

Goliath

a novel by
Ray Holland

GOLIATH

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A different version of *Goliath* was "e-published" in 1995 by Spectrum Press. This version is much, much better. Trust me.

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The reason for releasing these chapters is that I hope you'll read them and feel an urgent, compelling need to find out how it ends—so much that you'll be willing to buy a printed copy of the complete book. For info on how to purchase, visit www.greatbigdog.com.

Contact the Author

You can contact the author at rayhollandbooks@gmail.com with comments, suggestions, questions, or whatever. I can't promise to reply to all email, but I'll read everything.

—RH

1

The Story Starts Here

Meanwhile, in another part of town, Roger Glass Door Knob was sitting down to get his hair cut in one of those fancy styling salons. He had come to this place a few times before, always making his appointment with the same stylist, Emma Lou Josephine Vernacular Bloobus Rebecca French Fry Snuffy McTelephone Etta Hortense Wingding Tifferson Hortense P. Barnacle. Yes, Hortense is in there twice. Her parents liked it too much to use it just once. And since they thought she had a long name, her friends called her Emma Lou Josephine Vernacular Hortense Hortense P. Barnacle. It didn't flow off the tongue easily, though. She felt the whole thing would have been much more poetic-sounding if they were to leave Wingding in. Roger would have called her that—the Wingding version, that is—if he were ever to get an opportunity. He wanted to get friendly with her. She was very pleasant and agreeable to be around, and pretty besides.

But he didn't call her anything at all because he was extremely shy and scared senseless at the mere notion of talking to her. It was traumatic to ask her to cut his hair. Ask her out to the movies on Friday night? Holy smoke! She might as well be Satan's own evil, fire-breathing pet raccoon!

He had a girlfriend, a schoolteacher, but things weren't going very well with her. She wouldn't marry him because he didn't have a good enough job. He sold charcoal for Schurk Enterprises, out on the streetcorner in the rich people's neighborhood. He had himself a place on the sidewalk where he sat on a big, tall stool, like the kind they have in bars, except taller and not in a bar. It was customary for charcoal vendors to sit on tall stools so prospective customers could see them better. And he sold his wares out of a big ol' canvas bag to people who stopped at the red light.

She, the girlfriend, that is, said that selling charcoal wasn't a job for a real man. She said it was a dead-end job for a boring, underachieving loser kind of guy who had no talent, imagination or ambition, no offense intended.

And of course he took no offense, but still, he liked the job. He liked being outdoors and passing the time of day with the rich people. He made enough money to pay the bills and even had enough left over to indulge in a little (don't tell anyone) diuretic paint thinner every other weekend.

He wasn't living the high life like some wealthy guy who was rich, or even like some rich guy who was wealthy, but life was good. Well, that is, it was good enough. Sort of. At least he had a better job than his cousin Sylvester, who worked as a television antenna at a nursing home. It seemed to Roger that it would be terribly boring to stand perfectly still all day, but Sylvester liked to point out that it took a special person to do a job like that. He took pride in his work. And that's what Roger admired about him.

Anyway, Roger had been thinking that maybe he should break up with his girlfriend and move on. He was sure there were plenty of women out in the world who could appreciate

him for the man that he was. There were plenty of women who could appreciate him even if he couldn't afford a car or bus fare or clothes or food every day or toilet paper. Sure, all that stuff would be kinda nice, Roger had to admit, but really, to *expect* it was nothing more—or less—than decadent.

Emma Lou Josephine Vernacular Hortense Hortense P. Barnacle seemed like a woman who could appreciate him. And yes, he could appreciate her, too, for the woman that she was, whoever that might be (and if he could bring himself to talk to her, he might find out). They could get married and live in a big house, like with seven bathrooms and a tennis court in the closet. How could they afford such a house on a charcoal vendor's pay? She would inspire him to achieve greater and greater heights of charcoal sales, that's how. If you sell enough of *anything*, no matter what, you'll make a lot of money.

When he looked at it that way, it seemed so elegant, so simple and elegant.

But sadly, in reality, "I'd like a haircut" was all he could say around her, and he could barely say that. It came out in a croaky voice that sounded like a television set with bad reception showing a horror movie that had reached the big exorcism scene, while three guys with jackhammers were pound-ing away at the floor behind you (some would say four, but in my opinion that's overdoing it). You might not even be sure poor ol' Roger was speaking English if you were an impartial observer. But Emma Lou Josephine Vernacular Hortense Hortense P. Barnacle knew what he was saying. Hey, he was sitting in a barber chair in front of her. What else *could* he be saying?

And not having the slightest clue how sick in love Roger

was, what else would Emma Lou Josephine Vernacular Hortense Hortense P. Barnacle say except "Of course"? So she said it and began cutting Roger's hair. She clipped and snipped and trimmed and . . . well, she cut Roger's hair. They didn't talk because Roger couldn't, and Emma Lou Josephine Vernacular Hortense Hortense P. Barnacle just thought he was the quiet type who liked to relax quietly and enjoy haircuts.

After a few minutes, Roger suddenly remembered he had left his wallet at home. Oh, pooh stains! He sat in the chair, getting his hair cut, listening to Emma Lou Josephine Vernacular Hortense Hortense P. Barnacle whistle the theme song from *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis*, and he had in his mind this vivid—terribly vivid—picture of the wallet lying on top of his stack of Burl Ives Fan Club newsletters, right there by the phone. At the very moment Roger was leaving home, the commander of the Swedish army had called to invite him to a party. The call distracted Roger, and he forgot his wallet.

(It's worth mentioning here that Emma Lou Josephine Vernacular Hortense Hortense P. Barnacle was the president of the local chapter of the Burl Ives fan club. If only Roger could have mentioned Burl Ives, Emma Lou Josephine Vernacular Hortense Hortense P. Barnacle would immediately have become interested in him. But it was not to be. Now, how could they both belong to the club without her finding out about his love of Burl? He never went to the meetings. As far as the club was concerned, he was nothing more than some guy who sent them a check every year to pay his dues—and the chairperson of the membership committee was the only one who knew *that* much.)

Now, in the barber chair, Roger fought back a wave of panic. He wouldn't be able to pay for the haircut! And worse,

he'd have to suffer the embarrassment, the humiliation, the mortification, the shame of having to tell Emma Lou Josephine Vernacular Hortense Hortense P. Barnacle he didn't have any money. Not just a barber, not just a hair stylist, but the woman he loved. Or, that is to say, the woman he *would* love if he knew what to do about it.

What would she think?

What COULD she think?

Would he even be able to tell her why he wasn't handing her any money?

What torment! But there was one way out: He could die. He could haul off and die right there in the barber chair, and then no one would be concerned about the money.

It wasn't a decision a guy could rush into, but she would be finished pretty soon. He had to think quickly. What else could he do?

Uh, well, he could pull that potato milk shake out of his pocket and pour it over her head.

No, wait. That would make things worse.

Okay, so dying was the only thing he could do. Too bad it had to come to this. And he almost had enough money to get the air compressor out of layaway at the pawn shop. It would have been really nice to have that machine to clean his teeth in the morning before work—not that he understand how to use it for that, but the pawn shop guy had assured him that the daggone thing was the *future* of dental hygiene—but on the other hand, he wouldn't be going to work anymore. And he wouldn't be doing anything to get his teeth dirty anymore. Ready, everybody over there Wherever It Is That People Go When They Die? Okay, here goes.

Roger died.

Emma Lou Josephine Vernacular Hortense Hortense P. Barnacle thought Roger had fallen asleep. She kept on hair-cutting as if nothing was wrong. As far as she knew, nothing was, indeed, wrong. She finished the haircut and nudged Roger.

"Wake up. I'm finished."

Roger didn't wake up.

Emma Lou Josephine Vernacular Hortense Hortense P. Barnacle nudged him harder. This time Roger fell over and banged his head on a small antique wooden table. The banging didn't hurt Roger because he was dead, but it broke the table.

"Jeepers," Emma Lou Josephine Vernacular Hortense Hortense P. Barnacle said. She wondered, oh-so-briefly, if she should make him pay for the table. But it had clearly been an accident and, for that matter, partially her fault for nudging him (although she really didn't think she had nudged him that hard).

At that moment, Roger's roommate Cato Kierkegaard walked into the barber shop with a wallet-sized object in his hand. He was waving this mysterious object around as if to show it to whoever happened to be there. And this object was wallet-sized because it was, in fact, a wallet. It was Roger's wallet.

"Roger," Cato said, "I saw this on top of your Burl Ives Fan Club newsletters, and I knew you were going to be here, so I brought it to you." He held the wallet out at arm's length.

After a minute, Cato realized that Roger probably wasn't going to take the wallet. "Roger," Cato said, with lots of concern packed into his voice, so much that it was like sardines packed into their little can, "why are you on the floor?"

Then he saw Emma Lou Josephine Vernacular Hortense Hortense P. Barnacle. "Hi," he said. "My name's Cato."

"All right," Miss Cranberry said, "who can work this problem?" She wrote $123 + 89$ on the chalkboard and turned to look at the bright faces of her class, some of the brightest faces she'd ever taught. She had even received a special commendation from the school board for energy conservation because she didn't have to turn on the lights in her classroom.

The usual handraising kids raised their hands. It's always the same ones; every teacher learns that early on, and it's never the ones who need the practice, although it's understandable that you're not likely to volunteer to do something in front of the whole class if you think you're going to be a miserable failure and crash in a humiliating ball of flames.

But it was precisely the ones who needed the practice that Miss Cranberry would rather have at the chalkboard. And one in particular—yes, there he was, that little rascal, trying to hide behind Big Willie Fubar, which was no mean feat for somebody who sat four seats over from Big Willie and in the front row.

"Goliath," Miss Cranberry cooed, "would you like to try?"

Goliath looked as if his pants had fallen down. They couldn't have, though, because he was sitting down. "Uh, no, ma'am, I wouldn't."

She held the chalk out toward him. "Come on, Goliath. Give it a try."

"Can't I stay here and talk you through it?"

"I'm afraid that wouldn't work. Come up here."

Over by the window, Eunice Mae watched Goliath drag his feet up to the front. She leaned across to her friend Alma.

"That Goliath, he sure is cute." She said that because she thought Goliath was cute. She had images in her head of the two of them getting married and living in a big house, like with seven bathrooms and a tennis court in the closet. That would be the way to live, oh, yeah.

Alma nodded. She liked her men big and rugged and muscular, which Goliath wasn't, but she agreed because Eunice Mae was her friend. Alma was careful not to agree too vigorously, though. She didn't want Eunice Mae to think she was going to try to ace her out.

Up front, Miss Cranberry gave the chalk to Goliath. He looked forlorn, much worse than he had looked when his pet snail broke its leg. She couldn't understand it, his problem with arithmetic. He seemed to be able to do everything else so well.

He was popular in school, little Goliath was. He could play ball well—one day at recess, she had seen him run to first base!—and he laughed at the other kids' jokes and told a few of his own, and he watched all the right TV shows and talked about how cool they were in school the next day.

In the classroom, Goliath did well in History and English, and, for that matter, all his other subjects, but, obviously, not in arithmetic. He knew the names of all the presidents and could say them in chronological and alphabetical order, and in order of how tall they were and even in order of hair color, from lightest to darkest. He knew all about adverbs and Louis Pasteur, and barometric pressure and water clocks. He knew about the United States Government's system of checks and balances, and all about Eisenstein's *Film Form*, and how radio, television, and the internal combustion engine work, and how the battle of San Juan Hill developed, and how diamonds

are formed, and all the things Alexander the Great did. He knew both the additive and the subtractive color processes and the gestation periods of most mammals, and all about Brownian motion and red shift. He knew how they got steel and silver and red paint and paper and babies. He knew all that stuff and more, much more. Not bad for a third grader. But the kid could not add two and two together, even if you gave him a hammer and nails and a staple gun and two tubes of Stur-D-Glu, which is strong enough to glue a passenger jet to the ground, assuming you have some reason to do such a thing. He didn't have it in him—arithmetic, that is. (He had other stuff in him, though.)

And Miss Cranberry, his teacher, thought Goliath was cute, too. She didn't think he was cute in the way that Eunice Mae did because she was a grownup, Miss Cranberry was, and he was a little kid, but she thought he was generally little-kid-type cute. He would have been her pet, but Miss Cranberry didn't believe in teachers' pets because as a kid she had been one. She knew first-hand how rough a time the other kids give teachers' pets. One day, when Miss Cranberry was in the third grade, some bullies made her eat a whole bag of rusty washers. Yuck! She didn't want to inflict that on anyone.

But she was glad to see Goliath do well, which he almost always did, except in arithmetic.

And Goliath, now at the chalkboard with some arithmetic in front of him, began thinking of something else entirely, like nothing at all, because the pressure up in front of the class and the teacher and anybody who happened to be looking in through the window was much worse than it was when he did his homework with no one watching, and—well, let's face it—

he wasn't real swift with the homework. Not in arithmetic. So he stood there for a few minutes thinking about nothing, then about charcoal, and then he thought about fermentation a little bit, and then he wrote the number 17 on the chalkboard. He turned to Miss Cranberry.

"How did you get seventeen?" Miss Cranberry asked. She knew how he got it, which was at random, and she was dismayed.

And Goliath was distraught.

"Goliath, what's three plus nine?"

Goliath broke out in a cold sweat. He trembled. He looked around, hoping someone would give him the answer. He picked a number at random. "Twelve?"

"Very good, Goliath!" Miss Cranberry was happy, almost as happy as she had been when she won the Miss Wholesome contest at the state fair five years earlier. "Now write two up there."

Twelve? Two? What? If the answer was twelve, why write two? What's the deal here? If Miss Cranberry wasn't so nice, Goliath would think she was misleading him on purpose, just for fun. Some day, when he got rich and famous, he would make them change arithmetic so he could understand it more easily. He'd show that ol' arithmetic. But in the meantime, he'd have to put up with it. He wrote 2. Goliath knew it was unwise to antagonize the teacher. The teacher and the dentist. Always make sure both of them like you, and life is much better.

"Now write one up there above your two in one hundred twenty-three," Miss Cranberry said, "because you're carrying ten."

This is getting ridiculous, Goliath thought. Why write one

if you're carrying ten? And did he need a basket to carry the ten in? It was too much to think about, so he dropped the chalk. It hit the floor with a little "clack" sound, and a tiny cloud of chalk dust poofed up. He blinked at Miss Cranberry. "Goliath, what am I ever going to do with you?" she sighed. Miss Cranberry frequently had these little fits of despair. It was beyond her comprehension how anyone could be so smart at so many other things but so inept at arithmetic.

That's what she was thinking, but what she said was this: "I hope you don't go into any line of work where you'll need to know arithmetic."

Well, that was a really good one; Goliath, little Goliath, already had a job. He worked for Mr. Antwerp, who competed with Roger Glass Door Knob's employer, Mr. Schurk. Mr. Antwerp left a hundred-pound bag of charcoal on Goliath's corner every day a few minutes before school let out, and Goliath came along and sat on his tall stool and sold it. (That is to say, he sold the charcoal, not the stool.) He was the only vendor in the downtown area, and he made big piles of money. He knew all the arithmetic he needed to know, too. He sold the charcoal at a handful-and-a-half handfuls of money a pound, and Mr. Antwerp gave him half. Mr. Antwerp had shown Goliath how that worked out to five handfuls of money for selling the whole hundred pounds. So he was doing okay. But he had to, because he was supporting his whole family.

It was an unfortunate tragedy, or a tragic unfortune, but the rest of Goliath's family had been stricken with a rare disease, a disease so rare it didn't have a name. (Really, it's just that I don't want to bother with trying to think of a name for it. Thinking is hard!) This disease, this bad, bad mystery disease, seeped into their brains the way a flock of squirrels will

seep into your bedroom and take over your bed and build a nice little playground and picnic area for themselves on it. (That really is a common occurrence, isn't it? It would be disturbing to think I'm the only one it ever happens to.) And once there—the disease, that is, in their brains—it embarked on a complex biochemical adventure that polarized the lining of the submolecular structures of their hemotonic membranes. If you don't know what that does to the unlucky victims, let me tell you. It disrupts their thought patterns and memories in unpredictable ways. Symptoms vary from person to person depending on age, weight, diet (especially the amount of citrus consumed), length of fingernails, and number of Robert Frost poems the patient has read. But that's enough of that. We don't want our story to turn into a medical textbook. Look it up on the Internet if you're interested.

Anyway, poor Goliath's father's symptom was that he came down with a case of spontaneous amnesia, like in the movies. He wandered away from home, although not having the slightest clue where home was, he didn't know he was wandering away from it.

He ended up living in a closet in a radiator factory in Denver. It was a nice place to live because the factory had a snack machine and a men's room, and it was close to a discount store where he could go watch TV during the day. Down the street and around the corner and up three blocks and around another corner, there was a tavern where the men gathered at night and talked about sports and the influence of *The Art of War* on biochemical research. It was quite a life, it really was.

Now, Denver was far, far away from whatever city our story takes place in. In fact, it was in a different time zone. So

one day when he, Goliath's father, stepped off the sidewalk to cross the street, he didn't realize it was dangerous to walk out in front of the oncoming Rocky Mountain Stagnant Air Company truck. He thought he was still living on Midwest Time, and therefore the truck wasn't really going to be driving by for another hour! Tragically, he was kinda sorta right, but he hadn't accounted for the switch to Daylight Savings Time, which threw all his carefully calculated calculations out of whack. So he got clobbered anyway and ended up going *Wherever It Is That People Go When They Die*. In fact, he and Roger Glass Door Knob became good friends after Roger got there.

Goliath's mother, whose name was Cleopatra, used to make a very good living as a wasteful packaging designer. But when the disease struck, it made her completely lose interest in her career. She was upset about it. "I don't like it," she once said. But what could she do? You can't fake an interest in wasteful packaging, no matter how hard you try. She also believed now that she had been twenty-three years old at birth. "My parents did that on purpose," she told people. "They didn't want to deal with the hassle of raising a child, so they skipped over that part." Sometimes Cleopatra liked to go to services at different churches and then write fan letters to the priests and ministers. Sometimes her letters were extremely clever.

And there was Othello, Goliath's sister. His older sister, that is, and she liked to cook and write poems. Her poems were okay; some were good, but you can't make any money with poetry these days, even though her poems rhymed and everything, unless you write greeting cards (a line of work she didn't know about). The best talent she had, that she could

make money with, was that she could mix paint and match colors. If she could have gotten such a job, she would have been a valuable employee at a paint store or a printing shop. Her boss would say something like, "Othello, mix me up a gallon of Gang-Green Number Five," and Othello would have it mixed up in less time than it would take to throw up after eating a moldy peach. But she couldn't because she was blind. Of course, no one had any way of knowing that, that she could mix colors, but it was true. In addition to all that, she went to the school for blind people, where they taught her how to do stuff that's hard to do if you can't see. The teachers were nice people, and she was a good student.

So Othello had fun writing poems and trying to cook, although nobody liked it when she cooked. That was no fun at all. Cleopatra, their mother, always made Goliath eat some of whatever Othello "cooked" because, after all, the girl was blind and they had to be extra nice to her. Goliath didn't see the connection. Figuring it out was like trying to add numbers. And as we've seen, *that* was as big a disaster as Othello's cooking. Sometimes Goliath thought that if he didn't have to eat so much bad cooking he would do better with his arithmetic. He had heard somewhere that proper nutrition was important if you wanted to be able to think well. Maybe the way Othello abused the food destroyed all the nutritional value for the part of the brain that worked arithmetic. After all, he never noticed Othello or his mom do much arithmetic. He said so one night and got smacked, but such is the life of a nine-year-old boy.

And such were the people he had to work to support.

(You may be asking yourself, why didn't Goliath get this disease, this horrible mystery disease that would have dis-

rupted his thought processes? Simple. He was wearing a hat that day.)

Back in the classroom, Miss Cranberry was saying, "Sit down, Goliath." Goliath, trying to look invisible (and if he'd been thinking clearly, he'd have realized that you can't look invisible because if you're invisible, you don't look like anything), went back to his seat.

Miss Cranberry turned to the rest of the class. "Who can work the problem?"

Eunice Mae waved her hand enthusiastically. "I can, Miss Cranberry, I can!" This was her chance to show Goliath how they complemented each other perfectly as a couple. She could work all the arithmetic, and he could do other stuff.

"All right, Eunice Mae. Show us how to do it."

But Goliath wasn't paying attention. He was sulking because he'd been embarrassed in front of the class.

2

The Neuralgia Sisters

Let's visit with the Neuralgia Sisters, the notorious Neuralgia sisters, Norma and Nancy, for a while. They were twins, and Goliath was soon to start having problems with them—much bigger problems than the problems he had with arithmetic.

Norma and Nancy did lots of stuff before they started causing trouble for little Goliath and his friends. Nancy was writing a biography of Woody Woodpecker. She had the upstairs of their house crammed with binders full of notes and 3x5 index cards, and books and DVDs of cartoons, and reels and reels of films and projectors, and TV sets, and a photocopy machine and dozens of pencils and six typewriters and a computer, and file cabinets, and a Magic Eight-Ball, and other general sorts of research and writing materials.

Norma was trying to develop a method of boiling water without using heat. She had the downstairs filled up with pans of water and wires and transistors and pipes and tubes and nine-volt batteries and egg timers and stacks of pornographic magazines, and all kinds of crazy things. She even had an autographed picture of Captain Ahab! She also had a big book full of blank pages where she wrote down all the

stuff she did in her experiments. "That's the way the big-time hot-shot scientists do it," she said. "That way, they can look at it later and figure out what they did wrong." Norma must have planned to do a lot of wrong stuff, because she sure did have a thick book.

It was a mess, and they couldn't let people in the house because it took a considerable amount of skill and grace, not to mention excellent balance and coordination, as well as incredible powers of concentration, to walk around without stepping on something and messing it all up, or tripping over something else and falling down and breaking your wrist and then suing them for a whole bunch of money. None of that would have been good, Nancy and Norma agreed.

The Neuralgia sisters didn't used to have their own house. When they were children—little girls, that is—their family was poor. They were so poor that Nancy and Norma thought the reason they were twins was that their parents couldn't afford a different face for each of them. Nonetheless, a lot of folks had quite strong opinions as to which sister was prettier, and they had lots of fights about it. Who knows what they were thinking, because most people couldn't tell a bit of difference to look at them, and the smart ones wouldn't have said anything about thinking one was prettier (even if they thought so) for fear of making the other mad, so what that means is that the people who got into fights about it were dumb, and if they were *that* daggone dumb their opinions were pretty worthless.

And back then, when the Neuralgia sisters were children, they lived in a hollowed-out dictionary, the whole family did, in front of other people's houses. Usually they showed up at the front door and said, "Here we are," and put the dictionary

under a tree so it wouldn't get rained on too much. Then they ran an extension cord through a window and plugged it in, somewhere in the house, so they could have electricity. That part was pretty well pointless because they didn't have any electrical appliances, but it made their father, Mr. Neuralgia, feel as though things weren't quite so bad—after all, they had electricity! Anyway, whenever they wanted to cook food or take a bath, they went into the house and did it. It worked well for a week or so, and then the people who honest-to-gosh lived in the house would get fed up and kick them out or call the police or organize the neighbors into a vigilante mob to run them out. Then the Neuralgia family had to move on and find another houseful of saps to take advantage of.

Sometimes the other family was so wimpy that the Neuralgias ended up using their car and watching their TV. Mr. Neuralgia especially loved *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis*. "That Max Shulman sure is a television genius," he used to say. He insisted on watching it no matter what the other family wanted to watch, although often the other family turned out to be enthusiastic Dobie fans as well.

One time the Neuralgias moved in on a family and made really good friends with the people. They set themselves up in the basement and had the run of the house and the kitchen and all the food in the refrigerator. The other family let them make long distance phone calls for free. The two families had cookouts in the back yard together, went to the mall together, and started a traveling circus complete with robot trapeze artists and juggling chipmunks. But it turned out that the other family wasn't the real owners of the house. The real owners were on vacation, touring Valhalla, and they were *reeeeally* mad when they came back home and found all those

strange people and robots and chipmunks living in their house, people and robots and chipmunks they didn't know and had never seen before, so they called the police. (It was the robots that were the last straw. They leaked oil all over the carpet.) The Neuralgias and the other family almost got thrown into jail, and indeed would have if they hadn't been able to pack up and move out before the cops could get there. It doesn't take long to move when all you have to do is pick up a hollowed-out dictionary.

So Nancy and Norma Neuralgia grew up learning to take whatever they wanted and not think about how anyone else felt about it. For example, they knew a couple of big guys who were really mean, and they got these guys to intimidate everyone at school to vote for Nancy's boyfriend as The Guy Who Most Looks Like a Member of Duran Duran. He was elected unanimously. Even the other candidates voted for him. But to be fair, he did look a lot like a member of Duran Duran. Heck, he had taken a couple of piano lessons when he was younger.

The girls got into blackmail, too, a little bit. But they did it the lazy way. They sent all the teachers at their school notes that said, "We know what you do on weekends. Leave a bag containing a handful of money under the Elmo Lincoln Memorial Bridge every Saturday night if you don't want us to tell anyone." Out of twenty-five teachers, twenty-one paid the money faithfully. They must have been doing *something*.

And they, the Neuralgia sisters, always took a jarful of moths to the movies with them, and if they didn't like the movie, if it was a real stinker, they opened the jar. The moths would fly into the light from the projector and mess up the picture. The showing would be ruined, and they could not only get their money back but also have a little fun and give them-

selves something to chuckle about on the way home. Did I say chuckle? No, they giggled like little girls. The only thing was, their friends never wanted to go to the movies with them because they were afraid Nancy and Norma would moth it.

One day—in fact, the day after Roger Glass Door Knob's unfortunate haircut episode—they saw a notice stapled to a telephone pole. It said, "Charcoal Vendor needed for the rich people's neighborhood. Call Mr. Schurk." And it gave the phone number. Yes, Schurk Enterprises needed to replace Roger, poor unfortunate Roger, ASAP. The rich people's neighborhood was too lucrative a territory to leave untended one instant longer than necessary. Those rich people were *desperate* to find stuff to spend their money on. Even if they didn't need charcoal, they would pay top dollar if a vendor happened to be nearby when they came to a red light.

"What's a vendor?" Nancy asked.

"I think it's a mechanism on a lifeboat that keeps the oars in the water," Norma said. The sisters were really pretty smart in the sense that they had high-quality, state-of-the-art, MVP, Grade A, USDA Prime brains, but they hadn't learned much school stuff like vocabulary because they were busy being mean all the time.

"That doesn't make any sense," Nancy said.

"Let's call the number and find out," Norma said. "It sounds like a good business opportunity."

Right then a little boy, not Goliath but a different one, came walking down the street. Norma and Nancy stopped him and took a quarter of a handful of money coin away from him so they could make the call at a nearby pay phone.

Mr. Schurk's secretary, Miss Spikenhammer, answered. "Good afternoon, Schurk Enterprises."

"My name is Nancy Neuralgia," Nancy said; she was the one making the call. "Me and my sister Norma, we saw your notice on the telephone pole here, and we were wondering what a vendor is."

"It's somebody who sells something," Miss Spikenhammer said. "Are you interested in selling charcoal?"

"I don't know," Nancy said. "It sounds awful dirty. And not the fun kind of dirty, but just dirty."

"You can make a whole lot of money, especially in the rich people's neighborhood. And it's not dirty. And who's that I hear crying?"

"Oh, uh, some little boy who . . . uh, lost his mommy," Nancy said. Norma shooed him away. "So you say we can make a lot of money, eh?"

"Yeah. Big piles of it. As much as you can carry. Do you want to come in for an interview? We can work you in this afternoon."

"Do you want to go in for an interview?" Nancy asked Norma. "She says we can make big piles of money, as much as we can carry."

"Sure. I think we can carry a lot of money. And if it turns out to be a waste of time, we can always throw someone out the window."

"Okay, we'd like an interview. What's your address?"

"We're at the Intolerance Building, thirteenth floor."

"One more thing. Does your office have a window?"

Mr. Schurk's office had a window, but nobody could throw him out of it because it was that kind that doesn't open. Anyway, Norma and Nancy went down there to the interview. They knew all about the Intolerance Building because they used to work there, on the fifth floor, for the management of a

professional Russian roulette team. They were secretaries. Unfortunately, the team went out of business because the coach insisted on calling practices every day.

Outside the building, Nancy stopped and said, "Let's go in there and be real aggressive so we'll impress him. That way he'll know we really want the job."

"Yeah, that's a good idea," Norma said. "Employers like to see enthusiasm."

"They do. We'll show him so much enthusiasm that if enthusiasm were water, we would have enough to, like, put out the sun."

So they got in the elevator and tried to get their eyes to sparkle as they rode up. Unfortunately for them, your eyes don't sparkle very much when you're as mean as the Neuralgia Sisters. But they weren't worried. They could ace the interview without sparkling eyes.

At the thirteenth floor, they barged into Mr. Schurk's office, right past Miss Spikenhammer. "We're the Neuralgia Sisters, Norma and Nancy," Norma said. Nancy was checking out the window, trying to figure out if it would open.

"Which is which?" Mr. Schurk asked.

"Listen, afterbirth-breath, we want that job and we want it now, or we'll rip your pancreas out and tie it into a pretzel."

"Is that possible?"

Nancy leaned in close, nose-to-nose with him. "We'll figure it out," she said in a low voice, so low he could barely hear it. The lowness (lowosity?) made the threat all the more threatening. "We're in no hurry."

"I think you'll fit right into my organization."

"We'll be the judge of that," Nancy said.

"I have a special project you might be interested in," Mr.

Schurk said. "It'll require a lot of ingenuity, villainy, cunning, and ingenuity."

"You said ingenuity twice."

"I know. I wanted to say four things, but I could only think of three. Anyway, that's for later. The special project, that is. It's the thing that's for later. Right now, I want you to sell some charcoal because, well, that's the job I'm interviewing you for. I have an opening in the rich people's neighborhood. Very good sales potential, very good tips."

"Do people tip charcoal vendors?" Norma asked.

"Yes," Mr. Schurk said. "These people are so rich, they'll give you a hundred-handfuls-of-money bill and not wait around to get their change."

"Sweet."

"So I want you to do that for a while. If you show me you have all four of the qualities I mentioned . . ."

"Three," Nancy said.

"What?"

"You only mentioned three qualities."

"But I wanted to mention four."

"But you didn't."

"Okay, so if you show me you have all the qualities I mentioned, however many there were, I'll promote you and let you take care of this special project. I already see you have the right attitude for the job. So now I need to see the aptitude."

"We led the charge up San Juan Hill," Nancy said. It hadn't required villainy, but she figured it would show bravery and a zest for adventure. Yeah, zest.

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah," Norma said. "Teddy Roosevelt paid us to let him take the credit."

"How do I know you're telling the truth?"

Nancy sighed. "You're trying my patience," she said. "If we're lying, don't you think that having the unmitigated audacity to tell you a story like that proves we have cunning and ingenuity?"

Mr. Schurk didn't think so, but he was kinda scared of these women. And that proved they had enough villainy, no doubt about it. "You sound good to me," he said. "You're hired."

Working for Mr. Schurk, the Neuralgia Sisters made lots of money. They quickly made enough money to buy themselves a house in the rich people's neighborhood. What about their parents? Pooh on them. Remember, Norma and Nancy were mean. They didn't care if their parents had to keep living in a hollowed-out dictionary.

Here's the kind of stuff they did, a typical day at work for the Neuralgia sisters after they had entered the exciting and challenging field of charcoal vending:

They reported for work at their corner, bright and early at nine o'clock in the morning. The charcoal was waiting for them, in a big, hundred pound bag, the same way it was for Goliath. They opened the bag and stood around on the corner looking seductive. It was one of their techniques, one that worked well with married guys whose wives wouldn't have anything to do with their tallywackers, and with young single guys like Cato, guys who liked women and all the things women can do.

On one particular morning, a morning that was special only because each day is special in its own way, Norma and Nancy started out with the seductive bit. A guy in a gray,

twenty-four-cylinder National Motors Leviathan stopped and rolled down his window. He was wearing a gray, four-piece Rubella Brothers suit. This guy was Important and Busy. He had a job in which he spent most of his time talking on the phone. He wheeled and dealt. He owned the streets he drove on. A lot of people were scared of Norma and Nancy, but not this man. He didn't have time to waste being scared of the likes of the Neuralgia sisters. He was in control of any situation that came along.

"Good day," he said. His words dripped gold dust. Nancy watched it twinkle softly through the window and flutter down to the street next to his car, and she wondered it might be possible to vacuum it up after the guy was gone. "Are you ladies the neighborhood charcoal vendors?"

"Yes, sir, we are, sir," Norma said.

"I would like to purchase a modicum of charcoal," the man said. "Specifically, four chunks."

"Yes, sir," Nancy said, and she counted out four chunks. It was important to be polite to these people. A rich guy like this could do some good for you sometime, if he liked you.

The man sorted through a bunch of credit cards. He had the Usury card, the Exorbitance card, the Gold Ostentatious card (issued to only a hundred people in all of the whole entire universe!), and a bunch of others. "Do you ladies take credit cards?" he asked.

"No, sir. Sorry," Norma said.

"Oh," the man said. He tightened his lips and looked through his wallet. Not that he had to tighten his lips to look through his wallet; it was a mannerism he had, one he had developed in the making of hundreds of millions-of-handfuls of money deals. His work was full of tension. Usually every-

thing on his body was tense. Even his clothes. Finally, he found some money. "Can you break a one-hundred-handfuls bill?"

"No, sir. Sorry," Nancy said. She tried to think of some way to keep the guy talking so that more gold dust would accumulate on the street. She wanted to ask him to recite Hamlet's soliloquy, but he would undoubtedly be in a hurry.

The man handed her the bill. "Keep the change," he said. Wow, the Neuralgia Sisters thought. Mr. Schurk was right about these people!

Usually, the Neuralgia sisters did what they did best. The next car that drove by was a Spartan Motors Clunker. "Hey," Nancy shouted. "Come here!"

The car stopped and backed up to them. The driver was obviously from the poor neighborhood. He hadn't had a haircut in ages. His clothes were three sizes too small. His tires were rubber bands stretched around the rims of garbage can lids, and the car had a model airplane engine instead of a car engine. (Once he had gotten too close to some children who were playing with a radio controlled toy airplane, and they made him drive zigzags through a playground.) This guy was in the rich people's neighborhood only because he worked there, polishing driveways. "Yes?" he said.

"What?"

"Sorry. I mean, yes, ma'am?"

"Buy some charcoal."

"Yes, ma'am." He got out of the car without bothering to turn it off. Nancy saw that he was standing on the rich guy's little pile of gold dust. She hoped he wasn't grinding it into the pavement with his shoes.

The poor guy took his wallet out; it was an old cardboard

thing held together with dabs of chewing gum. "All I have is a third of a handful of money," he said.

Norma grabbed his wallet and looked through it. An expired driver's license, an expired library card, an expired insurance card, an expired video rental card, an expired Royal Order of the Golden Ferret membership card . . . and an ATM card that was going to expire the next day. "You can get more money out of the machine," Norma said.

"Oh, I can't do that. No, please," the guy said. "I only have seven handfuls of money in the bank, and my little girl needs new glasses, and my son needs orthopedic toenails."

Norma knew that orthopedic toenails were expensive, but she had a job to do. "Get the money and bring it back here," she said. "All of it."

"Yes, ma'am," the guy said, and got into his car. The car trembled as he drove away.

The Neuralgia sisters chuckled to themselves and amongst themselves. They felt pleased.

A few minutes later, the guy came back. He drove up really fast and screeched to a stop. "Here you go," he said, sticking seven handfuls of money out the window at them.

Norma snatched the money from the guy and counted it. "It's all here," she said.

Nancy took some charcoal out of the bag and stuck it in the guy's hand. "Thank you," she said. "Come back."

Nervous, he dropped a chunk on the pavement. He pretended not to notice. He didn't want to stay there for the extra few, precious seconds it would take to open the door and pick it up. "Oh, I will. I promise," the guy said. He stomped on the gas and drove away so fast that a ghostly image of the car lingered at the intersection for about thirty seconds after he

was gone.

Nancy picked up the dropped piece of charcoal and put it back in the bag. Yeah, they could sell it again.

It didn't take the Neuralgia Sisters long to make a lot of money, enough money to buy a big house with seven bathrooms and a tennis court in the closet.

3

People in Love

Another person important in this story is Dexter Kroger. He was Miss Cranberry's boyfriend.

Dexter was a big guy, big and strong and athletic, and he had been an all-pro offensive guard on his college football team. He was offered a contract by the Kansas City Cowboys, which was a real professional football team from 1924 to 1926. Unfortunately, Dexter wasn't born until 1978, and by then the Kansas City Cowboys hadn't existed for forty-two years. Don't ask me to explain it. Of course, the Dallas Cowboys started up in 1960. And a team in the AFL called the Dallas Texans also started in 1960, and in 1963 they moved and became the Kansas City Chiefs. Small world. There was also an NFL team called the Dallas Texans, and they were only around for one year, 1952, which was still before Dexter Kroger was born. The 1952 Dallas Texans were the last pro football team to go belly-up. And then—get this—after the Houston Oilers moved to Nashville, Houston got a new team a couple years later, and it was called The Texans!

And he couldn't sign up with the Kansas City Cowboys because they were gone. If he had, though, they would have kicked him out of training camp for playing his Stan Kenton

records too loud at night.

At any rate, Dexter worked for the Midwest Stagnant Air Company, which had been serving the stagnant air needs of the American Midwest since 1966, the year the Miami Dolphins started. Dexter drove a truck around and collected people's dryer lint and dust bunnies, and he took it all back to the plant where they infused it into the stale air tanks, which in turn were delivered to the customers who used stagnant air for various industrial, medical and (ahem) personal needs. Dexter liked his job; he felt useful. He had a brother named Earl, who was a ne'er-do-well. His parents believed he was being a ne'er-do-well just to irritate them, but he was a real, live, honest-to-gosh ne'er-do-well. Earl and Dexter both liked Peter Sellers.

And Miss Cranberry liked Dexter Kroger. She thought he was smart and witty and charming. She thought he was stylish and good-looking. She thought he had black hair, which was true.

Later on, "later" being a few days after Goliath had his little adventure at the chalkboard and a few weeks after the Neuralgia Sisters had begun their exciting and lucrative career in the charcoal business (and, I might add, the same day the sisters moved into their big, new house), Miss Cranberry and Dexter were watching TV. *Serve that Soup* was on, a reality show in which groups of successful pop music stars competed to serve soup to people in various places such as fine art galleries and auto assembly plants.

She told him about Goliath's problem with arithmetic. Since the chalkboard adventure we saw earlier, he, Goliath, had muddled his way through two more chalkboard adven-

tures and failed a quiz. "I just don't know how to get through to him," she said.

"You know what?" Dexter said. "I'm willing to bet that if he had a situation where he actually had to use arithmetic, it would all become clear to him, like a light switch flipping on. I bet he could do it."

Dexter really believed what he was saying. Miss Cranberry, however, wasn't so sure. He, Dexter, hadn't been there. He hadn't seen Goliath choke like a mosquito trying to suck the sap out of a tree (which happens more often than you would think).

But she didn't say anything. She merely sighed, grabbed his hand, and pulled his arm tighter around her shoulders. Both of them liked that.

Another person who's important in this story is Billy-Bob, also known as Billy-Bob Kierkegaard, if you want to know his full name. He was Cato Kierkegaard's younger brother, and he lived next door to Goliath and his family. He was a big kid, the biggest kid in school, like in high school or something. At any rate, he was older than Goliath, old enough that he should be finished with school altogether and working at a job and stuff, but he wasn't. He had flunked out a whole bunch of times and was far behind, several years behind other guys his age, and still not doing well, anyway. He was dumb-looking and goofy and smelled like a mayonnaise jar full of rancid carrot wine mixed with sweat from a hockey goalie after an overtime game. Fortunately, the jar's lid is screwed down very, very tight, so you can't smell the odor unless you get all up close, but still, it's unpleasant.

And he wore things around his neck. Things like DVDs

and light bulbs and paper punches and crayons. Things like plastic gargoyles and candy bars and rabbit-ear antennas and beer cans. He tied strings on these things so he could wear them around his neck, a different thing each day, and then he walked around where people could see him. One girl at school kept a spreadsheet to document all the stuff he wore, with the various objects cross-indexed by function, color, size and shape.

All the girls thought Billy-Bob was creepy and icky. None of them would go out with him, and he asked them all. Many times. He was too awful, they said. Maybe if he had just one less bad thing about him, then maybe . . . no, not even then. No.

Eventually, Billy-Bob decided he had a crush on Goliath's sister Othello. Now, understand that Othello didn't get many dates because the guys didn't like trying to figure out how to act around someone who couldn't see. And to be honest, Billy-Bob was no different. For a long time, he kinda sorta avoided thinking about her. But after he finally came to understand that nothing was going to happen with any of the other girls he knew, he figured that maybe, just maybe Othello would go out with him because she . . . well, let's come right out and say it . . . she might be desperate. Yeah, hoping someone will date you out of desperation sounds pathetic, but he was okay with that (mostly because he didn't understand much about the concept of "pathetic").

So Billy-Bob pondered on all this stuff, and one day he was ready to make his move. "I'm gonna get me a girlfriend, har har," he said. But he had to make extra sure to do it right because Othello was his last chance, and he didn't want to mess it up.

He went to see his brother Cato. Cato was a real, live, authentic ladies' man. He didn't have to work because every day a big crowd of women wanted to buy him dinner and give him all kinds of gifts. One rich lady gave him a house and a car because she liked a joke he told her. I mean, yeah, sure, it was a pretty good joke, but imagine—just try to imagine—what kind of joke could be *that* good. That's right. No joke can be that good, but Cato could.

And although Cato was dating Emma Lou Josephine Vernacular Hortense Hortense P. Barnacle at the moment, he never dated one woman very long. No, because another one always came along to divert his attention.

So Billy-Bob went to Cato's house, the one from the rich lady, the one that until recently he had shared with his lifelong best buddy, poor Roger Glass Door Knob. And Billy-Bob asked Cato for some expert advice about women.

"Girls like presents," Cato said. "Give her a little present, and you're in like an abscessed wisdom tooth." He was pretty sure that was how the girl would feel about it.

"What kind of present?"

"Any kind of little thing. It doesn't have to be big or expensive. Or fancy. It's the gesture that counts. And send it to her anonymously. Let her think about it for a few days and wonder who her secret admirer is. Later, when you tell her you were the one who sent it, she'll do absolutely anything you want." Then Cato went back to reading *The Adventures of Hrobigothr the Troll*. He was afraid he had said too much. He didn't want to encourage a project that, no matter what, was doomed to total failure.

And Billy-Bob, well, he didn't know what gesture or anonymously or absolutely meant, but he got the idea. He got

the idea that if a little present would do that well for him, a great big present would do much better. After all, he had such rotten luck with girls that he needed all the help he could get. And if it was a big enough present, she might be his slave for life! Gee whiz! He had heard about stuff like that. Then, when he got tired of her for a girlfriend, he could keep her around to shine his shoes and clean his room. Oh, boy! Maybe she would do his homework for him! This was going to be good!

Billy-Bob saved up his allowance and got a whole bunch of money, but he didn't know what to do with it. He didn't know what to get Othello or where to get it. He didn't want to ask Cato because Cato would think he was dumb if he asked too many questions. Yeah, you read that right.

So he took the bus downtown, Billy-Bob did. He got off at a street corner and walked around. After a few minutes he came to a pawn shop. He looked in the window and saw that they had a whole bunch of different stuff. They had jewelry and cameras and musical instruments and bicycles and a heart-lung machine. Hmmm . . . this might be a good place.

He walked in. The guy behind the counter looked up and said, "Can I help you, kid?"

"Uh, yeah, har, har," Billy-Bob said. "I'm looking for a present for a girl, har har. So she'll like me."

The guy paused a moment to size Billy-Bob up. You could hear the wheels turning in his head. You could hear them because they needed to be oiled. Maybe they could have used some of the oil those circus robots leaked on the carpet. "I can see you're a man of discriminating taste," the pawn shop guy said. "Step over here."

He led Billy-Bob to an ornate display case designed by famous artist Augustus Paradine. It contained a wooden box,

a little cube about six inches to a side. "You have to promise not to tell anyone I showed you this. Only special customers get to see it."

Wow, Billy-Bob was special. "Sure," he said. "Har, har."

"Yeah, okay." The pawn shop guy took out his keyring and opened the case. He picked up the wooden box and held it out for Billy-Bob to admire. "Do you know what's in here?" he asked.

"I've never seen it before. How would I know what's in it?"

"Good point. Well, check this out." The guy opened the lid. Inside, the box was lined with topaz-colored velvet. A little brown bean-shaped thing was resting on the bottom. It had a slight glow.

"Wow," Billy-Bob said, awestruck.

The pawn shop guy made a big show of looking around, as if to make sure no one was within earshot. "It's an imagination," he whispered.

"An imagination?"

The pawn shop guy grimaced and looked around again. "Not so loud," he hissed. He paused and looked intently at Billy-Bob to drive the point home, the point being that this was a highly important secret for a special customer. "Yes, an imagination. In prime condition, too. A woman brought it in about a month ago. We gave her a pretty good price on it, too, let me tell you."

"What would anyone do with an imagination?"

"Imagine things."

Of course, Billy-Bob didn't have enough imagination to understand how someone could use an imagination. Besides, it looked like a little, glowing bean. That wasn't much of a gift. "I don't think it's what I want," he said.

"Ah, I can see you're a sharp one." The pawn shop guy replaced the box in the display case. "Let me show you something else." He motioned for Billy-Bob to follow him across the room. "How about this heart-lung machine?" he said.

"What does it do?"

"Well, it . . . it . . . does heart and lung stuff, what do you think it does? Some kid brought it in. I don't know where he got it. Heck, I don't know how he managed to get it here, but here it is."

Billy-Bob could see that it was big, all right, and cool-looking, but he was pretty sure Othello already had a heart and some lungs. "I think, har har, I think I want to get something else, har, har."

"How much money you got, kid?"

Billy-Bob pulled his money out of his pocket. He had a big wad of bills all wadded up. "This much," he said.

The pawn shop guy gave the wad a casual glance, so as not to appear too eager. "Yeah, I got just the thing. Come over here."

He went to the back corner and gestured toward some kind of funny-looking machine that was next to a life-sized ice sculpture of Michael J. Pollard. Billy-Bob studied the machine. It had a tank-looking thing laid down on its side, and some motor stuff, and dials and buttons and a round part that looked like a clock with only one hand. It was not quite knee-high, this funny machine, and painted a color like blue and grey mixed up together.

"What is it?" Billy-Bob asked. Maybe it was a time machine, he thought. That would be cool!

"It's an air compressor."

"What's it for?"

"It compresses air."

"Oh." Billy-Bob, of course, didn't know what that meant, but once again, he didn't want to ask too many questions because he was afraid it would make him look dumb. So he regarded the machine with what he hoped was a thoughtful look on his face, and he nodded slowly. "You think she would like it?" he asked.

"No doubt about it," the pawn shop guy said. "Girls *love* these things."

"How much?"

"Are you ever in luck," the guy said. "I can give you a good deal on this. No, not just a good deal. A *great* deal."

"Wow."

"Yeah. Some guy had it on layaway. He had only one payment left, and then he died."

"Aw."

"Yeah, aw. But since it's already mostly paid for, I can give you a good deal on it. I can sell it to you and have it delivered for what you got right there in your hand."

"Wow."

After Billy-Bob was gone, the pawn shop guy's co-worker shook his head slowly. "Irving, why did you tell him girls love air compressors?"

"Hey, man," Irving said. "Did you *see* that kid, all slouchy-looking and smelling funny and kind-of-but-not-quite-drooling on himself and wearing a dirty gym sock on a string around his neck? It doesn't matter what he gives her."

"How much did you get for it?"

Irving counted. "Thirty handfuls of money." Added to the 14 handfuls of money that Roger Glass Door Knob had already paid, Irving reckoned he had gotten 44 handfuls of

money for a machine that had cost him only five. And the daggone thing didn't even work! He had played around with the wiring to see if he could get it to turn on, but since he didn't know what the heck he was doing, had no luck. Oh, well.

He pulled the "15 handfuls of money" sign off the air compressor and replaced it with a sign that said, "SOLD."

Billy-Bob went back to Cato and got him to write the card for Othello's air compressor. And Cato, good ol' Cato, he wrote the card in his best handwriting even though he didn't expect it to do any good on account of Billy-Bob was so creepy, but it might work. And if Billy-Bob got himself a girlfriend, she would keep him busy and out of Cato's way. Then Cato could bring girls home without having Billy-Bob show up at his swingin' bachelor pad at exactly the wrong time, as he always did, so it was worth two minutes to write out the card.

Of course, Cato didn't know what the gift was. He didn't care enough to ask, and it was unfortunate because he would have had Billy-Bob take the air compressor back and get some roses, which would actually have made Othello want to be Billy-Bob's lifelong love slave. (So often, it's the simple things that have the greatest effect.) Instead, the roses Billy-Bob would have bought, had he bought roses, were purchased by a middle-aged man who was in trouble with his wife after she found a strange pair of women's panties in the back seat of his car. Well, he was innocent of any wrongdoing. What happened was that another guy who had really been cheating on his wife was driving home from a date with his girlfriend and noticed that she had left her panties in his car. He figured he had better get rid of them, like, as quickly as possible, so he tossed them out the window. But then, see, our non-cheating

guy was driving by in the opposite direction, and the panties flew into his car through an open window, and he didn't notice. Uh-oh. So then, his wife found the panties the next day and a sort of nuclear fallout kind of scene ensued. He couldn't explain where the panties had come from. (And if he had known, how could he try to tell his wife a story like that?) So this guy, he bought the roses. That made the situation worse, though. The wife got all upset over the idea that he apparently believed he could buy his way out of cheating (which he hadn't really done anyway) with a handful of flowers that would be dead in a few days. And who was the cheating guy cheating with? The non-cheating guy's wife's sister! Whoa!

Sometimes it amazes me how all this stuff works.

Anyway, Billy-Bob took the card to the pawn shop and taped it to the air compressor. The delivery people didn't know why someone would want an air compressor delivered to someone else's front door as a gift, complete with gift card, but they knew they were getting paid. So they made the delivery early the next morning.

Later, when Cleopatra tried to step out to get the newspaper, she couldn't get the door open more than a couple inches. The air compressor was blocking it. She banged the door against it a couple times to see if she could knock the obstacle, whatever it was, out of the way. No luck. The realization that she couldn't get out of the house struck her like a drunken troll falling into a mud puddle. Thoughts of starvation floated through her mind. Goodness, would they have to turn to cannibalism? And more pressing, would the door open wide enough to let air in???

Othello came into the living room. "What's for breakfast?" she asked.

"Breakfast?!?!?!? We're all going to starve!!!"

"Do you think we could starve tomorrow? *Willie the Incoherent Weasel* is on tonight, and it's a new episode. Willie meets Imogene the Fabulous Ferret, and they go on a spree of doing good deeds for puppies."

"I don't think we have a choice. We can't leave the house."

"Why not?"

"Something's blocking the door."

Othello ruminated for a moment. "Why don't you go out the window?"

"Yeah, I could do that." Cleopatra slid the window up. It was a small window, but she figured she could make it through. She had to; what was the alternative? She put her foot through the opening, then bent over and began laboriously working herself the rest of way out. After about ten minutes, she was standing on the porch.

And there was the . . . the thing. She saw the envelope on top, taped down neatly and marked, "For Othello."

"Othello," she said, "there's something out here for you." She said "something" because she didn't know what it was. If she had known it was an air compressor, she would have said, "Othello, there's an air compressor out here for you." But she didn't.

"What is it?" Othello asked.

"I don't know."

"Maybe Goliath would know."

"Yes, go get him."

Othello went to Goliath's room and shook him awake. "Goliath, we need you to go look at this strange thing on the front porch."

Hmmm. Strange thing, Goliath thought. "Oh, it must be

Billy-Bob."

"Yeah, I bet it is."

Othello went to the front porch window. "Goliath says it must be Billy-Bob."

Cleopatra studied the air compressor. "No," she said. "I'm pretty sure it's something else."

Back to Goliath's room for Othello. "She's pretty sure it's not Billy-Bob."

Goliath roused himself.

"You can't go out the front door," Othello said. "That strange thing is in the way, so it won't open."

"You're sure it's not Billy-Bob?"

"Yeah, pretty sure."

Goliath walked out the side door and around to the porch. Cleopatra was still standing there looking at the air compressor.

"Gosh, that sure is a funny-looking thing," Goliath said.

"I. beg. your. pardon." Cleopatra said, offended.

"The machine thing," Goliath said. Of course, he didn't know what it was. He thought it might be a great big can opener, but that didn't seem quite right. "We'd better take it inside," Cleopatra said.

Goliath tried to pick it up, but it was too heavy for him. It was too heavy for all of them together. They tried.

"Let's leave it out here," Cleopatra said. It seemed like a good idea. She opened the envelope and looked at the card. "From your secret admirer," she read.

"Oh, I have a secret admirer," Othello said. "That's neat."

"If this thing's from an admirer, then it must be something that's good to have," Goliath said.

"We should try to find out what it is," Cleopatra said.

"We'll call the public library. They can answer all kinds of questions. Come on, kids."

Goliath led the way in through the side door. Cleopatra looked up the number of the public library and dialed. "Hello, library? What's that thing out there on our front porch?"

"Don't ever call here again," the library person said, and hung up.

Just then Billy-Bob came to the front door. Although Cato had told him to wait a few days, he couldn't, daggone it. He was too impatient. And Othello had not yet gotten around to wondering who the secret admirer might be. She was still wondering what the thing was.

"Hello, Othello?" Billy-Bob called.

"Billy-Bob," Goliath said. "Can you push that big thing out of the way so we can open the door?"

"Sure thing, har har." Billy-Bob bent over, took a deep breath, and shoved the air compressor a couple feet away from the door.

"Oh, thank goodness," Cleopatra said. "I was sure we were going to suffocate in here."

"Maybe we should get Billy-Bob to bring it inside," Goliath said.

"I'm not sure about that," Othello said. "Maybe we want to find out what it is first, so we'll know where to put it."

Well, Goliath thought, if it was really a can opener, they would want to put it in the kitchen. But if it was something else, then . . . who knows?

"Can I come in?" Billy-Bob asked.

"Yes, of course," Cleopatra said.

Billy-Bob bounded into the house with youthful enthusiasm and vigor, excited because this was the beginning of hav-

ing a real girlfriend. He tried to tell them he was the secret admirer. "Hey, Othello," he said, "I'm me, har har."

"Hi, Billy-Bob," everyone said.

"How do you like my present?"

"It was you who sent it?" Cleopatra astutely guessed.

"Yeah, har har." Billy-Bob got all self-conscious and blushed a bright, red blush that wasn't quite like any color Goliath had ever seen on a person.

"Oh, thank you, Billy-Bob!" Othello said. Hey, maybe he wasn't such a creepy and icky and disgusting kinda guy after all! She rushed up to Cleopatra and hugged her and gave her a great big kiss. She was really aiming at Billy-Bob, but he was standing right next to Cleopatra, and Othello could only tell the general direction his voice came from.

"Aw, it wasn't nothing," Billy-Bob said. He didn't think that he might have been the real target of the hug. But Othello realized her mistake when he spoke. Cleopatra sort of didn't do anything. Othello moved over to Billy-Bob.

"You're real nice for a creepy guy," she said, and Billy-Bob blushed more.

"Gee, Othello, har har, would you like to, har har, go to the movie show, har har, Friday night, har har?"

"I'd love to," Othello said.

"What's the present?" Goliath asked. "What is that thing out there?"

"It's a . . . a . . ." Billy-Bob stopped and put his hand in his mouth for a few seconds, thinking. "Oh, I know," he said. "It's a tongue depressor."

"It'll be useful in case we get sick," Cleopatra said. "What a thoughtful boy you are."

Goliath thought that meant the thing, the tongue depres-

sor, should rightfully be in the bathroom, in the medicine cabinet. But maybe not. It looked too big for that. Well, he figured it was all right out on the front porch for the time being, as long as it wasn't blocking the door.

And Billy-Bob, who almost never laughed, laughed a lot in the few days before Friday because he had him a real, honest-to-gosh date with a real, live, genuine girl. Har har. Now he would be just like Cato and all his friends. Wow! An actual girl! And Billy-Bob, he knew that girls were fun to take your clothes off with, and then you could do something real neat with them, although he wasn't clear on what it was, but once he got both of all their clothes off he knew he could figure it out, and then he could have a lot of fun with her, although a lot of people told him stuff like that was nasty and you shouldn't do it unless you were married, but he didn't care because most of the really fun stuff was nasty, stuff like playing in mud and eating tapioca pudding. So he knew if being naked with a girl was something nasty, he sure as heck wanted to try it. And what did any of that have to do with being married, anyway? Also, he could brag about it if he did naked stuff with Othello, and maybe people would start thinking he was cool and liking him.

Friday came, and Billy-Bob showed up at Othello's house early in the morning, before anybody was awake. Cleopatra stepped out to get the paper and saw him sitting on the air compressor. "I want to make sure I'm not late for my date with Othello," he explained.

"Oh," Cleopatra said, and took the paper in.

A little later, Othello and Goliath left for school. "No, I'm

not going to school today," Billy-Bob told them. And he didn't. He sat on the porch all day, waiting. The truant officer drove by once and noticed him, but Billy-Bob was so big that the truant officer didn't think he was a kid. Later, Goliath and Othello came home from school and went inside. Billy-Bob kept sitting there. Finally, when he figured it was time, he knocked on the door. Cleopatra answered.

"Is Othello home?" he asked.

Othello came to the door. "You're late," she said. "I didn't think you were coming."

Billy-Bob didn't know what to say. "I'm not late," he said defiantly.

They went to a movie, *Wuthering Heights*. Billy-Bob didn't understand it, and truth be told, he got all impatient and fidgety after about a minute and a half, but he didn't care. He was having a date with a real live girl, and that was more important than having fun. He didn't have to fidget long, though. After about ten minutes, a whole bunch of moths started flying around in the light from the projector, making flickering shadows on the picture. A few rows down toward the front, two women stood up. They looked exactly alike, and they were giggling like little girls. They kept giggling as they ran up the aisle and out of the theater.

Billy-Bob didn't understand any of it. He just hoped a lot of people would see him with Othello, a lot of people they knew, but no one did. He was still having a date, though.

After the movie, Othello said she was hungry. Billy-Bob didn't know what to do because he didn't know how to count money, and he didn't know how much it would cost to eat. "Aw, you don't want to eat," he said.

"Yes, I do," Othello said.

"Let's take off all our clothes," Billy-Bob said.

"NO!" Othello sputtered.

"But we can do nasty things."

"I don't want to do nasty things!"

"You have to! I gave you a present! A big one!"

"Billy-Bob, shut your mouth!"

"My brother told me you would do anything I said. And he knows what he's talking about 'cause he got lots of girl-friends."

"Take me home."

"You will, then?"

"No. Take me to my house. I'm going to stay there and you're not."

At this point, we'll note that it's a good thing Othello got all mad and stuff. If she had agreed to whatever Billy-Bob thought he wanted, he would have realized he didn't have the slightest clue how to go about, like, actually doing anything. It would have embarrassed him so much that he would have hitch-hiked to Kansas and sat in the middle of a cornfield for the rest of his life, never to be heard from again.

No loss to humanity, you say? Read on, read on.