

Eva

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Vamps: Journal of Absurdity and Horror

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“I heard she was a pianist and that the piano got pushed off the stage and she was crushed to death,” says Laurel, her feet slipping down the worn black steps to the abandoned pool in the school’s basement. “I bet we’ll see her ghost.”

“She’s supposed to haunt the theatre, not the pool.”

“I know that, fuck-face,” says Laurel. Rochelle laughs. Laurel always swears more around Rochelle, for reasons that she doesn’t like to think about, but probably have to do with the fact that her friend intimidates her. Rochelle has piercings and a perfectly proportioned face and wears foundation and is on the school’s hit list for skipping class, while Laurel is in advanced classes and spends most of her time with her computer, not friends. And Laurel has a rash under her nose. “Just because people say that she’s supposed to haunt the theatre doesn’t mean it’s true. They also say she was a pianist, and that’s not true. I looked it up. She was just an English teacher who directed all the school plays. She died in 1979 and was like eighty years old.”

“Huh,” says Rochelle. The stairs end in a room with three doors, two of which lead into the branching hallways of the underbelly of the school. The floor is yellow and gray checked marble, which is how Laurel knows that they’ve reached the older section. The new stuff is cheap and gray. “Where’d you find that out?”

“Someone’s graduate thesis on the history of drama in Edmonton.”

“Did they specifically say that she died of old age or just that she died in 1979?”

“Just that she died in 1979. But —”

“So she could have still been crushed by a piano.”

“Sure, whatever. It’s possible,” says Laurel, scrunching her nose. “Still, I bet she’s haunting the pool. That’s where I’d haunt if I were dead. Nice and peaceful down there.”

“We’re not gonna see any ghosts,” says Rochelle. “What we might see is Ross and Emily having sex in the locker room.”

“Even more chilling than a paranormal encounter,” Laurel says. “Yeah, I heard him talking about getting into the pool changing rooms. What an asshole.” They arrive at a wooden door that reads POOL in yellow paint and Rochelle jerks the handle.

“Shit. Locked.”

“Damn. That’s one way down. I wonder how Ross and Emily got in.”

“There’s at least two more ways.”

“The Potters’ Guild—”

“The exercise rooms...”

“Yeah. And I don’t even know where some of these go. We could try that one,” says Rochelle, pointing to a door with ALL VISITORS MUST REPORT TO THE OFFICE painted on its window. The window looks into darkness.

“Nah. Let’s do the exercise rooms,” says Laurel. She doesn’t really believe in ghosts. Still, she keeps scanning the doors they pass, half expecting to see a monstrous old woman leering from the windows with Hamlet clutched in dirty fingers. The girls pass doors with names like Transformer and Electrical Room.

“There might be a gym class using the machines.” Rochelle presses her head against the beige marble wall and listens. “I don’t think there’s anyone in there.” When she’s certain that there is no one in the exercise room, she moves through the lighted hallway. A Sharpie sticks out of her pocket. Laurel follows.

They’ve been planning to break into the abandoned pool for months. They’d both been there before; when they were in Junior High the drama department had put on a haunted house in the pool area that had been both gimmicky and genuinely terrifying. You would have expected Rochelle to be the one to suggest looking for the pool since she owns a vaporizer and a healthy disregard for authority, but it was Laurel. Lately Laurel has been thinking a lot about ghosts and old things in general.

“It’s weird seeing the machines unoccupied by sweaty preteen bodies,” says Rochelle.

“Yeah.”

“What’s wrong? You’re quiet.”

“Nothing. I just hope we can get into the pool soon. Even the locker rooms would be good. I have bio in fifty minutes.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll get there. The Instagram photos are going to be amazing.”

“Right,” says Laurel. The next way into the pool is blocked too. A wire grate covers the hallway. Rochelle and Laurel can see a piece of paper that says Pool Rules beyond the grate, and she can smell chlorine. Rochelle rattles the grate.

“Shit. Maybe around the corner?”

Around the corner, the door to the atrium between the Girls’ and Boys’ locker rooms is open. “Fuck yeah,” says Laurel, the knob turning under her grip. “We’re there. The locker rooms.”

Rochelle crows with delight. “Hold hands?”

“You know it,” says Laurel, bouncing on the heels of her feet, and together they walk around the stone partitions and into the vast emptiness of the Girls’ locker room.

Laurel had been worried about whether it would be dark, but the fluorescent lights from the exercise room continue into the locker room and run in a circle beside a row of narrow pipes. Teal, sky-blue and rust red lockers line the room. The school is obviously using the space for storage because the room is littered with wooden slats, dusty chairs, cardboard boxes, then in one corner, a Christmas tree and a pile of mannequins.

“I’m so into this,” says Rochelle, and in the flickering fluorescence her face is a pale excited blur, the sharp wings of her eyeliner barely visible. The room is bisected by a row of stone shower cells that are open so that in the event that someone

showered, they'd be visible from both sides of the room. The even distribution of shadows within their crevices reminds Laurel of teeth. Rochelle pretends to shower and shave her face with a single-blade razor still clotted with hair. "Gross!" says Laurel, laughing.

Rochelle picks up a mannequin. Red paint leaks down its cheeks. "This is too fucking good to be real. This is going to go with my 'urban witch' theme so well," she says, her camera flashing. The school's furnaces whir and grind. The air smells like wood and dust and there's a hot, greasy smell overtop of it all. Laurel grins so wide her mouth hurts. She feels faintly sick.

"Smells like McDonald's food."

"Smells like chlorine."

They find the bathrooms and showers and a red and blue door that won't open. Behind another grate, they find a curved hallway that says POOL in black tile.

"Fuck yeah!" says Rochelle.

"Locked," says Laurel, pointing to a combination lock hanging off of the metal mesh of the safety grate. She hooks her fingers in the grate, shakes it.

"Won't open. At least we got to see the mannequins," says Rochelle.

"Yeah. Too bad, though. I would have liked to see the pool."

"Let's go take pictures with them."

"You go take some selfies," says Laurel. "I want to hang out here for a bit. Absorb the ambience. Smell the chlorine."

"Alright, lone wolf," says Rochelle and stomps off to the pink-tiled showers with the Christmas tree and the mannequin head.

When Laurel hears the sound of her moving in the dust and wood, she gives the lock a single, thumping jerk. She'd seen that it was pointing at 15 exactly and suspects that it has been left at the opening spot.

It snaps open. Laurel cringes, waits for Rochelle to come running from two rooms over, but she doesn't come, leaving Laurel alone in the narrow stone hallway leading to the pool. "It opened. I was just about to tell you," she mentally rehearses as she squeezes past the grate and into the pool area. She takes the lock with her: she trusts Rochelle, but she has seen too many horror movies to think that leaving an open lock unattended is a good idea. The lights end before the vaulted chamber, and Laurel walks into the gloom. Her eyes do not adjust to the absence of light and she stubs her toe against a piece of broken tile. She doesn't care if Rochelle is pissed when if she finds her in the pool area alone, and she doubts that Rochelle will be distracted enough from taking selfies in the showers to look. And besides, Laurel needs to be here without Rochelle: her friend is too noisy and will ruin Laurel's only chance to meet a ghost. It's not likely that the exercise room will be vacant again during her spare *and* that the lock will slightly open. One of the two things might happen, but not both. It has to be now.

The pool area has a vaulted ceiling and stinks of chlorine and another sharp chemical smell. The pool itself has no water, but brims with shadow with solidity that Laurel didn't think that darkness could possess. She resolves to come back one day with flashlights. There's a cube of metal bars on the end of the pool where a diving board used to be. Laurel climbs up one, squints through at the cracked tile walls. A spray-painted message loops, but it's been scrubbed so that the paint is illegible. A sign says "No Shoes in the Pool Area" and above it is a declaration in yellow that "*AK + JJ wazz hurr*".

She climbs down the bars and sits on the lip of the pool, her legs dangling into the empty tiled space beneath. She waits. THE GAME says one part of the wall in front of her. SWED says another. Part of "Answered"? Swede? She rubs her nose. Keeps waiting. Part of her had known there would be nothing here, but a part of her had hoped. Fuck. She squeezes the lock in her pocket, too upset to be scared of the emptiness and darkness around and beneath her—Nothing here. Nothing interesting, anyway. Just the hum of the school's furnaces—She wipes her cheeks. She knew that there would be no ghostly Eva O. Howard in a dress from the thirties, of course. No Karen, her beloved aunt, smiling at her amongst the broken tile, her stomach swollen with what everyone had thought were just fibroids. Not even a chilly spot indicating a possible connection between the living world and the dead.

She knew that life didn't work that way, but she had still thought that maybe if rowdy Rochelle wasn't there, and maybe if she went to the most disused, horrendous part of the school, maybe there would be something more than an

empty pool that had stayed empty for the last fifty years and would stay empty until the school is torn down or sealed up. Laurel thinks that it's unjust that television and books can be so much fun while in reality, there is only the dry chlorine smell, the people who won't sit with you in class and the friend who just wants to smoke weed and imperfectly loves you.

She fingers the lock, tucks a piece of broken tile in her pocket, and shuffles back to the entrance to the locker room. She's found the answer to her question. In the most interesting places, there's just more tediousness, boredom and the roar of the school's furnace grinding through it all. Laurel locks the grate, spinning the combination of the lock behind her. "Hope custodial remembers the combination," she thinks, otherwise it will impossible get into the giant waste of space that is the abandoned pool. At least she has Rochelle. That's something.

She finds her friend in the bathrooms. There's no water in the toilets, but yellowish stains them look like they are brimming with urine. The girls scrawl messages in Sharpie in the bathroom stalls. Laurel quotes Hamlet. Rochelle quotes Fall Out Boy. It's fun. Laurel takes pictures with Rochelle and they hike back up the smooth stone steps to math and homework and busses. Dust settles in the locker room. The furnace grinds on.
