

# Cold Shoulder

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“Any more wine?” asked Amanda.

John turned to his wife and sighed. “Haven’t you had enough tonight?”

“Just go get another bottle and stop giving me grief. It’s not like I have work tomorrow. Maybe not all week if it keeps snowing like this—Whoop!”

John shook his head. He knew his wife was drunk because he was too. They’d polished off a bottle of red each and the heavy feeling it left him was dragging him towards sleep. Amanda was different though—she never quit while the night was still young. There was no point arguing with her, so John diligently went and got another bottle of Shiraz from the kitchen cabinet. There was another three bottles after this one and he worried. His wife would never drink them all—nowhere near in fact—but she may well keep going until she passed out.

*Or turns nasty.*

John re-entered the living room and unscrewed the bottle cap. He leant over Amanda’s glass and started pouring until the glass was almost full. He then topped up his own glass halfway.

"Sit down, honey. *Never Mind The Buzzcocks* is coming on. You like that."

He did and was grateful that his wife was in an accommodating mood. He sat down beside her and put a hand on her lap. It was a struggle to focus on the television, however, because something was on his mind. "You think Jess is going to make it home from work okay?"

"Yeah," slurred Amanda. "Why wouldn't she?"

John shrugged. "The snow's gotten pretty bad. Have you seen it recently?"

"Couple hours ago. Wasn't that bad."

"It is now. I'm starting to get a bit worried. You think I should try and walk down and meet her at the supermarket. Her shift finishes in ten minutes."

Amanda turned the TV up slightly and frowned. "She'll be fine. If you leave now you'd only end up missing her."

John thought she was probably right. The weather was close to a full-blown blizzard now and it was difficult to see beyond a couple of feet. Unless he knew the exact path that his daughter took home, they would miss each other. He didn't fancy going out in the cold pointlessly.

On the television, the programme began and John and his wife watched it. It was funny, but John couldn't find it in him to laugh. The same wasn't true of Amanda who was cackling at every joke, even if it was only mildly funny.

*How the hell did we end up like this*, he thought to himself secretly. Amanda hadn't always been like this. The underlying edge of aggression she now possessed seemed to grow more volatile each year, and her drinking was becoming more commonplace. His own drinking had gotten much worse than it used to be too. After twenty years of marriage, an unspoken resentment had begun to take control of their relationship. John didn't know how to stop it and was unsure if he even wanted to. It felt like something *needed* to change.

He wouldn't change the past though. Most of those twenty married years had been joyous, moving down to contentedness in the latter half. And of course they had a beautiful daughter. Jess being born was the proudest moment of John's life and he never stopped feeling that way about her. She was a strong girl with a character he admired. In fact she seemed to have many of her mother's good points—he just hoped that she lacked some of the worst.

"You paying attention?" Amanda asked him, breaking him away from his thoughts.

He nodded to her. "Just tired. Think I might go to bed soon."

Amanda huffed. "God, when did you become such a fuddy duddy? It's not even ten yet."

"I just can't hold my wine like some people."

Amanda scowled at him and leant away on the sofa. "What is *that* supposed to mean?"

John sighed and got up from the sofa. "Nothing. Nothing at all. You just do whatever you want, while I go to bed. Think that would suit both of us."

"Would suit me better if your bed was somewhere else."

Amanda often said nasty things when she was drunk, but that one was uncalled for. He turned around and faced her. "You keep saying things like that and you may just get your wish."

Amanda stood up and came at him. "Don't you threaten me."

He took a step away from her. "You're the one who bloody said it! Just sit back down. I'm not in the mood."

He tried to walk away, but Amanda followed. "What's your problem, John?"

He carried on walking. "What's my problem? I'm fine. I just want to go to bed."

"No," said Amanda. "I want to know what your problem is."

John hadn't been aware that he had voiced a problem, but rationality was never a key component of one of Amanda's arguments. He was starting to feel angry, but he had to keep a lid on it. The last thing the situation needed was two drunken people going at each other.

"Stop walking away," Amanda shouted after him.

He did so, turning to look at her. He tried to stay calm. "Look, honey, I'm sorry if I upset you. I don't want to fight. I'm just worried about Jess."

Amanda huffed. "You needn't be."

Something about the way she had just said that raised the hackles on John's neck. He felt a sudden stone of dread in his guts. "What do you mean by that?"

Amanda laughed and walked away. "Nothing. Don't worry about it."

"No," said John, following back after her. "What are you talking about? Why would I not worry about my own goddamn daughter?"

Amanda spun around and looked at him with a hatred that John hadn't realised she'd had for him. Their marriage really was over, he realised. The suffocating sadness that he felt was lessened slightly by the relief that also took root inside of him. He didn't care about any of that right now though. He wanted to know what Amanda had meant. She told him.

"She's not even your daughter," she shouted at him. "She never has been. I was shagging one of the neighbours when we lived in Burnley."

They'd lived in Burnley at the start of their marriage, almost twenty years ago and left five years later. Jess was seventeen. Amanda sat back down on the sofa and stared at the television as though she hadn't said anything. John felt a loathing for his wife now that was almost boundless.

He stood in front of her, blocking the television. "Say that again, and if you're lying..."

Amanda scowled upwards at him. "If I'm lying, what? What you going to do about it? Just get out of this house and don't come back. Jess isn't your daughter so you've got no reason to be here."

Rage took ahold of John as if his entire body was merely a marionette on a flimsy set of strings. Without thinking about it, or even realising he was about to do it, John picked up the half-full bottle of red wine and walloped it over his wife's head. Amanda fell back, stunned, blood already seeping from a crack on her forehead. The bottle had not broken, so John swung it again, hitting her in the temple. The shock left Amanda's face and was replaced by a look of bewilderment. Still the bottle did not break. Infected with an unbridled rage, down to his very soul, John swung one last time with all his might. This time the bottle shattered, smashing off Amanda's forehead with an almighty *crack!*

John had never seen a dead body before, but he knew he was looking at one right now. He was glad. Now his wife would not become the full-blown monster she was threatening to become. The decaying rot of her spirit had been halted by death and she would pass on with her memory intact. A tear escaped John's eye

as he realised he would get to remember his wife as the woman he had loved for so long.

John picked up the wine-soaked dead body from the sofa and started dragging it to the front door. The plan was to dump her somewhere, close by, on the estate. Later he'd call the police and claim she hadn't come home. Until then, he would dump the body and return, sit back and wait for his daughter to get home. He looked forward to raising Jess alone.

