

## REXALL DRUGSTORE

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FOR A WHILE BACK IN THE FIFTIES MY FATHER OWNED a small liquor store in the San Fernando Valley. He engaged his mother-in-law, my maternal grandmother, to work behind the cash register, where she spent the frequent idle times doing crossword puzzles with the help of one of those specialized dictionaries and sipping Ginger Ale to tame the cravings that persisted from her former drinking habit. She loved everything Hollywood, which was just over the hill, and found the declining screen artists who used to stumble in for their daily fifth, which she wrapped by discretion in the proverbial brown paper bag, “distinguished.” It was the word she applied to acerbic, middle-aged gay men dressed to the T, anybody from Europe, and forgotten movie actors who had begun looking like human wrecks, with or without their makeup.

Contiguous with the liquor store stood a Rexall drugstore. I enjoyed passing my time in the Rexall on summer vacation days when the weather turned too hot and polluted for me to play out of doors. There was a magazine display stand next to the pharmacist’s window, the wire kind that swivels on its base, and I’d pick out a comic book I hadn’t seen before and sit on the black-and-white tile flooring, whose geometric forms produced a soothing effect upon my brain. They left the lights down whenever the temperatures climbed to excessive levels; the atmosphere would be cavernous and shadowy. It felt like I was sitting inside an animal’s darkened lair or within the digestive system of Jonah’s whale. The salesclerk who worked there during that period, a woman named Beatrice whose age, race, and origin were indeterminable to my juvenile mind, would tell my mother, who wandered in on occasion looking for me when it grew too close to suppertime, how silently I’d passed the hours, how “good” I’d been. I abandoned myself completely to my reading in that decor and would barely be aware of my surroundings, my body as quiet and inert as the summery stillness of the many afternoons I spent at the Rexall, a comic book lying open in my lap.

One day in mid-August, at the tail end of a long heat wave that extenuated everyone in the region, I sat underneath the magazine stand in the Rexall drugstore. It was around three o’clock, an hour at which the temperature reached a

point of culmination. The sidewalks were deserted and glared like ribbons of beach sand under the blurry sun, and vehicular traffic along the road outside had been reduced to a sluggish car or two, or sometimes a hefty, chugging semi tarped in sooted gray. I finished the comic book I'd been reading and slipped it into its pocket on the rack. One of the few advantages of your father owning a liquor store is obtaining your soft drinks for free, a fringe benefit that might seem trivial to an adult but which felt like a privilege to me at the time, and being thirsty I crossed over the borderline, where an accordion door separated the two stores when one or both of them were closed. I walked to the back and grabbed a soft drink from out of the refrigerated display case. My grandmother lifted her eyes from her crossword puzzle as I went by, giving me her tight-lipped grin, tight-lipped because she had an ill-fitting set of dentures, which I'd seen more than once sitting in a glass, an image which revealed itself to my mind's eye at the most inopportune moments, mainly while I was eating. She slept in the guest room at home and placed the glass, half-filled with water, its hideous cargo sunk to the bottom, on the night table where it kept company to a lamp.

As I walked back down the aisle carrying my soft drink, with the intention of using the bottle opener hanging by a string from a peg on the counter, this being in the days before the twist-off top and the pull tab, a regular customer came through the door, looking to be in a more disheveled state than was habitual. His full head of hair, which I would describe as stormy in the best of times, was especially unkempt, and he hadn't applied a razor to his cheeks in about a week. He was haphazardly attired. He wore a wrinkled pair of beige-colored cotton slacks with no belt and a sleeveless undershirt that revealed the hair on his chest, gray and abundant, as well as the colorless flesh of his arms up to and including the deltoids. His eyes were the most striking thing about him, given the banal circumstances; they seemed at once to convey a distraught and haunted quality, yet also conveyed an incongruous astonishment, perhaps at the unpleasant mental and physiological events which were transpiring within him. The overall impression he gave was more or less consistent with that of the character he'd played in a series of horror films popular in the forties, a Jekyll-and-Hyde type monster who ravaged at night and to which he owed his minor and now rapidly fading renown. I remember wondering whether he'd become the role or if the role had become him, as it were, which I believe they refer to in the business as type-casting.

My grandmother straightened up as he piled through the door, pushed aside the crossword puzzle over which she'd been hunched, and said, "Good afternoon, Mr. Langford," in the sycophantic tone she employed with anyone who had ever graced, no matter how insignificantly or briefly, the silver screen. Langford headed straight for the liquor bottles lined up along one wall, where he stood gaping at them as if weighing the critical choice of poison for the day. He was a big man, with large bones and feet, the latter shod in a pair of black stockings and brown leather sandals, and seemed to take up an inordinate amount of space in the room, not all of it physical. As I passed by him on my way to the suspended church key he said, "Hello, boy," in his rich actor's baritone, the gravel of all the whiskey and cigarettes he'd consumed over the last thirty years grinding underneath. I opened my soft drink and took a slug; my grandmother being the salesclerk and my father owning the place afforded me certain prerogatives. Langford continued lingering by the rows of liquor bottles, and something in his attitude struck me as odd. Everybody knew he owned a house up in the foothills somewhere from which he only emerged well past the hour of noon, and most usually once the sun had gone below the horizon, to buy his hootch, his smokes, and the eventual food order to go.

As I observed him he stuck a hand into a pocket of his trousers and removed a metallic object. He spun around, a barn of a man, looming over my grandmother and me. "I'm afraid this is a holdup," he said, and it dawned on me then that the object he'd fetched from his pocket was a revolver. My grandmother, who'd been sitting at servile attention on her stool all this while, stood up on the twigs she used for legs. "Now," she said, holding an arm out in front of her to fend off any potential projectiles. Adrenalin had fired her complexion to a ruddy hue and steeled what was left of her atrophied muscles, but she seemed an ineffectual adversary compared to Langford and his gun, and with her arm extended she reminded me of a frail witch casting a spell that fails to produce the expected magic. "Back off, lady," Langford said. He turned around and took a fifth of expensive bourbon from one of the shelves. "How about a little drink yourself, Granny?" he inquired and lumbered over to the counter.

I knew all about my grandmother's disease and had even seen her in action once with a pint of vodka one evening when my parents went to a dinner party, but I'd never remarked in anyone the look she had about her now, the entire

body electrically alive with longing, the lower jaw gone slack, and I felt the fascination of the child for the major flaws and unmentionable vices of the grownup. “You don’t want to do this, Mr. Langford, it’s beneath you,” she said. But Langford, who’d begun enjoying himself and needed to steal the scene, perhaps his last, as much as he needed stealing anything else, stated, “Oh yes I do, Granny. You bet I do.” He stuffed the revolver back down into his pants, where he held it pointed up in the direction of her heart. “Break out the glasses, Grandma, if you got any,” he said.

We kept a few Styrofoam cups stashed under the cash register, and she brought a couple out and set them down on the counter. Langford cracked open the bourbon and poured out a round. The charcoal smell made me want to gag a little. “Here’s to ya,” he said. He picked up one of the cups as my grandmother’s gaze settled just about everywhere but upon the cup that remained. You would have thought she was following the erratic trajectory of some tiny insect darting through the airs, maybe a gnat. “Drink up, Granny,” Langford ordered after he’d done so himself. “Oh, I really couldn’t,” my grandmother whispered. “I’m afraid I must insist, Granny. If only for the conviviality of the thing,” Langford said. He let her get a good load of his gun bulge, which resembled exactly what you might think it resembled, if poorly centered, and rather short. My grandmother relented after hesitating a final instant like a cliff diver just before the plunge, three good fingers of hard liquor, neat, that she consumed while feigning to yield to the rigors of constraint. At which point Langford poured out another round.

He requested cigarettes after they’d reinvigorated themselves for a second time. My grandmother slid him some Marlboro filters, but he said he preferred Camel straights if that wasn’t any bother, so she shoved over a pack of those. In a rather elaborate unraveling ceremony that demonstrated the dexterity of his thick appendages, and how much they could make of a simple prop, he unwrapped the pack and extracted two cigarettes, one of which he stuck between his lips. The other he handed to my grandmother, who placed it cunningly at an extreme corner of her mouth. Langford lit them both up with the Zippo he happened to have on hand. I hadn’t been aware that my grandmother smoked but saw she did so with the flourish of someone practiced in this activity. I’d been leery of her prior to these events because I considered her ancient and idiosyncratic in nineteenth-century ways I could never fathom, but also because she was wound

up so tightly by her constant efforts to resist doing what she desired to do more than anything else. Yet now that she was indeed doing that thing, boozing it up in a cloud of tobacco smoke and emancipating moral amnesia, I learned it was possible to unwind oneself too quickly, and that loose could be as bad as tight, if not worse. “I loved you in...,” she began, suddenly loaded to the gunwales, but her tongue was too slow for Langford, who cut her off. “I’ve been loved in so many things and ways, Grandma, but before getting into that, stick whatever money you’ve got back there into a bag, if you don’t mind.” My grandmother lunged into more than “pushed” the button on the cash register; the cash drawer sprung open to the silvery tinkle of coinage. She applied herself in the fumbling and inefficiently painstaking fashion of the wasted to the stuffing of bills and change into a paper sack she handed over to Langford, who looked crestfallen when he peered down into it, for there wasn’t very much money at all, this being a slow afternoon on a slow day in a slow month on a relatively slow corner of the planet, with meteorological conditions of over one hundred degrees in the shade. “Hmm,” he intoned, snatching the bottle and splashing out yet another round. By this time my grandmother was incapable of standing and had sat back down on her stool, where she appeared to fight against disequilibrating forces known only to herself.

They both drank up again before Langford began to nod his head in the affirmative, and grit his teeth, as if he were arriving at some arduous conclusion. After a minute or two of this he announced, like a person finally coming to grips with reality, “What a disaster,” to no one in particular, but primarily to himself, which was just as well, for my grandmother was no longer capable of receiving any communications, concentrated as she was on preventing herself from drowning in the tumultuous and invisible seas upon which she alone navigated, the cigarette still burning down between her fingers like the fuse on a stick of dynamite. In the end her resistance was defeated and she collapsed to the floor, a disappearance which shocked Langford into action, inciting him to flee. I watched him through the window as he ran across the street like someone being hotly pursued and vanished from view in the cacophony of a honking car horn and the high hydraulic squealing of brakes.

Grandmother fallen in multiple ways, and muttering to herself between pitiful groans, I crossed the boundary in the other direction, entering the Rexall

drugstore, and found Beatrice reading a movie magazine behind a more uneventful counter. She glanced down at me and smiled and went back to her magazine. I knew there was human warmth behind the mask of lip rouge, pancake powder, and mascara she'd painted on herself that morning before coming in to work, above which her hair had been lacquered into a complicated permanent of frozen curls, if it wasn't, in fact, a wig she wore. I took a swallow of the soft drink I still held in my hand. I did everything methodically when I was a boy, being a kid who'd never been in a hurry, a quality that distinguished me from my peers.

"Granny fell down," I said after a few moments had gone by, not wanting to disturb the peacefulness I felt around me here with vulgar facts.

"What? Your granny fell down, honey?"

"Yes," I said. "We better go over."

Beatrice followed me into that other, less enchanted realm. By that time my grandmother had crawled to where the liquor bottles stood gleaming upon their shelves, she having recently employed the feather duster. One of her hands kept floating up into the air and waving around like she wanted to snare a bottle, but you could tell her efforts were only half-hearted, and certainly vain. "Oh my Lord," Beatrice said. "Are you all right, Mrs. Wakefield?" My grandmother replied: "You wouldn't know, would you, deary?"

There was commotion at the door, and Langford stormed in toting the money bag and the bourbon. "Hello, dolls," he said in a tone much too bright for the general state of things. Beatrice managed to get my grandmother to sit up, but her head lolled dangerously and she vomited down the front of her dress. During this time I noticed Langford stuffing the money back into the cash register and crumpling up the brown paper bag and tossing it into the waste paper basket we kept in a corner. He also laid a bill down like a playing card on the counter, ostensibly one of which he was the legitimate owner, no doubt in payment for the fifth he hit on nonchalantly from time to time as he watched the three of us. You sensed him liberated from the demons that hounded him, if only temporarily. We had a minuscule office with a phone behind a curtain in the back, and Beatrice went into the office and telephoned my mother, who arrived on the scene a few minutes later, while I worked at preventing my grandmother from keeling over. We lived just up the road, along a dry, chaparral-infested hillside. My mother had contacted the other employee before driving over; he showed up

about the same time she did, a bony, grizzled geezer who was always sucking on cherry cough lozenges and humming under his breath. With the help of Beatrice and the old man, but with no help from Langford, we walked my grandmother outside and squeezed her into the Buick, and when we got home my mother put her immediately to bed. By evening she was well enough to eat some milk toast my mother brought her on a tray. The following day she was pale, ethereal, serene, insubstantial; it seemed as though her human form were on the verge of dematerializing in the manner of ghostly apparitions at the end of a séance, and that night she died in her sleep. A few months later Langford also succumbed. There was a snippet in the newspaper. Drunk, he'd hit his head on the edge of the coffee table and bled to death on his living room floor, where the housekeeper who came in once a week discovered him. Not too long after that my father sold the liquor store, and at about the same time, although there wasn't any reason for my disaffection that I could pinpoint exactly, I stopped frequenting the Rexall drugstore. I discovered other pursuits to occupy me on summer days of elevated temperatures and smog-bound skies, though none would leave as enduring a mark, nor inspire me to cultivate the sometimes painful and often imperfect art of remembrance.