

# Tarpley Greathouse: The Ridiculous Typewriter Man Visits the K-12 School

by [Pedro Blas González](#) (June 2025)



A Woman Works on the Typewriter (Owen Smith for  
The New Yorker, 1995)

**Tarpley was alone in his** typewriter repair shop.

He stood by the large window at the front of the shop and gazed at the stillness of his neighborhood in early morning. The neighborhood children were at school; the few cars on the street were delivery vehicles.

A light drizzle blanketed the horizon with a dream-like mist that occluded the view of Tarpley's favorite neighborhood park, two blocks away.

Returning to his workstation, Tarpley turned the Remington Noiseless Model Seven typewriter he was inspecting on its back end and began to clean it. In the background, Sibelius's First Symphony, Tarpley's wife Margaret's favorite piece, was playing.

The bells hanging from the door handle of the front door rang. A customer walked into the shop. The woman said good morning, while closing her umbrella and holding the door open with her left leg.

"Hello, Ellen," Tarpley said, placing the Remington down.

"Mr. Greathouse, how are you? What a dreary day," the woman said, in an affected voice.

"Yes, I was just looking out the window. Well, at least it's not raining hard."

"Dreary nonetheless," the woman added, "I've made a mess of my Italian shoes. Tarpley, can you take a look at my little baby," she said, referring to her Hermes Baby portable typewriter.

"Your baby is acting up, I imagine," Tarpley said.

"Not exactly. Baby is always well behaved. It's just that the 'J' is getting stuck. It annoys me when that happens. The other day, while dusting around the desk, I may have banged it with a duster. Maybe that's the problem."

"Alright, let's take a look. Though, a duster is pretty light to cause much damage," Tarpley said, reaching out to take the typewriter case from the woman. "Do you want to leave it with me?" he asked.

"Can you look it over now?"

"I can. It could be something minor. If you like, you can leave it and return in a little while. Maybe you can get a bite to eat," Tarpley suggested.

"Oh, no. Not in this awful weather. I'll wait."

"Alright, let's take a look."

"What romantic music are you playing today?" the woman asked.

"Sibelius. His First Symphony. You like it?" Tarpley asked.

"Oh no. Sibelius is not a contender for my cats. Too romantic. It will drive them crazy. They're modern cats."

"Modern cats, eh?" Tarpley asked while inspecting the Hermes.

"Romantic music agitates my cats."

"How many lovelies do you have?"

"Three darling girls."

"I imagine they are selective cats," Tarpley said, trying not to smile.

"Oh yes. They even give me a run for my money. That's saying something."

"Well, the 'J' key is slightly bent. I think I can take care of that."

Noticing that the typewriter had cat hair in its typebars and internal mechanism, Tarpley turned to the woman and asked: "Tell me, Ms. Lecleur, have you ever caught your cats on top of the typewriter?"

"Well, yes. But Tarpley, caught is such a strong word. They are not criminals. My girls are allowed to climb wherever they want throughout the apartment. They can do whatever they want. They don't share my liquor because they can't open the bottles. Otherwise, they have the entire apartment to explore. Cats are curious creatures. They have better lives than we do, Mr. Greathouse."

"I see," Tarpley said.

Tarpley corrected the problem with the typewriter. After the customer left, he watched her walk across the street, the typewriter case in one hand, a pink umbrella with pictures of cats on the other.

*Well, that was another interesting exchange with Mr. Lecleur or is it Mrs. Liquor?* Tarpley thought. He sat down in front of the counter, smiled and began to type:

*The fussy woman has three cats. Not any humble cats.  
Fussy cats to match herself. Is there a boot  
camp for cats? Their owners, perhaps? I wonder.  
What a novel idea, that.*

Tarpley reflected: *What a combination: Postmodern ladies and their ultra ego cats. Is that what doctor Freud calls it?* He continued typing:

*The cat woman customer spoke.*

*I had no choice but to listen. Her voice resounding,  
filling the room. Her soprano voice packed the room with  
orders, exclamations. I began to worry about the state of  
my shop glass windows.*

*What is a cat sitting on the lap of a cat lady,  
if not the admission of forking paths  
that lead to solitary lives that bind together.*

*Tarpley, you are a ridiculous typewriter man, or so you have  
been accused by cat ladies, Tarpley thought, how I do enjoy  
the spectacle that is the world in my quiet moments.*

The bells hung on the doorknob of the front door of the shop rang. Tarpley looked up. A young woman entered.

"Hello Mr. Greathouse," she said, closing her black umbrella.

"Well, hello Maria."

"You remember my name."

"Of course. I remember the name of all my customers. Maria Fernandez, teacher of Spanish literature at the school several blocks from here. We discussed literary cats the last time you were here."

"I am very impressed. Wonderful memory you have, Mr. Greathouse. I couldn't stop laughing all the way home last time I was here."

"I enjoy myself whenever I can. The lighter side of life has always been a kind of hobby for me. So, tell me, is your machine out of sync?"

"My typewriters are working fine. I came to see you because I

have a proposition for you.”

“Oh,” Tarpley reacted.

“In a week, the school will be having its annual career day. We invite people from different professions—some are parents of the students at the school—to come and talk to the kids about their work. I want to invite you to come and talk to students about typewriters. Maybe you can bring two or three of your typewriters to show the students. You will make a good impression on them. Three of your typewriters will create a colorful contrast.”

“Ms. Fernandez, you want me to go to your school and talk to students about typewriters in this day of cellular telephones and other electronics? I don’t work in a profession like the other people you will be inviting.”

“You don’t need to. Some of the people coming are not professionals, but they do really interesting work. You are one of the interesting ones. Who doesn’t like interesting people?” Ms. Fernandez said.

“You humble me, Maria.”

“Besides, my students would love to meet you. I told them you are a genuine cat. *Un gato bravo*. They get it. Trust me.”

Tarpley laughed aloud.

“My students will appreciate you. They live in an age of mandated homogenous conformism. I have incorporated typewriters and their history in my literature classes. I use typewriters to introduce students to writers and writing. Anything that gets them to read. I mention you often.”

“Me?”

“Some students feel they know you. You know how impressionable young people are.”

"Ah, now I know why in the last several weeks three students from your school came into the shop asking about typewriters. Nice kids. Peculiar, I thought. Ms. Fernandez you surprise me. You are a supple, first-rate cat, and I don't mean cat lady."

"I am honored that you think of me as a real cat ... not a cat lady," Mr. Greathouse," Ms. Fernandez joked.

"Tarpley, call me Tarpley, Maria. I am Tarpley to my friends. You are a genuine character, just like your Spanish grandfather."

"You remember that too."

"I remember how proud you are of him."

"Thank you. So, do we have a deal?" Ms. Fernandez asked, "bring your wife with you. You'll both enjoy it."

"I think I can. I mean ... if you think it is a good idea."

"You will be fantastic. You'll have my students purchasing typewriters after your visit. This week I will promote your visit and get the students excited, the same way we do with the prom or sporting events."

"Oh, boy, Maria. Wait till I tell Margaret that I and my typewriters have been placed in the company of athletes and high school proms. She will laugh her head off. I hope I don't strike out, now that you have turned me into an athlete."

"You'll be great. I am thrilled you're coming. I will tell the students. I'll come by this week and give you the details. Maybe I can take the typewriters in my car—about three different models will create nice contrast."

Maria Fernandez left. Tarpley watched her walking away in the light rain, her black umbrella keeping her dry.

*Tarpley Greathouse, he thought, what a great mess did you just*

*get yourself into?*

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When Tarpley arrived at the school one hour before he was to sit behind a table alongside the other invited guests, he was taken to Mrs. Fernandez's first period class: Early Twentieth Century Spanish Literature.

Walking into the school office, then through the halls, Tarpley felt a strange sensation being inside a school. Many memories came back to him. A vivid melancholy came over him. He had not been inside a school in many years, since his two sons graduated from high school. He looked around, curious to read as many of the bulletin boards he passed on the way to Mrs. Fernandez's classroom on the third floor.

"These are very pretty," he said to the person guiding him, pointing to the bulletin boards.

"Thank you. Most of them are created by the children."

Once outside Mrs. Fernandez's class, Tarpley read a note that was written on 8.5 x 11 inch standard blank paper. It read: "Welcome Mr. Tarpley Greathouse to Mrs. Fernandez's Spanish literature class."

The main office person who guided him smiled at Tarpley and knocked on the door. Through the glass, Tarpley saw Mrs. Fernandez walking to the door. She was smiling. The teacher opened the door and shook Tarpley's hand. Leading him to the front of the class, she introduced him to the students.

"Class, this is Mr. Greathouse." Before Mrs. Fernandez continued introducing Tarpley, the students began to clap.

"Thank you," Tarpley said, gently bowing.

"Mr. Greathouse owns the typewriter shop off Myrtle Avenue. He has been at that location for how many years, Mr. Greathouse?"



she turned and asked Tarpley.

"Over forty years," Tarpley answered.

"Mr. Greathouse, welcome to our early twentieth century Spanish literature class. My students have recently been introduced to typewriters and the machines that some famous writers used to write their works. I have told them about your love of typewriters, storytelling, language ... what else, students?" the teacher asked the class.

"Cats," the senior students answered, excitedly, as if they had rehearsed for the occasion.

Tarpley laughed aloud.

"Mrs. Greathouse," Ms. Fernandez continued, motioning Tarpley to stand behind her podium, "please tell us more about yourself."

"I have been married for almost fifty years. I have two sons. One is a high school teacher, the other a university professor."

"Mr. Greathouse, these students helped me set up your table in the cafeteria. They love the typewriters. As is, I have two students over there right now making sure no one touches them."

"Yeah, if someone does, we'll take care of them," a male student said. Tarpley and the other students laughed.

"Mr. Greathouse, as you can see, we have some genuine cats in this class," the teacher said. The students began a boisterous laugh. "Mr. Greathouse," the teacher continued, "tell us more about your love of typewriters."

"Well, when I was a boy, my father worked in a machine shop that built transmission parts for automobiles. During my summer vacations from school, my father often took me to the

shop and allowed me to help with small tasks. I began to have great appreciate four gears and how machines work. I went to the shop for many years and got a lot of hands-on knowledge about how machines work. When I went to college, I became an industrial design major."

"Ah, I didn't know that," Mrs. Fernandez interrupted.

"Yes, I bought a typewriter to type my course material on. Whenever I had a problem with the typewriter, I figured it out and fixed it."

"So, you graduated as an industrial designer?" asked Ms. Fernandez.

"Oh, yes."

"What happened next?"

"I worked for several companies. At the time, I owned two or three typewriters. I didn't particularly like working in an office setting. One of my friends' father owned a typewriter sale and repair shop he wanted to sell. I thought about it and after several weeks decided to purchase it. At that time typewriter repair shops offered a necessary service. That is how I came to own *Greathouse Machines*.

"That's fascinating, Mr. Greathouse," said Mrs. Fernandez, "and how did your love of writing begin?"

"Well, I wrote short stories as a young man, even when I was in college and worked for the design companies. When I bought the shop, I had a lot more time to write stories while testing and repairing the typewriters. Stories are important to me. They slow life down. They enable us to organize our ideas about the world and human reality," he told the students.

"Mr. Greathouse, Ms. Fernandez told us you like to write light, eccentric stories," a senior female student said.

"That is some of the most rewarding writing. In the absence of storytelling, we are left with the droning sound of the daily world. As you can imagine, most mundane things turn out to be banal ... often trivial.

Ms. Fernandez nodded in approval.

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Tarpley sat behind a table that was set up as his booth. He was stationed between a lawyer and a nurse. On his table he had a 1949 Royal KMG standard— one of his favorite machines. He also displayed a 1964 baby blue Royal Aristocrat, and a light brown and beige 1960s Smith Corona electric Electra 110. He welcomed students to type on the machines. Students were dazzled by the speed of the electric Smith Corona.

Teachers paraded their students through the line of booths, allowing them to ask questions and enjoy the displays that the different guests brought with them. While Tarpley was talking to some middle school grade students about typewriters, he heard a voice call out: "Mr. Greatstreet."

"Hello, Mr. Greatstreet," said Matthew, Tarpley's little boy neighbor. Tarpley looked up from the typewriter and waved.

"Ms. Johnson, that's Mr. Greatstreet, my friend."

Matthew left his fourth grade class line and walked around the opening between Tarpley's table and the nurse next to his. The boy shook Tarpley's hand.

"How are you, Matthew? Good to see you at your school."

"I didn't know you were coming, Mr. Greatstreet. Mr. Greatstreet writes funny stories about cats and teaches me how to type," Matthew said, addressing his teacher.

Ms. Johnson, Matthew's teacher introduced herself and her class to Tarpley.

Matthew said: "I'm happy you're here, Mr. Greatstreet."

"Mr. Greathouse, Matthew," the teacher interrupted Matthew. She pointed to the name tag Tarpley was wearing.

Tarpley winked and nodded to Ms. Johnson.

"Yes. He is Mr. Greatstreet, my friend who fixes typewriters. Mr. Greatstreet can I type something?" Matthew asked.

"Of course. Go right ahead," Tarpley said getting up from his chair.

"Let's see," Matthew said, sitting on Tarpley's chair. He began to type with two fingers:

*Mr. Greatstreet has a black cat.*

*The cat is named Blackie.*

*The cat is big and long.*

*It has big white teeth and long whiskers.*

*Mr. Greatstreet writes funny stories about his big furry cat.*

"You like my funny story, Mr. Greatstreet?" Matthew asked. Tarpley read the story aloud while still standing.

"That's a fun and funny story, Matthew," Tarpley said, after he finished reading. Matthew's classmates laughed and clapped.

"Matthew is a natural-born writer," the teacher said, looking at Tarpley. The boy's face turned red with pride.

After Matthew's class left, Mr. Fernandez brought a tenth grade class to Tarpley's booth. A student said: "Mr. Greathouse you have a nice shop. I went in about a month ago. I don't know if you remember me."

"I do remember."

When school let out, Ms. Fernandez drove Tarpley to his shop. She helped him carry the typewriters into the shop.

"The children loved you. I knew you would be great, Ms. Fernandez said and hugged Tarpley. "You never told me you were an industrial designer."

"What's the difference? I am content to talk about typewriters all day long. I love mechanical things. They are some of the most honest and loyal things we can encounter in this world," Tarpley said.

After Maria Fernandez left, Tarpley turned off the shop lights, locked up, and stood outside his glass window that read: *Greathouse Machines*.

*Tarpley, you ridiculous typewriter man, he thought, when was the last time you had so much fun?*

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