

PARENTHOOD

SHORT SHORT STORY NO. 18

George and Emily had been married for three years when their daughter was born, although George was not entirely convinced that he was the child's father. He insisted on calling her Georgia, just to make a point. The infidelities on Emily's part had been so numerous and inappropriate – schoolboys, Anglican ministers, poets and so on – that he was unconcerned when her life descended into a mix of drug and alcohol addictions soon after. It was a good reason to divorce her and claim custody of the child. Which he did.

Two years later, life was not so good. It was hard work bringing up a little girl, particularly when she insisted on being fed three times a day and having new clothes every time she grew out of the old ones. His work was suffering and he hadn't had sex since her conception (or possibly before).

'You knew all this when you decided to take her on,' his friends told him.

'I'd heard *something* about it,' he replied. 'But honestly, I only did it to spite Emily. I mean she's probably not even *mine*.'

In the meantime, Emily had weaned herself off the drugs and drink after a spell at a rehab clinic in Montana where she had learned to bark like a dog and become her own best friend. She hadn't given up on the boys entirely, but as she said herself, she was straightening herself out, she wasn't *dying*.

Through a set of circumstances too involved to go into in 500 words, she became a celebrity, gracing the covers of magazines on a weekly basis. Did she want children someday, they asked and she gave a little start and said oh! Actually I think I had one once. But the man I used to be married to took everything after the divorce.

George watched from obscurity as his ex-wife became a tabloid fixture, earning millions for doing absolutely nothing, and resented every moment of it. Through her agent, he called her up and suggested that she take on parental responsibilities again.

'I'm sorry?' she asked, taken by surprise. 'Who is this?'

'It's George,' he said. 'We were married once.'

'I remember,' she replied with a laugh. 'Gosh, what a thing! We should get together for a coffee sometime.'

'I thought you might like your daughter back. She's no trouble, really, and I'm sure she'd like to get to know her mother.'

'Oh no,' said Emily, shaking her head. 'It's a lovely offer but -'

'Emily, please, I'm begging you.'

Emily thought about it. A child *was* good for publicity and would probably land her quite a few magazine covers. And it wasn't as if she'd actually have to look after her herself. There were people who could do that sort of thing for you.

'Well, perhaps it could work,' she said finally. 'What's his name anyway?'

'It's not a he, it's a she. A little girl.'

'Even better,' said Emily. 'What's her name?'

George thought about it. 'Emilia,' he replied.