

**Blocked:
A Drama in Prose
by BenSD**

[The Cast:

- Mr. Jed Arnold
- Mrs. Annette Arnold
- Jeremy Pollocks
- The Boss
- Narrator – Dressed as a fly, literally on the wall.]

[Direction:

This play uses a minimum of stage direction but as the narrator speaks, characters and crew should show the action creatively to their tastes.]

[Setting:

The scene is divided in two by a large wall, a single door set in the middle of it. The wall should divide the entire space evenly so that view of either room might be obscured to some of the audience, depending on seating. The wall should also have a small platform on which the narrator will stand, sit, perch, etc.; fashion to taste. On one side of the wall is Mr. Arnold's study. On the other side is Mrs. Arnold's kitchen. The time era is mid-1960s.]

[ACT I SCENE I]

[Narrator]

Act one, scene one begins in a quiet man's quiet study. Mr. Arnold is hunched over a typewriter, circa 1960-something. His wife stands on the other side of the door, listening for the tap of keys or her husband's reverberating snores to find out what's happening inside. For a month he has worked diligently at his novel, as she can hear him do now, tapping away, a ding sounding as he advances to the next line.

The moonlight is dancing on his fingers as he pounds the keys like some literary Beethoven. In the next room, Mrs. Arnold leans against the door and sighs, wondering when she will see her husband again. She paces, opens the fridge, but of course there's nothing inside. Her appetite is for companionship, not leftover meatloaf.

Mr. Arnold has, of late, only hungered for that steady tapping of keys. He only has an appetite for this novel he's been working on for thirty days. Now, however, he is nearing the end and thrashing purposefully and brutally at the letters. With one final clang of letters, Mr. Arnold pushes up from his chair and stares down at his final page, still sitting in the typewriter.

The sound is loud enough that Mrs. Arnold moves to the door to check on her husband. She hesitates there at the threshold, uncertain if the sound was cause enough to disturb him. She is still reaching for the door when Mr. Arnold steps up, swings open the barrier directly into his wife's face, and shouts,

[Mr. Arnold]

I'm finished! Honey? Where are you?

[Narrator]

Mrs. Arnold shakes the stars from her vision and pulls herself upright. She hardly cares that she was just struck in the face, only that she's finally getting her husband back.

[Mrs. Arnold]

Why, what wonderful news! I'm so excited for you!

[Narrator]

Mr. Arnold beams with pride at the child of imagination he has given birth to and steps back into his study, beckoning Annette to join him. He pulls his last page from the wheel of the typewriter, lays it face down on a large stack of papers, and indicates them to his wife.

[Mr. Arnold]

You take this, and read what thirty days of hard work on a novel can do,

[Narrator]

he says. Then, finally, mercifully, Mr. Arnold exits to sleep in the bed they share. Mrs. Arnold hangs behind. She wants to join him, of course, but she worries she'll offend Jed if she doesn't read at least some of his work.

[Mrs. Arnold]

Five pages,

[Narrator]

she pledges,

[Mrs. Arnold]

Five pages should be enough to give me an idea of things; that will make him happy.

[Narrator]

And so she sits down and begins to scan the first few pages of the massive manuscript. The first page is exciting and captures her breath. The second page is tragic and compelling. The third page is funny, and she laughs loudly in the quiet room. The fourth page is less intriguing; it is blank.

Mrs. Arnold, confused, begins to flip through the next several pages then continues until she has glanced at each and found nothing, not a single word more. She looks around the desk, to the sides, everywhere. There are no other papers to be found. There is no story, no separate ream of blank paper, not even the discarded draft of a single page. She decides she will simply tell her husband that she was so riveted she had to read *three* pages, despite being already very tired. Annette takes one big yawn as she considers her husband's lack of words. He had seemed so proud, but of what; three pages of work over the span of a month? Her yawn stretches on, almost uncomfortably long, and she thinks about how she will tell him when he presses her to read more. She finally closes her yawn with a sigh and exits from the study to join her already sleeping husband.

[ACT I SCENE II]

[Narrator]

Light breaks through the windows like a clumsy burglar. Mrs. Arnold is already up and making breakfast, juggling eggs, bacon, and toast. Literally. No, I'm just kidding, pick those up.

Mrs. Arnold is already up and making a breakfast of eggs, bacon and toast for her husband. It's a nice gesture which she's happy to provide. It's also a covert plan to keep his mouth full for as long as possible before he leaves for work. She's hard at work herself as Jed comes in through the door to his study. At the sound of the door opening, Mrs. Arnold springs back, though she's already well clear of it hitting her. She almost expects him to come in angry, to rage at her for replacing his work with blank pages, but he's smiling at the scent of bacon and still in his cartoon-festooned pajamas. He says,

[Mr. Arnold]

Wow, bacon! Is today my birthday?

[Narrator]

Mrs. Arnold smiles at his comment, just to avoid the conflict, but it feels to her like the implication is that she is not a dutiful breakfast-making wife. Mr. Arnold is meanwhile pulling a plate down from a cabinet and gathering some breakfast for himself. He smiles stupidly all the while, like a young boy who's been trapped in a basement and is now being served his first hot meal in six months; although he's starving and may yet die from various infections over the next few days, he is silently ecstatic and expectant. It's something better than a birthday; it's a hot breakfast on a summer day.

Mrs. Arnold, noting her husband's attire as he sits and begins to eat, says,

[Mrs. Arnold]

You've got clean pants and a shirt pressed and waiting for you upstairs. Aren't you going to be late for work?

[Narrator]

Mr. Arnold smiles a devilish breakfast-stuffed grin and mumbles out his bombshell surprise.

[Mr. Arnold]

It's Independence Day, baby! Today I celebrate my freedom from the gulag that I've been calling a job! And the first of many, I expect! Did you have a chance to finish my novel?

[Mrs. Arnold]

Oh, dear,

[Narrator]

Mrs. Arnold stammers back,

[Mrs. Arnold]

I was so tired last night but just so excited that I had to stay up and read just a few pages, and those few I read were marvelous.

[Narrator]

For a long moment the silence in the air is thick; the bacon is no longer sizzling and silverware has stopped scraping.

[Mr. Arnold]

Did it put you to sleep?

[Mrs. Arnold]

No, dear!

[Narrator]

his wife hurriedly replied,

[Mrs. Arnold]

It was wonderful! It was my desire to read it that kept me up so late in the first place!

[Narrator]

Mr. Arnold's smile fills back in quickly and the scraping silverware picks up again.

[Mr. Arnold]

So how did you like those few pages you read? What can you tell me?

[Mrs. Arnold]

Well,

[Narrator]

Mrs. Arnold replied,

[Mrs. Arnold]

The first page, I thought, was exciting; it caught my attention. The second page went on to tug at my heart strings. You wrapped that up perfectly, because by the end of the third page I was laughing. And then...

[Narrator]

She hesitated. There had been no 'and then.'

[Mrs. Arnold]

And then I had to go to bed?

[Mr. Arnold]

Surely you didn't go from laughter to sleep; what else did you read?

[Narrator]

Mrs. Arnold bites her lower lip and stays silent for a moment longer. She doesn't want to approach the subject now, not so early, but she can't lie to him.

[Mrs. Arnold]

The rest of the pages on top of those three were blank.

[Mr. Arnold]

Ah, yes!

[Narrator]

Mr. Arnold replies, with a spray of food. He kindly takes a moment to chew before continuing.

[Mr. Arnold]

That fourth page was a hard one to write. I must have made a hundred drafts! By the time I got one I liked, why, the ribbon on my typewriter had completely dried up. It's quite good; though, wouldn't you say?

[Narrator]

In fact, Annette really didn't know what to say.

[Mrs. Arnold]

So then...did you replace the ribbon?

[Narrator]

Mr. Arnold laughed, another spray of food erupting from his mouth.

[Mr. Arnold]

Why, dear, I would think the color of the words would be a little darker if I had; don't you? But what did you think of it?

[Narrator]

In response, Mrs. Arnold nervously chuckled back.

[Mrs. Arnold]

Certainly the best blank page I've ever read,

[Narrator]

she says. Jed's smile immediately fades and Annette's follows closely behind it as she realizes that she must have said something very wrong.

[Mr. Arnold]

A blank page?

[Narrator]

There is a long silence while Mr. Arnold struggles to swallow his food and stands from the table.

[Mr. Arnold]

I hadn't considered that it might look that way. Oh, no...

[Narrator]

Mrs. Arnold has backed up defensively, huddling into her silence. Her husband has never been abusive but she wasn't sure how he would handle this news; he could as likely explode in a flash of flames as shudder and sob.

[Mr. Arnold]

I thought it would be artistic,

[Narrator]

he says.

[Mr. Arnold]

I thought it was something special. But if all anybody ever sees is a blank page, if that's all they see, I've failed! I've completely failed!

[Narrator]

By this point, Mrs. Arnold feels ready to cry, as well. She knows there's no answer to offer as appeasement. Still, she has to offer something.

[Mrs. Arnold]

It's alright, dear, you've already written it once, we'll just get you some new typewriter ribbons and you can revise it with those.

[Narrator]

Now Mr. Arnold started to actually weep, slow sad tears of blatant defeat.

[Mr. Arnold]

It's no use,

[Narrator]

he tells her.

[Mr. Arnold]

It's just no use. Bad prose can be revised but blank pages? Might as well be cowboy toilet paper.

[Narrator]

Mrs. Arnold has nothing else to offer him. She wishes she had but, crossing her arms in front of her defensively, she knows there's nothing left for her to say. A moment of strong silence informs Mr. Arnold that he doesn't have much else to say, either.

[Mr. Arnold]

I'm going to change my clothes and see if there's any place open enough to sell me a typewriter ribbon.

[Narrator]

With that, Mr. Arnold exits back through his study and deeper into the home. Mrs. Arnold waits patiently for the sound of the door shutting. When she finally hears the latch click into place on the other side of the study, Annette follows behind her husband and stops at his desk.

His novel is still sitting there, if you still want to call it a novel. Annette does; she's not sure she can cope with him writing another one and is hopeful that just the experience will be enough to sate him. She sits in his chair, legs enclosed in the old oak desk as his often are when he's writing, and picks up the manuscript again.

The first page is just as capturing the second time. It reminds her of the first page she'd shared with Jed, how that little speck of love had captured them both. How they'd been married, been happy, been unhappy and, of course, been here.

The second page is still as tragic. With it, Jed took all of the pain Mrs. Arnold had ever felt and rolled it into a compressed ball of sad frustration. It feels good to hurt so much from just a few hundred words. As Mrs. Arnold reads the second page, she honestly wishes that he'd managed to record more of those thoughts for her to absorb.

The third page is just as funny but she doesn't make it quite to the funniest part, the laugh out loud point, and is only chuckling as Jed walks in. He's happy to see her smiling over the few pages of words she can read and his cheery disposition says as much.

[Mr. Arnold]

Don't worry,

[Narrator]

he says,

[Mr. Arnold]

Surely someplace is open to celebrate the birth of America in the most American form of capitalism; I'll get this novel righted in no time!

[Narrator]

On that chipper note, Mr. Arnold is off through the study and through the kitchen to embark on his quest. Once he is gone and Mrs. Arnold is sure she's alone again, she sets down the manuscript, neatening the edges with the flat palms of her hands. Suspecting that her husband will be unsuccessful but that she might enjoy better luck, Mrs. Arnold opens the drawer of her husband's desk and begins her search.

There must be a million things cramped in that tiny space, from paper clips and pens to forks and cigarettes. None of that is what she's after, though. What she wants lies deep inside, hidden amongst the mess. Finally, with some effort, Annette pulls out a single box containing a ribbon for Jed's typewriter, followed by a second, third and even a fourth. She sets them as

nicely as she can next to the typewriter, then shoves what she can back into place and closes the drawer.

With her task done, Mrs. Arnold stands up and brushes herself off. She's satisfied with her findings, if not altogether surprised. With only a tiny prideful curve of her lips, Mrs. Arnold turns and exits the study, heading back to the kitchen, her kitchen, her private variation of a study, and begins cleaning the mess left over from breakfast.

[ACT II SCENE I]

[Narrator]

Act two, scene one begins in a quiet man's quiet study. Mr. Arnold is hunched over a typewriter, his slouch such that his short beard inadvertently brushes flecks of ash from the keys. The entire room is covered in wadded up sheets of paper, all covered front and back with words. His wife stands on the other side of the door, listening for the tap of keys or her husband's gentle cursing to find out what's happening inside. For a month he has worked diligently at his novel, as she can hear him do now, tapping away, a ding as he advances to the next line.

The moonlight is dancing on his fingers as he pounds the keys like some literary mad man. In the next room, Mrs. Arnold leans against the door and sighs, wondering when she will have to see her husband again. She paces, opens the fridge, but of course there's nothing inside. Her appetite is for companionship, not leftover mashed potatoes.

Mr. Arnold has, of late, only hungered for that steady tapping of keys. He only has an appetite for this new novel he's been working on for the last month. He is praying for the end and thrashing purposefully and brutally at the letters. With one final clang of letters, Mr. Arnold pushes up from his chair and stares down at his latest page, still sitting in the typewriter.

The sound is loud enough that Mrs. Arnold moves to the door to check on her husband. She hesitates there at the threshold, uncertain what that sound could herald. She is reaching for the door when Mr. Arnold steps up, swings open the barrier directly into his wife's face, and shouts,

[Mr. Arnold]

I quit!

[Narrator]

Mrs. Arnold stays on the floor, not yet sure she should get up. Mr. Arnold has never struck her, but he's never been like this before, either. He stands there in the doorway a moment, then looks down at Mrs. Arnold apologetically. She says,

[Mrs. Arnold]

It's alright; you didn't know I was there. Listen, they're just words, it's really alright...

[Mr. Arnold]

You don't understand!

[Narrator]

he interrupted her. For a long moment the two watched each other until neither was sure if that last exclamation had been Mr. Arnold's entire argument. With minimal stuttering and marginal strength, he finally continues.

[Mr. Arnold]

I used to be good at this. I mean, I was really good at writing. Every word fit so well, like a jigsaw puzzle. Now, when I put the words together, I see a five-hundred piece puzzle with single pieces taken from a thousand different puzzles. It's absolutely puzzling.

[Narrator]

Mr. Arnold pauses a moment, hoping for a laugh, and gets none.

[Mr. Arnold]

It's hard to stay positive about something that you used to be good at and just aren't anymore. It's like trying to say, 'I'm sure I can ride a tricycle as good as I used to,' even though the last time I was on a tricycle was back when I still fit on one.

[Narrator]

Mrs. Arnold looks up at her husband with as much sympathy as she can manage and slowly drags herself from the floor to stand. Without knowing, Mr. Arnold has just signed a declaration of analogy war.

[Mrs. Arnold]

Yes, dear, you're too big for those toys now, but isn't that good? Now you drive a car and that's a fair bit better than riding a tiny tricycle everywhere.

[Narrator]

Mr. Arnold furrows his brow. With analogy war now official, though neither of them knows it for what it is, Mr. Arnold needs a good response.

[Mr. Arnold]

Driving to and from work every weekday isn't a good story, though. A grown man riding to work every day on a tricycle; now, that's a good story.

[Narrator]

Mrs. Arnold had only a moment to reply, saying,

[Mrs. Arnold]

Well, if the demographic you're aiming for rides tricycles, then...

[Narrator]

Before she has a chance to finish there comes a knocking, unnecessarily loud and drawn out, each pound echoing deeper and deeper into the home until the previous residents who had died there might have woken up to answer the damned thing.

It's Mrs. Arnold who finally does. While she goes to invite their visitor, Mr. Arnold straightens himself up and closes the door to his study, hiding the mess. Mrs. Arnold opens the

front door and in steps a man in a fine grey suit and a plastic smile. As he welcome himself inside, he says,

[The Boss]

Why, Jed never told my secretary he had a daughter!

[Mrs. Arnold]

Mrs. Arnold,

[Narrator]

she replies, straightening her clothes and posture. Mr. Arnold is looking on but has curiously said nothing. His wife continues,

[Mrs. Arnold]

And you are, sir?

[The Boss]

Oh, I'm sorry, my dear,

[Narrator]

The man replies,

[The Boss]

I'm The Boss down at the plant. Did you say you're Mrs. Arnold? But, dear, you're lovely; were all of his whispers to my secretary such lies?

[Narrator]

Mr. Arnold clears his throat. He's not ready to speak up but the time has come, just the same.

[Mr. Arnold]

What can I do for you, Boss? Sir?

[The Boss]

Well, Arnold, let's not talk about it here in the middle of your kitchen like savages. Come, let's go someplace we can sit and discuss.

[Narrator]

Without any warning or rush, The Boss makes his way through the room to the door just behind Mr. Arnold. With not as much as the casual flick he might give a fly, the Boss brushes the timid Mr. Arnold aside.

[Mr. Arnold]

I'm sorry, but it's something of a mess; you see we weren't expecting guests. I would rather...

[Narrator]

The sound of a door creaking open is enough to interrupt Jed Arnold right now. The boss opens the door casually, as if it were his home, and stares out into the room with that same unflinching smile. He says,

[The Boss]

Christ, Arnold, how many forests did you kill to get this carpet? What have you been doing in here?

[Narrator]

Mr. Arnold gulps audibly and says,

[Mr. Arnold]

Writing. Sir.

[The Boss]

Writing?

[Narrator]

The boss asks. The answer comes as only a slow nod and suddenly Mr. Arnold's employer is cracking up, busting a gut, and literally roaring with laughter. As he sits in the room's only chair, at Mr. Arnold's desk, he struggles to stop. As his chuckles die down he taps at a few buttons and quietly says,

[The Boss]

What a piece of shit.

[Narrator]

With that, he's laughing again. This bout is less furious and frenzied, however, and passes slightly faster. Mr. Arnold is visibly upset to his wife but outwardly seems his regular clam self. Once the laughter is extinguished, Jed continues the conversation.

[Mr. Arnold]

So what can I do for you, sir?

[The Boss]

Well, actually, Arnold...nothing.

[Narrator]

There's another short burst of giggles before The Boss continues.

[The Boss]

Really, though, I'm here because you can do nothing for me. I keep giving you chances and you've been doing such a terrible job that I thought it was my civic duty to come down here personally when I would otherwise be eating dinner just to let you know that you're fired.

[Narrator]

Thick silence permeates that air. The Arnold's are both dumbfounded and speechless. The Boss, meanwhile, is just soaking in the despair. The Boss chuckles again at the same joke that had been funny all along and continues.

[The Boss]

No, but seriously, Jed. Your performance lately has been a little sub-par so I figured, you know what? I'm going to fire that guy. I always like to fire people personally like this.

[Narrator]

Husband and wife stare in awe at the gap The Boss has created. He waits and says nothing more, holding out for the reply. Both begin to stutter something incomprehensible over each other and it is finally Mrs. Arnold who wins out.

[Mrs. Arnold]

I don't understand...

[Narrator]

That's all she can think to say. Mr. Arnold has nothing to add. For The Boss, however, that was all he needed to hear.

[The Boss]

It's not because of my personal investment in the company or because I care about my employees. No, no sappy shit. I like to see how the family reacts when it's all dropped on them. 'Oh, how will we survive?' Blah, blah, blah. I just wish you had children to ask you about things like birthdays and Christmas. Most men cry. Are you going to cry, Jed?

[Narrator]

Mr. Arnold meets the stare he is given bravely, but there's more to it than that. There's that crazy twinkle in his eye; it's the sign of a man who's written three pages in thirty days and struggled for a fourth through the next thirty. There's a half smile cocked under his beard, ready to fire. He says,

[Mr. Arnold]

Honey?

[Mrs. Arnold]

Yes, dear?

[Mr. Arnold]

Get the gun. I'll hold him here.

[Narrator]

The boss panics. He falls back in his chair and presses away from Mr. Arnold, now speechless himself. Mrs. Arnold also says nothing but walks past The Boss, pleased to act the part of a dutiful wife for this request.

The Boss is now against the wall, only inches from the door, but knowing that this is the direction with the gun, as well. Running through that door could be his only hope or his untimely end. His fear to decide ultimately made the decision for him when Mr. Arnold steps forward and picks the typewriter up from his desk with a small grunt. Mrs. Arnold appears back in the doorway as her husband hefts the crude weapon over his head.

The boss is, at this point, quite literally pissing himself. He crumbles to the ground like a frightened child and a dark stain appears at his groin as he pleads in staggered sobs for his life. Now it's Mr. Arnold's turn to laugh and Mrs. Arnold joins him. He says,

[Mr. Arnold]

Did any of those men you fired wet themselves?

[Narrator]

A quick movement, a bright flash, and Mrs. Arnold is holding something pointed at the man on the floor, sitting in a puddle of his own urine. The item is not a gun, however; the Arnolds don't own a gun, but they do own an instant camera. Mr. and Mrs. Arnold burst with laughter as the photograph develops while The Boss looks like he might burst with rage. Mr. Arnold rubs the tears from his eyes and The Boss silently rises to his feet. His movements are abrupt from the effort it's taking him to not kill them both. Fists clenched tight, he leaves the study, heads through the kitchen, and then through the front door.

The shelves in the kitchen rattle as the door slams shut and the two embrace in laughter like they haven't done for a long time. The gesture is simple, kind, and too easily forgotten; once the two have a hold on it, once they remember what it is, they are hesitant to let it escape. Finally, the two break apart only slightly to exit the study and go to bed.

[Mr. Arnold]

Really, it's good news; now I can focus on writing and support us that way,"

[Narrator]

Mr. Arnold says as the two leave together. Mrs. Arnold smiles for him, a pitiful sad smile, but they're already in the darkness on the other side of the door, and he might not have seen it even if he had been looking.

The camera and the picture still sit in the room while they are gone. The camera was expensive and impressive. The picture is nothing short of hilarious and incriminating. Neither of them mean anything now, though, in the middle of the night. When Mrs. Arnold comes down in the morning, with the sun up, everything will still be like she left it. For an empty room, though, time doesn't pass.

[ACT II SCENE II]

[Narrator]

Although Mr. Arnold no longer has to worry about waking up for work, the morning ritual doesn't break. The sun shines through the windows, illuminating Mrs. Arnold making breakfast and Mr. Arnold coming downstairs. He doesn't stop for breakfast today, though, he just stops midway through the study and stares at his typewriter. Mrs. Arnold stands by and chews a

strip of bacon as she waits for toast to pop. She's eaten a couple already and will likely eat a few more before her husband emerges for breakfast.

Although she expects him at any time, Mr. Arnold is sitting down at that particular moment, and in the next moment pulling the last page of his previous night's work from the typewriter. The sound catches Mrs. Arnold's ear and she turns to look at the door, as if it might have answers for her.

Then the door begins to tell her a story of rattling keys and the steady clunk of tiny hammers emblazoned with characters. The story starts slow but picks up speed steadily, a few clunks metamorphosing from a larva of meaning into an inspired cacophony of undeniable literary merit, until Mr. Arnold is typing out words as fast and heavy as his hands can move, sharp dings ringing in a steady rhythm with the clacking letters as he moves through the lines.

Mrs. Arnold is so entranced by the sound that she jumps when her toast finally bounces up out of the toaster. She doesn't move for it, though, and barely seems to notice it once the surprise has passed. Her interest is drawn to the door between rooms, left partially open from her passage only slightly earlier. Eager to see the artist at work, Mrs. Arnold grabs a handful of bacon from the counter and takes a bite from the mass as she creeps to the barely open door.

Mr. Arnold's back is to his wife, blocking her view of his work even as he pulls it out and turns it over on the table. She watches, no longer even chewing the wad of fried pig in her mouth, and Mr. Arnold keeps working, passing lines, oblivious to her, passing more lines as he goes, but never seeing her, line after line, even as time passes him by as he does with the pages.

Before either has a concept of how much time has passed, the sun has set and Mr. Arnold proudly draws out his most recent page and slaps it face down on the table. He stands from his chair at last and, with the typing stopped, Mrs. Arnold continues chewing and steps away from the door. Mr. Arnold enters the kitchen with a stretch as his wife positions herself next to the now-cold bacon. He sees her with a smile and says,

[Mr. Arnold]

I just finished perhaps the greatest story of my life as a writer.

[Narrator]

Although Mr. Arnold's life span as a writer is currently only a few months, Mrs. Arnold beams at his literary coos and spit bubbles. She swallows and says,

[Mrs. Arnold]

That's wonderful, dear! What's it about?

[Mr. Arnold]

Well, it's a sort of love story, but a science fiction world with fantasy elements, but more of a suspense piece, although I'd probably call the genre something closer to mystery; it's very avant-garde. You'll have to read it.

[Narrator]

Mrs. Arnold, who has no idea what her husband is talking about, nods her approval as he speaks and well after until he takes up the conversation again.

[Mr. Arnold]

Hey, is that a handful of bacon you're holding or am I just happy to see you?

[Mrs. Arnold]

Oh,

[Narrator]

Mrs. Arnold says, nervously placing her handful of bacon on the plate,

[Mrs. Arnold]

That's from this morning, I was just...I was going to throw it away.

[Narrator]

Mr. Arnold considers this for a moment, considers the handful of partially-eaten bacon and the chewing and says,

[Mr. Arnold]

Well, if it's good enough for you, it's good enough for me. Thanks for cooking, honey, but all this writing has gotten me tired and I'm sure you're anxious to read, so I'll just take your bacon to bed with me. In the morning, we'll send that off to a publisher!

[Narrator]

With only that and a smile, Mr. Arnold slips next to his wife to get his own even larger handful of bacon, then turns and walks back through his study to their shared bed. For once, though, Mrs. Arnold really is excited to take up reading. She eats a piece of leftover bacon as her husband leaves, waiting to be alone, and rushes into the study to finish it with Jed's new pages.

Although she is happy to begin, quickly sitting and thrusting into the work greasy fingers, the first page presents a problem worthy of a frown; only the first line is visible at all. The only evidence that the page might have been intended to hold letters past those is in the tiny creases left by the hammers as they struck the paper. She turns to the next page, then the next and the one after. Each one is blank.

She thrusts the papers back down on the desk and rolls her head back in the chair. What can she do? She begins picking up the balls of paper from around her feet. Well, what else can she do? As she picks them up, she starts to hurriedly unfold them on the desk, one after another as quickly as she can. If her husband intends to submit this to any publication...she actually doesn't know what will happen, but it won't be anything good. So to prevent that, she's changing the ribbon in the typewriter, carefully removing the last and placing a new one down in its place, changing them out so that the next set of key strokes leave a more defined mark, and then she's the one typing. She knows she's not the resident writer, but she has his words to work on. She taps away at the keys, more softly but with no less fervor, processing line after line of her own, copying down her husband's words as truthfully and quickly as she can.

Although they aren't her words, she works with the tireless dedication of the most obsessive artist. Time seems to pass faster for her as she goes, rattling out a burst of words in a line, then stripping out the page. Again she goes through the process, letters, words, lines, pages, and again and again.

She's thinking of her husband as she works. She does love his writing, at least when it's visible; she's never been untrue about that. She loves him more, though, and it's fear of seeing

him fail that gives her this present dedication as she types, shuffling one wrinkled page to the bottom of the pile each time she lays a new page at the top of her crisper pile.

Before she knows it, the sun has returned to remind Mrs. Arnold of the time. She pulls the last page of her copy from the typewriter and sets it down only long enough to pick up her collected effort and straighten it out. Wasting no time of his own, Mr. Arnold comes back down into the study after a good night's sleep.

[Mr. Arnold]

My dear! Did my writing really have so much impact on you that you stayed up all night?

[Narrator]

Mrs. Arnold is tired, more tired than she had realized until she started standing up, but offers only small hesitation.

[Mrs. Arnold]

Of course, I was too moved to rest. I really feel we should send it off immediately, exactly as it is; don't change a single letter. In fact, I'll even put it in an envelope for you.

[Narrator]

Mrs. Arnold leans over to rifle through the desk for an envelope but Mr. Arnold is quickly beside her. He snags the papers from her free hand and says,

[Mr. Arnold]

Oh no, dear,

[Narrator]

he says,

[Mr. Arnold]

I really should mail it flat, without creases. And how would we even fit this majesty in a single envelope?

[Narrator]

Mrs. Arnold watches nervously as her husband continues.

[Mr. Arnold]

Just listen to this first line: "It was the darkest night of all time." Really, that can't be beat! I mean, really, that's gold right there! Gold! And this line here: "The universe contracted in cosmic orgasm." That's deep!

[Narrator]

Mr. Arnold is immensely pleased by his work and, for a long moment of shuffling through the pages, reading the words he collected, he doesn't even realize that anything has changed. Slowly, though, he starts to get a sense of the story. All the while, Mrs. Arnold stands by, nervous smile covering the fear that he will find out about her treachery. When it finally happens, Mrs. Arnold is immediately aware. The moment the edges of his smile start to slip

away, she drops her façade altogether, barely remaining silent but paradoxically unable to speak. Finally, Mr. Arnold says,

[Mr. Arnold]

I don't understand...These are my words. I remember every line. These are my words, but this isn't my story. This isn't the way it happened. I don't...I can't...what is this?

[Narrator]

Mr. Arnold is half-paralyzed himself now, while his wife remains too meek to say anything. He reads over the words in a panic, flipping to the next page, hurriedly scanning it, flipping on to another page, never quite sure what he's seeing. He says,

[Mr. Arnold]

This is all wrong! No! This can't be! Am I going crazy?

[Narrator]

Finally, in the pause between panics, Mrs. Arnold speaks.

[Mrs. Arnold]

Jed...Jed, I'm sorry, I just couldn't...

[Mr. Arnold]

No!

[Narrator]

her husband interrupts.

[Mr. Arnold]

No! You knew? All this time, you knew about this?

[Mrs. Arnold]

Yes,

[Narrator]

she slowly begins,

[Mrs. Arnold]

But you have to understand, I...

[Mr. Arnold]

No!

[Narrator]

he says again, the same interruption.

[Mr. Arnold]

You knew I was insane all this time? And you never tried to help me?

[Mrs. Arnold]

No, dear! No! You're not insane! You don't understand! Your pages were all blank, I had to rewrite them from your drafts...

[Narrator]

She has more to say but his icy glare stops her. For a long moment the silence hangs uneasily above them both, like the blade of a guillotine. It is Mr. Arnold who finally speaks.

[Mr. Arnold]

All this time... All this time you knew I was crazy and tried to hide the truth from me. And now this? It finally comes out and the best lie you can think of, the best way you can come up with to keep me in the dark, is that I didn't write any of this? That I somehow imagined I was writing at all, and that's supposed to make me feel less crazy?

[Mrs. Arnold]

No! No, please, listen!

[Narrator]

She is pleading but even now her pauses are too long. She still doesn't know what to say.

[Mrs. Arnold]

You don't understand, I did this! I couldn't stand to see you fail, is all!

[Narrator]

Fury rises in the cheeks of her husband and Mrs. Arnold spends a long moment interpreting it, trying to see exactly the mistake she has spoken, before he makes the point painfully clear.

[Mr. Arnold]

You keep me captured here, a captive of my own lack of sanity! And why? Why? Because you think I'm a failure! And this is how it all comes out! Well, perhaps I am a failure! Perhaps I am! But I'm a crazy failure! Bat shit crazy!

[Narrator]

Another pause fills the room between his words, as if they're both trying to figure out what he means. In truth, only Mrs. Arnold is wondering; her husband simply doesn't care what his words could mean anymore. He knows the truth now, or at least the truth as he has interpreted it, which is that he is mentally insane and his words have little to no meaning at all.

[Mr. Arnold]

Alright, alright. So I'm crazy. I'm a crazy failure. Well, so were the romans! And you know what they say, right? When in Rome...

[Narrator]

Mrs. Arnold is scared now. She doesn't know what to expect from that drawn out and twisted smile he offers her. Whatever she expects, though, it certainly isn't what happens next. With a mad cackle, Mr. Arnold strips down to only underwear and socks and bursts out, through the kitchen and outside, shouting as he goes,

[Mr. Arnold]

I'm insane! I'm a crazy failure! I'm an insane crazy failure!

[Narrator]

then erupting in laughter. Mrs. Arnold says and does nothing. What can she do? At this point, she has to agree with his assessment; he is insane. She stands at the doorway, watching him run through the streets. She is confused, scared, sad, but all she can do is watch as his laughter fades into the distance only to be replaced shortly by the sound of not-too-far-off sirens as the curtain closes on Mr. Arnold's life as a writer.

[The End]