

## Welcome to the School of Dreaducation

It was the kind of campus where the students all dressed like they were forever heading to the Rec Center and not class. Even as fall descended, whatever that meant in one of the most temperate spots on the planet. A couple of maples might flare red for the season, their starry leaves washed to the sidewalks, assuming it was a year that saw any rain.

At any given hour behind the Ghoulvirtz Graduate School of Education you could find some of those sun-loving students relaxing in the garden that had a weird hump in its center. The story went that the elevation in the lawn made for better outdoor classes, easier for people to see a professor while sitting down when there was a bit of rise in the real estate, but most of the staff knew better. They were pretty sure the building was built around an ancient burial ground of some sort, perhaps Chumash, perhaps dilapidated office equipment.

After all, the fourth floor of the building was clearly haunted—why else would staff turnover be so high? People must have sensed *something*; the way that kitchen light would just go on by itself, the way the copy machine would act like you hadn't sent it a job that your computer insisted was complete. And now, after a pandemic (if after is a word we deserve to use yet, of course), and after so many staff members have moved on to a better place, the halls were often eerily silent, empty. There was a rumor old man Scratchasin was still in that corner office, but no one wanted to risk a hike down the long, long hall to check. Besides, there were terrifying rumors if you did talk to him, he'd try to read you a poem or something.




At least, that's what the newest new-hire heard from passing graduate students as they dispersed from their latest outdoor class. (Apparently, the undergraduate students usually couldn't even find the building.)

Not exactly what you want to hear on your first day, but it isn't as though she didn't know what she was getting into. Why else would the doors auto-unlock and lock at precise times every day, well after sunrise and well before sunset. Clearly, they were trying to keep someone out, or perhaps, something in.

As she climbed the echoing staircase to the fourth floor (everyone knows you never trust an elevator in a haunted building), she knew one thing for certain. The Ghoulvirtz Graduate School of Education had a secret, and she was determined to find out what it was. That is, if they didn't find out hers first.

One early morning, as another Ghoulvirtz staff member was climbing the same echoing staircase, she was spotted on the top floor, standing elegantly and arrogantly on the handrail. The staff member, who asked to remain anonymous and admitted to having been haunted with the memory of this uncanny apparition, would not be considered a reliable witness. That is, if photo evidence of the "majestic black and white furry creature" had not been provided.

Photo evidence seemed to be circling the dirty, empty, staff kitchen. The kitchen had become the forsaken land of broken Keurig machines and unwanted chairs. Mythical beasts were turning up everywhere. Sightings of mountain lions...trash pandas...and drooling possums plastered the corkboard. Were these creatures being created in the alcohol drenched streets of IV...or were they the products of the Science Labs? Notices about hazardous chemical spills had been blowing up the phones of Ghoulvirtz staff for months. Or, perhaps this was the work of the Ghoulvirtz staff that had been locked in a closet office for years. Their recent departure to the other side of the terrace seems suspicious....

Ghoulvirtz Staff Happening Board	
	<p><b>FOURTH MOUNTAIN LION SIGHTING AT UCSB</b></p>  <p><small>Fourth Mountain Lion Sighting at UCSB</small></p>
<p><a href="tel:18053248107">18053248107</a> Depositing new message evacuated avoid the area of physical sciences. Nor wth update will be provided when more information is available, press two. To replay this message, Press two. To replay this message, Press two. To replay this message, Press two. This is an emergency message hazardous material, unknown material released on campus Physical sciences. Northeast being evacuated, avoid the area of physical sciences. Nor wth update will be provided when more information is available.. Click here: <a href="tel:14699825005">14699825005</a> to listen to full voice message.</p>	

Not far from the kitchen resides one of the more peculiar staff members in the building, Count Tracela. Nobody knows how long Count Tracela has been working at Ghoulvirtz. It's like they had always been there. Eerily enough, there was someone who looked a lot like Count Tracela in an old picture from the Normal School founded by Abbie Normal which later became a part of UCSB.

The “do not disturb” sign is like a permanent fixture on their office door, 4113. What’s going on in room 13? In-taking, processing and then terminating employees. Why are they constantly hiring new employees? What happened to all of the ones that had just been hired? And what’s with all of the counting....50 employees, 65 employees, 75 employees. Why so many?

People hardly see Count Tracela but when they do something seems odd. Count Tracela avoids the sunlight and brightly lit rooms. There have been sightings of Count Tracela lurking in the mailroom in the dark. When they go for a walk, they are so covered up that you can barely see them. They claim that they get sunburned easily and are iron deficient. Perhaps that’s why Count Tracela is so pale or is it?

Count Tracela almost always has a background when meeting with others on zoom. You can barely see their face. What are they covering up? What’s hidden behind the background? Why are the dogs, Dogzilla and Mad-Max, making so much noise? What is going on at Count Tracela’s remote work location. Should we be concerned....

We were in our monthly all-staff meeting in room 4108. 4108...rhymes with hate. Coincidence? The lights flickered. Or maybe that projector bulb needs to be replaced. The mood was dour. Missing staff. Strange figures spotted. Someone even said they saw that grassy knoll *move*. Like it was *digesting* something.

Our forlorn faces jumped when we heard a rapping...a rapping on the 4108 door. OK yes there are three doors, but this is the one facing the hall. Don’t overthink this.

Two knocks and silence. And then two more knocks louder yet, intensified. In between the knocks we could hear murmuring.

“Are you going to open it?”

“No, YOU open it!”

“Don’t open it!”

“Listen to that! I think it said braaaainnsss. It’s a zombie!”

“You dummy, zombies don’t...”

Just then, the door flung open! There, stood a disheveled figure in tattered rags. It lurched towards us and we all leaned away, but we couldn’t gather the presence of mind to leave our seats and escape.

“Grrrrrvvss....”

We collectively gasped in horror as it drew close.

“Giiirrvveettsss.”

“Wait, what was that?”

“Girvetsssss....”

“Girvetz? You are in the wrong building. This is the *Gevirtz* Graduate School of Education.”

“What? Oh man, sorry bruh!” said the zombie, which upon further inspection, might have been a student coming off a rough night in IV.

It started to leave, but then suddenly turned around and menacingly uttered  
“BRAINSSSS....”

It came towards us again! Having had collected ourselves, this time we were ready. We picked up chairs, laptops, whatever we could get to defend ourselves.

“Brain....Sciences. Anybody know where Brain Sciences is?”

It panned the room, noticing our now weaponized state.

“What is wrong with you people? Forget this, I’m outta here.”

And so it left. And we lived to meet another day.

“Well that was odd,” said Raven, one of the newest employees at Ghoulvirtz. She’d sat at the far corner during the meeting next to Gwen.

“And did you notice assistant dean Cari Crownus’s expression? She didn’t even seem surprised about the zombie student. Is this what working at UCSB is going to be like?” It was Gwen’s first day on campus and she was already starting to wonder if she wouldn’t have been safer at her old job at the local animal shelter.

As they walked out of the room, Gwen looked back and saw Count Tracela and old man Scratchasin with their heads together. Those two were always sneaking around.

Because of the interruption, the monthly all-staff meeting had run long. The other staff members were flooding out of room 4108 and rushing towards the exit in a buzz, excitedly saying their goodbyes to each other and to Gwen and Raven.

“At least UCSB has better hours than the animal shelter,” said Gwen. “I’ve never worked anywhere that counted Halloween as a holiday, and it’s great that they’re so insistent that we leave early today too. I wonder if we get to leave early the day before each holiday?”

“I’ve gotta grab my things,” said Raven. “I’ll meet you at the bus stop.”

“I’ll join you. The bus won’t be here for a while.”

They walked down the hall, and Raven grabbed her bag from behind her desk and locked her office door. The two walked back down the now deserted South Arm hallway towards the exit. As the building got eerily quiet, Raven whispered to Gwen, “Do you know why they call the two branches of the building arms not wings?”

Before Gwen could say anything, old man Scratchasin, yelled out from behind them, “You shouldn’t be here at this hour, it’s not safe!” Gwen and Raven turned to see him running after them with Count Tracela trailing behind.

“Come on!” Raven grabbed Gwen’s hand, giggling, and started running towards the indoor staircase. “No one uses the indoor stairs, we can take them up a level and then take the fourth floor exit so they don’t follow us.”

They ran to the staircase and started climbing the old creaky wood stairs at the heart of the building. They were almost to the top when they heard clock bells ringing. As they reached the top stair, they noticed a door they’d never seen before.

“This must lead to the Ghoulvartz bell tower. Let’s go check it out. I’ve never been up there and we can count it as part of your campus tour.” Raven turned and winked at Gwen, “Unless you’re too scared.”

“We can check it out. We still have another 20 minutes before we need to be at the bus loop.”

As they climbed the stairs, they heard something hit the wall beside them. They kept climbing. As they reached the top, they saw a UCSB baseball cap lying on the last stair before the door.

“Isn’t that the hat the zombie student was wearing?”

“Shhhh,” Gwen warned. They opened the door and saw assistant dean Crownus toss a burlap sack down a trap door under the giant bell and heard the screech of an animal.

“It’s not what it looks like!” Crownus yelled.

Without thinking, Gwen’s animal shelter instincts kicked in and she rushed towards the screech. A wet thud echoed up to the roof, as the burlap sack crashed to the bottom of the deep shaft. More screeching. Gwen thought of nightmarish stories of kittens bagged up and thrown into lakes to drown. She knew people could be heartless. She pushed Crownus aside and flipped on the flashlight on her phone, angling the beam of light into the darkness.

As the light stretched far, far below, the screeching abruptly stopped. Gwen stared down and was shocked to see the light reflected back in dozens of sets of glowing green eyes.

Raven crouched next to Gwen to stare down the shaft and broke the silence. “What in the world is that? Gwen, what are they???”

Almost immediately, the screeching began again, frantic and feral as the eyes turned away from the light. The stink of rotting garbage rose up to the roof. Raven gagged. Gwen covered her mouth and nose. Below, she could see an undulating mass of gray fur with flashes of distinctive black-ringed tails. *Racoons*.

Gwen turned to the assistant dean, horrified to think of the long drop they must have survived. “What’s going on here, Professor Crownus? How long have you been throwing these poor creatures down here? How could you???”

It was not only the animal lover in Gwen that was so deeply hurt to imagine the pain of the desperate animals trapped in a sack and tossed down a hundred feet or more. Gwen was an educator, committed to making the world a better place for everyone. She couldn’t understand how Professor Crownus, a member of the Ghoulvirtz School she admired so, could do something so heartless. Raven’s expression mirrored Gwen’s shock and horror.

But rather than looking guilty or chastised or at least embarrassed to be caught, Cari Crownus looked grateful. She brushed off the bits of leaves from her knees. She scooted over a bit to sit with her back against the wall.

“It’s not what you think,” Crownus repeated. “It’s a classroom! It’s a classroom. I was throwing them some food—well, *trash*, technically, but that’s what they like—to celebrate the first day of classes. The fact is, I am desperate for TA’s. Please, Gwen, Raven... will you help me?”

As the shrieks continued from below, Crownus calmly gestured for the women to sit down next to her. Looking at each other with a confused shrug, they sat down across from the assistant dean, ready to jump up and run, or perhaps tackle Crownus, depending on what came next.

Over the next half hour, Cari Crownus explained the strange history of the Beleaguered Racoons Accelerated Improvement Nocturnal Seminar. She described the first time she’d noticed raccoons staring at papers they’d pulled out of the trash. She started to suspect that they weren’t just feeding off the garbage, but that they were actually seeking out and studying pages of notes thrown out by students. The raccoons weren’t just ravenous—they were also curious!

“Curiosity is one of the most precious things on earth,” said the assistant dean.

“Curiosity is the soul of education! I’ve spent my entire professional life teaching, and I

know how to recognize an eager student. I know how to recognize a hungry mind!" As she started to research raccoons, she learned they were nocturnal. "Sure, I could have used one of our windowless seminar rooms, but I wanted to test out my ideas before sharing them with the rest of the faculty." Cari described how she'd reached out to Old Man Scratchisin. "It turns out that there is a whole network of tunnels under this building! He'd been using one of them to store his wine, and it was his idea to go underground with BRAINS."

Gwen and Raven shrunk back, remembering the crazed shouts of Scratchisin and Count Tracula and the zombified students... "Br-br-brains?" Raven looked ready to pass out.

Cari was quick to reassure them. "BRAINS. You know, the Beleaguered Raccoons Accelerated Improvement Nocturnal Seminar. It's a whole curriculum! The raccoons love it! I gather up as much rotting stuff as I can find in the kitchen, and the raccoons have set up their own lounge down there. It's dark all day long, so we can hold classes any time." As Cari talked, the animals' shrieks had shifted in pitch. Now the girls heard them as the social chirps and squeals of excited animals, rather than cries of pain or fear.

"I've always adored raccoons," admitted Gwen, "from a respectful distance, of course."

"That's what I was hoping you'd say," said the assistant dean. "The only problem is I've been terribly short-staffed. That's why I'm feeding them from up here on the roof—it is so much quicker than walking down all those stairs. So, would the two of you be interested in being TAs for the BRAINS program?"

And just like that, Gwen became a TA on her first day at Ghoulvartz. She'd made a good friend in Raven and an important faculty connection that would change her life in ways she couldn't have predicted. From the roof of the Ghoulvartz School, with the glow of sunset beginning to color the horizon and the happy squeals of raccoons reminding her of children on a playground, it felt as if all the signs in her life were finally pointing in the same direction.

Unfortunately, the day wasn't over yet.

Gwen was relieved to find out that the Ghoulvartz School had a thriving BRAINS program supporting the cute and curious raccoons of campus, and that she amazingly was able to secure a TAship on her first day here, but she thought to herself, "That still doesn't totally explain why Count Tracula and old man Scratchisin were always sneaking around! What are those two up to?"

She headed towards the elevator and pushed the automatic door opener to the lobby area. The door shut behind her as she walked through it to wait for the elevator, when suddenly the door opened again on its own, then it would seem to shut again, then whoosh open once again. Was it a gust of wind? No, the air was still and eerily silent.

Now Gwen was curious. She went back out to go into the Dean's office area to see if she could find Vampira at the front desk. She knew that Vampira would know what was going on with the door, or could at least put in a work ticket to get it fixed. But when she got to the front desk, nobody was there. She walked down the dark hall and peeked to see if assistant dean Crownus was there, but the door to her office was shut. She peered down the long dark hallway to see if anyone else was there, but it was nothing but a row of closed doors with "do not disturb" signs hanging on the doorknobs, and one curious looking shut door at the very end of the hall. Where did everyone go? They were just here!

Gwen decided not to risk going back to the elevator and instead made her way to the back exterior stairs. That might be the quickest way to get down to the first floor to get out of here anyway, she thought. She started down the stairs and made it to the second floor when she heard the sound of rushing water. That seemed really odd, so she opened the door to the second floor and saw that the water bottle filler was on. There was an abandoned bottle left filling up that was spilling over. She quickly grabbed it to save the precious resource from being wasted.

Now where was she? Gwen hadn't been to the second floor yet, but it seemed oddly familiar. It had the same bland gray walls in a long dark hallway that she had seen before. She made her way cautiously down the hall toward the elevator, but as she approached the area between what had been referred to as the "arms of the building," she heard voices echoing through the halls.

Gwen knew, as she had seen so many horror movies before, that you should run away from danger not towards it, but something was compelling her to go check out where those voices were coming from. She saw there was a bridge up ahead past the elevators and decided to cross it.

The voices grew louder and she could see people down there in the lobby! Her heart began to pound and she felt the rush of adrenaline pumping through her veins as she made her way to the interior staircase and began to descend towards the voices. She made it to the last run of stairs and saw that everyone was there! There was Vampira, there was assistant dean Crownus, and she was standing next to a very tall figure whom she hadn't seen before. (Was it really him??)

"Gwen!!!" She heard her name called and looked to see who it was. It was Tracela! Tracela was standing right in the middle of the crowd, which seemed odd because she knew that we usually only saw her lurking in the corners, if we even saw her at all.

"Gwen, I've been looking for you!" Tracela said.

"You have?" Gwen replied.

"Yes, I need you to fill out your time card and approve it before you leave today."



“My, what? Oh. Um, yeah!” Gwen stammered. Of course, that makes sense now! Count Tracela has been looking out for everyone to be sure that they get paid. Gwen felt so sheepish thinking that she was up to no good.

“I had to be sure that old man Scratchisin approved his time card and everyone else did too before we all gathered here,” explained Tracela.

“Why, what’s going on?” Gwen asked.

“It’s the ‘Ghoulvirtz School Welcome Back’ party that the Dean has been wanting to do for ages!”

“Oh, how cool!” exclaimed Gwen. “Then, is that him? Is that Dean...”

“Yes, yes, it is.”

There hadn’t been a Dean sighting in months, but he was really here! Everyone was here! While there seemed to only be a few familiar faces left since before everyone disappeared from the building for 18 months, the new faces now filling the room seemed to light the place up, and Gwen was so grateful that she was one of them.

She went over to the refreshment table to pour herself a glass of wine (was that allowed?), but noticed it was placed underneath a huge brightly colored print on the wall of a purple building with a severed head and hand in front of it. Gwen was distracted by it and began to study the small figures of people walking in front of the purple building in the print, and one caught her eye. It sure looked like the Dean, and she remembered that she heard about the photo of the old Normal School that seemed to have someone in it who looked a lot like Count Tracela. The mystery wasn’t yet over, but Gwen knew that she was here in the Ghoulvirtz School for a reason, and she was bound and determined to find out what it was!