

Half a Dozen of Another

Brian Allan Skinner

“You are a fraud and kind of disgusting.”

The note was left in my mailbox with no envelope or postage. I looked up and down the road, but there was no indication anyone had driven past recently. Despite a breeze, the dust was down. Nothing stirred among the sagebrush and chamisa.

It was handwritten on lined paper, the holes at the left margin ripped out by tearing the page from a spiral notebook. I thought it a waste to use up an entire sheet for a short note. I re-read it in case some more writing had appeared, looking down the road in case there was a plume of dust after all. I shut the door on the metal mailbox and returned to the house.

Re-folding the note, I placed it under the lamp on the kitchen table so the wind wouldn't blow it off.

I admit I'm a fraud, but who, other than God, also knows it's true. I smile at people even though I'd sooner spit in their faces most of the time. I'm dating a gorgeous woman named Hypatia, but I am far more attracted to her brother Alexander. I go to church every Sunday even though on most of them I haven't a shred of belief.

The message got under my skin. It remained irritatingly the same no matter how often I read it. The handwriting was only vaguely familiar. I wondered which of my friends or neighbors left it for me. I'd had no recent falling-out with any of them. Devising a plan to get one of them to tip his hand, I decided to tell them I'm taking a home study course in handwriting analysis, asking them to send me a full-page sample.

That night I awoke at three in the morning and had to go downstairs to re-read the mysterious letter. I never got back to sleep.

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The responses to my request for writing samples trickled in. None of them came close. Hypatia gave me hers on our next date. She wore a sleek red dress, silver earrings like tiny hubcaps, and high heels. Wearing jeans and an untucked shirt, I felt underdressed and was annoyed at her. She sensed it and made sniping remarks over our supper at *The Two Maggots*, a place whose name put me off before the first bite. I grew resentful of how much the meal and wine at this faux French bistro would set me back. But that's where she wanted to go.

After supper, Hypatia lured me back to my place. I'd had a half-glass of wine and she'd downed the rest of the bottle. I knew what was on her mind. As always, I suspected she thought I'd never made it with a woman before and it made me nervous. I was running out of excuses.

"Are you still a virgin, Six?" she asked. "You fumble around like a teenager."

"Are you kidding?" I laughed. "Maybe I just had a little too much to drink."

"You? If one sip does you in, you've got a threshold low enough to trip over. Could you make me a cup of coffee?"

I admit I thought of adding something to her coffee other than cream, but was afraid she'd still be here in the morning. The cup rattled in the saucer as I brought it to her.

Hypatia was asleep—or passed out. I thanked God. At that particular moment it was easy to believe in Him. She slouched into a corner of the sofa, her legs spread wide apart: a situation most men would find enviable.

I trundled upstairs to bed and wondered whether or not to pretend we'd done it. Assuming Hypatia was not herself a virgin, how would she know? She could not have refuted a visit by extraterrestrials.

When I came downstairs in the morning, she had the good manners to be gone without a trace.

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There were no matches to the handwriting on the note, not even to the sample from Hypatia, who was my prime suspect. I didn't know anyone else. How would an utter stranger know so much about me?

At last I came to the opinion that it was left in my mailbox by mistake, though I couldn't quite explain its uncanny accuracy. I was glad I didn't know the true recipient. He sounded like a real bastard.

* * *

The next note was in Saturday's mail: same paper, same handwriting. My hand trembled.

"If your friends knew how you lied to them, they'd be disappointed; but if they knew the truth, they'd run screaming."

I fetched the first note and set it beside the new one, and sat at the kitchen table. Except for the message, they were identical, torn from the same spiral notebook.

After wracking my memory for the one person I overlooked who actually wrote the letter, I decided to go out for a drink. My usual haunt was *The Ornerly Burro*, what passes for a gay bar here in Red Willow. It's a gay bar only in the sense that if they find out you're gay, they don't throw you out. It wasn't the sort of place where I usually found women, so it was a chance to evade my often cloying dates. My good looks often forced me to resort to such measures.

They knew me at the *Burro* though I'd had only a handful of conversations. The regulars called themselves *Burrocrats*. Certainly none of them wrote the note. I never told anyone my name.

I ordered a bourbon-and-soda without the soda. My attention was drawn to a black-haired fellow in tight jeans at the end of the bar, but I did not seem to be able to get his attention.

I asked the bartender, a fellow named Lloyd, to send him a bourbon-and-soda. He refilled mine, again without dilution, and I sauntered on over to introduce myself.

"Alexander," I exclaimed.

"Hi, Six. Hypatia said I might find you here."

"Why would she say that?"

"I guess she was right. You're here."

His smile made it hard for me to concentrate. Like his sister's mestizo handsomeness, he'd inherited the best of both worlds.

"Do you think I like men or something?" I asked him.

"If not, who's left? Aliens from Roswell? She said maybe I could help you come to terms, you know, one gay man to another?"

"You're gay?"

"Why else do you think I come here?"

"For the drinks?"

Alexander laughed again and I saw a bit of his sister's dark fire in his eyes. I realized he was the one person I knew whom I hadn't considered might have written the notes slipped into my mailbox. And his motive? He was trying to out me. Blackmail? What else?

"Maybe there is something you can do for me, Alex."

“The name’s *Alexander*.”

“Sure. Whatever,” I told him. “I owe your sister an apology. I know that. But if she sees the letter is from me, it’s likely to burst into flames before she reads it. If it’s in your handwriting, I at least stand a chance of her reading it. Could I dictate it to you?”

“Sure. On what with what?”

I congratulated myself on my quick thinking to get a sample of his writing. Handing him a ballpoint from my jacket pocket, I pulled a bar menu from its plastic sleeve. He could write on the back.

Feeling my second highball, I managed to concoct the most insincere pile of horse shit imaginable. I made it Hypatia’s fault I was no longer attracted to women. I ordered another drink.

“It’s not my letter,” Alex said, “but it *is* my sister. You’re not winning any points.”

“I’ll worry about keeping score. Thanks, Alex... ander. Aren’t you going to finish your drink?”

“No, sorry, Six. The hard stuff wipes me out. Good luck. Let me know how it goes.”

“Sure thing.”

I could see then and there that Alex wasn’t the culprit. You can’t fake your handwriting.

I had no intention of sending anything to Hypatia, except maybe a bill for her half of all the meals and movie tickets I wasted on her. And I’d no plan to tell Alex anything except that he wasn’t my type after all. Folding the letter and putting it in my pocket, I finished his drink and the rest of mine.

The lot of *The Ornerly Burro* was a swirl of cars, none of them mine. Going up and down the spiraling rows for the second time, I came upon Alex and another guy making out on the front seat of an old Ford pickup. I didn’t feel so good. They noticed me when I slipped onto the hood of my car bending over to pick up my keys. Alex jumped out.

“I think you better let my buddy Lance be your designated driver, Six. Keys?”

I motioned in the general direction of the ground. They got me into my car, sprawled onto the back seat. I still didn’t feel so good.

* * *

“You pretend you got your name because you were ‘Daddy’s Li’l Six-shooter.’ But, after two brothers and three sisters before you, your parents got tired of coming up with names and called you simply ‘Number Six,’ or ‘Six’ for short.”

I slammed the door of the mailbox so hard it didn’t have time to squeak. The rusty screws broke and the mailbox came off its post, clanking to the ground. I didn’t need to compare the goddamn letter to anything. It was the same as all the others.

The true story of how I got my name was revealed only when my father imparted it to me on his deathbed. My mother was already dead. The only other person in the room was the hospice volunteer. Did they even keep records on them?

I determined to find out. Though I should have been at work in the greenhouse at *Mila-Grow Nursery*, I took another day off and drove to the next county. My boss was on the verge of getting angry. Nicolás’ voice went up a notch and, impossibly, his English became more fractured. I took the letter with me.

My father had died at *Our Lady of Perpetual Suffering Hospital* three years ago. They sent me to the Office of Records in the basement. The woman behind the desk was named “Fanny” according to her tag. She looked like one. I told her what I needed to know.

She adjusted her glasses and pulled open a deep file drawer.

“I remember your father. I worked upstairs back then, at the main desk. He was always polite and cheerful.”

“Yeah, well it depended on who you were. What about the hospice worker?” I asked.

“I remember her, too. A neighbor of mine, actually. Our husbands were in AA together. Dorothy. She died last year of an overdose when her husband—Lester—decided to divorce her. ‘Lester the Loser’ we called him.”

“He outlived her, didn’t he?” I remarked. “Well, thanks for nothing much.”

On the way home I nearly drove off the shoulder three times, getting so involved in the side roads and cloverleafs and detours of the letter mystery. I had no more suspects. When there are no more suspects, everyone is a suspect again.

As I approached my driveway, I could see the mailbox sat once again on its post. Maybe the mailman had come by with some real mail. But it was empty and nothing held it to the wooden post. No doubt some goddamn do-gooder. I knocked it to the ground again and kicked it. The door popped open and a sheet of folded paper flew out. I chased it across the dusty yard.

“Good guess, but no cigar,” it read.

* * *

The rest of my week was quiet, except for a rash of irksome customers at the nursery. There were no more letters. The bastard seemed to like weekends, though. He had nothing better to do with his Saturdays than play cat-and-mouse peek-a-boo with me. I decided to lie in wait, re-fastening the mailbox and closing the dented door as though setting a trap.

I moved a comfortable chair over to the living room window and peered through a slight parting of the curtains held in place with Scotch tape. Closing the window so a breeze wouldn't suddenly expose me, I leaned back and tried not to think about why I was sitting there. I got fidgety and hungry, but it was having to pee that made me forsake my post of duty. I brought two sandwiches, three sodas, and a bucket back to my station. I was not going to miss my prey.

The afternoon passed staring at a dun landscape motionless except for the occasional dust-devil twisting down the road or a procession of look-alike clouds going from nowhere to no place. I fell asleep in the chair and awoke with the rising moon staring me in the face. It was almost nine.

I rushed out to the mailbox. It was empty, my Saturday completely wasted waiting for Godot.

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My sleep was fretful and sweaty. I kept wondering if maybe there just hadn't been enough light from the moon to see the letter. Or maybe it had gotten stuck at the back. I resisted every urge to get up and have another fruitless look inside the mailbox. But once the sun rose, there was no point avoiding it any longer. I felt dreadful; my head throbbed.

Sure enough, at the back of the mailbox, a letter on lined paper. I unfolded it just as the first ray of sunlight crested The Mountain.

“γνωθι σεαυτον,” it read.

I recognized it as Greek, but had no notion what it said. In college I studied Greek for one semester thinking I'd be studying ancient Hellenic architecture in its homeland. Foreign scholarships dried up that year and I never applied again.

Wondering whether I'd kept any of my college notes from that time, I dashed upstairs to the bedroom. A beat-up desk that had been my grandfather's was pushed into a corner. In the bottom drawer were my college notebooks. Right on top was the red one marked “Greek 101.” I flipped through it rapidly, discovering I could still decipher the alphabet.

“Gnothi seauton,” is what it came down to: “Know thyself,” the ancient Greek aphorism. It was inscribed in the forecourt of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi.

It struck me all at once how similar this notebook paper was to that of the mysterious letters. No, not similar—identical, down to the number of spiral holes. On the last page on which there was writing was the sixth message: “Give up? See next page.”

Taped to the next page was a square of cooking foil, displaying my wide-mouthed astonishment, distorted by the crinkles and creases. My heart drummed as though I’d been running. By what mental serpentes, by what leger de brain, had I arrived at this devious method to come clean with people, at least with my friends? It scared me. How crazy was I?

Someone knocked on the screen door to the parlor. Anyone who knew me knew to come around back. He called my name. My knees were rubber. I didn’t know if I could get downstairs.

“Six?” a different male voice asked. “Are you OK?”

It was Alexander and Lance.

“It’s not latched,” I told them.

“Just driving by. Wanted to see if you were all right after the other night,” Lance asked.

“Yeah, sure. Why wouldn’t I be?”

They turned to each other and laughed.

“You seemed woozy, that’s all,” Alexander said. “Maybe it’s best you don’t remember.”

“Don’t remember what?”

“No, I’m not going down that rabbit hole. We wanted to invite you to a barbecue next Saturday. A single friend of ours will be there, just so you know.”

I resisted my first thought to blow them off. I told them that, having never dated a man before, maybe they could offer some pointers. We walked outside to their truck.

“It’s probably better to follow your instincts and your heart,” Alexander offered. “And thanks for making Hypatia feel better. She said your letter made her cry. She forgives you. She understands.”

“My letter?”

Knowing yourself is a good idea generally, but it doesn’t mean I want to know everything.

We shook hands. I watched the billows of dust chase their truck to the horizon.