

FREE

SAY IT

LICORICE

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Read editorials, interviews, and reviews at SolomonG's blog: <https://thereshegrows.net/>

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WARNING: This work contains strong language and graphic violence.

This was Sunday night in the early 1990s within the Mountain View neighborhood of Anchorage, Alaska. Three young ladies argued inside a dilapidated apartment on the corner of a small three-story building. The apartment doorway opened into a small hallway with a kitchen on the right and a modest living room straight ahead. Another hallway branched off from the living room and connected to two bedrooms and a bathroom. Place had been left unlocked and thus was freely accessible to the youth.

“Say it,” raven-haired Blanca pleaded. She stood in the middle of the hallway leading into the littered living room and wore a white sweatshirt with UAF printed on the front. Electricity had been shut off long ago so the only available light came through the apartment's open door. Her body blocked much of that ambient light. Graffiti adorned the walls and sticky fingers had long ago removed all electronics.

“This is so stupid,” the blonde, Cynthia was her name, replied and kicked a discarded beer can. The dusty aluminum container rolled across stained living room carpet, but abruptly stopped when it hit the leg of the torn couch. She sniffed and furrowed her brow. “Place smells like piss.”

Blanca's brother Sergio had discovered this abandoned apartment while walking around with his friends. They bought a cheap mirror from a Salvation Army thrift store and mounted it on the living room wall above where a television had been. A rusty nail tenuously supported the mirror via a bit of cheap string. This was to be the centerpiece of Halloween initiations.

“C'mon!” said Blanca.

“What is it with this peer pressure bullshit?” asked Cynthia.

“Just do it, okay? Sergio said my friends would be too scared,” Blanca replied.

“Who cares. Tell him we did,” suggested Sandra, the third girl. She was a brunette wearing a

light gray hoodie and blue jeans. “Don’t make a difference.”

“He’ll know,” Blanca replied.

“Fine! Licorice, Lic--” said Cynthia.

“Have to look at the mirror!” said Blanca.

“God, it’s so dark. What difference does this make?” Cynthia said.

“Cynthia...”

“Shut up! I’ll do it.” she turned and faced the mirror. “But together. So we can get out of here. Don’t know why you care what Sergio thinks.”

The three ladies lined up facing the mirror with the beat-up couch behind them. Blanca was in the middle. She clasped Cynthia’s hand as well as Sandra’s.

“Here we go,” said Blanca.

“Licorice, Licorice, Licorice, Licorice!” they said in unison.

“I said the scary name. We all said it. Happy?” Cynthia asked Blanca.

“Yeah, this was stupid. Let’s go,” said Sandra.

“Okay, okay,” Blanca replied. She lead them down the hallway to the front door, but it slammed shut!

Blanca turned the knob and pulled, but the door did not move. She tried once more and pulled harder, but to no avail.

Sandra stood behind her. “Stop fucking around, I got school tomorrow.”

“Not my fault, door’s stuck!” said Blanca.

Cynthia crinkled her nose. Something had changed in the air. The urine odor was gone, but what replaced it was worse. Air inside the room became hot, but Cynthia could not imagine why Anchorage in October would suddenly feel so stuffy, like Miami in August. She kept her mouth shut lest her friends think she was nuts. Spotting a Matanuska Maid milk jug in a nearby trash pile made her think of spoiled dairy and roiled her stomach.

“*Blanca...*”

“Who said my name!?” Blanca asked.

“What? Nobody did,” said Sandra.

“Not funny,” replied Blanca.

Sandra pushed past Blanca to try the door herself, but was similarly unsuccessful.

Cynthia stepped forward to try the door herself. “Maybe there's another way out?”

Blanca turned to face Cynthia and shook her head no. She froze as the shadow of an immense hook moved across the wall. Then Blanca was yanked back screaming as she was pulled into the living room which was filled with impenetrable darkness.

“Blanca!” Sandra shouted.

“What the hell is happening?!” shouted Cynthia.

Just then a giant hand wrapped its ice-cold fingers around Cythia and Sandra. It pushed them with undeniable power. The front door had opened and the two ladies were thrown out onto the walkway.

“One at a time,” an inhumanly deep voice said. The door then slammed shut.

“Blanca!” the pair shouted for their friend. Blanca screamed. Her voice rang out but seconds later its volume diminished and all they could hear were gusts of wind. A minute later the door creaked open. Cynthia and Sandra screamed in horror.

“Blanca?” said Cynthia. Her shaky hand pushed the door open and asked for her friend once more “Blanca?”

She looked back at Sandra who said nothing, but shook her head no. Cynthia took a deep breath and stepped back inside the apartment. Further and further she went inside looking for their missing companion. Minutes passed as Cynthia searched while Sandra did nothing but tremble outside. Eventually, Cynthia returned to Sandra.

“Blanca's not in there. She's gone,” said Cynthia. “What should we do? What do we do!?”

“I... I don't know...” said Sandra crying.

The next day Lindsey and Natalie drove down Commercial Drive. Lindsey was an overweight short brunette wearing a Halloween-themed sweatshirt. The cheery nature of that sweatshirt was at odds with Lindsey's dour expression. Lindsey was a twenty-year old skinny blonde wearing a thick knitted blue sweater. Both were newspaper employees, Lindsey had worked as a photographer for several years already while Natalie was a newly hired writer.

On the radio Axl Rose sang the words, “Why do you look at me, when you hate me?”

“Do we have to listen to K-Whale?” asked Lindsey, referring to local rock station KWHL.

Natalie was driving and reached over to switch the radio off. It was a cloudy day with the sun only periodically peering through to shine on the cold ground below.

“You sure Guy is going to be okay with this?” Lindsey asked.

“We already took photos for the fluff piece and got the rundown. Come on! This is a chance to do something important. Aren’t you interested?” Natalie replied.

Lindsey frowned. “No.”

“Worried Guy will yell at ya?”

Lindsey looked at her sharply. “I ain’t scared of that lazy asshole.”

“This won’t take anytime; I promise.”

“Better not. You just got this job and already making extra work for me.”

The two ladies stepped out of the well-used silver sedan.

Not many people were around save for a few older men standing alongside a stair stoop across the way. The gentlemen were talking loudly, bickering actually. There was shouting when the discussion became heated. One of the participants was in a wheelchair and left the area in a hurry. Then a young boy walked past carrying a white plastic basket full of dirty clothes.

Natalie stared at the building where the young girl had disappeared. Earlier that morning she read a tragic tale. Police reported that a young lady had been taken by an unidentified assailant. This was a rough area though. Such things happened. Local news would make a passing reference and then move on. Natalie was concerned that the fate of a poor girl would be forgotten in hardly any time at all.

A yellow line of police tape barred entry. Natalie motioned for Lindsey to take some shots. Lindsey complained that it would never be printed, but complied nonetheless. Meanwhile, Natalie was approached by one of the men who had been arguing nearby.

“You a reporter?” he asked.

She nodded. “Natalie Farr, I work for the Daily News.”

“Why are you here?”

Natalie pointed toward the police tape. “Um, I’m investigating the disappearance of Blanca Rodriguez.” Natalie’s face reddened and she prayed her little lie was not obvious. In a matter of speaking she spoke the truth. Although, her investigation was self-initiated and her supervisor at the Daily News would have been shocked to learn of her actions.

Across the courtyard, Sandra watched Natalie from under a nearby tree.

He scoffed, “Investigating? Bullshit. No one cares what happens here. Not the cops and certainly not journalists. Cops will name somebody, no need for you to investigate.”

“That’s... that’s not true.” Natalie gulped. “Do you ” her voice cracked so she took a moment to compose herself. She spoke again this time more forcefully. “Do you know what happened?”

“Licorice took her.”

“Who is Licorice?” Natalie asked.

“If you really cared you'd already know,” he replied and walked away.

“We done?” asked Lindsey. Natalie shrugged and they began to return to their car. A voice cried out as Natalie reached for the door handle.

“Hey lady, hey!” shouted Sandra.

Natalie turned and saw Sandra with her disheveled and greasy brown hair.

“Can you help?” asked Sandra.

“We're not social workers kid,” said Lindsey.

“Lindsey,” Natalie said and narrowed her eyes.

“I heard you were asking about Blanca. I can tell you what happened, but need someplace to go, okay?”

“Sounds like a druggie,” whispered Lindsey.

“Fuck you!” said Sandra and then she turned back to Natalie.

“I'll tell you all about last night, but I need a place to stay. Don't want to go back home. Okay?”

“Tell the authorities kid. Seriously, maybe they can help you,” said Lindsey.

“Police won't care and couldn't help even if they wanted to,” she sighed. “Look, if I give you the story will you buy me food and a place to stay tonight?”

“Sure, sure I can do that,” replied Natalie.

Lindsey scoffed, but Natalie ignored her. “Don't mind Lindsey. Hop in the back seat.”

“This will come out of your own pocket,. You know that right? Guy ain't going to reimburse you for squat,” said Lindsey.

“I know, but it's fine. Let me worry about it. Alright?” said Natalie.

An hour later Natalie and Sandra were sitting in a small room on the fourth floor of a cheap hotel on fourth avenue. Natalie had dropped off Lindsey along the way.

A fast food bag sat on the dresser, next to the television. Empty cheeseburger wrappers and French fry containers were crumpled up inside.

The two sat quietly on the single queen-sized bed. Sandra had already recounted the events of

the previous night. Natalie couldn't help thinking that she just wasted a not insignificant portion of her meager salary on food and the hotel. It did not help Natalie's skepticism when Sandra insisted they cover the mirrors with bathroom towels.

"Okay, um... thanks... for the story. What about your family? Are you going back home tomorrow? This room is only reserved for one night."

She nodded. "Dad will be back from the North Slope by tomorrow, but he can't help. He won't know what to do. And I don't know how to save myself."

"What about the other girl that was with you, Cynthia? How is she? Where's she at?"

"Home with her parents."

"Look, maybe I can find you some help, like a counselor?"

"Counselor? What they gonna do? Comfort my Dad when I'm dead?"

"Sorry, thought you could talk to somebody."

Sandra frowned.

Natalie crossed her arms and took a deep breath.

"*Sandra...*"

"No, don't call my name! I don't want to die!"

"Wha...what's going on?" asked Natalie. "Nobody said anything."

"Her voice so loud, how can you not hear it?"

A flash of light caught Sandra's attention. Lightning flashed and thunder followed. Natalie was from the Outside, had not been in Alaska for long. Yet, despite her inexperience, she knew lightning was rare in the 49th state.

"Calm down. It's only a little bad weather."

She walked to the window overlooking the parking lot. "Oh my God! She's huge. A giant taller than a skyscraper, as big as Sleeping Lady mountain. There! How can you not see her? Dammit look right there!" Sandra pointed outside the window. "Her hook is coming closer, going to break through the window!"

Natalie held her hands up with palms out. "Calm down okay, I'm gonna call someone alright?" Natalie's palms became sweaty and pulse began to race. "*Fuck me, this kid is having a bad trip,*" she thought.

Then the window shattered and Sandra fell back on her ass. She shuffled backward as fast as possible. In her terror she tripped and fell to her knees. Sandra turned to yell at Natalie.

“Hook is coming toward us. Run!”

Natalie was pushed aside by something cold and hard. She fell hard on her ass. “Fuck!” Natalie sprang back up to her feet and twisted around looking for what had knocked her down. She saw nothing and was surrounded by empty space. Natalie was frozen with fear; she had not lost her balance. Something knocked her down.

Sandra was babbling, making noises not words. Suddenly, Sandra began moving toward the outside. Her torso was supported by something unseen. Her feet scraped against the floor as the invisible force tugged inexorably. Sandra was pulled toward the shattered window.

She stretched out her arms grasping at anything to resist being pulled outside. Another flash of lightning illuminated the room. Before she could fully comprehend, Natalie imagined an impossibly large arm with a hook pulling Sandra. Suddenly, Natalie could see what Sandra saw.

“No... no...noNO!” Natalie screamed.

The hook dragged Sandra out the window. Sandra's agonizing cry sounded loudly until a sickening thud ended the anguish.

Natalie fell once more to the floor. Her eyes were blank. She stared locked in place at the opposite wall. Many minutes passed. Then there was a knock on the door and an angry man's voice.

“Ma'am, I'm from the front desk, what are you doing in here? People are complaining about the loud noise.” He opened the hotel room door with a turn of his master key.

“What the hell?” The man pointed at the shattered window. “You're going to pay for that!”

Natalie said nothing, but only stared at the opposite wall.

The next afternoon Natalie drove herself back into the Mountain View neighborhood. She had spent the morning at a police station telling them what happened. More accurately, she told them a story they could accept. Sandra's corpse was discovered in front of the hotel. Natalie wanted to tell everyone about the horrific scene she had witnessed, but worried they would think she was a lunatic. Instead, she lied. She said that Sandra had been distraught over the disappearance of her friend and jumped out of the window. She feared that telling the truth would end with her in a jail cell or mark her as insane. Natalie told herself that the lie was necessary that maybe she could, somehow, save the final girl.

To Natalie's dismay, police officers accepted this fabrication without difficulty. One officer, Patrolman Ettinger, told Natalie that the apartments were in a bad part of town and such tragedies were to be expected.

Upon her return home she received a telephone call. Thus she found herself driving once more down Commercial Drive past the big snowmobile (*snowmachine as locals called them*) dealership.

Natalie walked toward the apartment building. She hoped not to encounter Sandra's family. To her relief no one stopped to confront her. No one questioned her report. Natalie thought she could find a

way no matter how far-fetched to save the life of an innocent young lady.

She knocked on the door. No reply. She knocked again. Finally, noise came from within the apartment. A person was moving inside. A gruff voice spoke, "Come in, door is unlocked."

She turned the worn brass doorknob and stepped inside. The room was dark with light only in the living room. Smooth tile flooring ran throughout the place. A shadow box was mounted on a far wall with an American flag and several military ribbons inside. An old man wearing an olive-green crew-neck sweater with epaulets slowly wheeled his wheelchair to face her.

"Please come in," he said while sitting in the living room.

She walked down the hallway past a bathroom on the left and a kitchen on the right. He motioned towards a nearby couch and invited her to take a seat.

"I saw you yesterday with a photographer," he said. "You were asking about Blanca then you left with her friend Sandra. Heard about what happened with Sandra and I figure you saw something. So you believe now."

She crossed her arms in front and held her elbows, turned her head to the side, and looked away.

"You know what's happening. The horror those girls summoned you understand now," he said.

She reluctantly looked at him then nodded.

He extended his left hand. "I am being rude, sorry. My name is George Erickson."

"Natalie Larson," she replied as they shook hands.

She stammered then sighed and brushed hair out of her face. With a deep breath, she tried once more. "How? How could you know?"

"What you witnessed last night I saw it too. When I was a kid."

She stared at him. He took a deep breath.

"When I was sixteen a few guys and me stood in a room. My friends called Licorice. The ghost that you saw. People have shared her legend since long before I was born. Story of a Native Alaskan girl from Eklutna born in the first half of the 1800s when the Russians controlled this land. Initially, Russians brought with them firearms and exotic treats like black licorice. A treat which the young girl took a liking to and always asked for."

"But those Russians were greedy and lazy. They forced Native men to trap for them and forced Native women to keep them warm at night. As the girl grew older they began to take a keen interest in her and wanted something in return for licorice."

"Tried to make her a sex slave and cut her hand off when she resisted. They thought that brutal act would break her spirit and in a sense it did. She no longer dreamed of a happy life. No more time spent thinking about finding love someday. Normal concerns were consumed by hate. She took a gaff

hook and made that her new hand. It bothered the Russian trappers to see her proudly walking around the village where everyone knew she had defied them. She never did what they wanted so they made a show of torturing and finally burning her alive.”

“That was not the end though. Her hostility was too much to pass onto the next world. Malice kept her alive or at least not fully dead. Licorice killed the men who burned her. She consumed their souls and drew power from killing. That made her something evil. She took a new name from the treat her murders gave out. What she was before was gone and what remained was a malevolent being hungry for souls and growing stronger every time she killed.”

“My friends did not believe the legend. Did not realize people could manifest evil by simply speaking a word. They wanted to show courage as all young boys do. Prove their manhood, you know? So they called her name five times in front of a mirror. It was late, long past when I was supposed to be home. I knew my mother would be mad, but I was sixteen. Friends had already done it and it was my turn. Didn't want to look like a momma's boy. Heard her outside calling for me, but I ignored her. Then I started saying that damned name.”

“Was only one syllable in when Mom opened the door. Never seen her so mad. Frightened. She smacked my mouth with the back of her hand. Hard. My Mom was not the type to hit, not unless the situation was serious. My friends were shocked.”

“She dragged me back home. Made me swear on a King James Bible that I would never do that again. Wouldn't relent until I gave my word.”

“That night my friend John was killed. No one saw what happened. Someone discovered his crushed body the next day. Folks assumed he was robbed and then beaten. But his injuries were horrific. No way a thief would have done that. Wounds he received were ghastly. Cops called it excessive. Only a psychopath would have inflicted that much pain and suffering.”

“Next night I went to see Tom. Found him sitting on a bench at a People Mover bus stop. Nobody else around. It was dark and the bus was no longer running that late at night.”

“I called to him, but he didn't respond. He started raving, yelling about something I could not see. Said there was a giant woman with a hook for a hand. Screamed he didn't want to die.”

“He was freaking me out. But then I did see, like you saw. You follow me, don't you? You know it's true. There was something there that took him. Something real enough to kill, but not so real you can fight it,” he began to laugh. It was an ugly laugh not born of humor, but of resignation. “You think I'm senile, but I'm not!”

“This is too much, I don't know what to do. We need help, okay? Just-”

“No, there ain't no time. I need you to do something, okay? Just take this,” he said and handed her a thick accordion folder stuffed full of old papers of various colors and sizes. Presumably, he had built this collection of notes over many years.

“You need to read what's in there 'cause I'll be... well, I wouldn't be around after tonight.”

“Sir, you're scaring me.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “No worry. Ain’t got to fret,” he said as tears flowed down his face. “You going to have a long life. I’m going to fix things and save that girl.”

She backed up. “Please...” he held the folder in his hand, but she moved toward the door.

“Ain’t going to hurt you, I swear!” He stopped moving toward her.

She pulled the door open then stopped. She remembered there was still a young girl who might yet be saved. She cursed her fear.

“Please... please, just listen okay? I need you to read my writings, my research. Find Cynthia and tell her she’s going to be alright,” George said.

“How is this going to be okay?” Natalie asked.

“Gotta pay a price to make bloodshed stop, but Licorice ain’t picky. Will take anyone. And there’s a lot less life in front of me than behind. That girl dunno what she done. She could still have a good life. So, I will take her place,” he said and wiped tears off his cheeks.

“You got an important job to do. You got to read that folder for me then find the girl. Name’s Sandra Jackson. Tell her she gonna be okay. You need to do this, alright? You just have to.”

“Now get a move on. You ain’t going want to be here for what’s next,” he said.

“No,” she replied.

“What?”

“No, I will stay with you.”

“Now now, what is going to happen you won’t be able to forget. This is not going to be pleasant-”

“I’ll stay. Feel like someone should be with you even though I have no idea what I am doing.”

He sighed.

“Young lady-”

“I’m not leaving,” she said evenly, but firmly. She reached out and touched his shoulder.

He opened his mouth, but no words came out. Finally, he closed his mouth and let loose a sigh.

“No use waiting any longer then,” he wheeled his chair in front of his bathroom mirror. Then he began to chant. Something indecipherable. Too quiet for her ears at first. But it was getting louder. She heard the word Licorice alongside strange sounds.

A minute passed, but nothing changed. Natalie stood motionless.

“*This is crazy,*” she thought.

But something changed. His image in the mirror was different. Reflection showed his face but also something else. She blinked and only saw his reflection, but a second later the something other returned. Air felt wrong suddenly warmer than it should have been.

“I feel a little woozy,” she said.

Natalie moved back into the room and sat down on one of the twin beds. Room was getting almost hot.

“Did you adjust the thermostat?” she asked to no reply. The old man was silent now. His eyes unblinking as tears rolled wildly down his cheeks.

Large misaligned fingers reached out of the bathroom mirror. The hideous hand pushed a soap bottle, a black plastic comb, and a dirty glass labeled “Anchorage Fur Rendezvous” off the counter. Gripping the counter Licorice pulled the rest of herself into the room. She wore an old fur coat which had been discolored by some dark fluid. Natalie shook involuntarily when she realized that it was blood on that coat. Some of the blood was still wet and moist, fresh carnage from recent kills.

Smell was sickeningly sweet, like an infected wound. Temperature within the room raised another several degrees. The ten-foot tall woman hunched over under the ceiling of George's small apartment.

The giantess grabbed the old man by the throat. She lifted him up out of his chair as he began to choke. She opened her mouth exposing jagged teeth, more than what a human ought to possess. Bright light streamed off George and flowed into her mouth. George no longer gasped for breath. He slumped forward and stopped moving.

“No, you're killing him! Please don't!” Natalie said, but her pleas for mercy went unheeded.

George began to diminish in Licorice's grip. The old man shrank, losing size as Licorice sucked life out of him. Finally, he was only six inches tall. She dropped him down her gullet.

Licorice looked at Natalie and smiled using the inhuman number of teeth in her mouth.

“You wanted to see me again?” asked Licorice. “Do you want to give yourself to me?”

She looked Natalie up and down.

“Say it.”

Natalie shrieked.

“So desperate to be a journalist you abandoned family and friends. New girl far from home in the only place that would hire you. Working in an office where no one cares. I see the future. No chance to do anything important, no romance, and no one to even commiserate with as you toil in a dead-end job for the rest of your days. Utter the words and I can end that misery. It's easy. Say my

name five times. Join the others.”

“No,” Natalie whispered through deep gasps for breath.

“I can wait. Every time you look in a mirror I will be there, waiting.”

Natalie backed up until she hit the wall. She pressed hard fervently praying she could somehow push her way through the wooden barrier to safety.

Licorice smiled. An inhuman number of irregularly shaped teeth formed a poor excuse for a smile. Then the giantess withdrew back through the mirror.

Natalie was left alone with the empty wheelchair. Accordion folder sat on the coffee table. She sat there for hours until the sun's rays began to rise over the horizon and shine on small frozen puddles in pockmarked driveways. Finally, Natalie picked up the folder and began to read.