

TIMOTHY SCHEIN

MILKY CONSISTENCY

THE 7-ELEVEN PARKING LOT WAS GLAZED OVER WITH A light blanket of wasted water, reflecting the garish neon lights of the little building in a small sea of second hand colors. An artist's used palette. Chester Wilder pulled his weathered 87 Honda into the center of it and parked carelessly, using two spaces. It didn't matter. It was 3:00 a.m. and no one was to be seen. Chester imagined the clerk fast asleep in the back, stretched out across a couple of milk crates, his head resting on a pillow of potato chips. Being paid to sleep.

Chester needed milk. And although 3:00 a.m. was a somewhat unusual hour to be running errands, the milk provided a lovely excuse to run out on an argument with Joyce. "Look, I'm going out," he said.

"Out where?"

"To get milk. To get milk for the kids' cereal."

"But I'm not finished talking. The kids can eat eggs."

"No, they need cereal. I need cereal. Oat Bran."

He left and he drove, maneuvering his car through the city streets with the windows down and the heater on. It had rained earlier, and the smell of rainwater on asphalt was smoky and musty. He thought about his marriage. He thought about his life.

He remembered telling people he'd never get married. Marriage was for the weak. People who couldn't be comfortable with themselves. Marriage was an anchor around your neck, all the time pulling you down beneath the water's surface. All daily energy spent trying to keep your head above. To keep the lungs filled with oxygen. With life. And just when you think you've mastered treading the water and are breathing easily *Boom*: another child. Ten more pounds of burdensome weight.



DIANE KAI

People who need people are the luckiest people He laughed aloud and turned the radio down as he pulled into the 7-Eleven parking lot, mixing the neon colors with the tread pattern of his worn Goodyears.

He walked through the door, tripping the infrared sensor. A rude alarm for the clerk dozing in back. Chester walked to the refrigerated case and stared mindlessly. *Farmer John, Hillshire Farms, Kraft, Knudsen.* His tired eyes captured and reflected back in the slowly spoiling meat. He opened the case and removed a bright red carton of Borden Vitamin D whole milk and glanced downward at his midsection hanging unflatteringly over his belt. Thick rich milk for growing bones did little for a 35 year-old rapidly approaching middle age evidenced by a flabby mid-section. He thought about his own father's enormous belly and how as a kid he'd always kept as much physical distance between he and it, not to draw attention to the fact that he, Chester Wilder, was somehow related to a man attached to such utter ugliness. *No dad, you don't have to come do the scout meeting if you don't want ... No, I don't need a ride to Jim's, but thanks anyway.* The old guy never seemed to catch on.

Chester had read somewhere that the only difference between lowfat and whole milk was calories. His kids put so much sugar on their cereal — even the Cap't Crunch — they'd never notice a change in milky consistency. He could fill the carton with urine. They'd never know the difference. They hardly looked at anything but the television while they ate. Nevertheless, knowing better, he still held the red carton of whole milk. Force of habit.

Chester made his way to the register, the cold milk pressed up against his light nylon jacket, slowly chilling his right nipple. It felt nice. Something akin to a desirable itching in his groin. He stopped by the magazine rack and gazed furtively at their glossy covers.

Vogue, Glamour, Cosmopolitan. They all boasted photographs of beautiful women Chester had seen only on the covers of magazines. Blonde women, pert breasts bulging unnaturally from their bodies, pushing the elastic limits of their clingy stretch dresses that so narrowly covered their pubic areas (which Chester assumed were shaved clean anyway for another day's swimsuit session). Different faces, different clothes, different names — all the same bodies. Bodies he'd never touched, or dreamed he'd have the opportunity to touch. Fleishy facial perfection existing entirely in his mind, projected upon the insides of his eyelids as he tried to reach orgasm with the same familiar friction of ten years of marriage.

A dull thudding sounded softly outside, quickly reaching a mind-numbing level. Chester raised his head from the magazine rack's sea of faces and looked outside. A small metallic blue Toyota pickup parked and turned off its engine. The droning bass beat of a nameless hip-hop song by a faceless band continued to shake the front windows as if they were once again liquid. Sound waves on

a warm glass sea.

Three young boys, none older than seventeen, spilled out from the cab of the truck. All were dressed essentially the same: baggy jeans cinched tightly at the waist with thick black leather belts, wildly patterned silk or rayon shirts, black Doc Martens, with thick cloth coats depicting the insignias of various professional baseball teams. Each jacket matched the respective wearer's hat, all worn at different angles on their separate heads. Individuality, Chester assumed.

He altered his course toward the register with a detour into the candy aisle, more as a means to watch than to satisfy any craving for sweets. The boys formed a loose huddle in the lot. Chester made out an occasional "Holmes" or "Homeboy" but had a hard time following their conversation through the thick glass. *Bulletproof?* he wondered.

As if attached by some invisible elastic cord that prohibited movement of more than three feet from a common center, the group made their way into the store. The common center was a taller boy in a California Angels cap with the thin beginnings of his facial hair cropped into a patchy goatee. He led the way into the store with the other's dutifully tailing, never breaching the three-foot allowance.

Peering through the rack in the candy aisle, Chester charted their movement against a backdrop of *Bubble Yum*, *Life Savers*, and *Tic Tacs*. He didn't think of himself as a nosy person, but the thought of Joyce, sitting at their dilapidated Formica kitchen table with the thin shaky legs, chain smoking Kents, hell bent on argument reentry, did little to propel him toward the checkout with any sort of urgency. He opted to survey the candy while keeping a stalling eye on the kids.

The boys circled about the store mumbling to themselves. Chester began to lose interest, giving the candy more a serious browsing. They came nearer. Their mumbling becoming gradually clearer — a swimmer coming to the surface — until Chester could hear them plainly.

"What up? How many?" a darkly complected boy in a Cleveland Indians cap asked.

"If it was up to me, I'd get thirty for myself. Fuck you guys," Angel said. The rest responded with nervous laughter. "The lady wants to dance with me first, second and last, friends."

"Then why's she got all three of us here?" the Cleveland Indian shot back. The Detroit Tiger laughed, but quickly quieted with the glare given him by Angel. He continued, ignoring the challenge as if it were nothing more than a single ant waging war on the entire grand planet Earth: "I'll just get as many as we've got money for."

"She's hot," Tiger stated reaching deep into the pockets of his baggy jeans

and dumping a handful of cash and coins into Angel's open hands.

"She totally want's it. I can tell," said the Indian doing the same.

Chester was half-tempted to quickly bridge the half an aisle distance between them and plop down his share just to be in on it. To be in on something. A camaraderie long since passed him by: his youth, his friends, his marriage, his wife, and soon his kids, whose unfailing worship that once had seemed so endlessly deep — bordering on something spiritually untarnishable — was now crumbling apart into pieces like a bag of cookies dropped on a hard linoleum floor. Impossible to reassemble. They no longer looked at him for *all* the answers. Television, school, magazines, and their friends supplied more current, less antiquated information. But here was a chance to join up once again. To become one-of-the-guys.

He never would.

So he watched, feeling mildly guilty but unable to direct his attention away. He was back in third grade. On the school bus 9 year-old Chester Wilder dropped his brand new box of 64 Crayolas with the built-in sharpener. The crayons rolled and skittered away from him beneath the seats as the bus driver accelerated and braked. Little Chester was seized with a sick panic. His mother's words filling his young head: *responsible little boys take good care of their belongings*. He slipped down under the bus seat trying to gather up the lost crayons. Moving and squirming like a man in a crawlspace, he worked his way forward until he was under the seat directly in front. Reaching for another lost crayon he shifted from his stomach to his back, and found himself looking up the yellow flowered dress of Lisa Nightingale. She held a large Mead folder across her lap blocking her view of Chester.

He forgot all about the box of 64 Crayolas with the built-in sharpener. All he could do was stare at the bright white cotton underpants that covered her so smoothly, so unlike his own that covered a bumpy, bulgy exterior. As long as he remained still he could gaze happily at something otherwise forbidden. Something of beauty because it was so completely foreign. He was part of a secret worship. An uninvited yet welcome member of the club. He stared quietly until he felt the bus round the familiar curve just before his stop. Only out of necessity did he grudgingly pull himself away.

"What kind," the Indian asked. Chester jerked his eyes away, afraid he'd been staring. He picked up a Payday candy bar. *Serving size one*, it read, *390 calories*.

"Cheap kind. Fuck lubrication. When she sees me, that's all she'll need," Angel said. Tiger and the Indian laughed as they all made their way toward the counter.

Chester wondered if the girl they spoke of was in the truck out front. He

wanted a visual picture to compare with his assumptions. The willing woman. He slowly rose to the tips of his toes, trying to sneak a peek over the candy rack to the truck in the parking lot. Darkly tinted windows. Nothing. He dropped back down flat onto the soles of his worn Nikes, wishing he's seen her.

Angel made the purchase. As the others followed him out to the parking lot he tossed them each a box. "Live it up friends," was the last thing Chester heard him say before they left, tripping the sensor. It made the same annoying buzz whether one was coming or going.

Chester walked to the register and set the milk on the counter. The clerk was rubbing sleep from his eyes. Outside, Chester saw Tiger open the door of the truck. A small, petite young girl stepped out, distinguishable mostly for her entire lack of any distinguishing characteristics. Young, short, and plump, with a forgettable face framed by brown shoulder length hair that couldn't be called either curly nor straight. *Wavy* he supposed. Definitely not the flashy sex kitten he had secretly thought. Not a *Cosmo* girl. Regardless, Chester felt his nipple tingle again, although the milk was no longer against it.

Tiger and the Indian hopped back into the truck, followed by the girl. The truck roared to life. The thundering bass beat shook the store's front glass once again as it pulled away.

Chester was gripped by an urge. An urge to see more. Even participate maybe. Irrational as it was, he reached into his jacket pocket and fumbled for his car keys. "Look," he said to the clerk, "I gotta go ... I forgot my wallet. I'll just run home. Be right back."

The clerk frowned.

Outside, the wind was picking up strength. Strong steady gusts whipping the surrounding palm tree fronds into a slow brushing frenzy. The intensity of the parking lot's reflected colors becoming somewhat muted as the water was whisked away. Chester started his car just as the truck's taillights were beginning to fade from sight. He darted from the parking lot, wishing he'd opted for fuel injection back in 87.

He hung a good quarter mile back. It wasn't difficult to keep the truck in sight. He thought about high school. His friend George who could easily identify the make of any automobile simply from the nighttime glowing shape of their taillights. The endless hours spent doing just that. And now, as an occasional car swung between the Honda and the truck, Chester smiled softly to himself, quietly thanking George Winston for the little bit of know-how that had inadvertently been passed along.

Trying to keep them in sight, he didn't read the street signs. Rather, he concentrated on mirroring their motions: Right *right* — Left *left*. He recognized the first couple streets, but soon was in an unfamiliar neighborhood, similar

yet somehow darker than his own. Another tiny enclave of analogous houses, with only minor cosmetic variations. More endless tract homes. Five styles. Scattershot order. A contractor's idea of individuality.

The truck's brake-lights flared bright red. Chester stopped the Honda two blocks back and quickly killed his lights and engine. He slumped in the seat. Eyes peering out just above the dashboard. He was pretty sure he hadn't been seen. The hours logged on *The Rockford Files* finally good for something.

The truck's doors opened and all inside poured out onto the street: Tiger, Angel, the Indian, and the girl. The boys huddled about her in a tight circle obscuring Chester's view, but nonetheless he could see. He saw her white skin and long lustrous black hair. Her breasts riding high. Her stomach and thighs smooth and yet unmarked by time's pocked revenge. The surprised expressions of delight that flickered across her face with each new sensual wonder. Each new experience provoking a different reaction. Never familiar.

His arms and legs tingled as if filled with ginger ale.

The huddle made its way into the house. Lights came on.

Chester left the Honda and closed the door quietly, grateful for the increasing wind that muffled the otherwise dead quiet of the late hour. He moved toward the house adopting a mock confidence. A local homeowner on late night community patrol.

Just above an unkept hedge circling the house, a large bay window allowed visual access to a sparsely furnished living room. Chester darted toward the window and hid among the bushes below, again confident he hadn't been seen. A high-backed couch blocked the bottom six inches of the window, leaving a small area on either side between the window and the wall. Chester slid his head into the gap and surveyed the room.

They all bounded in, arms filled with pillows and blankets. Angel and Tiger moved the furniture to the far walls of the room, clearing an open area in the center. The carpet beneath each piece, although matted, looked fresh and new. The Indian began spreading blankets on the floor, covering it with a patchwork of blues, whites, and reds.

The girl entered the room. She wore a short denim shirt, white stockings, and a low-cut sheer black bustier. Chester decided that she wasn't more than five years older than his own daughter. But those were crucial years. His daughter was really no different from her 8 year-old younger brother. Both sexless sticks — ten and eight — more concerned with afternoon television than anything else. At least not yet.

The girl walked toward Angel and kissed him deeply. Her arms around his neck; his around her waist. After a moment, they pulled apart and Tiger stepped in, then the Indian, and finally back to Angel. A sexual square dance. He turned her around, her back against his chest, and ran his hands over her body. Tiger

and the Indian began doing the same. The girl rolled her head back against Angel's shoulder and smiled.

They began to undress her.

Chester watched from his dark alcove, not feeling the sharp branches prick his hands, drawing tiny drops of blood. He brought his fingers to his mouth and began chewing on the nails. Something he hadn't done since he was a teenager. A teenager with his first girlfriend: Renee Bacon. Sixteen; her white canopied bed. Her parents gone to Myrtle Beach for the weekend. Renee made dinner. Pork chops and candlelight. A bath together, bed, sex for the first time. The moment he entered her he wished it were over. It was far too intimate. He had no business being there, and she, no business asking him to be. Afterward, he felt ashamed. He held her face to his chest, not wanting to make eye contact. Not wanting to ask questions or make promises. It was always the same with her. It was always the same.

They were all in their underwear now. The girl was plump. Soft and round. Pink panties one size too small dug into her thighs and bottom. The boys — thin lanky and frail-looking without their thick coats — all had their hands upon her. Three masseuses; one client. She writhed under their hands, using her body to guide their touch. Angel unclasped her bra and deftly removed her panties as if he'd performed the action a hundred times before.

The Indian was the first to remove his underwear. He made a move toward the girl now lying on her back. Angel grabbed him by the shoulder and roughly pushed him away. The Indian made a quick angry lunge toward Angel, but the action was quelled simply by his icy gaze. Angel then finished undressing.

He was upon her. He worked inside her as the others watched, and occasionally touched, her or themselves. Chester felt as though he were watching a play. Community theater. The actors cognizant of their audience, yet true to their profession the fourth wall stood solid.

Angel finished and was followed by Tiger. Tiger finished and was followed by the Indian. And by that time Angel was ready again. A bottomless well of youthful energy. Assembly-line sex. With each new partner came a new position with no awkward shifting of bodies. A finely tuned machine. The girl smiled. Hitting her marks. Again and again.

Chester watched two complete cycles before moving away from the window. He walked back to the Honda as the sun was rising slowly over the horizon, evaporating the night chill. There was no wind now. He was warm in his light nylon jacket. He rolled up the windows, turned off the heat, and drove away.

The 7-Eleven was still deserted when he pulled into the parking lot. The

outdoor neon lights were off now. The parking lot was dry. Nothing to reflect. Nothing to reflect upon. He chose his milk and headed home.

With the coming of new daylight, the oncoming drivers began turning off their headlights. Chester watched them wink out two by two. He thought about Joyce. The first time they'd had sex. How he hoped it would be different. It wasn't. Pregnancy. Catholicism. Lack of choices.

The kitchen light was on. Joyce was sitting at the table. An ashtray full of cigarette butts at arm's length. She looked up at him. "Did you get the milk?" she asked calmly.

"Yeah," he said, holding up the light blue carton.

She looked at him quizzically. "Low fat?"

"Yeah, low-fat."

He set the milk down and walked toward her. She stood. He looked into her pale blue eyes for several seconds, kissed her lightly, and put his hands around her waist, pulling her close. She hesitated briefly, then slipped her arms around his neck. He held her tightly.