

# **Wormfeed**

*By Benjamin Netherway*

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**Sunday, 16<sup>th</sup> October 2034; 06:04**

**Case Number: NA; Incident: 10-48**

**Reporting Officer(s): DI Collins; Other investigating officer(s): DC Taylor**

A cordon has been hastily erected along the seafront. The sun has barely risen above the horizon and is already smothered by a blanket of thick, grey clouds. From the windscreen, you can see the sea wall, and out the side windows you're flanked by other patrol vehicles. The 'Grand Pier' dominates the view, with its gaudy LED light displays, fading graphics and rusting bolts. Sea birds caw into the dawn air and litter the skyline. They watch and wait for fresh rubbish to be discarded so that they might swoop down and tear it apart.

You can just catch the reflective surface of the sand and mud, but the view is obstructed. You get out of the car and lock the doors. Christ, it's cold; barely halfway through October and the temperature's plummeted. You regret shaving. The air tastes of chemicals, landfill and salt.

The blue air rinses everything from here to Wales with a light pissing of mist, clinging to bricks and bones alike. Now you're stood up, you can see the flats stretching a mile out to the distant sea-line. Mud—deep enough to swallow children whole—shines, blurring the line between heaven and earth.

You walk towards the cordon and the high-vis man standing behind it. The blue police tape continues down the beach until the mud is sufficiently deep that no-one but an idiot would attempt to circumvent it. Though, judging by the state of the teenagers you passed this morning, still pissed up from the night before, a wire fence may still have been a better idea.

As you approach the officer standing at the ramp, you look up at the pier entrance. The gates have been locked shut, but you can see turnstiles leading to the walkway. An enormous mascot of a cannibalistic hot dog smiles maniacally at you. You shiver and pull your coat closer.

A broad-shouldered officer stands behind the cordon, his hands stuffed into his vest with his muscular, tattooed forearms exposed. His face is hard with a dusting of white stubble like morning frost on a dying lawn. His high visibility coat glimmers in the glow of the floodlights and the technicolour glow of the pier's LEDs.

The man holds up a large, gloved hand.

"Morning," you say.

He looks you up and down before speaking.

"Sorry sir, this is a crime scene. You can't come any closer." His accent is thick and rhotic, robotic in his protocolled speech.

You turn around, looking at your car, parked amongst the police cruisers. You've not seen this uniform before. He's a big man, made of protein, sweat and creatine. Local PC.

"I'm DC Taylor, here to see DI Collins."

He doesn't move. Maybe he didn't hear you, try again.

“I’m Detective Constable Taylor and I’m here to see Detective Inspector Collins. From CID.”

“I’m not letting anyone in until I see a badge, mate.”

Who the fuck is he calling mate? Can’t he tell you’re not a bloody civvie? You fish your warrant card from your pocket and show it to him. He eyes it for a moment.

“I don’t know you and you’re not on my list. I’ll have to call my SO.” He puts his hand to his radio and begins cycling the channels.

Is this guy for real? Officer...Neal, is it? That name’s going straight in the ‘tosser’ folder. Screw this guy, assert authority.

“Are you taking the piss?”

He looks up from his radio at you, surprised. “What was that?”

“I said, are you taking the piss?”

He bristles and flexes his knuckles against his vest. “No one gets in this crime scene unless I say so, lad. You’re not on the list,” he leans in close and whispers, “so go do one.”

A short woman in a brown coat lingers halfway to the forensic squad, staring out over the mud and water towards Wales. She blends in with the weather: greys and browns that, by sheer stubbornness and will, displace the air, cold and dirt. Her long coat flaps around her legs.

“Neal!”

You both look towards the voice. The woman is marching through the sand towards the two of you. You lean closer to him.

“Still feel like being a prick?”

He turns with a face of thunder, but before he can say or do anything, the woman reaches the cordon.

“Neal! Let him through and get back in line.”

She looks tired today, like she’s made of angles and lines rather than skin, fat and bone. Her eyes are a cool grey with a blue ring lining the pupil. The cold mornings always bring out the colour. Her few wrinkles cut deep into her pale skin, particularly at the laugh lines at the corners of her eyes and around her tightly held mouth.

“I ain’t got no orders to let no Taylor through, guv.”

“I don’t remember asking your opinion, Constable. But since you’re clearly hard of fucking hearing, here’s an order for you. Let him through. Now.”

He flexes his knuckles again but stands aside.

“Yes ma’am.”

As you duck under the ribbon, he spits on the floor where you were just standing, and glares at you as you walk down the ramp onto the beach.

You walk alongside her a good twenty paces before speaking in a low voice. “The fuck happened here, boss? You piss in someone’s cornflakes?”

She looks around to check for wandering ears. “The local force are upset that CID’s taking over.”

“Why?”

“Their MP promised to be tough on crime, so they’re under higher scrutiny and tackling more ‘tough crimes’ locally to improve their rates.”

“For fuck’s sake.” Local constabularies always want the murders that wrap up easy, but the second it takes more than half a brain cell and a cotton swabber to figure out, they come crawling back to the chief and beg for the cavalry.

“Never mind that now. I hope you got enough sleep and an empty stomach; we’ve got a stinker.”

You fall into step as the sand becomes firm, wet, then muddy. There’s another hundred meters of mud to get to the scene, red cordon and eagerly awaiting corpse. You’re glad they told you to bring your wellies. A group of figures struggle in the mud, filtering in and out of a white gazebo. Two amphibious tractors stamped with RNLI sink into the soft earth, the once brilliant orange chipped and stained. Two dusty white vans with ‘Forensic Squad’ stickered to their sides had parked closer up the beach where the sand was still firm, their windows already misted over.

The inspector pulls a pair of latex gloves from her pocket and passes them over as you approach the final cordon. The red tape hangs loose around a pink mass, half submerged in the mud. You slip your hands into the gloves, pulling the tight material over your skin, so the friction rubs, causing you to immediately begin sweating. The sergeant adjusts the wisps of her mouse brown ponytail before addressing the forensic crowd.

“You lot all done here?”

The shortest of the scrubbed-up scientists stands up straight.

“For now, yeah, boss. Pictures have been done and we’ll take her down the coroner’s once you’ve had your fun. Just give us a shout.” The doctor looks up at you and hesitates. “Try not to break her.”

“Thanks Graham.” The inspector turns to you as the group disperse back towards the tractors, where hot flasks of tea and coffee are perched on the flat surfaces. The inspector turns to you.

“Come on then.” You step under the cordon and take a look.

The body is rank. You couldn’t smell it on the way down here, but now you’re looking over her, the sour taste of spoiled meat assaults you. The chemical smell of refuse falls from the railings of the pier, and the salt stench of high tide barely registers over the death reek. You can taste the bile rising in your throat and your stomach twist itself into knots. Thankfully, the mess below you is barely recognizable as human. You know it is—was—a person, but it’s hard to make out what’s happening. There’s a mop of black hair with greying roots, knotted and spread out in a heap over the damp head. Mud glistens on it, and you can see flecks of mud and sand have penetrated all the way through her hair down to the scalp. Her skin is pale, but tinged with purple bruises and greening from decomposition. You suspect that her natural skin tone was probably pale, but it’s so hard to tell at this level of decay—you’ll have to wait until identification for precise images.

“You’re handling this better than me,” says Nicola, with her nose screwed up. Your tongue feels sweaty, so you nod, wary of the risk of opening your mouth and firing out the half-digested banana and porridge from this morning. She spits into the mud before speaking again.

“She was spotted about a half hour ago, tangled up with the buoys.” She pointed towards the bright orange buoy, resting thirty feet away.

“Still floating?”

She nods.

“So she didn’t fall from the pier?”

You both turn to look back, then upwards at the distant railing.

“It’s looking unlikely. We’re trying to contact them from CCTV, but there’s no one in until eight. Judging by the bruises and injuries, it seems more likely she washed up than drowned.

“Who found her?” you ask.

The inspector nods back up at the pier. “Cleaner, taking the bins out at the end of his shift. Neal, back there,” she points to the tosser, “was first on the scene, already taken his details and a statement.” She takes a look at her watch before speaking again. “Half the fucking constabulary’s been down prodding the poor bastard and trying to stick their nose into the scene.”

Local police often get territorial about murders. They always want to appear to be doing all the work, all up until it hits the media and the public wonder why nothing’s happened yet.

“How long until the tide’s back?” you ask, wary of the brown water in the distance.

“We’ve a good few hours, but it’s forecast to rain. We need to finish up here as quickly as possible and get aerials done quickly. Anything that washes up needs to get nabbed pronto, or she might get shelved.”

“Alright.” You look down at the body again and wince internally. “Let’s have a look.” Nicola crouches down, careful to pull her jacket up over her thighs to save it from the mud.

Her clothes seem sturdy and expensive, though they don’t fit well on her. Her jacket wraps loosely over her frame and her t-shirt stretches across her bust and stomach. Her skin is mostly intact, so she can’t have been in the water too long, and the decomposition isn’t far enough along to suggest the bloating is from bacteria. Her wrists are bruised, with the skin scraped and torn in places. You pick up a hand, now ice cold to the touch, and examine her fingers. Chubby, pale, and lacking any bruising on the knuckles that could suggest a fight. She wears no jewellery, nor has any visible tattoos.

“Have you got her on her front?” You ask as you attempt to lift the woman. Her arm has a sickening resistance that’s like snapping a glowstick. You carefully put the hand back down before anything cracks or tears.

“Not yet.”

You look up at the inspector, who’s squinting across the body at you. “We considered a crane, but we couldn’t get one here in time, and besides, she’d probably fall apart.”

You stand and move around to the other side of her body.

“Once she’s down patho, we’ll have a proper look.”

You nod in response. You take a look at the damage, having steeled your stomach to the best of your abilities.



The back of her head is mangled, scalp caved into a broken skull—hair dyed with the brown-red of blood. Bone dust has settled in the ichor, sparkling white like a toadstool mushroom.

“How big, you reckon?” The inspector asks.

“Two and a half inch?” you respond, breathing through your mouth. “Open skull fracture.” You stare at the splintered bone, glaring white against the mottled red and pink. Your stomach gurgles threateningly. “Fucking horrible one an’ all.”

“It’s not deep, and it’s not gouged out the area.” The inspector leans in close to the wound and considers it briefly. “Bad enough to crack the shell, but only barely breaking through fat and skin.”

“Not a heavy hit, then.”

She stands. “Not heavy enough to call an instant kill. She could have survived for a few minutes on her own. Maybe made a full recovery if she’d gotten attention.”

“Judging by the damage to her clothes, the abrasions on her skin and the small fracture, I’m going to guess the killer struggled to take her down.”

“You’re certain someone got her, instead of a fall, or drowning, then?”

She shakes her head and points at the dead woman’s sleeve. “That’s dried blood, so it happened before she got her dunking. There’s no obvious livor mortis, so she’s most likely been rattled around like a brick in a washing machine.” She crouches again to gingerly pick up a hand. “No broken skin on the knuckles or bruises on her wrists, so unlikely she was in a fight.” She stands up and exhales through her nose. “A quick blow or two to the back of the head, I reckon. “

Despite the revulsion on her face, she looks quite proud of herself. She puts her hands on her hips and looks around the crime scene. “If the shoe fits...”

She stares down at the body. “Who goes out, supposedly near a large body of water in full winter kit without any ID?” She looks around the beach another time. “Could have been suicide.”

The word makes your salivating mouth dry up. You shake your head. “Even the most prepared suicides are surprisingly spur-of-the-moment. For all the planning that can go into it, so much care is placed on the prep, that it wouldn’t occur to someone to leave all their things behind. People jump off bridges with their house keys still in their pockets, with fresh food in the fridge.”

The inspector eyes you curiously. “Okay...So, not a suicide then.”

You look away, feeling rather too seen for your liking.

“Why is it, the ones without ID always have no tattoos or identifying marks?” The inspector sighs. “Okay. Let’s go with this being a pre-mortem injury.”

“So, this is officially a murder scene.” Disappointingly there’s no shrill musical motif.

She screws up her face while thinking. “Uh-” She’s not sold, but coming up blank with other options. “Until we’re convinced otherwise.”

“I bet you thirty quid that she comes back with a brain injury being pre-mortem.” What are you saying? Did you just bet on the cause of murder, standing over the body? Jesus, James, how fucking morbid can you get?

The inspector sucks through her teeth and walks around the corpse, clearly unphased by your wager. She takes a final look at the scene. “Come on. Let’s get this down before my fingers freeze off.” She peels her gloves off and turns them inside out, prompting you to do the same.

You take them from her and pass the two pairs to a forensics officer with a biohazard bag. You return to the inspector, already unfolding the screen of her tablet.

Her fingers move slowly on the translucent screen, shaking. “Victim is white-” She cocks her head to look at the corpse. “Or white passing. Late thirties to early forties with black, or very dark brown hair.” She looks at you. “5’5?”

“5’4, I’d say, allowing for the decompression of her spine after being submerged.”

“5’4 then.” She types as she talks. “Abrasions to the arms and hands, and a blunt impact injury to the back of the skull. Discovered at approximately five forty-five this morning. The call to dispatchers was at...” The inspector scrolls the screen on her watch before returning to the tablet. “At five forty-eight. First responders on scene at five fifty-six.” She mutters under her breath while filling out the officer information.

The inspector passes you the tablet and points at the box to sign off on the report. You rub your finger over the screen in a messy squiggle.

The inspector gestures to the nearest uniform. He hands her a radio which she speaks into. “All units assigned to Operation Austell; I want continued eyes for any personal effects. Pick up *everything*. Divers arriving in a few hours to scour further out the estuary at high tide. Report to Sergeant Burdett, over.”

The radio bleeps and static thin voices confirm the message. She hands it back to the uniform, who turns away and unsteadily stumbles through the mud back to the tractor. You look down at the information on the tablet.

No ID, no effects, no clear perpetrator. Coroner called at 0600 hours, permission granted to transport the deceased to office and to obtain dental moulds and DNA evidence. All according to protocol. You pass the device back to the inspector. She folds it twice and stuffs it into her inner jacket pocket.

“Right then.” She pulls out a box of cigarettes as you begin the walk back to the beach. “Shall we get back?”

You nod. She pats you on the shoulder before leading the way out of the mud. You glance back at the body, now being carefully fussed over by the forensic squad, a stretcher laid out on the mud next to it. You can’t help but imagine how the body would bend and snap if the stretcher broke under the waterlogged weight. Of course, it won’t; they’re designed to carry more than 25 stone. You swallow the vomit.

“Come on, Jim.”

You look around at the grinning woman, happiest when a glittering fag-end sticks from between her teeth. You take your time to the car, hoping for her to finish it before entering the vehicle. The sand becomes firm, then soft. You walk over the eroded concrete and the ancient cobblestone before reaching the impromptu police car park. Nicola gives a signal to a uniform, who goes off to talk to the local squaddies. Before long, you’ve reached the tiny red Suzuki, gleaming in the overcast white light. You should really ask her to not smoke in the car. She waits for you, pulling on the passenger door.

“Bloody hell man, come on—my hands are gonna fall off here.”

You glance at the cigarette, still half-way finished. You sigh and click the key in your pocket. You open the door, sit on the seat and take your wellies off, replacing them with your regulation boots. After placing them in the boot, you close the door and turn on the heater. She’s still wearing the wellies and has them pressed up against the interior of the footwell. She throws the cigarette out of the window and leans back in the chair. She looks over at you while you give her the dirtiest look you can muster. She rolls her eyes.

“Just drive the fucking car.”

**Sunday, 16<sup>th</sup> October 2034; 08:34**

**Case Number: PENDING**

**DI Collins and DC Taylor**

Stale air hits you hard as you enter the office. The heavy steel door against your hand had been keeping the warm air from mingling with the freezing temperature of the poorly insulated corridors surrounding it. You hold the door open for the inspector, who is immediately intercepted by the guv and whisked away into the office. The iron-taste of body odour from thirty adults reminds you of lactic acid rising up in your throat while running, of toil and blood. You walk over to your cubicles where you crack the window, allowing more cool, fresh air to dilute the heady mix of sweat and warmth.

DS Tomlins, a short, bald man in his early forties with thick arms and a red, jowled face looks over to you, glaring. Despite the sweating, he always complains of being too cold. When you met, he shook your hand reluctantly and has never once returned a smile. Him and Riley go way back, their partnership being the closest thing to a friend that either of them can maintain. Though he's wary of the inspector, he gives her the time of day and respect, which surprises you. You always got the impression he was jealous of his higher-aspiring colleagues and should be resentful of the inspector. However, Stuart 'Noser' Tomlins is well known for arse kissing the guv and for doing what he's told, but only what he's told. If the chief needs someone to agree with an unpopular decision, or to spout some bullshit to the press, look no further than captain shit-moustache himself, DS Stuart Tomlins. He looks away and drinks from his faded mug, unaware of a small dribble of coffee falling down his chin and onto his greying white shirt.

You sit down in the dusty blue foam chair and gingerly rest your arms on the rests, still suspicious of the ‘repair’ that budgets required you to perform yourself. You can’t believe that you pulled off something as simple, yet utterly manly, as repairing an ancient Ikea chair. No, something will give, and it will give when you least expect it.

You type in the thirteen-digit code and password and wait, gingerly leaning back in the chair. The screen flashes with lines of meaningless code as security sub-systems kick into gear and the operating system warms up. It reminds you of the ancient computers at school, where opening a pdf would take five minutes. How encouraging that the state’s justice wing is running at similar levels of efficiency. The spinning loading wheel freezes, so you look out of the window.

Below you is the most well-behaved 200 meters of Bristol: outside the Bridewell Police Station. Cars travel slowly up towards the Bear-pit and taxis cut up cyclists. Hooded and hunched pedestrians meander towards the already acid-washed facades of the new Broadmead shops. You look at the building opposite, at the drawn curtains of student accommodation. Two weeks ago, you looked across and saw a student stark bloody naked, drying her hair with a towel. She went about her entire routine unphased, drying off, skin care, makeup and dressing before she looked out the window and saw you.

You didn’t watch her like some kind of pervert, but every time the monitor would freeze, or you’d need to think about something you’d look out the window, as you always do, and she’d be there in slightly less compromising states of dress. It was only as she was putting her earrings on at the window and looked you dead in the eyes did she shut the curtains.

Thankfully, the complaint you were dreading never came. She's been very careful about her window since and you've been extra careful not to look too long at any one place.

The kebab shop below the accommodation is dark, and the one worker you can make out behind the counter has his face resting on his arm while he watches something on his phone. A delivery driver smokes outside the door, cool-bag hanging limply from his bike. The planet turns another slow day and the city moves on as if one of her children wasn't found dead on a beach.

Nicola sits down in her seat opposite you and sighs.

"All good, boss?"

"Yeah, yeah." You hear her tapping on the keyboard before she leans back. She too looks out of the window.

"The guv's told me the recruitment freeze is holding for another quarter."

Ah fuck.

"So, looks like we're gonna be knocking about like headless chickens for the next twelve weeks."

"How come?" You're a smart guy. You didn't need to ask the question, but still it comes.

"No money, resources stretched thin, blah blah blah..." She looks over the divider at you. "Different excuses but same old shit. He's given us a couple of Stu's DCs to help with footwork and Paul will be temporarily reassigned if he works through enough mispers." She pauses and looks over the divider at you. "Until then, you'll be helping run this murder."



Your stomach tightens. “What, like, run the investigation?” You try to keep your voice steady, to play off the excitement. You suddenly become very aware of where you’re looking, what face you’re pulling and the pitch of your voice.

“Mhm. I know it’s not ideal, and it’s a lot of work to drop on a constable.” She lets the moment hang. “But I think you’re up to it.”

You lick your lips; they’ve gone suddenly dry.

“You agree with my assessment?”

“Yes, boss.” The words tumble out before you have a chance to really think about what you’re saying. A moment of silence passes.

“Good lad.” She looks at you briefly and smiles.

You fail to play it cool. Pride washes over the back of your neck and turns your cheeks pink.

“Thanks, boss.”

She doesn’t look up. You load the police database and begin typing.

“You know what to do?”

You nod while bringing up the case file. ‘Senior Investigating Officer - DI Nicola Collins’, and right there, under Investigating Officer you type ‘DC James Taylor’. No longer are you relegated to ‘Other personnel’. This could be what you need to get Sergeant. You smile and crack your knuckles. Never have you been so excited for admin.