

ONE

From: tec_m@national.com
To: crazdin@dinu.com
Subject: Re: Writers

Hi Dinuka,

Thank you for the interest you've shown in Techno Magazine. We are always on the lookout for new writers. Please drop in at our offices anytime during a weekday for a chat.

Regards,
Asela Pathivitharana,
Editor, Techno Magazine

* * *

From: crazdin@dinu.com
To: tec_m@national.com
Subject: Re: Re: Writers

Dear Mr. Pathivitharana,

Thank you for the prompt response. I'm afraid I will not be able to 'drop in for a chat' as I work on weekdays. Could you kindly let me know the assignments you want me to work on, and how much you'll pay me, via an e-mail?

Best Wishes,
Dinuka

* * *

From: tec_m@national.com

To: crazdin@dinu.com
Subject: Assignments and Payment

Hi Dinuka,

Sorry, can't think of an assignment straight away. You are free to write about anything you like, as long as it's relevant to Techno. We pay eight rupees per published word.

Rgds,
Asela

* * *

From: crazdin@dinu.com
To: tec_m@national.com
Subject: Great

Dear Mr. Pathivitharana,

Wow! Eight rupees per published word is very generous. Will find an assignment on my own and work on it straight away.

Best Wishes,
Dinuka

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TWO

Himath wraps his left arm round the back of my seat and peers at the space behind the car. He is trying to reverse it into the slot between a high-ace van and a bike in the office car park. He has never been this close to me before. To have his arm around the seat is almost like having it around my shoulders.

He is so close I can smell his aftershave. I am glad the music is playing and Frank Sinatra is singing ‘Fly me to the moon...’, because I hope the music is muffling the sudden urgent beating of my heart. I keep my eyes on the dashboard till he finishes reversing, pulls the hand-brake and opens the door.

He turns to me and asks, “Dinuka, what’s the matter? Is something wrong with the dashboard? Why are you staring at it as if it’s going to bite you?”

“No...it’s nothing,” I mutter, gathering my bag and opening the door. Shooting me a suspicious look, he stares at the dashboard for a second, trying to make sure nothing is wrong with it.

“Well, I promise you it will be there when you come back in the evening. You *are* going home with me, aren’t you?”

“Um, yes. If you don’t mind...”

My voice trails off as we both get out of the car, clutching our office paraphernalia in our arms; he with a stylish black briefcase, and I with my battered cloth hold-all which, I try to convince everyone who looks at it with raised eye-brows, is a must-have for all good journalists. My unruly hair is tied in a ponytail while my crumpled cotton shirt and faded denims contrast sharply with his well ironed white shirt, black trousers and close-cropped hair. He looks stylish and totally in control of the situation.

Locking the car without another word, he strides off towards the massive concrete structure in front of us. I follow him at a slower pace. I know he will disappear into the lift and get off at the third floor, where he works as an accountant for the Daily Guardian.

I run up the stairs to the second floor. The Guardian is where I work too, as a journalist and the second floor is home to the scribes of the Daily Guardian. Ever since I joined The Guardian a year ago, we have travelled to office together in Himath's car, although, usually Himath's sister, Nimali—secretary to the Chief Executive Officer—would have driven with us.

Every morning, I make a dash to their place, minutes before Himath starts the engine and backs the car out of the garage. Since I don't drive, I am lucky to live only three houses away from where he and Nimali live with their parents. Lately, in the morning, spending time replying to the emails the editor of Techno sends me means I reach the car just in time.

I write for Techno because I need the extra income. I turned twenty-two last month. I plan to travel and see the world before I settle down. My first stop will be New York, where my uncle works as a professor at a college in Queens. The air ticket costs a fortune though, and I don't want my parents to finance the trip. I want to be totally independent. Hence the part-time job freelancing for Techno.

Today, Nimali reported in sick because she intends to go venue-hunting for her upcoming wedding. When I sprinted over to their house this morning, Nimali had come out, still clad in her nightdress, to say I would have to ride alone with Himath.

"You're not scared, are you?" she had grinned wickedly, eyeing her brother.

Although my heart was beating rapidly at the thought of sitting next to Himath all alone all the way to the office, I had tried to hide my excitement. I have known him and Nimali ever since the day they moved to our neighborhood and we played together as kids. It's only recently, after I started working at The Guardian, that I blush at the very thought of him. That's a secret only my diary and I know!

My mind is still on Himath, (his designer-chic stubble, the strong angles of his face, the smell of his aftershave, the way he had noticed me staring at the dashboard) as I climb the stairs two at a time to my office. How did he feel about being alone with me? Had it been absolutely necessary, to put his arm around the seat, or did he do that to get close to me?

Craaaaaaaash! I hit something hard as I open the door and enter my office space, the features department of the Daily Guardian. It

takes a few seconds to realize I've crashed into a dozen box-files held by Godzi (short for Godzilla, our nickname for Tissa, sub-editor of the book-reviews section and Buddhist pages).

"Sorry! Did I hurt you?" asks Godzi, with a concerned look on his face. Genuine, I think, because the guy really is into meditation and acquiring merit through good deeds, as befits one who is in charge of the Buddhist and the *poya* (full moon holiday) pages.

I yearn to go down on my knees, clutching my chest in agony, but grin and say, "No, no! Didn't feel a thing." as I wheeze past him.

"Good Morning Mr. Sebastian," I exclaim, as cheerfully as I can, to the figure seated on the left-side of the room, even though I can still feel the pain and am dying to do something to ease it.

"Morning!" he says, without lowering the pages of today's Guardian. This has been our custom ever since my first day at work. Mr. Sebastian is the features editor, and, as confessed during my first few weeks at work, twenty-two years older than me and twenty-six years younger than my father. He looks as cherubic as the poet P.B Shelley would have, if Shelley had lived to be this old.

As far as office work goes, both of us have now settled down to a kind of an amiable relationship; me as the youngest journalist around and him as my editor, mentor, guardian and tormentor. Anything more? On my part, at least, there is a deep sense of admiration for all the books Mr. Seb has read and the deep thought-provoking editorials he writes effortlessly almost every day. As for what he thinks about me, I really don't know.

Not that I care. Not when Himath is there to occupy my thoughts all day. I am too busy daydreaming of the million intimate moments that might come about on our way home this evening. I wish we lived somewhere far away like Timbuktu, with the journey home lasting more than the twenty minutes it usually does in normal traffic conditions.

I am brought back to the present by Mr. Seb.

"So where is my copy?"

I shrug my shoulders to say I don't know. Both of us know there is no copy. This is only the preamble of what will follow.

"Come here."

I leave my tiny desk to stand in front of the massive oak structure that masquerades as Mr. Seb's desk, (at The Guardian, rank is symbolized by

the size of the desk of the owner) feeling like a kid summoned by the principal at school for misbehavior. I know Mr. Seb does this on purpose.

“I would like you to work on this today,” he says, handing me a brochure. “Go there today, interview as many people as you can and write something for Opp-leader for the day-after-tomorrow.” (Opp-leader is the page opposite the editorial and is the second most coveted page in the newspaper, the best being the page with the editorial)

I am dismissed with a flick of his hand. How do I get there? Will I be given transportation? Experience tells me I will have to look after all that on my own. The almighty St. Sebastian has given a command and I, a mere mortal journalist, have to comply.

It takes me more than two hours to find the correct bus route and to reach my destination. After killing hours in various government departments, I finally manage to meet a couple of officers who are willing to divulge enough information for my article.

I make it back to the office by four-thirty pm and sign off at five. I walk to the car park, thinking of the opening paragraph of my copy, which I'll be writing first thing tomorrow morning. My heart thudding, I stop short in my tracks. Himath is waiting at the entrance of the car park, looking cool and debonair. I forget all about my copy.



THREE

From: crazdin@dinu.com
To: tec_m@national.com
Subject: I'm a girl

Dear Mr. Pathivitharana,

Sorry. I thought you knew I'm a girl when you first wrote to me. But this isn't the first time people have thought I'm a guy. I'm glad I called you today. I can imagine how surprised you must've been when you heard me say 'I'm Dinuka'. I hope this won't hinder the assignments I'm working on for Techno.

Best Wishes,
Dinuka

P.S: Would you have allowed me to write for Techno if you knew I was a girl?

* * *

From: tec_m@national.com
To: crazdin@dinu.com
Subject: Re: I'm a girl
Hi Dinuka,

Certainly not. I mean, you being a girl doesn't matter at all when it comes to writing for Techno. In fact it's a pleasant surprise. Go ahead with the assignments you are working on.

Regards,
Asela

P.S: Please call me Asela—I feel uncomfortable when you refer to me as Mr. Pathivitharana.

* * *

From: crazdin@dinu.com
To: tec_m@national.com
Subject: never

Dear Mr. Pathivitharana,

Call you Asela? Never. You are my editor. I'd like to be formal with the editor of Techno. I am worried if I get too friendly with you, something might go wrong, and I may not get to write for Techno again. I want to keep a professional distance between us.

Best Wishes,
Dinuka

* * *

From: aselapath@asela.com
To: crazdin@dinu.com
Subject: Hi

Relax. You can be formal with Techno. But from now on, I'll be writing to you from my personal e-mail address. Please call me Asela.

Rgds,
Asela

* * *

From: crazdin@dinu.com
To: aselapath@asela.com
Subject: Once bitten twice shy

Thanks but no. If I do, you might cast me off one day.

* * *

From: aselapath@asela.com
To: crazdin@dinu.com
Subject: Re: Once bitten twice shy

Cast you off? Never.

* * *

From: crazdin@dinu.com
To: aselapath@asela.com
Subject: Re: Re: once bitten twice shy

Is that a promise?

* * *

From: aselapath@asela.com
To: crazdin@dinu.com
Subject: Re; Re: Re:

YES. A PROMISE.

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FOUR

“Every human being has a little bit of insanity in them” said Lord Buddha. I mutter his words to myself as I make my way to the Institute for the Treatment of Obsessive Disorders (TOD) on 1st Lane, Colombo 10. Mr. Seb has sent me on this assignment because he saw a news item saying the institute will be celebrating its tenth anniversary next week.

Seated in the reception area, I read the posters on the walls; Dementia, Depression, Schizophrenia, Anxiety, etc. Statistics suggest hundreds and thousands of Sri Lankans suffer from mental disorders. My eyes shift to a teenage girl with a Mona Lisa face (only darker) seated in front of me. In outward appearance at least, she appears perfectly normal. If not for the badge saying ‘Client’ pinned to her blouse, I would never have taken her for a patient. Seeing me staring at her she, walks up to me, covers her mouth with her hand and begins to giggle.

I raise my eyebrows and gently ask her, “What’s the matter?”

She giggles again and says, “I’m scared of boys.”

“Scared of boys?” Not knowing what to say, I repeat her words.

“Yes, very scared of them.” Then she looks at my denim and cotton shirt. “You’re dressed like a boy too,” she pauses, giggles some more and says, “but I’m not scared of you.”

I make room on the cushioned bench and invite her to sit beside me. Before she can, Dr. Neil Wijemuni, the chief medical officer, walks towards me and says, “Let’s step into the library where we can have a leisurely chat.”

As we walk down the passages of TOD, an old man with craggy, Clint Eastwood-esque features walks up to me and shakes my hand. He seems to have forgotten that we had already done that ten minutes ago, when he had asked my name and wanted to know the names of all the newspapers published by The Guardian Publishing House. He had even jotted them down on a piece of paper. I learn from Dr. Wijemuni that Mr. Eastwood suffers from dementia, which makes him forget recent happenings.

We are alone in the library. Dr. Wijemuni looks quite fit for someone in his early forties. He gives me a comprehensive lecture on mental illness and the work his institute is doing to eradicate the stigma attached to those who suffer from mental disorders. I am diligently writing down everything he says. Suddenly, he stops talking. I raise my head from the notebook and look up at him. His eyes meet mine across the room. He shifts slightly in his chair.

He looks at me strangely and in an altered tone says, “Any person who has obsessive thoughts is also a mentally disordered person. There are some men who don’t know how to handle their thoughts...”

I look away and seek refuge in my notebook. He gets up from his chair and begins to walk unsteadily towards me, with his hands in his pockets.

“How good is your knowledge of biology? Did you do science for your A-Levels?”

I gulp and put down my pen. He is standing directly in front of me now, leaning in.

“Do you know what *copora cavenosa* means? Shall I show it to you?”

I grab my bag, stuff my pen and notebook in it, and run.

* * *

I sign off, somehow or the other, at five in the evening, after writing the article on TOD. Himath is the only one waiting for me in the car park. The novelty of being alone with Himath has worn off by now. Nimali has begun to take more and more days off to prepare for her wedding and I have been riding alone with Himath, to and from work, every day. Since she is going to resign the moment a replacement is found, no one minds Nimali’s absence from work.

Today, my mind is too preoccupied with the incident in the morning to chat with Himath the way I usually do. I am still thinking about what Dr. W had said, squirming at the way he had looked when I last saw him. Himath takes his eyes off the road for a moment and looks at me closely.

“Is something wrong?”

“No!” I exclaim too quickly.

“Where’s all that chatter about what Mr. Seb said, what you said, what a reader called to say and what Kaushalya said about her girlfriend’s spending sprees?”

“You mean you actually listen to all the stuff I tell you every day?”

“Not really. It’s more like noticing the silence when there is no one chattering away like a monkey all the way home. I can’t believe life could have been that quiet at features today?”

I let him get away with the monkey reference without protest. My mind has other things to worry about. Should I tell him about *copora cavenosa*? Was that what the doctor said? What did it mean? Ask Himath? No!

I decide to change the subject. “Tell me about your day for a change.”

“Nothing to say. Lots of accounting. Boring!”

I remain silent. I’m thinking of how I will write everything that happened today in my diary. I am almost at the last bit of my imaginary narration when he pulls up outside my home. He gives me a puzzled look before driving off. I ignore it and wave goodbye, trying to look as cheerful as possible.

At about nine that night my mobile rings. The number is unfamiliar. I prepare myself to say wrong number.

“Hello?”

“Dinuka?” A familiar voice. “Himath here.”

“Oh, hello.”

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yep!”

“You were quiet today in the car...”

“Hmmm...”

“Did you quarrel with Mr. Seb?”

“No.”

“Then?”

“Had to go out on an assignment today.”

“And?”

“I saw this doctor and he said some weird stuff.”

“Weird stuff like what?”

“Just stuff.”

“Stuff you can’t tell me?”

“Hmmm...”

“Why not? It doesn’t help to have things bottled up inside you.”

“Hmmm.”

“Will you stop saying ‘Hmmm’ and say something?”

“No. See you tomorrow. Will Nimali be there?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Okay. See you in the morning.”

“Good night.”

