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# Death Before Dishonor

By DOBBIN THORPE

*Rena Arblest was, perhaps, no better than she should be.*

*But she was no worse, either.*

*And therefore deserved less than she received.*

RENA Arblest woke with a splitting headache and a dull pain in her left thigh. The headache she was used to. Her Sunday morning hangover. But the pain in her thigh was something new.

She untangled herself from the knot of sheets, blankets, and bedspreads, pulled up her rayon nightgown, and found that her left thigh had been bandaged over. Drops of dried blood speckled the gauze. Wincing, she pulled off the bandage.

"Ohmygod!" she groaned. Because, there, on her thigh was a big red rose with green leaves and three inches of thorny stem. It wasn't too clear yet—clotted blood blurred the edges of the tattoo—but it was clear enough to make out the words printed on the scroll that circled her American Beauty: SAM—FOREVER!

She didn't know anyone called Sam. Hank, Larry, Barnie, Lou, Roy, or Gordon would have made some sense. But Sam? While she

drank her first cup of coffee, she went through her phone book. There was her uncle, Samuel Arblt, but he had been dead six years. There's a Sam's Bar on Division Street, but that couldn't be it. After her second cup of coffee she went into the bathroom and tried to wash the design off her thigh. The dull pain became lively; one of the thorns dripped fresh blood; but the rose faded not at all. It was a for-real tattoo.

The phone rang. It was Sam.

"Sam *who?*" Rena screamed into the receiver.

"Why, Sam Zimmerman! Don't tell me you've forgotten already? Boy, you were really stoned last night." Sam Zimmerman laughed.

"Did *you* put this thing on my leg last night?"

"Who do you think?"

Rena let loose. When she had a hangover, she was even more inventive than when she was high. For a woman, she had a really

astonishing command of the colloquial. Pausing for breath, she realized that there was only a faint buzz listening to her. Sam had hung up.

She went to the yellow pages and looked under Tattooists. Sam Zimmerman's Expert Tattoo Parlor was on State Street. She called the number listed for the parlor. No one answered. It wouldn't be open on Sunday morning. She looked in the large directory. There were over twenty Sam Zimmermans. She seethed.

The phone rang. It was Hank Burney.

"I can't see you today, Hank. I'm sorry, it isn't possible."

"I'm only in town until seven tonight. I've got to start back to Philly at seven." Hank was a truck driver and, in consequence, a big spender. She felt just sick refusing him.

"I'm sorry, baby. I'm really sorry."

"You've got somebody else there. Is that the deal?"

"No, baby—I'm sick. I'm really awful sick."

"Hell, it's Sunday morning. Everyone is sick."

"You don't understand."

"I think I do."

There was a knock on the door.

"Hank, I've got to hang up. There's someone at the door." She could almost hear Hank grinning with contempt.

"I'm coming over." He hung up.

RENA threw on a terrycloth bathrobe over her nightgown, straightened out the bedspread, and opened the door a crack.

"Hi, Rena."

She didn't recognize him, although she had the feeling that she would like to. Six foot, thick red hair, and a thick red face of the kind that Rena considered handsome. His bared arms were black with tattoos.

"Are you Sam?" He nodded; she considered. "Well, you better come in." She took the chainlock off the door and admitted him.

Sam glanced at her leg inquisitively. "How's it feeling? The soreness wears off in three, four days."

"You've got to take it off. You've got to. I can't have people seeing that . . . that *thing* on my leg. It's indecent."

"But last night you were begging me to put it on. Besides, no one is going to see it there except me. How about a peek?"

"No!" Rena pulled her bathrobe tight about her legs. "I don't even know you."

Sam replied with a grin.

"Ohmygod," Rena mumbled. Then, more emphatically, "Oh my God."

"What're you doing this morning, anything?"

Rena remembered that Hank was on his way over. If he found her here with Sam, there'd be the devil to pay. How did she ever get in these situations? Drink, she told herself for perhaps the hundredth time. She drank too much.

"What I thought," Sam went on, "is that we can go back to the parlor, if you really want me to take it off. It looked so pretty last night. But if that's what you want. . . ."

"Please. I'll be ready in one minute." She took her clothes into the bathroom and, for once, she was as good as her word. She was ready in fifty-eight seconds.

\* \* \*

Sam Zimmerman was a serious believer in the art of tattooing. He knew he was the best tattoo artist in Chicago, which is no mean boast. But that was not enough. Sam Zimmerman wanted to surpass himself. The only competitor of a daVinci is daVinci himself.

Sam escorted Rena through his parlor and explained some of his more esoteric designs. But all the while, he was sizing her up. She was small. In a way, that was an advantage. The size of the canvas is not the criterion of a masterpiece—and she would probably stay small. Sam had seen too many excellent tattoos spoiled by sagging flesh—shapelessly nudes turned into baggy hari-

dans, proud eagles drooping their spread wings. But Rena would probably keep her shape for a long time. Sam judged her to be close to thirty, and if she was going to put on weight, she would show signs of it by now.

Sam, himself, was thirty-six. He had never been married. He was going to marry Rena. He had decided that last night at the Loop Bar, where he had picked her up. And he could be pretty sure of himself on that score. A tattooed lady doesn't have much choice in the way of husbands.

Meanwhile, he humored her.

"This one," he said, pointing to a knight on a black charger that was reared up over a dragon, "was my first really good design. It takes about twelve hours and costs four hundred bucks."

Rena whistled.

"I didn't want to put just any old design on my own chest, you know. I spent years deciding what it should be. Well, this was it. Let me show you." Rena raised a hand in protest, only to be handed Sam's sweat-stained tee-shirt. The same knight on the same rearing horse poised over the same fire-breathing dragon was on Sam's chest. The knight's lance extended up to his right shoulder, and the dragon's tail vanished beneath his belt.

"There's a story that goes with this picture. You see the

shield he's holding up—it's right in front of my heart. Well, when I was called up for the draft and sent over to Korea, that shield stopped a bullet." Rena laughed. "Laugh, if you want to, but it's the God's truth."

"When are you going to take this thing off my leg," Rena demanded. "I ain't got all day."

"Sit down on the table over there and let me take a look at it." Rena hesitated. "If you're going to be modest, I can't do a thing for you, sweetheart."

"That's better. Now, this is going to hurt some, so grit your teeth. He dipped the needle into a bottle of disinfectant, wiped the tip with cotton wool, and turned on the electric motor. It sounded like a dentist's drill. Rena was terrified of dentists.

"Don't jump like that!"

"It *hurts*."

"I told you it would hurt."

Rena began to sob. "You've got to do something."

"Well. . . ." Sam Zimmerman smiled slyly. ". . . most people find that a snort or two stops most of the stinging. How do you like it, straight or on the rocks?"

"Don't you remember?"

Sam poured out one tumbler of Scotch.

"Aren't you having any?"

"I've got to be sober."

While Rena sipped at her first Scotch, Sam showed her the tattoos on his back.

"Personally, I could do much better than that, but the back is the one place a man can't get to himself. Now, here's something interesting . . ." Sam rolled up his pantsleg. A large, red heart stood out on his calf. Printed on the heart was the single word: MOTHER. "You wouldn't believe it, but that little design saved my mother's life."

Rena was getting to the point where she would believe it, however. She had had no breakfast, and the Scotch was taking hold.

While Rena drank her second tumblerful, Sam showed her his special portfolio.

"Oooh, that one is pretty," Rena purred.

"You like that?"

IT was eight o'clock. Hank Burney was too mad to care. At seven o'clock he had begun drinking from the bottle. Now the bottle was empty. He rummaged through Rena's kitchen for another without success. He did find a salami in the icebox and he brought it back into Rena's combination living room-dining room-bedroom. There he sat, surlily, slicing off chunks of meat with a bread knife, and chewing. At eight-thirty, he lit his last cigar. Deliberately, he used the floor for an ash tray.

At nine o'clock or a little after (Hank had, by that time, smashed Rena's alarm clock-ra-

dio on the floor), Rena arrived home.

"Where the hell have you been all day?"

"I went to the art. . . ." Rena was rather unsteady on her feet, but her dignity was, if anything, heightened—easily the equal of Hank's. ". . . to the art museum."

"You're high as a kite."

"Yourself," Rena retorted spiritedly. "And what, may I ask, are *you* doing in *my* apartment?"

"I used my key."

"I never! I call that nerve, I. . . ." Rena fell back into an overstuffed sofa from the excess of her outrage. There she fell asleep.

She woke up in a very few moments, as Hank was loosening her tight clothing.

"What's these two bandages for?"

"I scratched myself. Leave me alone!"

"Come off it. You know I missed the boat on your account tonight. I'll get called on the carpet for sure, and it's all your fault."

As Rena prepared to retire, she had a vague recollection of something she was not supposed to do. A red-headed voice which she could not quite identify whispered in her ear: "You promise?"

"I promise," she replied.

"Promise what?" Hank wanted to know.

"Then say so," the voice commanded.

"There'll never be anyone else but you."

Hank guffawed.

"Swear it," the voice said.

"I swear it."

"You're honor-bound to live up to that. If you don't—" The voice became very grim. "—there's nothing I can do to help you."

"Well, I'll believe you," Hank said, grinning. "Just for tonight, I'll believe it."

\* \* \*

At four o'clock in the morning, Hank got out of bed to go into the bathroom. He was gone no more than five minutes. When he had returned, He found Rena had been stabbed more times than he had the nerve to count. He called the police.

When the police arrived, he explained exactly what had happened. He could not explain why the door had been locked: Rena must have locked it, he supposed. Or how her assailant had come in through the window, since she lived four flights up without a fire escape. He explained that the knife was on the table for the salami. There was no blood on the knife—they could see that for themselves.

The police examined Rena more carefully than Hank had.

They noted that her assailant had stabbed her body almost everywhere except where the two bandages bound her thighs. Under one bandage, they found the rose tattoo and the words: SAM—FOREVER. Under the other an olive branch was twined around a six-inch knife blade. It was a very elaborate tattoo; the knife seemed almost to glint in the

overhead light. On the hilt of the knife was inscribed the motto: DEATH BEFORE DISHONOR.

Here and there the knifeblade was dyed a bright red. It was not blood, but it looked like blood. It had not been there when Rena had left Sam Zimmerman's Expert Tattoo Parlor earlier that evening.

**THE END**

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