

Playing at House in a Caravan

DO you remember that wonderful feeling, a mingling of joy and important responsibility, that you felt when you were a child playing "house"? It was a tingling feeling, completely satisfying, in which you were happy as long as the day might last. And now to me, although I have children of my own, a caravan holiday has that same thrill. It is like playing at house on a grand scale and with the certainty that it will last at least a fortnight, not just one all-too-short rainy afternoon.

As yet we do not own a caravan of our own, but we rent one at the seaside. It stands in a field behind a farm, and you can smell the sea on the breeze as soon as you get out of the car and stretch your legs and shake out your coat.

It is usually an acutely uncomfortable journey, for the car is loaded with everything we think we can possibly want and a great many things that some of us know that the others never will. But when we shoo away the inquisitive cow and step out on to the grass, all the discomfort and fuss of getting there is forgotten, for now the game is most truly on.

There are the little latticed windows complete with curtains and the front door wide open to greet us. Inside, with two excited children and all the luggage round my feet, it seems at first impossible to move, but after the children have bounced on the beds and looked into every cupboard and then fallen outside again to race round in the sunshine, I begin to see the possibilities and to taste the first exciting thrill.

There is hardly room to hang up all the coats and mackintoshes, but if I am tidy and careful I shall be able to keep my dresses in the suitcase under the bed. To me, who am not usually tidy, this is like the challenge of New Year's Day.

I remember the first time I lifted the lid of the box-cupboard under one of the windows and found a wash-basin with a real plug and beside it two gas rings for cooking. Underneath were the saucepans and the frying-pan, the dust-pan and brush

and a duster, just as they used to be under the nursery sofa in those playing days.

I wonder why it is so much fun to manage things in a confined space—for a short time, I mean. It is a kind of testing of one's ingenuity, to which one rises with enthusiasm. But very soon one has worked out a kind of system. Putting the children to bed is like a game of chess, unless of course it rains and that spoils everything. Provided it is fine, therefore, you insist that they play outside while you turn the daytime sofas into night-time beds and boil the kettle. The next moves in order are: towels on your bed, night clothes on theirs, biscuits and milk on the table, the lid above the wash-basin up, the window closed.

The younger child is then undressed and washed. He protests loudly about his face and neck but thoroughly enjoys the final stage of sitting on the lid of the gas cupboard and dabbling his feet in the now soapy, grey water. Sitting in bed, he gloats over the fact that the biscuits and milk and his books are so close and that the cows come and blow through the window at his feet.

The chess moves go on: boil more water, tidy away one lot of small clothes, pour out the water and then repeat the washing and brushing on a slightly larger scale with relatively more protest. If they both get to bed without too much delay or wildness, you know that you have played well and won that game at least.

Have you ever sat in bed and dried the breakfast things, or washed out of a bucket on the caravan steps on a glorious summer morning? The water is cold and sparkling in the bucket, and you look up and dry your face in the sunlight.

Letters and milk and water seem more valuable and exciting when you have walked across a field for them while gulls cry in a deep blue sky overhead.

Why is it all so exciting? I have never been able to make out, but I know it is, and I leave it at that.

Joan Fawcett

