

### A Poached Egg on a Nest of Mashed Potato

It was a grey August morning. In spite of the dullness the girl eagerly anticipated the day as painters were coming to decorate the dining room. Then at breakfast her Father announced that today he was going to deliver orders. Her heart leapt. Her greatest joy in school holidays was to accompany him as he took stationery to village shops and post offices in the Peak District. She loved sitting by her adored Father in his new car - a beautiful pale green convertible with creamy beige benchseat (no seatbelts or Health and Safety regulations in 1955!). Then not giving any reason the Father announced he did not want to take her. "Kiss me goodbye," he said. "NO!" she screamed with all the venom a disappointed nine year old in a temper tantrum could muster and ran off. Her Father left. The phone rang. Crisis at the shop. Her Mother was needed to serve in the Post Office. The girl was left with the decorators and spent two glorious messy hours learning to strip wallpaper.

Suddenly there was the sound of a car returning. Puzzled, the girl rushed to the door. There was her Mother but with a face she had never seen before. The Mother turned to thank the young policeman who looked almost as shocked as the Mother as he struggled to cope with his first case involving tragedy in a young family. The girl heard her Mother speak to the decorators. "Found in a layby ... slumped over the wheel ... in hospital ... massive stroke." The girl knew about strokes. One killed the Grandfather she never knew. Her beloved invalid Grandmother had died from her third stroke only eighteen months ago. The Mother talked to the girl. Flurry of activity. Case packed. Colouring book produced. Girl sent to play with friend, and, great excitement, stay the night.

Late next morning the exhausted Mother brought the girl home. The Mother had no appetite but knew her daughter needed to be fed so put a plate of poached egg on a nest of mashed potato in front of the girl. The girl started to eat. The phone rang. Hushed conversation. The girl abandoned her meal. The girl looked at the Mother. The Mother looked at the girl. Instinctively the girl rushed to her bedroom leaving the Mother to experience her first moments of widowhood alone. Prostrate on her bed the wailing girl knew primitive emotions no child should have to feel. The mother came to the girl. United in grief that was the moment my childhood ended, my life was forever flung into a new orbit, and never again would I want to eat a poached egg on a nest of mashed potato.

Gillian Roberts