

# Her Wraith

## SHORT STORY

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Educator unavailable; Region-at-Large, *Affiliate*.

Gold Medal, **Best-in-Grade Award**

August fourteenth.

And I was awaiting trial. Licorice stuck in my teeth.

It was all Fanta-orange suit and tie, holler here and there, wooden benches smack dab in your face and a big old Hulk hammer to finish court off. No rainbow candles or birthday cake for you. Even if it was my birthday.

Not like there was any such cake to ever be heard of again. Considering the complete demolition of all chefs and bakers (if you could make canned beans and ketchup in these times, go you, don't expect a James Beard award), the best self-loving thing I could do was light a Marlboro cigar on the roof—good luck keeping it out of the rain—and wish myself a great happy birthday.

You don't care. Screw me. That's fair, nobody really gives a damn about sob stories, so.

If you'll listen, I call it being committed to a cause, and the judge calls it first-degree homicide

The Blight of 2041 was the greatest tragedy ever known. We never recovered, half the world was doped like crazy. First things off, Cikada introduced their latest product, some sort of hallucinogenic drug that allowed entry into the much-coveted portal of pink elephants. Eden, they called it. Pretty much accurate, that junk did make you feel heavenly.

I mean, in my case it felt like I was dead-of-night speeding a hundred fifty miles per hour. Or maybe it was because of the gorgeous Marguerite Lyza-Gray who was sitting next to me on that park bench, all peaches-and-cream upturned face with those mesmerizing water-blue eyes and her hand on mine. This was all after the Blight that she got me into Eden, with a stick of Cikada's licorice. I didn't know it was doped, but who cared, best thing in my life, even though I hated that candy.

Turns out, Cikada fucked up. Eden got into people's brains fast and messed with them. Like a seeping venom, it worked lethal and sure. But how was that going to be a problem, normal people with normal lives didn't purchase that stuff, only the dicey guys on the streets.

Cikada then made their second fuck-up, of course. They'd gotten big before the downfall. In a blink of an eye Eden had been globalized, to the point where people were using it as a flavoring for their water. Fizzy berry, jazzy lime. We all thought it was sick, but no. By the time the federals got suspicious enough to recall Eden, the window had already closed.

Am I infected? Should I be situated in one of those stark-white hospital wards, foaming at the mouth, bloodshot eyes, crazy screaming like a banshee? Should I be lying dead with a bullet through my brain?

Very superstitious, but nope. That's Corey York for you. Well, Licorice, don't ask me who named me. I don't even know who my mother is. But, let me tell you, growing up in a cloning lab doesn't make you wimpy. Not even sadder. Just angrier. It makes you a survivor.

While I missed out on the motherly love and filial duties, I got a surefire way to endure in this crumbling cutthroat-run world. I'm not the bragging type, and even if I was, immunity against Eden was nothing to boast about, considering that hundreds of other guys and gals had the same ability.

Cikada went bat-crazy. Armed corps were ordered to break into the labs, all of us were regarded as assets obviously. I was ten, got out fine somehow. Life wasn't horrible on the run; I acquainted myself with new friends, other refugee kids surviving barely by scraps like me. A smart chick who called herself Patty Kjehlburg, a short yet speedy dude by the name of Felipe French (we called him Fry), Sally

Kreuton, who I didn't like too much, but oh well. And, of course, Marguerite Lyza-Gray. Together we were the quintet, all our moralities and happenings and errors woven together like different threads of yarn.

And then my memory clouded. I swore I had only met them once. Yet it seemed like my life was taking on a life of its own. Cikada hunted us, we ran. Infected hunted us, we ran. Life was all about running.

Then came the day. I was out foraging the streets when I saw her.

It brought the old Corey York back, in a way.

She could be a lot of things. Got in places where water couldn't reach. Vibrance was her voice, a gorgeous singer. That subtle grapefruit-vanilla aroma. But here and now, Marguerite Lyza-Gray stood alone beside a giant pile of mossy rubble on the Sealed Bridge. Her hair glowed like ebony silk in the red glare of the sinking sun. Head turned down, she had not seen me yet.

This entire phenomenon was absurd. Last summer she had, in a blink of an eye, simply vanished. Disappeared into the haze. The quintet was torn and missing a thread. I was at that point of wondering if we were in love or in war. Got to our usual foxhole spot atop the old creaky lighthouse, and was ironically rewarded with a scrawled note taped to the railing. A white flag, flapping tattered in the wind.

She was defeated.

*I told you, Corey. Change, or I'm gone by tomorrow.*

And now gone she was.

Along with half of me, not like I wanted it to be that way. Love was a twisted thing. I proceeded to throw that mean note in the ocean (how could she think that would suffice in replacement of a beating heart), didn't cry but might have after I returned to our camp and drank a little with Fry, who, as always, wrangled the truth out of me.

Well she was no fool. Neither was I. Here my girl was, standing alone in full-view of Cikada patrols. And here I was, changed the way she had wanted, yelled, argued, cried about.

"Margot!"

She looked up, and I was floored. Like I said. These eyes. Clear and luminescent like the

shimmering blue water of lagoons, compelling like that. Her face changed in that second, giving way to something more than shock.

It hurt me to place it: disgust.

"Marguerite Lyza-Gray, for chrissakes, it's me, Corey."

"I know it's you, Corey," she whispered, and I was suddenly overcome with a crippling desire. To oh-so-gently touch her satin-like skin. Skim my fingers over the curves of her upturned face. Her rose-red mouth. She was perfect, an angel like that.

It was just like before.

I reached out, and she jerked back.

"What's wrong?" I felt myself getting heated.

"Margot, goddammit. Listen to me! What are you doing out here? Cikada could shoot you down!"

"Corey.." She squeezed her eyes shut, backed away

This was where it ended. This was where the story ended. This was where the pages flip and there's nothing left but empty. This was where the door to the lifeline shuts.

This was where we ended.

And then came the explosions.

We were caught in the blow range, flew twenty feet backwards across the trembling bridge. My ears rang. Somehow I got us both up and moving, even as bullets rained above our heads and smoke clogged our noses.

I was not exaggerating, this was no child's play. Cikada occupied these sleek silver choppers, and regularly scouted for survivors of the Blight. I knew this. Yet I had failed to keep Margot safe. This area had been quarantined long ago, and the agency clearly had no concern of what occurred inside the zone, survivor-inhabited or not.

A Cikada fleet had been chasing a horde of infected, and we were in the thick of it, being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The next second bombs dropped from the air, flinging shrapnel. The roaring fire came dangerously fast.

I flung myself at Marguerite Lyza-Gray and shoved both of us out of there, into the jet-black plunging river below.

And what happened after? I swear I got us both ashore. Flailing limbs, choking, foul water, fallow skin. She was not moving. Cold skin, closed eyelids.

Was she alive? How could I know? The Bridge still blazed above us, engulfed in flames. It would later melt halfway and fall. I pulled her out of it. I swear The Judge made her standing claim.

“You are the reason for Lyza-Gray’s disappearance.”  
God, I saved her.

“There was no fire.”

There was. All in my mind’s eye I remembered it; licking ember-orange flames, eating everything in its path. White ash singing on my skin. That crackling stench of melting car plastic.

Then came the most inevitable question of all:  
“Where is Marguerite Lyza-Gray?”

I didn’t know, said as much. I’d blacked out five minutes after getting ashore. When I finally regained consciousness, I was behind bars. Spent some time getting warmed up cursing and screaming my head off at Cikada’s guards, burned out and then went to sleep.

The Judge had familiar eyes, that was all I noticed when she suddenly cleared her throat and announced, “Marguerite Lyza-Gray is dead.”

I asked why she was lying.

“We’re not, Corey. She’s dead.”

“You expect me to believe that?”

“Please don’t argue, Corey. Don’t make this any more difficult. She’s been dead, for what, four to six weeks. Just tell us what you have to say.”

Finally, finally, I found my voice. Asked the most obvious question of all.

“How?”

The Judge shook her head, looked to one side. Something was strange about the way she spoke, a tremor in her voice. “Because, Corey. You did it. You killed her.”

Except. She was still sleeping, a soft, dreamy look on her face, her body curled like a seashell under the blue sheet, hands tucked under her face. The roseate morning light danced off her cheekbones. She was impossibly still.

Impossibly peaceful.

I sat there, floored.

“What did you do after you saved her, Corey? You didn’t black out. We traced muddy footprints back to your apartment. Blue body bag. They found a used knife, some signs of turmoil in the room. Her

blood and DNA samples stained your clothes. Your bed. What happened that night, Corey?”

In a second, it all dawned on me. Cikada already had her in captivity, and was in the process of framing me. Licorice York who? I was the killer of Marguerite Lyza-Gray, that was what everyone would choose to believe. This court was not about justice. This hearing was a sham. Panic rose in me.

“What did you do with her? What the fuck is going on?” My voice rose. Blood pounded in my ears. The only rhythm keeping me sane. They kept saying she was gone. Kept saying I did something. The chains chafing my wrists felt heavy as gabbro rock.

After a moment I calmed myself. The truth was the truth. Nothing could change that.

“We all want to be the heroes of our stories. It’s human nature.” The Judge smoothed her hair.  
“You’re scared, I understand. You want to be in control of the situation. But this is the truth, Corey. And you can’t run from it any longer. On February 24th, 2024, your then-girlfriend, Marguerite Lyza-Gray, broke up with you. She reportedly told her sister it was because you couldn’t get clean. Despite that on your first date, she herself introduced LSD to you, in the form of a Licorice stick. Your name is not even Licorice York as you have imagined, being your alibi, intentional or not. Your real legal name is Lucas Kovacs.”

I sat calmly. She—they—could lie all they wanted. Deceive all they wanted. Like I said, the truth is the truth. I felt sick at the same time, what the hell. My hands shook. I let them, then shoved them into my lap.

“You got worse. Couldn’t withdraw, it only made things worse. About two months later at dawn you broke into a restaurant downtown, killed the shop owner, Jonathan Windsor, and ate a meal. Did that again several times. You’ve been on the run since. Marguerite Lyza-Gary went missing in June. Her body was found in your apartment room a month ago.”

“You killed her.” I spat the words like venom.

Judge folded her arms on the table, looked me straight in the eye. I shuddered, the familiarity of her level gaze again making me uneasy. She was working in a league with Cikada. The thought filled me with horrid fantasies. They were going to kill

me. I had to get out.

"That's what you've been telling yourself for twelve years, Lucas."

"What the hell are you on about?"

She looked away, then back. "Your hallucinations. You didn't meet Patty Kjehlburg, and there was no Blight of 2041. All your friends and fantasies, you created them in your head."

I tried to get up. My mind was jumbled like a jigsaw puzzle, I couldn't think. Had I been injected with Eden? Had they found a flaw in the cloned blood that gifted me immunity to the drug? The chains held fast as I raved in her face. I had to be mad.

Judge continued, calm and composed as ever. It only made me angrier, the anger, I shook with it. "Dr. Julep, your social worker, has found a solution as to why. You were obsessed with Lyza-Gray, and everything you did to get to her, you thought was saving her. When you saw her alone on the Brooklyn Bridge, you attacked her on instinct—"

"Why didn't she look at me?" I demanded, the questions spilling out my mouth not of my own accord. "Goddammit, why did she hate me?"

"She didn't recognize you," she replied, tone strange.

"She did. She spoke my name. I heard her."

"You have to understand, Lucas. You'd been living on the streets for months."

I was horribly silent.

Judge smiled a little. "Tell me. When you saved Patty and Fry and Sally from Cikada, did you kill somebody?"

I couldn't speak, couldn't make a sound.

"They were just food, Lucas. You just needed them to survive. That's why you broke into restaurants in your hallucination frenzies. Hamburger, french fries, salad. The names aren't real. Don't you see? It all makes sense."

"Stop playing with my mind!" I roared. It was like vertigo. I was Alice, falling down deeper and deeper into the rabbit hole.

Judge rose from her seat, clasped her hands together behind her back, and looked out the window. When a window appeared in the room, I had no memory of it occurring.

"This isn't even a court hearing. Look around. I'm sorry, Lucas. You're at your daily monitored check-

up on Wednesday afternoons, as you have been for many years. I'm your psychiatrist."

"Fucking stop."

"Just confess," she said very softly. She hadn't even named herself. I didn't believe her. Couldn't. "Just confess! Confess that you played a hand in her murder!"

"Cikada will never triumph!" I shouted.

Even as my vision blurred up. Something wet trickled down my face. Oh god, it is Margot, her thin screams. Muddy feet dragging limp across the linoleum. I forced her, she was already dead. Frozen skin and glazed eyes. Tangled nest of ebony silk hair, red oily blood tainting yellowing bedsheets. Bleach, filling my senses. I scrubbed, scrubbed, scrubbed away. Nobody would know.

I was so *fucked*.

I gave up, fell right into my own bottomless pit of darkness. The Judge had been right from the start. My story didn't make sense.

But I didn't think I could live without it making sense. Instead, I put up my last warhorse.

"What year is it?"

Silence.

I asked again, still nothing.

"My age?"

Judge hesitated, then spoke. Her voice trembled slightly. "It's the autumn of 2036. As to your question, you are 41. Fifteen years you've been addicted. You were caught almost two months ago."

"A lot of math," I remarked emotionlessly.

"Yes," she said quietly. "And it's been almost twelve years since you stole the life of Marguerite Lyza-Gray."

I froze, time suspended for a moment. Water-blue eyes. Lagoon-blue. One rose-tattooed hand out, offering that stick of black licorice. She'd been so good to me. Big, bright smile like you only live once. Sun in her eyes. I hated that candy, but hey, this was Margot.

"And you won't."

I'm not even listening. Her upturned little face smiled back at me. I would run to her.

"Ever forget again, Lucas Kovacs."

The chain suddenly snapped. I struggled to get up, about to run like I always had been my whole life, now or never.

The Judge's hand trembled, one red-nailed finger on the Glock. A single tear, small and glassy, slipped down her cheek. I finally realized, too late, what had been so familiar about her eyes.

"My name is Elena Lyza-Gray. And this is justice for her."

Yet she turned the gun on herself.

It might have been almost mercy, to somebody like you. An observing outsider. But it wasn't. As the sister of the woman I murdered lay dying on the floor, she laughed blood. You could never confess. But it's alright. This is worse.

I would later learn Elena had hunted for me for all those twelve years, and when she found me, she got what she wanted. To make me suffer.

Because I still saw her. Margot. In my head. Everywhere.

They sent me to a hospital. I didn't fight. There was no chance of getting to escape this horrifying guilt again. No drugs. No relief.

But one day, sitting in that chair, staring into space, a young patient beside me slipped something small into my palm.

And I met her again. ■