

## Winner of the Christmas 2007 Short Story Competition

**Author - Christine McHaines**

**With her story**

### **We Will Rock You**

Tenderly, Emma laid the doll in the crib. She frowned as the straw scratched her hand. 'Where are his clothes?' she asked her mother. 'This is all prickly.'

'It's all right, Emma,' said Jane. 'He'll have a shawl round him in the play.'

'He needs it now,' Emma insisted. 'He'll get cold.'

'All right,' Jane sighed. 'If it will make you happy. Let's see what we can find.'

She went to a box and rummaged inside. 'Here's a lovely piece of cloth to make a shawl. He'll be nice and warm in this.'

Emma snatched the material and wound it lovingly around the doll. She placed it back in the crib then knelt down, singing softly. We will rock you, rock you, rock you, we will serve you all we can, darling, darling little man.

Jane watched her daughter handling the doll, unable to stop a lump forming in her throat. She always liked playing with dolls, she thought, but she treats this one like a real baby.

'Hi Jane. Hi Em.' Jane looked up as her husband Bob walked in. 'What time's the play?'

'Two o'clock. But I said we'd be there at one with the crib and the shepherds' outfits.'

'Time for a cup of tea then,' Bob said. 'I don't know why you had to make all that stuff, you're only a part time teaching assistant.'

'I wanted to do it. And Emma helped.'

Emma looked up. 'This is my baby,' she said to her father.

Bob turned to his wife. 'This is getting out of hand,' he growled. 'She's obsessed with that doll She should be doing other things by now.'

'It'll pass.' Jane kept her voice steady. 'And don't shout. You'll upset her.'

She flinched as Bob turned away. What about upsetting me? she read in his eyes. You never have time for me these days. And she couldn't deny it. Looking after Emma seemed to sap all her energy.

'Thanks for coming home,' she said gently. 'I can't leave Emma alone while I help with the play. You can both come and watch, or you can stay here if you like.'

Bob shrugged and Jane's heart went out to him. She knew he loved their daughter as much as she did. Loved her, but couldn't handle her.

'I'm coming.' Emma sounded positive. I want to see him in the play. We're going, aren't we Dad?'

Seeing Emma's earnest face, Bob's anger crumbled. He slid an arm around her shoulders and whispered. Yes darling, of course we're going.'

The sight of father and daughter in that moment of intimacy stabbed at Jane's heart

The years melted away, and Emma was a baby again, wide-eyed and rosy-cheeked, sucking at her father's finger as he held her on his lap. How proud he had been then, how he had enjoyed those baby years. And how close they had become in the years that followed, those wonderful, rough and tumble carefree years, when the only worry Emma had given them was not eating her greens and developing mumps just as they went on holiday.

Nostalgia swept over Jane and she wished that they could go back, back to those times that had made such tender memories. But one thing was certain in her uncertain mind. There was no going back.

When they were ready to leave, Bob picked up the crib. As he lifted it the doll fell out and hit the floor with a thud.

'Jamie!' Emma's scream filled the house as she rushed forward and scooped up the doll.

Bob's composure slipped then. 'It's not Jamie,' he cried in exasperation. It's only a doll.'

Stop it, Bob!' Jane said, trying to divert Emma's attention from his words. It's all right, Em. He's not hurt.'

Emma was cradling the doll and rocking it in her arms.

'We can't go on like this,' Bob said savagely. She'll never get any better all the time we keep up this pretence. Emma, it's not Jamie.'

'What's his name then?' Emma turned from her father to her mother, a confused look on her face.

'Jesus,' said Jane, taking the situation in hand. 'His name is Jesus. And he's needed at the Nativity play. Come on, let's take him there. We mustn't let everyone down, must we?'

All through the play and afterwards, Emma was silent. I hope we haven't done any damage. Jane thought, watching her over the tea table. She looked at Bob. She couldn't blame him, she knew. Dealing with Emma had put a strain on them both.

‘Why couldn’t we bring the baby home?’ Emma asked.

Jane had heard those words before, and they made her gaze into Emma’s eyes. It was genuine, childlike curiosity she saw there. Or was it? Did she detect a gleam of self knowledge, a glimmer of the painful truth?

‘The play’s on again tomorrow,’ she answered carefully. ‘They need to keep him until then. They’ll look after him, don’t worry.’

That night, after Emma had gone to bed, Bob voiced his feelings. ‘I can’t take much more of this. I want my daughter back.

‘The psychiatrist says she’ll come out of it in her own time.’

‘She’s twenty-three. We were supposed to have a grandson. Instead we’ve got a child again. I miss Jamie too. But he’s gone.’

So has Kevin, Jane wanted to say. It’s no wonder she’s had a breakdown, losing a baby to meningitis and then her partner leaving her to cope on her own.



After the Nativity play the next day, Jane helped clear the hall. Instead of just watching, as she had done the previous day, Emma helped stack the chairs.

‘Do you want this back?’ one of the teachers asked Jane, holding up the doll.

Jane turned to Emma and Emma looked at the teacher. Jane’s heart somersaulted as she heard her daughter’s answer.

‘No,’ she said, her voice clear and steady. ‘Keep it for next year. After all, it’s only a doll.’

The End

*Christine McHaines lives in Portsmouth. As well as being a wife, mother and grandmother, she helps to run a charity for children in the Portsmouth area. Now retired, she is a member of the Portsea Writer's Circle and has had articles published in local magazines.*