

Dictation by Amanda Penlington

Miss Benson

Mr Goldman

Their routine of boss (Miss Benson) and secretary (Mr Goldman) is of great importance to them so all of their actions and speech should be undertaken as deliberately and precisely as any ritual. Any breaks in their routine are indicated in the stage directions and should be played differently to mark these breaks to the audience.

An office.

(Miss Benson sits at a desk, reading papers, making notes, checking a diary. This activity can be improvised by the actor and director but it should establish that she is establishing this office as her space. Eventually she picks up the telephone and presses a single button. She has plenty of notebooks and pencils on her desk.)

Miss Benson      (on the telephone, starting their routine game) I need you Mr Goldman.

(Mr Goldman comes in.)

Mr Goldman      Yes, Miss Benson? What can I do for you?

Miss Benson      Dictation Mr Goldman, better fetch your notebook.

Mr Goldman      Yes, Miss Benson.

(Miss Benson files her nails. Mr Goldman exits, then returns, notebook in hand.)

Miss Benson      You have your notebook Mr Goldman?

Mr Goldman      Yes Miss Benson.

Miss Benson      Please take a seat.

(They smile at each other).

Miss Benson      Good. Let's get down to it.

(Miss Benson smiles, Mr Goldman opens the notebook.)

Miss Benson      (She is filing her nails again) To Mr Hardwicke of Hardwicke artilleries and weaponry.

(Mr Goldman looks for his pencil. It is missing.)

Miss Benson      Dear Mr Hardwicke. Regarding your recent request to extend your order for ...

Mr Goldman      Er, Miss Benson, if I could stop you there?

Miss Benson      Yes, Mr Goldman? Am I going too fast for you? Would you like me to slow it down?

Mr Goldman      It's not that, Miss Benson.

Miss Benson      What is it then Mr Goldman?

Mr Goldman      I've forgotten my pencil.

Miss Benson      Oh dear, Mr Goldman. Well we can't get going if you don't have a pencil, can we? Better go and get one.

(Mr Goldman exits.)

(Miss Benson looks at her hands and nails.)

(Mr Goldman returns with a pencil).

Miss Benson      Fully equipped now Mr Goldman?

Mr Goldman      Yes thank you Miss Benson, fully equipped.

Miss Benson      Right then Mr Goldman, please sit.

(He sits.)

Miss Benson      Let's get down to it. To Mr Hardwicke of Hardwicke artilleries and weaponry. Dear Mr Hardwicke. Regarding your recent request to extend your original order for 3000 boxes of Benson's power nuts and superhard screws...

(Whilst taking down the dictation Mr Goldman breaks the tip of his pencil at this point.)

Mr Goldman      Er, Miss Benson?

Miss Benson      Yes, Mr Goldman?

Mr Goldman      I'm having a little trouble keeping up Miss Benson.

Miss Benson      Why is that Mr Goldman? Would you like me to go slower?

Mr Goldman      No, it's not that Miss Benson.

Miss Benson      What is it then Mr Goldman?

Mr Goldman      It's my tip, Miss Benson.

Miss Benson      Sorry?

Mr Goldman      My tip. I appear to have broken it off.

(Mr Goldman shows his pencil to Miss Benson.)

Miss Benson      Oh dear. You were probably pressing too hard, Mr Goldman.

Mr Goldman      Yes Miss Benson.

Miss Benson      Better sharpen it up Mr Goldman.

Mr Goldman      Yes Miss Benson. (Mr Goldman gets up, takes a sharpener offered by Miss Benson, sharpens his pencil, bending over to put the shavings into the bin next to her desk. She watches him.)

Miss Benson      Hard or soft Mr Goldman?

Mr Goldman      I'm sorry?

Miss Benson      Is your pencil hard or soft Mr Goldman?

Mr Goldman      2B.

Miss Benson      Sounds a bit soft. Better try a 2H this time. I think you'll find that you can do more with that. Here, take one of mine. (Miss Benson hands Mr Goldman one of her pencils.)

Mr Goldman      Thank you Miss Benson. That's very kind of you.

Miss Benson      You're welcome. And ...

Mr Goldman      Yes Miss Benson?

Miss Benson      A little less pressure this time, eh, Mr Goldman?

Mr Goldman      Yes Miss Benson.

Miss Benson      Smooth, soft strokes should do it. Like a great artist. Don't feel that you have to rush. Let the equipment do the work.

(Mr Goldman returns to his seat. Miss Benson applies hand cream to her hands.)

Miss Benson      Now, where were we?

(Miss Benson puts her feet up on the desk and stretches out in her chair, placing her hands behind her head.)

Miss Benson      Read back to me what you've put down thus far.

Mr Goldman      To Mr Hardwicke of Hardwicke artilleries and weaponry. Dear Mr Hardwicke. Regarding your recent request to extend your original order for 3000 boxes of...

Miss Benson      Benson's power nuts and superhard screws...

Mr Goldman      Benson's power nuts and superhard screws... (He writes).

Miss Benson      I hope you don't mind me saying so Mr Goldman, but you seem to be having a little trouble with this piece of dictation.

Mr Goldman      It's not that, I...

Miss Benson      Yes Mr Goldman?

Mr Goldman      I'm a little uncomfortable.

Miss Benson      Uncomfortable?

Mr Goldman      Yes. I hope you don't mind me saying so?

Miss Benson      Not at all Mr Goldman. I'd hate for you to be uncomfortable. (Beat.) It's probably that chair. Why don't you come and sit over here?

Mr Goldman      Where?

Miss Benson      Here.

Mr Goldman      But there's no chair.

Miss Benson      Just perch on the edge of the desk then Mr Goldman. That way I can keep an eye on you and make sure that you're keeping up.

(Mr Goldman perches on the edge of the desk. They look at each other.)

Miss Benson      Now, let's get back to Mr Hardwicke's request for Benson's power nuts and superhard screws.

(Mr Goldman does not bring his pencil to the 'ready' position on the paper.)

Miss Benson      I sense that you are a little unwilling to take down this dictation, Mr Goldman. If we don't get this letter out and the extended order processed then Mr Hardwicke's men can't build his supergun.

Mr Goldman      (Breaking the routine) Can I ask you something?

Miss Benson      Yes Mr Goldman (she stresses his name to try and get their routine back on track).

Mr Goldman      (This is not part of the routine.) Do you believe in Mr Hardwicke's supergun? It sounds like a monstrous weapon, capable of wreaking unimaginable horrors. Do you really believe in it?

Miss Benson      (Sits forward; again, she tries to stay in role whilst giving an explanation that is not part of their usual routine.) It's not up to me whether I believe in it Mr Goldman, it is up to me to supply him with sufficient screws and nuts to build it. He depends upon the quality of our products to ensure the firepower of his weapon. Our viability as a firm depends upon fulfilling such orders. Our ability to fulfill the orders is based on strong management. Without a strong boss at the helm you would be out of a job. (Beat.) (Now re-establishing the routine) Are you more comfortable now Mr Goldman?

Mr Goldman      No, not really. This desk is a little hard.

Miss Benson      Perhaps you'd prefer something a little softer?

Mr Goldman      Yes.

Miss Benson      What do you suggest Mr Goldman?

Mr Goldman      I don't know, Miss Benson. There doesn't seem to be anything comfy to sit on.

(Miss Benson smiles.)

Miss Benson      Well, you better come and sit on my lap then, Mr Goldman.

Mr Goldman      Yes Miss Benson. (Mr Goldman sits on Miss Benson's lap.)

Miss Benson      Better, Mr Goldman?

Mr Goldman      Much better Miss Benson.

Miss Benson      Good. Comfy?

Mr Goldman      Very. Thank you. (Mr Goldman yawns.)

(Miss Benson moves her legs, making Mr Goldman fall. Her move should be obvious. It is part

of the ritual.)

Miss Benson Obviously a little too comfortable.

Mr Goldman Sorry about that Miss Benson. That was my fault.

Miss Benson Yes. Better climb back on.

(He does.)

Miss Benson Office work is rather tiring isn't it, Mr Goldman?

Mr Goldman Yes Miss Benson.

Miss Benson You're not alone in finding it tiresome Mr Goldman, (now she is breaking the routine) I sometimes wonder if our efforts are getting us anywhere.

Mr Goldman (Trying to maintain their roles but obviously anxious that it's about to collapse.) Don't think like that Miss Benson. (Now, out of the routine.) What you do here at work is important. Without you being here at work I wouldn't ... I couldn't imagine working without you.

(Beat. They both realise they need the routine to get through this moment of honesty.)

Miss Benson (Back in the routine.) Big business is so stressful. Constantly having to compete for each big order, having to work the factory long hours to meet the orders and then having to chase the clients for payment, especially in this difficult economic climate. It's vital that we keep this going.

(Now, a new and unfamiliar part of the routine.) At the end of the day when I go home to my husband I don't think he understands what my work is like. I think he finds it hard to...

Mr Goldman (Gets up. Appalled by this new information.) You have a husband?

Miss Benson Yes, Mr Goldman.

Mr Goldman (Breaking the routine.) No. That's not ... No.

Miss Benson (Attempting to re-establish the routine by staying in role.) Yes, Mr Goldman.

Mr Goldman (Confused.) But you are a 'miss' Miss Benson. 'Miss'. 'Benson'.

Miss Benson (Dangerously close to collapsing the routine.) I am Miss Benson at work Mr Goldman. (Beat.) At work you are my Mr Goldman and I am your Miss Benson. In my own time I answer to quite different names. Names my husband likes to use. Names that I like my husband using.

(Pause. Realises that she needs to go back to their usual routine).

Miss Benson But no need to worry your sweet little head about that. This is work time; back to work, back to the task in hand.

(Miss Benson pats her lap, Mr Goldman returns to sitting on Miss Benson's lap. Slight pause, as they both get back on track.)

Miss Benson (Half in the game, half about the game.) Remind me of where we're up please to Mr Goldman.

Mr Goldman 'Benson's power nuts and superhard screws.'

Miss Benson 'Benson's power nuts and superhard screws'. Yes. Thank you. (Beat.) (The game is now back on track.) I am delighted to inform you that, due to a surge in productivity based on increased manpower...

(She begins stroking his hair here but they both carry on with taking/receiving the dictation without a pause. It is not part of their usual game but it is a gesture of reconciliation between them. It is a tender moment.)

...we are able to meet your request for an additional 2000 units, thus bringing your total order to 5000 boxes of power nuts and superhard screws to be dispatched on the 20th of next month. Signed A. J. Benson, managing director of Benson's Brass. Do you have all of that Mr Goldman?

Mr Goldman Yes Miss Benson. I have it.

Miss Benson Good. You can type that up later on.

(She continues to stroke his hair. Mr Goldman closes his eyes. Neither speaks nor makes any other move. Their shared moment should be subtly enjoyed by both characters and played for slightly longer than either actor thinks that they can get away with it.)

Miss Benson (Softly.) Good. (She kisses the back of his head.)

(Slight pause.)

Miss Benson (Firmly, back on track.) Now, the letters that you typed yesterday...

Mr Goldman Yes Miss Benson?

Miss Benson Bring them in please.

Mr Goldman Yes Miss Benson.

(Mr Goldman exits with his notebook and the pencil Miss Benson gave him. Miss Benson takes out a compact mirror and looks at her reflection. Mr Goldman enters with the typed letters.)

Miss Benson      And the envelopes and stamps?

Mr Goldman      I'll just get them.

Miss Benson      Thank you. (Mr Goldman gives her the five letters, then exits.)

(Miss Benson applies lip balm to her lips during his absence. He returns and hands her the envelopes and stamps.)

Mr Goldman      Envelopes.

Miss Benson      Thank you Mr Goldman.

Mr Goldman      And stamps.

Miss Benson      Thank you.

Miss Benson      (Takes her time to look at the letters). These are satisfactory, Mr Goldman.

(She signs each letter.)

Miss Benson      Now fold them please.

(He takes his time to fold the A4 letters into thirds so that they will fit into business envelopes. He does not put them into the envelopes, handing each letter to Miss Benson for her approval of his folding. His folding requires him to stand at the desk, bending over slightly. She watches him.)

Miss Benson      (She checks his folded letters.) Good. All up to your usual high standards.

Miss Benson      Now, the envelopes. (She checks the addresses on all of them, one at a time.) Good. Very neat. Now place the letters inside the envelopes.

(He does so and then gives them to her unsealed.)

Miss Benson      Good. Thank you. (She puts them on the desk). Now lick.

(He takes one and licks it.)

Miss Benson      No. I'll hold them.

(She remains seated. She holds each envelope for him to lick. He stands next to her. She varies the height during the following dialogue so that he licks the first one standing, the next bending,



the next on his knees and the final one very close to the floor.)

Miss Benson      Lick. Lick. Lick. Lick. (Each word is a command for him to lick each envelope.)

Miss Benson      Good. (She strokes his hair. He does not move from his position close to the floor.) Now the stamps.

(She places a stamp in the palm of her hand. She lowers this first stamp to the level of the floor, where he has remained. She does not need to say anything, he knows what to do. He licks the stamp. She puts the stamp on the envelope.)

(She places the second stamp in the palm of her hand. She lowers this stamp to the level of just above her ankle. He rises to lick the stamp. She puts it on the envelope.)

(She places the third stamp in the palm of her hand. She lowers this stamp to the level of just below her knee. He rises to lick the stamp. She puts it on the envelope.)

(She places the fourth stamp in the palm of her hand. She lowers this stamp to the level of just above her knee on her lap. He rises to lick the stamp. She puts it on the envelope.)

(She places the final stamp in the palm of her hand. She lowers this stamp to the level of her genitals. He rises to lick the stamp. He remains where he is whilst she puts it on the envelope.)

Miss Benson      Good. (She strokes his hair and closes her eyes. He remains. Again, they hold this pause for as long as they dare to make the audience slightly uncomfortable. She opens her eyes.) Now, better get them posted Mr Goldman.

Mr Goldman      (He stands.) Yes Miss Benson.

(She hands him the letters with one hand and strokes his receiving hand with the other.)

Miss Benson      Oh, Mr Goldman, those hands.

Mr Goldman      Yes Miss Benson? What about my hands?

Miss Benson      They are rough Mr Goldman.

Mr Goldman      Must be all the paperwork Miss Benson.

Miss Benson      Well, we will have to do something about it, Mr Goldman. We can't have you handing Mr Hardwicke a cup of tea with rough hands like that when he collects his order.

Mr Goldman      No Miss Benson.

Miss Benson      Here, let me help you with that.

(She takes the letters and places them on the desk. She takes some handcream from her desk and squeezes it into her own hands. Slowly, she smooths the cream onto Mr Goldman's hands. This should be slow and sensual rather than obviously sexually-provocative.)

Miss Benson      There we are Mr Goldman.

Mr Goldman      Thank you Miss Benson.

Miss Benson      Now, Mr Goldman... oh, those lips.

Mr Goldman      What about them Miss Benson?

Miss Benson      They are dry Mr Goldman.

Mr Goldman      Probably all those envelopes Miss Benson.

Miss Benson      Well we can't have you talking to Mr Hardwicke with chapped lips when he collects his order.

Mr Goldman      I don't think he'd mind.

Miss Benson      Au contraire Mr Goldman, you are the first face that our clients see, as my secretary you need to look the best you can look. Here.

(She takes a pot of lipsalve from her desk and applies it to Mr Goldman's lips with her finger. Again, it is slow and deliberate.)

Miss Benson      (She whispers.) A little softness in a hard world.

Mr Goldman      (He smiles. Almost giggly.) Thank you Miss Benson. Should we..?

Miss Benson      Yes, Mr Goldman?

Mr Goldman      (Teasingly.) Should we make explicit to Mr Hardwicke the potency of the power nuts and superhard screws?

Miss Benson      What do you mean Mr Goldman?

Mr Goldman      Well, the power nuts need a firm application, a really tight squeeze. They are power nuts, after all.

Miss Benson      Yes Mr Goldman. And the superhard screws need plenty of power behind them to bore them tight into the holes.

Mr Goldman      Yes Miss Benson. It's all in the grip with a superhard screw.

Miss Benson      Yes Mr Goldman. Better make a note of that for Mr Hardwicke. Fetch your notebook and pencil.

(He exits. She draws a roll of sellotape and scissors, if required, nearer to her. She smiles. He returns with the notebook and pencil.)

(Mr Goldman smiles, waves the notebook, sits on the chair and begins writing.)

Miss Benson      What are you doing Mr Goldman? (He doesn't stop writing.)

Mr Goldman      (Whilst writing.) Writing Miss Benson.

Miss Benson      Are you composing that note yourself Mr Goldman? (He doesn't stop.)

Mr Goldman      (Still writing.) Yes Miss Benson.

Miss Benson      That is most irregular Mr Goldman. (He stops.) Dictation is dictation and composition is composition. I ask you not to confuse the two. Confusion leads to chaos and I will not tolerate it in my factory Mr Goldman.

Mr Goldman      I apologise Miss Benson.

Miss Benson      Get up Mr Goldman. (He gets up.) Give me back my pencil. (He does.) Don't think I didn't notice you taking it away just now. Put your notebook down, Mr Goldman. (He does). Bend over and place your hands flat on the desk Mr Goldman.

Mr Goldman      I...?

Miss Benson      ...Flat on the desk Mr Goldman. (He does.)

(She takes the roll of sellotape and tapes his hands to the desk. She can either use a sellotape dispenser or scissors to cut the tape. She should appear very calm and precise throughout and not at all angry. But both should take the action seriously. Once he is taped down and her materials are put to one side she stands and looks at him. A brief pause. She picks up a ruler, looks at it and flicks it.)

Mr Goldman      Are you going to hit me Miss Benson?

Miss Benson      Yes Mr Goldman.

(She stands behind him and brings the ruler down hard onto the desk next to him. It does not hit him but it does make him jump.)

Miss Benson Better prepare yourself.

(Mr Goldman takes a deep breath. Miss Benson puts down the ruler and makes sure that Mr Goldman sees her putting it down. This is their signal that she won't use the ruler, she'll use her hand instead. She moves behind him.)

Miss Benson      Are you ready Mr Goldman?

Mr Goldman      Yes Miss Benson. Ready when you are.

Miss Benson      Ready.

(They both take a deep breath. She raises her hand slowly to her starting position, then more quickly to take a swing back and hit him. At the height of her arm swinging back quickly the telephone rings so the spank does not happen. They freeze, look at the phone and wait. It rings again. Miss Benson answers it. Mr Goldman does not move.)

Miss Benson      Hello, Benson's Brass? Oh hello Mr Hardwicke. (Slight pause.) Yes. Yes it is. We were just about to send you a letter to confirm that we can handle the requested increase to your order. (Pause.) Yes, I appreciate that an email would reach you more quickly but we pride ourselves in our traditional approach here at Benson's Brass. (Pause.) You want to speak to A.J. Benson, the company's managing director? Certainly. I'm putting you through now. (Miss Benson holds the telephone to Mr Goldman's ear.)

Mr Goldman      Hello Mr Hardwicke. Yes, this is Mr Benson, managing director of Benson's Brass. I'm a little tied up at the moment Mr Hardwicke, may I place you on hold?

(Mr Goldman nods towards the phone and Miss Benson presses a button to put the call on hold. She uses scissors to free him from the desk. The conversation below occurs whilst she's cutting him free.)

Mr Goldman      Did I do it right Miss Goldman?

Miss Benson      Yes, Mr Benson.

Mr Goldman      I thought you were very good. You made a very good managing director. I'd love to have you as my boss.

Miss Benson      Thank you.

Mr Goldman      Is that what it's really like? Being a secretary?

Miss Benson      Of course Mr Benson, that's exactly how it is.

Blackout.