

BOB THURBER

Cinderella She Was Not

THIS IS A FAIRY TALE, a sort of teaching tool for my children and yours. The year is 1999, and the world is a mess, so don't count on anything even resembling a happy ending.

My name is Raymond Masterson. I'm twenty-eight, married, and lucky not to be in jail. In my nineteenth year I ripped off a couple of downtown dope dealers, people who seldom forgive and never forget. Truthfully, I never expected to see my twenty-first birthday, and now, pushing thirty, I've got one kid in diapers, and another child on the way.

As pathetically mundane as all that sounds, I'm actually doing okay. Thanks to my wife's recently defunct old man (you may have read about the passing of "Uncle" Sam Porter, founder and CEO of Porter's Drug Stores), I've got a few bucks in the bank, so I don't have to labor like most folks. It's a great thing not to have to work or to worry where the money is coming from. Even so, in spite of my good fortune, most days I'm miserable, tortured by a terrible sadness. For one, I don't know a damn thing about being a good father. I worry about that.

Mainly I'm frightened that despite my good intentions, given enough time, I'll somehow screw my kids up. I worry about heredity and the dark horrors hidden in ancestral genes. Granted, I concern myself too much with things beyond my control—about "Foreign Policy" and "U.S. Interests" and what the world will do to my children. About depravity, and disease, and war.

I once read that if parents truly loved their children there would be no more wars. That's a hard line to swallow, though difficult to argue with. Oddly, it was written by a mystic who never went to war or had any children.

Incidentally, there's a war in this story, a small war, the shortest on record, but a war nonetheless. Possibly you watched it on television, and rooted for the home team. Or maybe you know someone who was there, and can describe the fireworks first hand. I'm only including this little war here because it is a semi-pertinent part of the story, but I've played it down as best I can.

Primarily, this is a tale meant for my children, for when they become young adults. It's a somewhat crude, but hopefully moral lesson in love and lust, if not

quite a secret map to guide them and keep them forever watchful against the coldness in us all.

So: Once upon a time . . .

My first wife, Alice Porter-Masterson, had two lovely sisters, both ten times prettier than her. “You married the ugly duckling,” my new sisters-in-law liked to tease. “You should have married one of us, Raymond.”

Sometimes they said this while fluttering their long lashes or modeling a new swimsuit or a pointy pair of heels. I’d bite my hand when they did that. My stomach would do flips and jumps. Polly was seventeen; Jodie, twenty-three. I was twenty, trying to be James Dean cool, and savagely angry at their staggering beauty. Either of them could have been Playmate of the Year.

Alice Porter—the middle sister, the one I’d married—really wasn’t ugly. She had a crooked nose (like her father) in a plump baby face (like her mother), but soft eyes and a pretty mouth. She was hands down the prettiest girl I’d ever dated, at least twice as pretty as any women I’d gotten past first base with. And bright, too. She’d skipped a year in grade school, made honor rolls galore, taken college courses in her senior year. She did all that then reneged on college and married me instead.

Poor Alice. She suffered from too big a heart. I was a loser then in the same way I am a loser now. But she had looks and brains, enough to get her somewhere. The dumbest thing she ever did was marry me. The dumbest thing her father ever did was not to shoot me on sight. The absolute dumbest thing I ever did was propose to Alice before laying eyes on another member of the Porter family.

No one is trying to fool anyone here. I’m not embarrassed to say I’m lazy. I don’t work now, and I didn’t work then. Though back then, right out of high school, I believed I was an artist, and that employment was strictly for non-artists, for people too afraid to starve. That’s what I told people right to their faces. I’d give them this bit about writing the “Mother of all novels.” I’d go on and on about it—about the magical truth of literature, about my willingness to starve for Art’s sake.

“You’d better marry a rich girl,” they’d say. “You better marry money, Raymond.”

In those days, to make ends meet I panhandled on the East Side, bought dope with my earnings, hiked downtown and over to the South Side, sold single joints for five bucks a piece, and covered the rent with enough left over for a bag

of groceries. There's a lot more effort to not working than people realize. But I was pretty serious about it. I considered myself a serious artist. The actual art, the writing itself—I figured sooner or later that part would come of itself. Until it did, the other part would be easy. I'd already been starving practically my whole life.

I had a childhood you don't want to begin to know about. I had a mother who makes the Wicked Witch of the West seem like a nurturer and a decent role model. I had a father who gave me his sandy blonde hair, strong white teeth and (so, I've been told) his arrogant disposition. He was a real hot shot who went off to Vietnam to get his foolish head blown off (literally foolish, because he volunteered. Literally blown off, and stuffed into a body bag with the rest of him).

I won't even get into any of that here.

This isn't a bellyache or a grumble. I'm not whining or looking for sympathy. Generally, I can't stand people who feel sorry for themselves. War veterans, or otherwise. My basic philosophy is this: Life doesn't care about any of us. That's the first line in my book, by the way.

Alice promised she'd take care of me. I'd sold her some dope outside her Catholic high school. We'd gone on a few dates, seen a couple of movies. I'd gotten her up to my room a couple of times. I'd even gotten her clothes off once, but that was all. Crazy nuns had put a lot of wacky ideas into her head and she had a few nutty ideas of her own. Then I showed her some poems, a few outlines for stories, a hundred or so pages of scribbled notes for my novel. That's what did it. She couldn't get over them. The more she read the more she believed in my art. But she didn't like the way I lived. Squalor, she called it. She said the Black Flag made her nose itch.

I actually had to get down on one knee and propose before she'd fuck me. Then she said she'd only marry me because it was the right thing to do. "I love you, but I'm not doing this for me," she said.

Alice was a peach.

The first time I met her parents, the only thing Mr. Porter said to me was, "You don't fool me for a second."

After that it was touch-and-go for a while. First the wedding was off, then it was on, and then it was off again.

Mr. Porter was a semi-retired pharmacist who owned a chain of drugstores, and he'd done all right for himself. His wife didn't have to work. His daughters didn't have to work. He had a house like a castle and a dozen acres of land. He

fought Alice tooth and nail over marrying me. She reported their battles in great detail. She called it “The Daddy War.” I listened, but I didn’t care either way. By then she was already slipping money to me so I wouldn’t have to hustle. She would let me fuck her every chance we got.

This went on for months.

Finally, Alice talked her mother into renting us an old farm house that sat way back on the Porter estate, barely visible behind a neat row of pines. The house had historical significance of some kind, and even though Mr. Porter owned it outright, it couldn’t be razed. For years it had been just sitting there, jacked up off its foundation, disconnected from heat and water. Mr. Porter said we’d have to do all repairs and renovation work ourselves. Or else pay someone to do it. He washed his hands of the whole affair. He said he’d finance the wedding and that was all. After that, he said, it was anybody’s gamble.

In this way “Uncle” Sam Porter, owner/operator of Porter’s Drug Stores, put an immediate end to The Daddy War.

Although Alice had never worked a day in her life, she went right out and landed a good job as a secretary/receptionist/bookkeeper at a Ford dealership. In no time the boss there said she was going places. He found it remarkable she could type one hundred words a minute with her eyes closed and still keep a file drawer in alphabetical order. Pretty soon he gave her all the hours she wanted. She racked up overtime week after week. At first, to keep the peace, she told her parents I was “between jobs.” Then she told them I was a buyer/seller for a jewelry house, which was half a truth, because I was authorized to sell jewelry out of a book.

Long before I’d met her I’d sent away for some “Get Rich Quick” info from an outfit in Salt Lake City, Utah. They’d sent back a small glossy catalog and half a dozen different forms. I even got a business card (exactly one) and a date planner, both stamped with the gold logo of Diamondback Jewelry—a tiny rattlesnake twisted into a ring. It wasn’t a real job, of course, because I’d never sent in a single order, but it kept Mr. Porter off my back.

The jewelry was junk—chintzy ornaments made of cheap metals, rings and pendants and bracelets set with manmade stones. Paste and glass, mostly. And cat’s-eye, zircon, garnet, tanzanite, rhinestone. All the photography was top notch.

“How much is this one,” Polly said, pressing an almond-shaped fingernail against the page.