Puppy Love

Written by

I.D. Evans
Elijah Everest was a hated kid at Garrick Elementary school, isolated from the borders of reality. He was often bullied by his classmates. Sometimes after school, kids would sneak up behind him and steal his backpack. His lunch money would get snatched by the meanest kid at school, Mason Marr. He was the target of pranks. Even his teachers seldom gave Elijah a chance. His fifth-grade teacher especially, Mrs. Luttrell, would often instruct him to stop talking, while someone else behind him was actually making the noise. Thus, Elijah was not well-liked at school. No one really knows why, but perhaps Elijah was a little too soft for his classmates and teachers. His lack of toughness made him an alienated boy.

One day at school, Elijah walked lonely to class. He was sarcastically pleased to see Mrs. Luttrell, teaching social studies with twenty other students who ignored his existence.

“All right, class, it is time to learn the Revolutionary War,” said Mrs. Luttrell. Everyone’s chins leaned to their fists in boredom.

“What event sparked the war?” asked Mrs. Luttrell.

Elijah immediately shot his hand up, expecting Mrs. Luttrell to call on him. But, Mrs. Luttrell simply ignored him and waited for everyone else to raise his or her hand.

“Anyone?” asked Mrs. Luttrell, sighing.

She quickly smiled and wrote on the white board, “The Boston Tea Party.” Elijah grew frustrated and disillusioned. He was expecting Mrs. Luttrell to call on him. He immediately realized though that he could not be relied on to say anything.
Puppy Love

It was like his mouth was supposed to have never been born. In the next column, one desk in front of Elijah, Chase Janey gave him the raspberry. Elijah tried his best to forget it.

The bell rang for P.E. Elijah hung up his backpack on his coat hook. But suddenly, Matthew Hilby and Chase Janey took his backpack from under him.

“Hey, Matt, look! It’s the loser’s backpack,” said Chase jeeringly.

“Throw it over here!” shouted Matt.

Elijah tried to play Monkey in the Middle to retrieve his bag back. But the backpack was thrown in a very fast force that it was hard to catch it.

Many students turned their heads to the situation. Some laughed, some cheered, and few were too bored that they had no idea what was going on. The rabble would not wind down until Mr. Stark’s whistle a few minutes too late. Mr. Stark was one of Elijah’s friendlier teachers. He accepted all his students, believing everyone as a team, willing to cooperate over compete.

“Hilby, Janey, stop this right now! This is a gym, not a boxing ring. Let go of Elijah, or I will dock you a grade!” yelled Mr. Stark.

Chase immediately exclaimed, “But, teacher, he’s a loser boy!”

“So what? The L.A. Lakers lose from time to time, but that does not make them losers.” Mr. Stark then approached closer to them. “Now let go of Elijah, or I’ll give you a wedgie!”

The class tittered.
Afterwards, Chase and Matthew finally stopped and physical education resumed as usual. Mr. Stark announced they were going to play softball with four mats. So everything would be fair for Elijah, he split everyone into two teams: Elijah was in Team Red, while many of his enemies were in Team Blue. Elijah felt relieved he was not on his enemies’ side. Still, he felt out of place when he was affiliated with classmates who felt dismissive towards him.

Team Red decided to be the first to kick off while Team Blue was on the defensive. Gerald Locket was the pitcher who threw the ball to Jimmy Gilroy. Jimmy kicked the ball wide enough for him to make it to first base. Tyler Foyle was up next, followed by Hannah Livingstone, Danielle Whitman, Trinity Shriver, and then Elijah. Elijah felt a little nervous when the ball was being thrown towards him. He missed one, which ended in a strike. A few of the other students from both sides snickered, making him sweat more anxiously. But he managed to kick the second ball successfully, running speedily to second base. He then continued until he was out a couple inches away from the plate. While some classmates on his team groaned, Mr. Stark proved his good sportsmanship and yelled, “Way to go, Everest! You had a good run there. The score is 3-0!”

P.E. ended with Elijah’s team winning with 6-4. It was a good game, and Elijah felt accomplished with his participation. He was no athlete, but he bestowed courage, which appealed to a few of his classmates. One such classmate was a brunette girl named Lucy Baker.
Lucy was very pretty. She had straight, long hair, green eyes, a fair complexion, and a wide smile. She was an exceptional athlete in basketball and track, winning second place at the annual track-and-field competition in May for hurdles and the 200-meter race. She received good grades, was a member of the history and science clubs, and was a friendly and likable person to many of her classmates.

Lunch was coming up. Elijah was at his locker, putting away his social studies textbook and sanitizing his hands. Then, just as he closed his locker, Lucy yelled from behind, “Hey Elijah!” while running towards him.

Elijah turned his head. “Oh, hi Lucy,” he greeted with a casual smile.

“Good job in gym today,” she said.

Elijah shrugged. “I don’t know if I would call it good, I think a lot of people were laughing at me when I got out.”

“Oh, don’t listen to them. They’re a bunch of hotshot losers who can’t tell a person for who it’s worth.”

Elijah looked down for a couple seconds, letting Lucy’s statement soak in, and then nodded. He was lucky to have someone named Lucy stand by him to give him a little confidence. They walked to lunch together, making Elijah forget his alienation for the moment.

They continued walking together after lunch, with a couple of Lucy’s friends Hannah Jennings and Jenna Stevens. Hannah was a blonde-haired girl who wore flashy pink shirts and was libero for the school’s volleyball team. Jenna was also blonde-haired, showing her beautiful long hair in the spring breeze, was a violinist in orchestra,
played shooting guard for the basketball team, and like Lucy, had an angelic
personality and smile. Hannah was indifferent towards Elijah, but Lucy’s defense of
him reflected a change in Hannah’s views. Jenna, however, was far nicer to Elijah and
hinted towards hanging out with him and Lucy on certain weekends. It felt good for
Elijah to have a few girls be on his side, like a cheering squad.

School was out at 2:50 in the afternoon. Elijah walked home with a growing
smile. He realized he had at least a tad of luck with his life even with society’s denial.
His house was about three blocks from the school across a beautiful park. It was very
convenient for him because of all the dogs and the children running freely across the
open space.

However, the park was not safe for the moment. By the time Elijah arrived on the
premises, it was occupied by a middle-school gang of bullies called the Highwaymen.
Elijah had trouble with them before: they would try to sneak up behind him and shout
“Hey, Neverest,” make Elijah turn around in fear, get immediately grabbed by Chad
“Sheriff” Lewis, and warn him to get out of their territory or give him a red tattoo on
his face and humiliate him in front of his peers. Elijah tried taking heed of his threats so
he would not have to confront them again.

Today was not very lucky. They were playing on their own turf, messing with
anyone who dared to get spotted in their line of sight. Upon seeing them from a
distance, Elijah did not hum a sound as he hid behind a thick bush. He then stealthily
skulked down the path, trying to conceal himself as best as he can. Home was not very
far when he tried going up a slightly elevated path. However, once he was almost out of the park, one of the Highwaymen shouted, “Hey look, it’s Neverest! Let’s get him!”

Elijah tried to avert their gaze as he ran, telling them to go away. They were still chasing him, however. He had to run as fast as he could to his front yard for safety.

“You scared, Neverest?” asked Chad.

The other members taunted as Elijah headed towards his own territory, “You better run, bunny, run,” while imitating shotgun bullets.

Elijah’s leg was almost grabbed by Chad as he was trying to set foot on the front lawn. But luckily he was saved by a faint cry from afar. The Highwaymen suddenly stopped, startled. It started faint, but then crescendoed into a bark. Realizing the sound, the Highwaymen started running away.

“Next time, Neverest, next time,” exclaimed Chad as he ran out of sight.

Elijah chuckled to himself as the Highwaymen ran back towards the park. He was amazed how the gang could get scared by a faint bark. He knew it was a dog barking, but the sound was not nearby enough for the dog to chase after them.

Suddenly, Elijah saw the dog running towards him. The dog was a black Labrador who looked like a mutt: He was unclean and neglected. But the dog was friendly and happy to allow others to pet him. Elijah already took a liking to him, and immediately thought about asking his parents to let him stay since he looked orphaned, left behind by a former unkind master.
“Here, boy, let me take you in. Come on, follow me,” whispered Elijah cheerfully as he guided the dog inside. The dog was also very obedient and was happy to find a better master.

Elijah opened the door. He found his mother reading a book in the living room while watching the news.

“Hey mom, look who I brought home!” exclaimed Elijah.

They both hugged. “Well, look who we have here, Elijah. I see you brought a dog home,” said his mother.

She bent down and examined him. “No collar. Almost smells like alcohol, as if his former master deliberately threw an empty beer bottle at him. Poor thing, I’m going to give him a bath. You can keep him, your father won’t mind when he comes home from work. How was school?”

“Well, the usual. The boys kept picking on me and I almost got brought down again by the Highwaymen.”

His mother sighed. “I really wish our neighbors would inform the police on those hoodlums. Those guys always want trouble. I hope you don’t have any bruises or anything.”

“No, mom, luckily.”

“Well, I’m glad,” said his mother as she touched his cheek. “Don’t worry about your classmates. Once you hit high-school age, they would probably forget that they even made fun of you. You’re not a fool, Elijah. I love you; you have intelligence and a kind heart.”
“Gee...well anyway, aside from that, I walked with Lucy much of the day – that beautiful girl I mentioned before. She even introduced me to some of her friends.”

She smiled. “You should invite Lucy over sometime. Sounds like a very nice girl. You two might make a good couple.”

Elijah shrugged. “I don’t think it’s like that, but thanks, mom. I will invite her over sometime.”

He then hugged his mother and went to his room to do some math homework. Luckily, it was a simple worksheet of long division problems. Elijah was never good at math, and cringed at fractions, but he nevertheless regarded arithmetic as a fun subject, especially multiplication.

When it was about dinnertime, Elijah walked to the kitchen to find his favorite chicken patty sandwiches on the counter, with green beans and corn. He shared his food along with both his parents, his father arriving twenty minutes before dinner and learning about the new dog.

“So do I keep him, dad?” asked Elijah.

“It’s up to you, sweetie. If that dog ran down the street to you, you might already know that answer.”

Elijah immediately smiled. He bent down where the dog was begging for crusty buns. “Do you hear that, boy?” said Elijah as he was scratching the dog’s cheeks. “You are now a member of our tribe. Now what should we call you?”

It took Elijah a few minutes to think of a name, but he then knew exactly what to call his new pet. “I’ll call you Tank. How about it, boy? Will you defend my land?”
The dog panted heavily in joy. He was ready to follow his new family. He was also ready for dinner. Elijah promised he would give him pieces of hamburger crust and leftover corn as a welcome gift.

Elijah’s father cleared his throat. “Deb has been telling me you have a girlfriend in your life. Is she really pretty?” he asked.

“…Yes, dad, she is,” Elijah replied diffidently.

“Our son just doesn’t want to reveal any attraction. We all know he really likes her,” Elijah’s mother joked.

“Maybe, I guess. She’s really nice. Certainly better than several of the kids at school.”

“Don’t worry about those other kids, Elijah. They might change once they hit puberty. They might grow to like you, or join the wrong crowd. At least you know what the right crowd is, and that I’m proud of you,” said Elijah’s father, knowing his son will grow up knowledgeable of his surroundings.

The next morning, Elijah woke up with Tank sleeping on his bed. They had both enjoyed a pleasurable night together. Unfortunately, they both woke up on a school day and Elijah did not want to suffer more torment from his classmates. He wanted to just watch the dragons flying and the blue dog sniff out clues on television. But he also wanted to learn new things and the girls he hung out with yesterday made him a little more secure.

Elijah ate the usual breakfast made from his darling mother: Waffles dressed in Mrs. Butterworth’s™ syrup and a glass of orange juice. He then brushed his teeth, took
his lunchbox, and accompanied his parents along with his new dog who was ready to
go on his first car ride. He only lived a couple blocks from the school, but he preferred
riding with the family to school so he could try making good conversation. Some of his
favorite times are riding in the front passenger’s seat.

It was another usual day at school. Mrs. Luttrell once again pushed everyone
hard on the reading system or else they were forced to stay indoors during recess if
their standards were not met. Elijah was one of those people who had to always stay
during recess hours because he underperformed on a few of the reading comprehension
tests, although he was a good reader and just wanted to read for leisure. He found the
tests ridiculous and much of the time the questions covered trivial matters, not
significant parts of the story. But he had to follow the rules, or else discipline was made.
And it made him feel uneasy about his fifth grade experience.

His classmates were still an annoyance. Jimmy Gilroy taunted him constantly in
the classrooms. Hannah Livingstone and Heather Papandrea were whispering ‘what a
freak’ behind him in math class. Chase gave him a booger-flavored jelly bean in front of
the “popular” crowd as they snickered. And one girl would call him a weirdo after
asking a question.

He tried to ignore the misfortunes, however, because he knew Lucy would never
taunt him like that. He would daydream about her in class when Mrs. Luttrell would
show a video that no one seemed interested in. Maybe he had feelings for her. Maybe
he developed a serious crush for the first time. He wondered what to give her for
Valentine’s Day: A flower, perhaps, or maybe he might give her some candy. He hoped
he would be the first to take her to the school dance, maybe even the senior prom if he was lucky. *I’m happy we’re friends for now. That makes me ever more comfortable,* he happily thought.

After orchestra practice, which was one of his favorite classes besides music, Elijah quickly opened the door and started the weekend excited and overjoyed that he did not have a single piece of homework to do other than reading. He was ready to play some video games once he got home. He thought about inviting a few of his friends over for gaming. He could also invite Lucy if he caught her at the right time. And perhaps, if he was up for it, Tank could be the mascot. So much was going through his mind that he needed some time to pay attention to the road so he could race home.

But starting the weekend was not an easy task. Elijah still had to go through the park, where Sheriff Lewis and his Highwaymen were always hanging out. And since Tank scared them off last time, Elijah felt a slight lump in his stomach, fearing that they are going to mean business this time. He knew he was in trouble.

When he was walking towards the park, he heard a faint call for help. It was a girl’s voice. He immediately rushed over to the grounds to see who was in peril. It was Lucy, who was being pushed around by Sheriff’s gang. Elijah was now mad. It was worse when he felt humiliated around them, but now it was a girl and a valuable ally. He had the impulse to confront them and rescue Lucy from their intimidation.

“Hey Lewis! Stop it! Put her down!” yelled Elijah angrily as he ran.

“Hey, look, it’s Neverest again. The trap worked!” The gang turned around towards Elijah, snickering, with Lucy trapped in Sheriff’s clutches.
“I mean it, Matt. Put...her...down,” said Elijah firmly.

Sheriff looked at Lucy, still trying to cut free from his tight grip. “You want her, Neverest? Nuh uh,” he snorted. “You scared me last time, dweeb. Now it’s my turn for retribution!”

Elijah nervously shook his head. “So you think trying to terrorize my friend is how you define ‘retribution’? I don’t think so. It’s me, Matt. Leave her out.”

He walked closer to Elijah, staring at him with the smug, dangerous look on his face. “Now listen here, squirt. There’s one sheriff in this playground, and it is Matthew F. Lewis. No one messes with me or tries to scare me off. I ain’t fooled, Neverest, I ain’t fooled. I ain’t afraid to threaten anyone who tries to double-cross me.”

“Oh yeah, well then, where’s your victim?” asked Elijah snidely.

“Wha...” Sheriff immediately spoke, as Lucy was finally gone. She was actually hiding behind a bush, waiting for the perfect time to pounce them. “Where did she go? You conniving—son of a...”

“Now!” shouted Elijah. Lucy jumped from the bush and tackled Sheriff from behind. They then both held each other’s hand as they ran to Elijah’s front yard. They were still in danger, since they had nowhere else to run to, tired from running. The gang approached them, Sheriff leading the pack. He dangerously warmed his knuckles up, getting ready for revenge.

“You troublesome brat!” he shouted as he was about to punch Elijah.

But just when Elijah was crouching down, Tank bit Sheriff on the rear.
Elijah and Lucy both giggled. The bite saved them a trip to the nurse’s office. Once again, Elijah was lucky to have a devoted dog defend his honor. Dog was really man’s best friend, and in this case, both. So they got the last laugh.

“Get off me, mutt! Get off me!” Sheriff was struggling to shake Tank off him. He persisted though until Matt apologized to Elijah and Lucy for threatening them.

“All right, I’m sorry. Can this mangy mongrel get off me now!?”

They both thought it out, still feeling entertained at the sight. Finally Elijah said, “Sure, Matt, you’re forgiven. Tank, heel!”

Matt felt embarrassed that he ever apologized. He saw apology as a sign of weakness, so he rarely apologized except to his parents if he did something he was not supposed to. Now that he has shown mercy to someone he considered a “weakling”, he could not find it in his heart to retain his bigheaded attitude.

Elijah felt more relaxed and self-confident. “Now Matt, I want you and your posse to leave. Don’t bother me or Lucy again.”

The three ran after the dog gave an affirming growl. The dog now knew their scent and could track it down like a bloodhound. He was proud to have a master who respected him and was glad to have a best friend around him.

Lucy felt a little amazed at Elijah’s newfound courage. She liked him anyway, to be sure, but she somehow felt that there would be more than what was anticipated. She did not know why everyone else at school teased him, because he was a nice guy, and after today, he proved himself quite courageous.
“Are you all right after all that, Lucy? I’m sorry you had to show up at the wrong time,” said Elijah, putting his hand around her back.

“Oh, they didn’t seem so tough. At least the park seems less dangerous now. Maybe they’ve learned their lesson,” replied Lucy, trembling less.

“I know, they’re scary,” Elijah reassured, turning his head towards Tank. “But luckily, you are looking at a super team.”

Lucy chuckled. “Oh, you,” she teased. Then her smile widened. “They were wrong, Elijah. Your classmates—they’re wrong.” Elijah shrugged, but Lucy continued. “But even if you weren’t that bold, I still like you and I’m glad to be your friend. Because deep down, you have a heart of gold, Elijah. Your heart’s worth more than spine.”

Elijah modestly smiled, but accepted the compliment. “Thanks. I just wish I actually was braver.”

Lucy gave him a small kiss on the cheek. “That’s for outside. You don’t have to prove it.”

Elijah felt more comfortable, especially from that kiss as he was rubbing it. “Say, my parents are not home right now, but would you like to come inside for a couple hours. I have a whole library of video games and movies.”

“Sure, I’d like that,” Lucy nodded. “I would love to see your house.”

“Let’s do that.” With that, Elijah and Tank came in and closed the door.