

Saltwater Taffy

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Runner Up | Most 'Explosive' Read Award

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"Where is it?"

"This way... suit up, it's a mess."

In the skinny hallway of a run-down beach house sat Officer Peter Wethers, a man as wide as he was tall. To his left was Officer Corinne Smart, struggling into a white hazmat suit and cursing under her breath. Government employees, officers, and forensic experts buzzed around, inspecting every inch of the dilapidated house. But despite their coworkers' frantic search, Wethers and Smart felt the world slow to the speed of a dying heartbeat.

When investigating a cadaver like this, time moves slower.

"Curse these suits." Smart tugged at the itchy fabric and sighed.

"Would you rather be soaked in... body stuff?" Wethers inquired messily.

"N-no."

They remained in the beige-carpeted hallway, noting the lack of light.

"No time to waste," Peter Wethers had seen everything, but this case was new. This was sickeningly different.

"Yeah."

They continued on, wincing at every creak of the floorboards underneath the matted carpet.

In the once-bedroom, dark blood coated the walls in a Nightmare on Elm Street fashion. The lack of light blotted out all other details and furnishings. Internally, Wethers called this the Blood Room.

Nothing of this human remained.

"Oh." Officer Smart stood upright in the creaky doorway, covering her already-covered mouth.

"Don't say I didn't warn you. No leads, no evidence, nothing. The woman who lived here was a hermit, apparently. Witness reports say she hadn't seen sunlight in months."

"I see. Any family records?"

"Only a nephew, supposedly in Nebraska. She didn't have friends, she didn't have a TV, my god, she didn't even have a cat. It's a messy case, Smart. We don't know where to start."

"First 48... time is wasting. We have to move."

"We can't."

Wethers, who had bravely stepped into the middle of the bedroom, stared dully into Smart's goggles. His had fogged up, as he had a habit of huffing and puffing everywhere.

A visibly exhausted forensic scientist peeked through the doorway and sharply instructed Wethers to move away from the Blood Room.

Awkwardly, he changed his sanitary booties in the doorway.

"And there was no weapon?" Smart had said it to break the heavy silence.

"Corinne, you're smarter than this. Bodies don't just liquify."

She just grimaced beneath her suit and wandered through the somber beach house.

Has this ever happened before?

SIX MONTHS LATER

It had been only two weeks since the previous hermit woman's case had been abandoned. Reports had spread of a man dying in the exact same fashion as the hermit woman, and naturally, Smart and Wethers had followed it.

A plastic interrogation table sat the two disgruntled officers, and a woman whose husband had recently exploded.

Beneath the faded fluorescent light sat the widowed Doris Marsdin, a frail shell of a woman. Her ashen skin seemed even duller in the cheap tube lighting. A light buzzing emanated from them. *Bzzzzzzz*.

She began to shake so violently that her hair followed. Doris Marsdin was practically vibrating during her interrogation.

"It just... happened. I don't know, I don't know, I don't--"

Across from the jittery woman sat Officer Peter Wethers and Officer Corinne Smart, in a staredown with their subject. Wethers, though he wore chunky patent-leather shoes, could barely

see over the table.

With a heavy sigh, Wethers interrupted Doris's rambling.

"We know it 'just happened', ma'am. It 'just happened' twice now. You were closest to the body, and though this is a sore subject, we need to know what went down exactly."

He stretched every syllable of exactly, waving his pudgy finger in Marsdin's sunken face.

Their subject straightened, moved her greasy jet-black hair out of her face and returned

Wethers's sigh. Blood was caked underneath her fingernails.

The digital wall clock that was bolted above the door read 3:54, in glowing red stripes.

"He and I were walking along the beach at around 9:00 in the morning. We were considering heading back around 9:30... and then he--"

She gasped suddenly, tears forming in her eyes as if on cue.

"He melted! He just turned into a puddle! I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO TELL YOU!"

She shot up from the lazily placed folding chair and the trembling resumed. Her bloody fingernails tore at her hair. Though the officers did feel some remorse, Marsdin's breakdown was similar to a theatrical performance, one they'd seen dozens of times.

But these deaths were new. These deaths were sickeningly different.

Officer Smart sighed, completing the sigh rite of passage, and reached out her hand loosely. She grimaced and placed her hand on Doris Marsdin's vibrating shoulder.

"You've performed an amazing act of bravery today. It's never easy to revisit trauma, especially in an interrogation similar to this one. I'm proud of you, Ms. Marsdin."

Smart's grimace turned into a realer smile. Doris gently removed her nails from her hair, and in that moment, Officer Corinne Smart exploded into a puddle of dark, potent blood.

Splatters, streams of viscera coated the table and the manila folder containing Doris Marsdin's file. Wethers's mug, once printed with *Seaside Police Dept.* spilled off the lip of the table. Coffee poured onto the slick floor.

Officer Peter Wethers and Ms. Doris Marsdin screamed in unison, and then there was horrified silence.

Silence.

Silence.

Bzzzzzzzzz.

Wethers sank to his knees (admittedly, he wasn't far from the floor anyway), and made an unconscious scooping motion through the stagnant air, as if to make Smart whole again, to piece her back together.

Doris, instead of trembling as she'd do normally, stood stiffly and her red, red mouth hung open.

Coppery blood pooled into their eyes and they refused to care.

Wethers felt the slow, time-altered feeling begin again. The blood pouring down the walls resumed in slow motion, and Wethers noticed that the blood flowed slower than his own embarrassing tears.

Doris finally closed her mouth as the ring of blood had sunk a few inches off the wall.

“I just... don’t... know.”