

Playmate - a short story by Kit Reed

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Look at them, Karin Fowler thinks, two round heads bent in the sunlight.

Adorable. Danny, her testy three year old, is playing nicely for once, squatting happily in the sandbox with his new best friend.

Denny, she thinks the child's name is. Sounds like Denny, but with that lisp, it's hard to tell. So what if he lisps, he's really sweet. And so easy to get along with! No matter how horrible Danny is, he can't seem to scare this one off the way he does every other sorry excuse for a

playmate.

Denny, is it? Could his name be Danny too? Not likely, it's just too coincidental. It's enough that they look alike. The difference is that Karin's Danny is, OK, difficult, while Denny/whoever, the neighbors' child, is perfect. If he comes over often enough, maybe some of it will rub off on Danny here. She thinks Denny's mom could probably teach her a thing or two about parenting, but hey. She's a working mom. It's enough to throw the ball or make brownies with the boys, life is too short to go knocking on other mothers' doors. Besides. The last thing a careerist like Karin needs is advice from some candy faced professional mom. Perhaps if you were around long enough to exercise a little discipline...

So what if the woman does do it better? Denny always knocks politely and comes in smiling, amazing manners for somebody a narrow notch above toddler. It's as if he tries to stay small, so she won't trip over him and send him home. Doesn't fight, always shares. Never cries even when Danny bops him. Trots off to the toilet without being reminded and if there's a problem over a toy, Denny laughs and hands it over.

Karin never has to worry about what they are doing when he gives her that ravishing smile and the two of them trot off into Danny's room. At the end of the day every single toy will be shut back in the toy chest and all Danny's stuffed animals will be back on the shelves, staring at her with military precision.

Unlike her own personal dirt tornado, Denny always has a clean face, shining hair, cute OshKosh overalls and coordinated T-shirts, no food stains that Karin can see. Ever. It's clear the child's mother takes good care of him. Right, she thinks with a twinge of guilt. Like he's a fulltime job.

And if she's never met her? Hey. People keep to themselves here in Cadogan Hills. Nice neighborhood, there are some lovely people here. But.

Sometimes Karin thinks it would take a quake or an explosion to make them open the regulation white drapes in their uniform picture windows and a firebomb to bring them out of their front doors. Cadogan Hills is so exclusive that except for a couple she met at preschool and cute Denny here, she hasn't seen any of her neighbors up close. Oh, chronic gardeners wave as you drive by in the nightly attempt to find your own house, but you'd better not stop to talk. After all, you haven't been introduced. And she hears children playing at twilight sometimes but she never sees them. A gated community was never Karin's idea of a good time -- up market, manicured "homes" and yuppie neighbors cut from the same social cloth -- but she understood what big Dan was buying when he moved them in. "Life's

too short to deal with downscale neighbors," he told her. "We both work too hard to waste time hunting suitable friends for our kid."

So what if it's lonely? Dan is right. With everything going on at the ad agency, Karin's hard pressed to get in all her mothering before work and early evenings, when she drags herself home so tired that she's walking on her knuckles. She's spread too thin to check out every little friend Danny tries to make. During the week, Blanca copes. Even though Blanca is from Ecuador and not too good at English, she's terrific. Danny adores her, which is both necessary and a source of jealousy. She cooks, cleans, manages play dates; she carools to the community preschool where Danny is supposed to get socialized. Which is what the Fowlers are paying the five K for, according to the brochure. But Blanca also gets the best of his smiles and those cute new words. It's the only reason she hasn't quit. Listen, Karin tells herself. That's weekdays. The weekends are mine. Denny comes over Saturdays and every Sunday. If he's there weekdays, Blanca doesn't say. He picks the best time -- after Karin's had her kid fix and before Danny starts whining, "I'm bored."

Danny lights up. "Doorbell!"

"I bet I know who it is." Smiling, Karin opens the door and looks out at eye level. At his giggle, she looks down and pretends to be surprised.

"Why, it's Denny!" She does not say, again.

Green OshKosh overalls today. Canary yellow shirt. Blond hair, bowl haircut just like Danny's. Karin thinks that's why she likes the child so much. They look like brothers. Who wouldn't like a neighbor child, looks a lot like one of her own? She thinks sentimentally, the second child I ever had. "Can Danny play?"

"Benny?" she tries. He blinks those green eyes. "Or is it Lenny?" He murmurs in that little kid way. With a frisson she leans closer. Why does this part creep her out? She tries, "Danny?"

He blinks. Doesn't exactly evade; he says "Denny," or something like it -- she thinks. Then, clearly, "Is Danny here?"

"Of course, sweetie, come on in." When Karin bends to hug him, he clings so she has to pry his fingers off. Poor kid, she notes. Full time mother and starved for love. With a darling smile, he trots off to Danny's room. The child's mother would speak clearly -- real name, nickname, might even reel off a pedigree and a list of food fetishes, but Karin has decided not to like her. If she was that good a mom, Denny wouldn't be over here all the time. The woman seems to drop him on the doorstep, ring the bell and go. Unless, since Cadogan Hills is so quiet and ultrasafe, he trots over on his own. Unlike hellacious Terry McGonnigle, whose parents are brokers, Denny is an ideal guest. With Terry, Karin has to be on the phone with Patti McGonnigle every living minute -- hitting, fights, better come over, Terry started it, but he's going to need stitches.

She never, ever has to discipline Denny. It's a little eerie, but he's never bad! And bless him, he never overstays. Comes after lunch so she won't need to feed him or phone his mom about allergies, and just when she starts wondering whether to call and ask if he can stay for supper, he lisps "Fsthangs" and goes.

"It's pizza," Karin offers at suppertime, even though she's glad it will be just the three of them -- her, Danny and Dave.

"I mvf piffm," Denny says.

"We'd love to have you, Denny."

He says -- it sounds like, "Mwenny."

"Lenny?"

"Fwenny."

"Oh, Kenny."

Little mite standing there with fur in his mouth and sweet, blind love shining in his eyes. "Nwmenny."

"Do you know your phone number?"

He shakes his head.

"I can walk over with you, ask her myself."

"Nemf." Smiling, he shakes his head.

Safe as a theme park, Cadogan Hills is completely silent at twilight, happy families sitting down together behind locked doors. The late afternoon light is thinning and Karin says in a moment of apprehension, "Will you be OK going home, or shall I get Mr. Fowler to walk you?" She imagines marauders in the bushes, coyotes swarming down out of the hills.

"Just a minute." Calls. "Dan?"

"Nmmne," Denny says. A little agitated. Lenny? Kenny?

And when she comes back with Dan, the child is gone. "He's so little," she says to her husband. "I hope he gets home all right."

"Perfectly safe." Dan slides his arm around her waist. "That's what we're paying for. For all we know, he lives next door."

"Danny, stop that!" The kid is elbowing and gouging between them. He hates it when they touch. Karin worries. "I should tell his mother he's on the way."

Dan draws her back into their warm kitchen. "Believe me, if he doesn't make it, you'll hear soon enough. Danny, stop that!"

"I don't know," Karin says uneasily, "these houses are tight as drums. Anything could happen out there and we'd never know."

"If anything bad could get past the gate," Dan says. "Which it can't. Security."

She sighs. "Security." And notes peripherally that Danny is wearing Denny's shoes. "Danny, where are your shoes?"

"Mwenny," he says.

"Top of the line Ralph Lauren 4Kidz and you swapped them for K-mart sneakers! Danny, what were you thinking?"

"Nmmne." Past the point of no return on this Saturday, her son wrenches the joystick off his Nintendo and starts jabbing her.

"Stop that. And speak clearly!"

A round-the-clock mom would probably max out on a chronic guest whose mother never invites back. A professional mother would resent this, is this unfair or what? Thing is, Danny is such a handful that half the time Karin wants to beg Blanca to stay all weekend, but no. Wouldn't be motherly. Besides, two days, she ought to be able to handle it and Denny makes it tons easier. Always handy, and he never makes her say, "Don't you have a home?" or, "Won't your mommy worry about you?"

Still, they may be playing together too much. The shoes. And Danny has picked up the lisp. She comes home one day to find him in an outfit she never bought. Green OshKosh overalls, canary yellow shirt. Cute. Fresh, as they say, as paint, but not what she put on him this morning before she left for work.

"Danny, where did you get these?"

"Mwenny."

"Stop it with the lisping. You can talk, so drop it. Where did you say they came from?"

But Danny smiles an angelic Denny smile and says through fur, "Fwerhnm."
"Don't make me get a speech therapist for you." She sighs. "And look what you did to his clothes! Better let me put these in the machine, If we send them back dirty, Denny's mom is going to think we're terrible."

Doesn't think much of it until she comes home from work Monday and finds him wearing Denny's clothes again. Green OshKosh overalls, canary yellow shirt. Wrecked, of course. When she peels them off, Danny begins to cry.

"Sweetie, what's the matter?"

"I want them. He promised." Danny's bawling so hard that it's all he can manage. Never an easy child, he grapples her to the mat over the outfit:

"We're swapping, Mom, we're SWAPPING."

"All right. Shit. Fine. But let's do this right." Grimly, she phones Macy's and orders a dozen canary T-shirts and a dozen pairs of OshKosh overalls. FedExed, priority. No explaining to Denny's mom. When Danny wrecks one set, Karin will damn well replace them.

A failure, that effort. Even before the clothes come and Danny rips, spots and/or stains every item, Denny's mother has changed him into engineer striped OshKoshes with little white polo shirts. No matter what Karin puts on Danny in the morning, when she comes home at night he is wearing Denny's outfit.

It's not as upsetting as the hair. Bowl haircuts one day, buzz cuts the next. Denny is first. He arrives on a Sunday morning with that sweet grin and fresh OshKoshes -- blue! her heart sinks -- and a buzz cut. "My," she says, making a mental note to take Danny to the barber -- the kid screams like a demon every time she tries to comb his hair so this is a Good Thing -- "don't you look nice."

Smiling, he trots past her into Danny's room. Wow! This is so weird! When they come out at the end of the day Danny's hair is buzz cut too. Karin sweeps through Danny's room like a tornado. There's no telling how the children brought this off. No sign of clippers, not a loose blond hair anywhere.

Weird, she thinks, and is secretly glad that she doesn't have to drag screaming Danny to the barber. Frankly, she doesn't like the way the barber looks at them on these visits, as if she's a Nazi hunter with a fresh catch. So what if he's been bitten twice, it's not like Danny is Hannibal Lecter.

So the weekends go on nicely enough in Cadogan Hills, although Karin is distinctly disturbed on the day when she goes into Danny's room and finds both children naked. Nothing dirty, she's sure of it. They're too young and besides, she can tell by their expressions, but undressed like that, they really are hard to tell apart and it's this that she finds unnerving. The children dress quickly enough and Denny peels off, trotting smartly for the front door with a lisped "fwnm," which she takes to mean "Thank you."

Cadogan Hills, Cadogan Hills, for months this child has been coming to her house and Karin still doesn't know which of the identical high end houses in their cul de sac he's actually coming from. A wild thought crosses her mind. What if Denny gets dropped at the main gate by some latterday Fagan intent on casing the house, or by hippies in a neoSeventies psychedelic bus? He's small enough to snake through the bars or wriggle underneath while the guard isn't looking and come up in the ornamental shrubbery outside the clubhouse. What was that guy's name, still in jail, has his own album, Charles Manson? Karin's sure it's nothing like that but Denny's

mother should have the kids at her house for a change, and besides. Best, she thinks, to follow the child to his house and confront her.

She waits until the next Saturday play date. After Denny thanks her and goes, Karin slips out the front door into the sweet, safe twilight of Cadogan Hills and follows. In the half-darkness she can't know whether Denny spotted her or is skibbling along unawares. If he saw her, is he leading her away from his house or toward it? In the deepening shadows he ducks under wrought iron gates and bounds over flower borders as if he doesn't have a care. Then he shoots a wild, sly grin over his round little shoulder and disappears into a crowd of moving shadows.

Odd, being out here in the dark. Disorienting. For a minute she imagines the bushes are full of shifty little children but when she crunches through a neighbor's hedge to get closer they evaporate and she backs out quickly before the alarm goes off and the First Alert cars come down on her.

"I don't know what to think," she tells Dan that night, whispering so Danny won't hear. At the moment he is having a tantrum in his crib, which they still use because at least they know he's safe when the bars are up. It isn't so bad his walking in, the problem is when he picks up the nearest sharp instrument and starts hitting. Karin's mother insists that Danny needs a touch of the hair brush, but Karin doesn't believe in spanking and besides, her take on discipline is another story. He doesn't see that much of me, I don't want him to have only bad memories. So what if she's paying for it now? It's not as if she can do it differently, or upgrade to a better model.

"If he had something to hide," Dan says into her hair, "Benny wouldn't keep coming over."

"Denny. I think."

"Besides, he's only a kid!"

"A sweet one," she says mournfully. "I know you love Cadogan Hills, but if you want to know the truth, it's a little weird out there. For a minute tonight I thought..." But she is interrupted by Danny roaring for attention. He hasn't barged in on them yet but she just found a dead mouse under her pillow. Token of love, she wonders? As if from a cat? It's for you, Mom. Why does this make her shudder? "All right," she calls in her best false voice, "All right, I'm coming!"

Odd to be scared of your own child, especially in this bastion of safety, but Karin used to pray for Denny to come every Saturday because it was easier, and when he did, she prayed for Sundays. Now she wishes he'd stay forever. Lord, she thinks, what if I scared him off. What will I do with Danny then?

But Sunday morning he's there, OK. He and Danny play so nicely that after a while the silence gets to her and she sticks her head in the door. Odd, what she thinks she sees. Two round heads turn toward her, two pudgy right hands hold strange little rubber masks with kids' features and... No, she thinks, shutting the door quickly, she did not see two little boys with flesh-colored blanks where they used to have faces.

When they come out of Danny's room, everything is as before. Everything is fine. Fine! Karin has no trouble telling them apart because Danny gouges her in the shins "accidentally" as he comes out and as he leaves, Denny gives her one of those sweet smiles of his. She is thinking about those flickering shadows. "Denny, it's really dark. Don't you want me to walk you?"

"Nwm," he says, shaking his head gravely.
As the door closes, Danny astounds her. "I am sick of Denny."
"Oh no," she says. "It's Sunday night after all, you guys had a great time today and you're just tired. You know you love Denny. Now let's go have supper."
The next day is Monday and a work day. Karin goes off without kissing Danny goodbye. He was, as Dan says at times like these, pissy to her. She gets home so late that Blanca collides with her in her hurry to get out.
"Blanca!" Oh dear. Better ask. "How was he?"
"You know, Ms. Fowler." Blanca sighs with her eyes rolled up for emphasis.
"Thank God the friend came."
"Denny?"
"Lenny, maybe. Benny... Strange today, Ma'am, so strange!"
Karin groans. "OK, Blanca, let's hear it."
"He not want to go home! First time ever. I push him out. Have to push hard. Feel bad about it," Blanca says.
"Oh well," Karin says. "No harm done, even perfect children have a bad day sooner or later. He'll be bright and sunny by the time he comes back."
"He won't be back," Blanca murmurs right before she slams the door and the alarm system kicks in.
Odd, Karin thinks. This is a little odd.
Then Danny comes out of his room and for the first time ever, he looks absolutely, completely and totally glad to see her. "Hi Mom, I missed you, Mom."
With a minimal flicker of guilt Karin says carefully, "Denny?"
And is oddly satisfied when the child says clear as a bell and right as rain and right on the button just exactly what she hoped he'd say, "Mommy, don't you know me?" Smiling, seraphic. "It's me, Mom. Danny."
For a second. Just a split second, she considers. Then she wraps her arms around her child and picks him up. "I know you are," she says, hugging him close. Closer. Forever. "I know my own sweet Danny when I see him."

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