

Dear Ben,

It's probably time to put a few things down in writing. Till now I've cut your sense of professional ethics a lot of slack. After all, we were friendly; you helped me get this job; I couldn't help but feel affection for you and your oddball ways. But I no longer find the latter quite so cute.

Every month, various contributors to the magazine bring to my attention that the very day after the new issue is sent out, they get a call from you asking them to pitch ideas to *Good Weekend*. Invariably these writers are struck by your lack of guile; they include those who you have, apparently unwittingly, offended or even cast off in the past. Invariably they are also struck by the lack of your own ideas.

Naturally, some are also rather pleased to be offered a higher rate than you know I offer (\$1 a word), and indeed higher than I know you offer to most of your writers (70 to 80 cents a word).

Let's go back to the start. Within my first weeks in the job, contributors to the *Monthly* were letting me know you were offering them \$1.50 a word. I kept a list; within a month there were eight on it. Interestingly, they were all male. Yet you denied this, both to me and publicly (to the *Australian*). You were lying, but you had to, as you were simultaneously insisting to other writers (who, interestingly, were all female) that 80 cents a word was as high as you could go.

Then, a few months ago, you offered *me* \$1.50 a word to write for you. Your chutzpah was kind of funny, though some writers (such as those suspecting you of underpaying them) felt otherwise when I showed them your email. By then you'd started courting a select bunch of *Monthly* contributors with a rate of \$2/word. We both know who they are – well, I know of four. That's ok. It's not as if they don't deserve it. And it's not like they've stopped writing for the *Monthly*.

I don't mind a bit of competition, and you've got to do what you've got to do: *Good Weekend* has never looked more bereft, which saddens me – it was my home for a long time. Seeing a six-year-old *Two of Us* column of mine regurgitated last Saturday, with the same couple telling the same story, was fairly telling.

But your compulsive pursuit of the contributors to each new *Monthly* issue does trouble me. Having a stalker may be a form of flattery, but it's still kind of creepy.

Today I found out just how far you will go. This is what I learnt: you very recently badgered one of Australia's very best writers to pull a story he'd agreed to write for the *Monthly* and sell it to you instead. You eventually offered that writer \$2.50/word. This meant that writer would get \$15,000 more for his story. To that writer's eternal credit, he did not go back on his gentleman's agreement with me. There is no question in my mind that you offered that kind of money not just because that writer was worth it, or because the readers of *Good Weekend* were worth it, but because you wished to undermine the *Monthly*. This is despicable. It is also plain weird. Get some ideas of your own, and stop behaving like a fucking dalek.

John –

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