

David King

ROMA

Roma picks her way past the broken down blue Ford which has lain in the garden for years and calls me and Robbie and Ianie inside. Just by the wall is a red toadstool, but that can be admired another day. Today, we shall be playing with the toys from the Weeties.

The toys are in two parts. One consists of an animal or a farmer, the other a weight. In the case of the farmer, who is wheeling a barrow, the weight is a sack. The idea is that when attached with cotton and hung over the edge the weight will draw the animal/farmer towards the edge. The animals' and farmer's legs hinge ingeniously.

Daisy the cow, Fido the dog, Mrs Quack the duck, and Farmer Jones are assembled in the centre of the wood-grain table.

"Come on, Mrs Quack." The trial has begun, but Mrs Quack is always slow. This toy belongs to son Ianie.

Roma has her hair in a roll, some hairs of which are grey and stick out. Her face, which is round and just starting to develop wrinkles, often has a surprised beam, as though some total stranger has just complimented her. Or, more likely, she has realised what enchantment she harvests from the preschoolers in her care.

The table's reflections shift as the toys march along, Fido in the lead. Farmer Jones's sack is gold, while his body and barrow are orange. He is from two different packs.

Is there a place in this game for Roma? I wonder, as I edge my stool in front of Ianie. Of what colour plastic would she be made, and would she be even slower than Mrs Quack? And what weight would drive her to the edge?

Today we visit the toadstool. Roma leads the way, followed by me, then Robbie, then Ianie.

Roma parts the daisies: and there it is. A red cap, with white spots. Truly, it is remarkable. This is the fourth time I've seen it. How did Roma spot it in the first place? Time is different for us in our cosy housewife-preschooler niche; perhaps space is as well. Eventually, I realise, the toadstool will die, and for entertainment we may all have to march next door to my place and search for fool's gold in pieces of granite. I found one not long ago. The fool's gold caught the sun, just like real gold. Really, though, the granite itself was almost as entrancing. Have you ever noticed that no two pieces of it are exactly the same colour? Mine was the cerise of sunrise, or sunset.

"I've never seen a red toadstool before," Robbie says shyly. She said the same thing the last time Roma revealed it to us.

"Perhaps the gnomes sit on it," Roma answers, beaming in the knowledge that she's part of our world. We're very sophisticated preschoolers. Everything we do is both fun and necessary for our development. Roma, though, has one foot in a particularly infantile world. Last week she chased eldest son Russell round the garden, trying to give him some innocuous apricot-flavoured medicine, just because she wanted to throw away the bottle. In the sense that Robbie, Ianie, and I do only what is appropriate for us, we're really more adult than Roma.

"Two feet across, the toadstool, I think," I observe.

Today is the day Roma likes least: the day when we sit inside the rusted Ford and pretend to drive it. She dislikes this day because she is unable to join in: she's too plump to get through the door. She must have been able to once, of course — assuming the car belonged to her and her husband. I don't know much about him, except that he comes home in rough cap and overalls. I don't think Roma is very attached to him. She asks him to change before he gives her a peck. He couldn't be grubbier if he had crashed the car and dragged it into the back yard. But if he had, it would have been a long time ago: the plastic of the seats is cracked and feels like pieces of toenail now.

As I take the wheel, I laugh. Perhaps we're insane, and this is an asylum. No, that could happen only in make-believe. But aren't we at

the age when it is appropriate for the real and the make-believe to lose their clarity?

Robbie is protesting. Ianie has forgotten that it's her turn to drive. Roma has seen: out she comes, ready to administer gentle reproaches and orangeade.

I accept my orangeade courteously. Robbie is already drinking hers with animation. Ianie is staring at the tall, venusta-entangled fence.

Today I resolve to break the routine. For a while I've been feeling a little edgy; and I realise now that I want to play by myself — at least for a spell. I stand at the gate and explain to Robbie that today I shall be climbing trees.

"Won't you change your mind?" she presses. "Apart from you there's only the boy next door; and he might misbehave."

"But I'm the boy next door," I point out.

"I mean next to you."

"I think perhaps you're judging him hastily. Overall, I like him. When I grow up perhaps I'll even marry him."

"Can boys marry boys?"

"Why not?"

Roma appears at the door. Over her simple cotton dress she is wearing an apron: she has been baking. She will have heard my intention to climb trees, and will be trying to deter me with cupcakes. Roma's cupcakes are delicious. Their cherries are red and plump, and their icing, lemony yet sweet, overflows the wrinkles of their cups. The cakes look just like the picture on the baking soda pack. In the kitchen, Roma is certainly not rusty.

After just a slight hesitation, I accept a cupcake and thank Roma, thereby committing myself to a day with the Weeties toys.

She looks relieved, but also, strangely, a little knotted-up inside. "You're getting very tall, aren't you, David? I suppose you'll all be going to school before I know where I am."

It is the start of the school holidays. The view from the trees is a picture, but despite coaxing neither Robbie nor Ianie says much. I have often asked about their mother; but they both say only that she has had a "breakdown". Several times Robbie has even cried. My own view is that after the death of the toadstool Roma ran out of ideas to occupy us; but that would not explain why we could not have continued to drive the Ford or play with our toys from the Weeties or even eat her cupcakes.