

Glass Soup

by Jonathan Carroll

Chapter One Simon's House of Lipstick

Haden was in trouble again. Big surprise, huh? So what else was new, right? That man wouldn't have known he had a pulse unless the IRA was closing in, his ex-wife was circling his field with a squadron of divorce lawyers, or a rabid dog had just bitten him on the dick.

When he opened his eyes that morning this is what immediately filled his mind: he had no money to pay the bills on his desk. His car was dying of three different kinds of automotive cancer. He had to lead a city tour today and if he didn't do it well this time, he would likely be fired.

Earlier in his life it was okay when Haden lost a job because there was always another around somewhere. But now, like the last pair of socks in the drawer, there were no more left. He had to wear this one with the big hole in the toe or else go barefoot, and barefoot meant even more trouble.

Sighing, he threw off the thin purple blanket he'd bought at a Chinese discount store after his wife left him and took everything, including the blankets. But she was right to leave because he was a dog in every way except loyalty. No, that's not fair. To call Haden a dog was to insult canines. Call him a rat, a weasel; call him a disease with a head. Simon Haden was not a nice man, despite the fact he was a very handsome one.

His face had been the downfall of not only innumerable trusting women, but also one-time friends, used car dealers who gave him a better deal than they should have, and former bosses who were proud for a while to have such a handsome guy working for them.

Why do we always, always fall for good looks? Why are we never immune to them? Is it optimism or stupidity? Maybe it's just hope—you see someone pretty and the sight convinces you that if they can exist, then things are right in the world.

Uh huh.

Haden used to say women don't want to fuck me, they want to fuck my face and he was right. But that was history. Now few women wanted to fuck any part of him. Oh sure, sometimes one down at the end of a bar who'd had too much to drink and begun to see double saw two Hadens and thought he looked like a movie star who's name she couldn't remember at the moment. But that was rare. Now he usually drank alone and went home alone. He was a shallow, self-absorbed middle-aged man with a fading face and an empty bank account, who gave guided tours of a city that was no longer his friend.

Why a tour guide? Because it was mindless work once you got the hang of it. And the tourists he led were so interested in what he said. Haden never got over how grateful these people were. They made him feel like he was giving them his city rather than just pointing out its sites.

Once in a while a good looking woman would be part of a tour group. They were like an extra tip dropped in Haden's hand. What a wonderful guide he was on those days! Witty and informative, he knew everything they wanted to know. And what he didn't know, he made up. That was simple because he had been doing that sort of thing his whole life. His audience never knew the difference. Besides, his lies were so imaginative and interesting. Years later while looking at snapshots of their trip, people would say "See the dog in that portrait? It lived to be twenty-eight years old and was so loved by the Duke that its gravestone is as big as his."

A lie of course, but an interesting one.

Maybe there would be a pretty woman today. Gripping the sink with both hands, Haden stared into the bathroom mirror and said a little prayer: Let there be a beautiful female face today in that crowd of blue hairs, hearing aids and TV sized eyeglasses. In his mind he saw them all-- saw their cream colored crepe-soled shoes the size of small hydrofoils, the permapressed leisure suits a thousand years out of fashion. He heard their loud voices full of whines and never-ending questions—where's the castle, the toilet, the restaurant, the bus? Was one beautiful face asking so much? A daughter along for the ride, a nubile granddaughter, someone's nurse, anything to spare him a day surrounded by The House of Lipstick. He said those words slowly into the mirror, as if he were an actor learning his lines. Today he was guiding a group of people from The House of Lipstick. What was that, a store that sold only lipstick? Or a business that manufactured it? He would know more when he opened the envelope given to him at work, detailing the job.

He smiled, imagining twenty old people with lipstick-smearred lips, all very attentive to what he was saying. Glistening red lips, the color of a clown's nose or a dog's rubber ball. Sighing, he picked up his toothbrush and began to prepare for the day.

Because Simon Haden was a very vain man, his small closet was bursting with the best clothes-- Avon Celli cashmere sweaters, one-two-three-four Richard James suits, one hundred and fifty dollar belts. He certainly had good taste and style, but neither had helped him much over the years. Yes, they had enabled him to fool some of the people some of the time. But sooner or later everyone, even the dumbbells, figured Haden out and then invariably he was out: Out of a job, out of a marriage, out of chances.

What's most interesting about people like him, even more than their pretty faces, is that they almost never understand why the world eventually ends up hating them. Haden had done terrible things to people. But for the life of him, he could not understand why he had ended up where he was now—living alone in a lousy cramped apartment, working a no-exit job, and spending far too much free time at the TV watching whatever was in front of his eyeballs. He knew which wrestlers were feuding with whom in professional wrestling. He had given serious consideration to buying those Japanese steak knives on the Shopping Channel. He carefully taped his favorite daytime soap operas if he had to miss an episode.

How did I end up like this?

If someone had told Simon Haden that he was a colossal prick and why, he would not have understood. He would not have denied it, he would not have understood. Because pretty people think the world should forgive whatever their sins are simply because they exist.

He finished in the bathroom and went to the bedroom. The envelope containing the day's instructions lay on the dresser. In his underpants and sheer black socks, he picked it up and tore it open.

A little man the size of a candy bar stepped out of the envelope into his hand.

"Haden, how you doin'?"

"Broximon! Long time no see. How are you?"

Broximon, dressed in a beautiful blue pinstriped suit, brushed off both arms as if being inside that envelope had dirtied them. "Can't complain, can't complain. How're you?"

Haden carefully put him down on the table and then pulled up a chair.

"Hey Simon, put some clothes on before we chat. I don't wanna be talkin' to a dude in his underpants."

Haden smiled and went off to choose an outfit for the day. While waiting for him, Broximon took out a tiny portable CD player and turned on some Luther Vandross.

With the music cooking in his ears, Broximon walked to the edge of the table and sat down with his legs dangling over the side. Haden sure lived low. The man's apartment showed no signs of life. No texture, no soul, nothing there that made you go whoa, that's cool. Broximon was a firm believer in "to each his own," but when you're in a man's home, you can't help looking around, right? And if you see that apartment ain't got nothing inside it but the heat, well then that's just the truth of the situation. You're not making any sort of value judgment; you're just reporting what you see. Which in this case wasn't much, that's for damned sure.

"So I'm showing around this House of Lipstick today, right?" Haden came in wearing a formal white shirt open at the neck and a sharp pair of black slacks that looked like they had cost serious money.

"That's right." Broximon reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded slip of paper. "A group of twelve. And the part you'll like is that they're almost all women, average age 30."

Haden's face lit up. His prayer had been answered! He couldn't believe his luck. "What's the story with them?"

"Did you ever hear of 'Mallvelous' in Secaucus, New Jersey?"

"No." Haden looked to see if Broximon was joking with that stupid name.

"Biggest shopping mall in the Tri-State area. Then someone started a fire in it and it became the biggest shopping mall fire ever in the Tri-State area."

Haden checked his pockets to make sure he had everything—keys, wallet. Then he asked without much interest, "How many died in the fire?"

"Twenty-one, over half of them in the House of Lipstick. The fire started right next to their shop and so they didn't have much chance of escaping."

“What was it, some kind of cosmetics store?”

“Yup. The guy who owned it—you’ll meet him today—had himself a good little business because that’s all he sold. Just about every brand of lipstick on the earth. You know how everybody’s crazy for specialty shops these days. He had brands from the weirdest places, like Paraguay. You never think of women wearing lipstick in Paraguay, you know?”

Haden stopped walking around the room and stared at Broximon. “Why not?”

The little man was instantly embarrassed. “I don’t know. Because it’s—I don’t know. Because it’s fucking Paraguay.”

“So what?”

For want of anything better to do, Broximon stood and brushed off both sleeves again. In a cranky voice he asked “Are you ready to go or not?”

Haden stared at him a moment longer, his expression saying he thought the little man was an idiot. The message was conveyed loud and clear. Finally he nodded.

“Good! So let’s go, huh?”

Haden picked up Broximon, placed him on his right shoulder and left the apartment.

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He always met the tour bus outside the café where he ate his breakfast. The bus driver was one of those saps taken in by Haden’s good looks and sometimes-charm and was more than happy to detour a few blocks out of his way to pick up the tour guide.

The bus doors hissed open. Simon Haden charged up the steps, lit from within by two cups of strong cappuccino and the optimism that comes with knowing you are going to spend the day with a bunch of young women.

The bus driver, Fleam Sule, waved one of its many tentacles in greeting at Simon. Then with another tentacle it pressed a button to close the door. Haden had always loved octopuses. Or was it octopi? He would have to ask Fleam Sule that some day, but not right now because Women Ahoy!

Winking at the octopus bus driver, Haden put on his best, most winning smile and turned to face the passengers.

Outside on the street, Broximon stood and watched as the bus pulled away from the curb. A maple leaf blown by the wind collided with him, disappearing the tiny man completely from view for a second. He brusquely pushed it away and the leaf fled down the street. Shaking his head, Broximon reached into his pocket and took out a cell phone the size of a pencil eraser. Speed-dialing a number, he waited for it to connect.

“Hi there, it’s Brox. Yes, I was just with him.” Broximon listened while the other voice said something long and involved.

Down at the corner the traffic light turned green. The tour bus took a left and disappeared into the city.

Broximon started going up and down on his toes and looking at the sky as the other person talked on. Eventually he was able to interject, “Look, Haden doesn’t get it yet. It’s as simple as that. He doesn’t have the slightest

clue. Do you understand what I'm saying? He's not even on the map yet." Broximon saw a bright red cookie wrapper skittering down the street toward him. He started moving out of its way long before it arrived. Seeing it pass reminded him that he hadn't had breakfast yet. That made him doubly impatient to get off the telephone and find a place to eat. "Look Bob, I don't know how better to tell you—he doesn't get it. There is not one indication that Simple Simon sees the big picture."

Listening some more to the voice on the other end, Broximon was no longer paying much attention. To amuse himself, he stuck out his tongue and crossed his eyes. After holding that pose for a while, he couldn't take the other's verbal diarrhea anymore. So he said "What? Huh? What? I'm losing you. We're losing our connection here—" Then he pressed the disconnect button and turned off the phone altogether. "Enough. Breakfast time."

It took several seconds for Haden's eyes to adjust to the blue dark inside the bus. He was so eager to see the women that he squinted hard to distinguish who sat facing him. The first thing he saw was a cassowary in a green dress. Do you know what a cassowary is? Neither did Haden, nor did he remember the one time he had seen one at a zoo in Vienna. He had stopped to look at it, thinking once again how weird nature could be.

Seeing that giant bird staring at him now, his eyes narrowed in dismay. Oh no, they weren't going to do this to him again, were they? He remembered one tour he'd lead where—

"Excuse me?"

Trying to locate the face, he worked very hard to overcome his growing distrust. "Yes?" He hoped his voice sounded happy and helpful.

"Is there a lavatory on this bus?"

Lavatory. When was the last time he'd heard that ridiculous word used, fourth grade? Smirking a little, he looked toward the questioner. Seeing her, his smirk died and Haden almost yawped because she was absolutely hair-raisingly beautiful. And blind.

That's right—even in that shadowy space he could plainly see the woman's eyes were so deep set in her head that they could not possibly have been functional.

"Uh yes, there's a, uh, lavatory at the back of the bus on the left side." Absurdly and without thinking he beamed his best, most winning smile at her.

Like a crazy young dog pulling on its leash, all Haden wanted to do then was race down the aisle to her side and ask everything. What was her name, why she was there, where had she come from... He held himself back though and tried to calm his mad-to-get there impulse. He silently chanted to himself slowly, slowly-- do this right.

For the first time since being hired to do this miserable job, Simon Haden was glad to be a tour guide; glad that today's sightseeing would last for hours. It was the top dollar, see-everything, fifteen stops, watch your step getting off the bus tour. Normally he loathed it. Today with this blind angel along for the ride, it would be bliss.

Not that it mattered now, but he looked over the rest of the passengers on the bus. There were a few people, a few animals, two cartoon characters, and an almost six foot tall bag of caramels. Nothing special, nothing new. If they had been his only customers that day, it would have taken a real effort to rise to their occasion. But with the angel sitting on the aisle in row seven, he was going to enchant them all.

He picked up the bus microphone and turned it on. Blowing into it once, he heard his short puff resound throughout the bus speakers, proof that the thing was working. Sometimes it didn't and to add insult to injury, he ended the day hoarse.

"Good morning and welcome on board!"

As one, the humans, animals and cartoon characters smiled at him. But the giant transparent bag of beige candy shuffled impatiently in its seat. Let's go, it appeared to be saying. Let's get this show on the road.

Haden disliked caramels. He ate a lot of candy because he had a sweet tooth, but caramels were too much work and too much trouble. Invariably they stuck in his teeth like gluey pests and had once even pulled out an expensive filling when he ate one at his parent's house. But they were very much a part of his childhood memories because his father loved caramels and was always eating them. His mother stationed little plates of the golden squares all around the house for her man.

"Today we're going to try and give you a pretty good overview of the city. We'll be starting in the center naturally and then working our way out--"

"Excuse me?"

He recognized her voice immediately and with a dazzling smile that could have lit the inside of the bus like a thousand watt light bulb, he turned to the beautiful blind woman, ready to heed her every wish. "Yes?"

"Is there a lavatory on this bus?"

The only way to make beauty ugly is to show it's crazy. Like twisting the top off a jar of something wonderful to eat, the moment we're hit by the terrible smell of it gone bad, even the hungriest person will drop the jar in the trash without a second thought.

Haden took a short quick breath as if he'd been punched in the stomach. She had already asked that question one minute ago. Was she crazy? Was all that beauty wasted because she had scrambled eggs for brains? Or maybe she just hadn't heard his initial response. Was that possible? Maybe she'd been distracted or thinking about something else when he had specifically said-

He stared at her, not really knowing what to say now. And as he stared, something dawned on him. He knew this woman. We rarely forget great beauty but sometimes it does happen. He ignored her question now because something in him kept saying I know her face. But where did he know it from?

The bus suddenly jolted to an abrupt stop, knocking Haden way off balance. He turned to see what had made the driver slam on the brakes like that. Through the front windshield he saw a school class of young kids being shepherded across the street by a middle aged black woman wearing a vibrantly colored dashiki and an Afro haircut that made her head look like a

round, carefully trimmed hedge. When all of the kids had crossed the street and were safely on the other side, the woman raised a hand and wriggled her fingers in thanks to the bus driver for stopping.

At first Haden didn't recognize the woman, her Afro hairdo or dashiki; it was her wriggle. He knew that wriggle. He had lived with it for almost a year at one time in his life. Seconds later he was absolutely sure of her. He knew the wriggle, knew the gesture, and now he knew the woman who made it.

Whipping his head around, he looked at the beautiful blind woman. He knew her too. What the hell was going on here? Why was the world too familiar to him all of a sudden?

Back a few rows in the bus, Donald Duck looked across the aisle at the cassowary and slowly raised an eyebrow. The cassowary saw it and shrugged.

"Mrs. Dugdale!" Her name fell on top of Haden's head like a brick dropped from the roof. "She was my teacher!"

The octopus bus driver looked at him. "Who was?"

Haden pointed excitedly through the windshield in the direction of where the children had just gone. "Her-- the black woman who just passed with all those kids. That was my teacher in third grade!"

The driver looked in the rearview mirror a moment at the passengers. At least half of them had slid forward in their seats expectantly, as if waiting for something important to happen.

The driver feigned indifference. "Yeah? She was your teacher. So what? Too late for me to run over her now."

"Let me out. I've got to talk to her."

"You can't leave now, Simon. We just started a tour."

"Open the door, I gotta get out. Open the door!"

"They'll fire you, man. If you walk out like this on a tour, you're history. Don't do it."

"Fleam, we're not having a discussion here, okay? Just open the damned door." Haden was a big man with impressive muscles. Fleam Sule was only an octopus and wasn't about to argue. However it couldn't resist flinging a last warning at the other's back as he walked down the steps to the street, "You're in trouble now, Simon. As soon as I tell them about this back at the office, they're going to fire your ass."

Haden wasn't listening. He didn't even hear the door hiss shut behind him or the bus pull away from the crosswalk. He certainly did not see all of the passengers flock to one side of the bus to see what he was going to do next. Even the beautiful blind woman was there; her cheek pressed to the cold glass, listening intently as someone described to her what Simon Haden was doing at that very moment.

He hurried after Mrs. Dugdale and the children. It was amazing that he had abandoned the tour and even more, his chances with the gorgeous blind

woman. But the moment he realized who was leading those kids across the street, Haden knew he had to talk to her.

Because her third grade class had been so important to him?

Hell no.

If he'd been forced on pain of death to remember one nice thing about that year in Mrs. Dugdale's class, all that he would have been able to come up with was she kept a goldfish in a large round bowl on her desk that was soothing to look at.

Then was it because Mrs. Dugdale herself was one of those memorable teachers who change our lives forever by example?

Nope.

The woman yelled at students or threw chalk at them whenever she felt their attention was wandering, which in her class was most of the time. Her idea of teaching was assigning individual oral reports on what was grown in Surinam. If you were bad (and most everything was bad to Mrs. Dugdale), she made you stand interminably in a corner against what she called "The Wall of Shame." In other words, she was like too many teachers you had in elementary school. Haden had endured her moods and mediocrity and morsels of knowledge for a year and then he moved up to fourth grade.

But there was one thing about her that he had never forgotten and it was why he was running after her now. In fact this one thing had played a significant role in forming him. It was one of those rare childhood moments that we can look back to and say without hesitation right there—that X marks the spot where something in me was changed forever.

When he was a boy, Haden had one great friend who happened to have the unfortunate name Clifford Snatzke. But Cliff was so utterly typical that he blended into life with only that unusual name to distinguish him from X zillion other boys. For a while, until girls eventually became both visible and scrumptious, the two boys were inseparable. In Mrs. Dugdale's class they sat next to each other which made the time with her slightly more pleasant.

Right before that school year ended and report cards were sent home, Cliff became frantic that he wasn't going to pass because he had failed too many spelling tests. He worried so much and so vocally about it that an exasperated Haden finally urged his friend to go see their teacher after class and just ask. After much hemming and hawing, Snatzke agreed to do it-- if his friend would wait for him outside the school building. Although Haden had ten other things he wanted to do at that time, he agreed. What were friends for?

Not much in life bothered Clifford Snatzke and his face showed it. Usually he wore a slight smile or else a pleasant blankness that said he wasn't thinking about anything special and everything was okay.

But when he emerged from the school half an hour later, his cheeks were the red that accompanies great humiliation or a bad cry. Seeing him like that, Haden eagerly asked what had happened inside. At first Cliff wouldn't even make eye contact with his friend, much less tell the story. But eventually he did.

Mrs. Dugdale was sitting at her desk looking out the window when he entered her classroom. Always one to mind his manners, Cliff waited until he was noticed. When the teacher asked what he wanted, he told her in as few words as possible because all of her students knew that Mrs. Dugdale liked a person to get right to the point.

But instead of looking in her grade book or giving him a lecture on how to improve his spelling, his teacher asked what kind of name Snatzke was. He didn't know what she was talking about but said only that he didn't know. She asked if he thought Snatzke was a very American name. He said he didn't know what she meant. She looked out the window again and didn't say anything for a long time. After a while he gently repeated his question about his grade in spelling.

Who knows why, who knows where such a thing came from in the woman, but Mrs. Dugdale then turned to this little boy and said "Get down on your knees and ask me, Clifford. Get on your knees and ask for your spelling grade."

Kids are dumb. They're trusting and they have faith in what adults tell them because adults are the only authorities they have ever known. But the moment he heard this order, even dumb Clifford Snatzke knew that what Mrs. Dugdale was telling him to do was both wrong and extraordinary. But he did it anyway. He got down on his knees as quickly as he could and just as quickly asked for his grade. His teacher looked at him for a few seconds and then told him to get out of her room.

That was the story. If Haden hadn't known his friend so well, he would have thought Snatzke made the whole thing up. But he hadn't. Before there was a chance to say or do anything, the front door of the school opened and Mrs. Dugdale emerged carrying her familiar brown leather briefcase. She saw the two students, gave them a fake smile and moved off.

Both boys stared at the ground for a long time. They couldn't look at each other until she was gone because of their shared knowledge of what she had just done.

Simon knew he had to act. Mrs. Dugdale had done a very bad thing to his friend. But Cliff would let it slide because he didn't have the guts to face her.

Haden did and for one of the only times in his life, he decided on the spot to do a genuinely selfless thing and right the wrong that had been done to his friend. Throwing Cliff a reassuring look, Simon trotted off in the direction of the faculty parking lot.

When he got there, Mrs. Dugdale was already in her beige Volkswagen and the engine was running. When she saw him coming toward her car she rolled the window down halfway. He would always remember that—the window went down only halfway; as if whatever he had to say was not important enough for her to make the effort to lower it further.

Moving toward the VW, he felt as confident as a God about to fling a flaming lightning bolt at a sinful mortal. He was going to let her have it because boy, did she deserve it.

"Yes Simon? What do you want?"

He looked at her and panicked. Whatever God-like courage he had brought to that moment fled. He could almost see it running crazily away in a zigzag across the parking lot, its ass on fire like Wile E. Coyote in a "Road Runner" cartoon. Haden loved cartoons.

"Why-" He managed to squeeze out of his terrified lungs before starting to hyperventilate. He thought he was going to have a heart attack.

"Yes Simon? Why what?" Her first two words were friendly; the second two were a steel trap snapping shut.

"Why-" He couldn't breathe. His tongue had turned to stone.

"Yes Simon?" He saw her right hand release the emergency brake. Her mouth tightened and her eyes flared when she realized he wasn't going to say anything more and that he had delayed her unnecessarily. Desperate and terrified, he did the only thing his body could manage at that moment—he shrugged. Mrs. Dugdale would have said something nasty if she hadn't seen Clifford Snatzke walking towards them.

She didn't even bother to roll up the window. Putting the little car in gear, she shook her head and gunning the engine, pulled away from Haden.

On and off for the rest of his life he thought about that moment and what he should have said and done. It haunted him, as childhood memories so often do. He even dreamt about it at night sometimes. But always, even in those dreams when his big Cinerama, Dolby sound-surround moment came to be valiant, he chickened out.

Well not this time, by God! He had been having a rough go of it recently. Maybe seeing Mrs. Dugdale on the street now for the first time in thirty years was a test. If he passed it, things would take a turn for the better. Who knows? Life could be sneaky sometimes. The lessons it taught weren't always straightforward. Anyway, he'd like nothing more than to tell that bitch what he thought of her all these years later.

As he hurried after her now, a thought blazed up in his mind like a flame flaring in total darkness: maybe many of his failures in life had been due to her and that stinking incident so long ago. If she hadn't scared him into silence, the courage he'd had on the tip of his soul that afternoon would have emerged. For the rest of his life he would have known it was there in him and real and could be used any time he needed it.

Rather than a botched half-assed, bill-laden, dead end life full of microwave meals and lousy smells, Haden might have been a contender-- if it hadn't been for Mrs. Dugdale. He picked up his pace.

A few moments after he caught sight of her, a car driving down the street lifted lazily off the pavement and took flight. It buzzed around overhead in a few circles before veering off out of sight behind an office building. Two large chimpanzees dressed like 1930's gangsters in double breasted suits and black Borsalino hats came out of a nearby store smoking cigars, speaking Italian and walking on their hands. Haden saw these things but paid no attention. Because Dugdale was near.

As he closed in, he touched the tops of her students' heads as he went. Despite his preoccupation with wanting to reach his old teacher, he

couldn't help noticing how warm the children's heads were under his hand. Like little coffee pots all of them, percolating.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Dugdale?"

Her back to him, the woman turned slowly. When she saw the adult Simon Haden standing two feet away, her eyes did not ask who are you? They said I know who you are-- so what?

"Yes Simon, what do you want?"

Aaaugh! The exact same words she had said to him thirty years ago in the elementary school parking lot. The same unsympathetic expression on her face. Nothing had changed. Not one thing. He was almost middle aged but she was still looking at him as if he were a bad piece of fruit at the market.

Fuck that. His moment had come. Now was the time to act decisively. Now was the time to say something brilliant and important to show her who was boss.

Because he was in such a state of shock after hearing her familiar words, Haden did not realize that all of Mrs. Dugdale's students were frozen in place, staring at him with intense anticipation. Nor did he notice that essentially the whole world around him had come to a standstill because it too was waiting to see what he would do next. Oh sure, cars moved along the street and flies buzzed their mad circles in the air. But all of them—the flies, the drivers in the cars, the molecules in their lungs—everything and everyone had turned to Simon Haden to witness what he would do next.

He made to speak. We must give the man that. Stirring words came to him, perfectly right for the moment. The right words, the ideal tone of voice. He was all ready to go. He started speak but then discovered he no longer had a mouth.

He worked his mouth up and down, or rather the skin on his face where a mouth had previously been. It stretched, it moved, but that was only because it was skin and he was working the muscles beneath it. Muscles that should have controlled a mouth but Haden did not have one of those anymore. He had only skin there—smooth flat skin like the long expanse on a cheek.

He put both hands up to touch it but that only confirmed what he already feared—no mouth. Unwilling to believe what they were feeling, his fingers kept groping around there as if they were feeling for a light switch in the dark.

He glanced at Mrs. Dugdale. Her expression made that terrible moment worse. Scorn. The only thing on her face was scorn. Scorn for Haden, scorn for his cowardice, and scorn for whomever he was now in her eyes. He was re-living his thirty year old moment of truth with her in the school parking lot. And this time he would have prevailed-- if he'd only had a mouth.

But he didn't. Frantically he slapped the space on his face where a mouth should have been. While doing that, he glared at the woman-- this villain in an Afro who was winning again. The only weapon he had to use now was his eyes. But eyes are not meant for this kind of warfare. A dirty look doesn't have the firepower, the mega tonnage a ripping good sentence does.

Somewhere in a far corner of his mind, Haden knew that he had been here before, right smack in the middle of this moment and same situation, mouth less. But his fury and exasperation combined brushed aside this déjà vu. So what if he had been here before—he still had to handle it now. Still had to find a way to defeat Dugdale and show her that he was not the fool her mocking eyes said he was.

Desperation growing, he looked around for something, anything that he could use. His eyes fell on a little girl. Her name was Nelly Weston and she was one of Mrs. Dugdale's students. The girl was tormented too often by the teacher for being too slow, too sloppy, too dreamy for Dugdale's liking.

Haden picked up Nelly and slid his hand under the back of her sweatshirt. It happened so fast that she didn't have a chance to protest. But when he touched her bare back she understood instantly what he was doing and smiled like she had never smiled before in her teacher's presence.

Nelly looked at Mrs. Dugdale and opened her mouth wide like the ventriloquist's dummy she had just become. It was all right though because she also knew what was about to happen. Out of her little girl's mouth came a man's deep voice—calm but a little threatening too-- Simon Haden's voice.

"You mean old witch! You haven't changed at all in thirty years. I'm sure you're still torturing your students when no one is watching. When your door is closed and you think you're safe. Remember Clifford Snatzke, huh? Remember what you did to him? Well, surprise! You're not safe and some of us do know exactly what you've done, Bully. Shithead."

Nelly mouthed his words perfectly. She could feel Haden's hand on her back manipulating her, but he didn't need to because the two of them were wholly in synch with the words. What he wanted to say she wanted to say, and she did.

When he was finished and staring triumphantly at Dugdale's stunned face, Haden barely heard a voice nearby say "Well, it's about time. Bravo for you."

He shifted his eyes over and down and to his real surprise, there was dapper little Broximon, hands on hips, a big smile on his face. Where had he suddenly come from?

A million or a billion synapses and connections and whatever else suddenly happened in Haden's brain. Something big was taking form in there, something was coming clear. He suddenly looked at life around him. At the street, the cars, the people, the sky, the world. And then an instant later, Simon Haden understood.

He gasped through a mouth that reappeared on his face the moment he made his discovery. He lowered Nelly Weston to the ground.

This city, this planet, this life around him was his own invention. He had created all of it. He knew that now. Where had he created it? In the dreams he had every night while he slept.

He looked at Mrs. Dugdale and was almost as surprised to see that she was smiling at him and nodding. So was Broximon. So was every person nearby. A small dog on a leash was staring and smiling at him too. He knew the dog's name—Kevin. He knew because he had created it one night. He had created this entire world.

Simon Haden finally realized that he was surrounded by a city, a life, a world that he had gradually made every night of his life in his dreams. Everything here was either fashioned by him, or taken from his conscious life and carried over into his dream world where he could play with it, fight against it, or try to resolve it in a place of his own.

At forty, Simon Haden had had more than fourteen thousand dreams. A lot of material there with which to build a world.

"I'm dead." He stated this—he did not ask it as a question. He looked at Broximom. The little man kept smiling but now he nodded too.

"That's what death is—everyone makes their own when they're alive. That's why we have dreams. When we die all of our dreams come together and form a place, a land. And that's where we go when we die, isn't it?" This time Haden looked at his old third grade teacher for corroboration and she nodded too.

"Then you live in that dream land you created until you recognize what it really is, Simon." She said it cheerfully in the same tone of voice one would use to proclaim that it was a beautiful day.

Thoughts, images and particularly memories shot back and forth across Haden's mind like tracer bullets in a night firefight. Octopus bus drivers, cars that flew, beautiful blind women—

"That blind woman- I remember her now. I remember the dream of mine she was in. She was always saying the same thing again and again. It drove me crazy. I had the dream right after I got married. I dreamt—"

Broximom waved the rest away. "It doesn't matter, Simon. So long as you realize what this is all about now, you can fit the individual pieces together later."

"But I definitely am dead?" For some reason, Haden looked at little Nelly Weston this time for the answer. She made a child's big up and down nod to make sure that he understood.

He gestured with both hands at the world around them. "And this is death?"

"Your death, yes." Broximom replied. "And you created all of what's around us at one time or another while you were alive. That is, except for Mrs. Dugdale and things like that giant bag of caramels on the bus. Remember how much your father loved caramels?"

Haden was petrified to ask the next question but knew that he must. In a low voice, almost a whisper he asked "How long have I been here?"

Broximom looked at Dugdale who looked at Nelly who looked at Broximom. He sighed, puffed out his cheeks and said, "Let's just say you've had this meeting with Mrs. Dugdale pretty often. But before this, she's always won. You should be very proud of yourself, Simon."

"Answer me, Broximom. How long have I been here?"

"A long time, pal. A very, very long time."

Haden shuddered. "And I'm just realizing now what it's all about?"

"Who cares how long it's taken, Simon? You know now."

The woman and the girl nodded vigorously in agreement. Haden noticed that the rest of those around them were nodding too in much the

same way. Even Kevin the dog was nodding—everyone clearly agreeing on this issue.

“Well what am I supposed to do with it? What am I supposed to do now?”

Mrs. Dugdale crossed her arms over her chest and wore a very familiar expression on her face. Haden remembered it well. “Today you finally passed first grade, Simon. Now you move on to second.”

An icy chill tiptoed up Simon Haden’s spine. “Death is like school?”

Again, every one and every thing there grew the same smile and looked very pleased at his progress.