. “You can count on me.”

I took the stairs down to Supplies, where I signed out a new umbrella, briefcase and clip-board. Then I walked across the corridor to Transportation, where I collected a new bus-pass, and with that I was on my way.

Unfortunately I didn’t have any contacts among milkmen, who even then I knew as a close-mouthed, clannish lot. So I was forced to resort to plain old groundwork detection. I must have gone through billions of bills of lading, millions of petrol dockets and invoices, thousands of farms and hundreds of bottle factories — and at the end of the line there was one thing I was sure of. There was a cover-up going on. A whitewash. Some of the handwriting on the milk destination dockets looked forged.

I called in a handwriting expert. He took one look at the handwriting and said “Yes!”

“Yes, it’s forged?”

“No. Yes, it’s handwriting. I could recognise it a mile off. I’m not a handwriting expert for nothing!”

Dead useless, he was.

But at last I had my answer — or at least an inspired guess.

The Combined Dairies, in East Grinstead!

Somehow that Dairy was acting as a Black Hole for milk: thousands of gallons a week were entering it in lorries and never coming out again in little bottles to be placed on the doorsteps of the trusty burghers of Sussex.

I double-checked my figures. They had to be right. My heart pounding with righteous indignation, I went to see the Chief.

“What is it, Pond?” he asked.

“The project you assigned me to, sir. I think I’ve cracked where the milk is going. I don’t know why, or what they do with it, but give me half a dozen trained auditors, and by gosh I’ll find out!”

“There was a cover up going on. A whitewash. Some of the handwriting on the milk dockets looked forged.”

“Oh. That.” He seemed less than interested. “You may as well drop that project, Pond. Probably just a computer error — you know what they say: To err is human, but to really ball things up you need a computer. Forget all about it. There’s something new that’s come up on grain-yield quotas that I need you to check into . . .”

“But the milk!” I expostulated.

His eyes seemed to glaze over. “Pond-I-want-you-to-forget-all-about-the-milk-issue,” he said, as if reading from an invisible autocue.

“I don’t think that would be advisable,” I began, but he interrupted “FORGET IT!” Then he cradled his head in his hands and pointed to the door.

If only I had known then what I know about their hellish hypnotic powers! If only The Chief, like myself, had taken his milk skimmed (bless my recurring weight problem!) then perhaps things would

have been different . . .

When the Chief showed me out of his office I was in a quandary. Should I investigate grain yield quotas — a fascinating area to be sure — or should I pursue the milk matter further, against the express wishes of my superior?

Twenty years of civil service discipline was hard to break, but break it I did. Valour won out over discretion. I marched up to Transportation and demanded the money for a train ticket to East Grinstead.

How can I describe my first impressions of that hellish town to you? A town on the outside so calm and peaceful; on the inside seething with the repressed emotions familiar to those of us who have seen them vividly illustrated on the BBC's *Play For Today*.

The Combined Dairy offices were situated a little outside of town. Low, red-brick offices, surrounded by a fifteen-foot high fence, topped with barbed wire and electrified; the only entrance or exit was via a gate through which electric milk floats were continually jangling and trundling their way. In the centre of the dairy were a couple of strange structures which instantly caught my eye: one was an enormous storage tank, the other resembled nothing so much as a fifty-foot-high saucepan.

I resolved to enter the compound.

Perhaps it was all too easy, perhaps I should have suspected something was amiss. But had I not seen the ruse work on television so many times? I flagged down the next milk-float to pass me. "Excuse me," I called. "I think you have dropped something."

He stopped his float, and got out. "Where?"

I pointed to the road. His glance followed, and I hit him across the back of the head with my briefcase. He crumpled to the ground. I appropriated his white coat and his cap, then I climbed into his float.

I climbed out again. I had temporarily forgotten that I do not possess such a thing as a driver's licence; and while I can reconcile my conscience to bonking a milk-merchandising malefactor, I could not face the knowing criminal act of driving a vehicle I was not licensed for.

Besides, I didn't know how to start it.

Disguised as a milkman I walked through the gates, unchallenged by the granite-faced, white-coated guards or the banks of television screens and cameras. Once inside the compound I was unsure what I should do next; after a few minutes deliberation, though (during which time I avoided a milk-float patrol, armed with what appeared to be machine guns) I decided to head for the saucepan structure.

It rose into the sky like a gas-works, and I ascended the outside by means of metal-strutted steps set around it, climbing very carefully. After what seemed like an hour's climb (but was, I am sure, no longer than five minutes) I reached the summit, looked down inside, and gasped. At the bottom of the 'pan' was a hole, which went straight as a mine-shaft into the ground, to what distance I could not estimate. In the hole was a glass tube, about twenty feet across, which rose from the pit to the top of the 'pan'. And on top of the tube was what appeared to be a modified milk-float.

I was about to move closer and examine it when there was a noise from behind me.

"Don't move a muscle, Mr. Pond. Not unless you have a desire to be shot in the kneecaps."

I didn't move a muscle.

“Now turn around — very slowly.”

I did that as well.

I recognised the man standing in front of me, flanked by gun-toting heavies. Or at least, I did not recognise the man’s face, but I knew who he was. I knew the significance of the tiny golden crown affixed to his cap, of the purple-and-ermine cuffs to his white coat. I was in the presence of a man whose very existence was legendary — the Master Milkman, he who had power over the traffic of milk throughout England.

“James Pond, I presume,” said The Master Milkman. He was not as old as I imagined that he would be; a burly, pagan man with enormous hands.

“How did you recognise me?”

“Come now, Mr. Pond. The briefcase and umbrella were a dead giveaway.”

The guards stripped me of my borrowed costume, relieved me of my briefcase and umbrella and handcuffed my hands behind my back.

The Master Milkman came over. “What you are witnessing,” he told me, “is the most important project in the history of humanity.”

“I don’t know what you’re doing, you fiend, but you’ll never get away with this!”

“Why on Earth not? You’ll never tell anyone what you know.”

“My superior at MinAg knows where I’ve gone. When I disappear they’ll put two and two together.”

He chuckled, and my blood ran cold. “A simple hypnotic added to the milk in the Ministry’s tea-trolley has already caused your superiors and workmates to forget you ever existed. All record of you has been expunged. The same hypnotic,” he added, “that we used on your Chief to persuade him to make you forget about the Milk Affair. Such a pity you didn’t take the hint, really.”

I believed him — it all made sense. “Well, if I’m not going to tell anyone, perhaps you would be so good as to tell me what *this . . .*” I gestured with my head towards the pit and the float-on-the-tube “. . . is all in aid of?”

“Certainly.” He snapped his fingers. “Guard — bring me a chair!” When this was done he sat down and began to explain. “Tell me, Mr. Pond, what is the limiting factor when it comes to space travel?”

“Well, propulsion, I suppose, or perhaps the Speed of Light. But I fail to see what this has to do with . . .”

“Patience Mr. Pond. Now . . . have you ever boiled milk?”

The man was mad, I decided, but I would play along. I nodded.

“Did it boil over?”

I nodded again.

“What I am telling you now is perhaps the oldest secret that we milkmen possess. And it is this. Milk boils only when you are not watching it.” He must have seen the confusion on my face, for he went on, “Let me give you an example. You fill a pan with milk. You place it on a source of heat. You wait. You watch it. You stare intently at it. Nothing happens. Then your attention is distracted; the phone rings, let us say, or someone calls to you. You turn around *and in the fraction of a second that*

your attention is otherwise engaged the milk boils over!

“Any scientist can tell you that milk contains millions of micro-organisms, even after it has been pasteurised. But what no scientist has yet realised is that these micro-organisms are sentient, and not only that — they are telepathic. They wait for that fraction of an instant when you aren’t looking and then — whoompf! Milk all over the cooker.”

“You fill a pan with milk. You place it on a source of heat. You wait. You watch it. You stare intently . . .”

“Supposing that what you are telling me is true,” I asked, “What has it to do with this apparatus, and that milk-float on top?”

“*That*, Mr. Pond, is no ordinary milk-float. That float has been rendered spaceworthy! As you said, what we are lacking in space travel today is a viable means of propulsion, and even then we are limited by the speed of light. But there is one substance which *can* travel faster than light — *boiling milk, when it thinks you’re not looking!*

“The milk is poured in from that storage contained over there into the glass tube, which descends many thousands of feet into the bowels of the earth. Our cosmonaut climbs into his space-float at the top. Then, we stare. The milk cannot boil while we are watching, but it is subject to extremes of heat and pressure at the bottom of the tube. We continue to stare, the milk continues not to boil. But sooner or later someone’s attention will flicker — perhaps for just a miniscule fraction of a nano-second. But in that time the milk has to boil over, and in so doing it breaks the speed of light, and propels the space-float off into space!”

“But . . . why?” I felt as if I had just been force-fed a yoghurt.

He smiled. It was not a very nice smile. “Power, Mr. Pond. Up there, Mr. Pond, is the Milky Way. And in the farthest corner of this galaxy of ours — the word *galaxy*, incidentally, comes from the Greek word for *milk* — there are beings like us. And they have promised us weapons beyond Man’s wildest dreams — if only we go there to collect them.”

“You mean . . . ?”

“That’s right. They don’t deliver.”

“No, I meant, you don’t mean they’ve been communicating with you?”

“Not with us, Pond old fruit. With the milk. It’s telepathic, you see.

“And tonight, the first part of our plan commences in earnest. Sidney Greenbaum, Milkman of the Year, will ride his milkfloat to the skies. He will visit the aliens, get the weapons, and then return — and on his return we will elevate milkmen to their rightful place as Masters of the World!

“Although it’ll only be a couple of hours for Sidney, almost four years will take place here on Earth before he returns and the Blessed Day . . .”

“The Blessed Day,” chorused the guards.

“. . . the Blessed Day dawns.”

“The world must be warned!” I gasped.

“Perhaps,” he smirked. “But you will never get a chance to tell anyone.”

“You’re going to kill me?”

“Nothing so crude. You will be kept prisoner here, Pond, for the next four years. After that you may go and tell whoever you wish. But it will be no good — they’ll already know!” He gestured to the guards. “Take him away.”

They led me down to the cells. That night they launched Sidney Greenbaum into space. It was, my guards told me, totally successful.

Since that time I have been kept a prisoner down here — fed on a diet of milk, sliced white bread, cream, processed cheese, eggs and — saints preserve us — yoghurt! But they have made a mistake — they have agreed to let me walk around the bottling plant tonight for exercise (I have been putting on a great deal of weight recently). I will be accompanied by a guard, of course, but I will take this manuscript, wrap it in one of the plastic bags my bread comes in, and stuff it into an empty milk bottle while he is not looking. There is but a slim chance that it will work — but I pray that Providence is on my side.

Whoever receives this message, you must warn the world! The hellish milkmen must not be allowed to go through with their plan! Round them all up, before it is too late!

I must stop now, for I hear a guard outside my cell. A guard in a white cap and coat, carrying yoghurt. Seek not to ask for whom the milkman cometh; he comes for you! And remember . . .

(The manuscript breaks off here. It was found wrapped in a Wondawhite Loaf wrapper, inside a bottle of milk, delivered to my door. I do not know what to make of it; the delusions of an unsound brain? A practical joke? But this I do know. I shall never be able to look at another milkman in quite the same way again.

And I have stopped taking milk with my tea.)