
Evan's World

By Kenny Shepard

Evan's white teeth matched the miniature police badge he wore on his t-shirt. He loved playing cops and robbers in his long yard stretching along his mother's driveway. The hot, black top was the perfect place for a chase scene and the ivy crawling along the asphalt made the nastiest of crashes comfortable. Although surrounded by dozens of neighborhood children, Evan was always left to create his own solitary games. Three doors down while the other Campbell Street seven-year-olds now congregated for a kickball game, Evan remained uninvited, at home, in his own circle of imaginary playmates.

Lined up neatly along the drive were blow-up clowns and cartoon villains punch bags. Evan's playmates for the day were perfect, punchable targets for his tiny fist or bicycle tire. After they had been physically punished for their crimes, the inflatable bad guys were hauled off to the dark jail cell conveniently located in Evan's garage. Here, they would serve a life sentence for at least ten minutes before Evan would proclaim them escaped.

Evan's mother, Katy, leaned against the kitchen window watching her son. She giggled, noticing his starch white hair standing on end like a porcupine; then, her eyes watered watching Evan slug an imaginary culprit in the face. As the Joker punching bag bobbed against the ivy, Evan turned to face the window abruptly. The distance between the Joker and Evan's mother was long, but Evan squinted to see her watery eyes. Somehow, he knew she'd be watching; she always seemed to be around when he needed her: for affection, for a hug, or in this case, for a quick round of applause.

Evan saw his mother's hands clap together behind the window. Her round, pale face was framed by stained glass fruit: a red apple, purple grapes, and a bright orange Evan had bought for her birthday last year. As Evan squinted further, he noticed his mother motioning him to come closer. Then, as he obeyed, she held up his favorite Saturday afternoon lunch: peanut butter, apricot jam, and banana sandwich, potato chips, and cherry-cola. Evan could barely see the bread from behind the mountain of rippled chips, but he knew his favorite meal was waiting for him.

Katy arose with the Sunday morning sunshine. Since her husband had moved out two years ago, she had only one breakfast to prepare besides her own. With toast toasting, and orange juice resting on the table, Katy climbed the stairs to awaken her son. She puckered hard and smooched Evan on his white cheek; then, she stayed close to his face. When his eyelids opened, they revealed blue eyes with sleep in the corners. When they focused on Katy's eyes, she knew he

was awake. She quietly whispered, "Breakfast," as if Evan needed a reminder to eat; he was always hungry.

With breakfast gone, Evan dressed for church. He hated to go, but trusted his mother that someday, he'd be happy he'd gone.

Evan's only enjoyment from the service was the "pre-show" activities. As usual, at fifteen minutes before the service began, Katy and Evan strolled hand in hand to the front pew. Here, Evan smelled the sweet fragrance of freshly cut roses. The Church's auxiliary chose the pulpit flower of the day each week, and Evan loved to second-guess them. Unlike other church-goers, Evan's least favorite service was Christmas. Undoubtedly, the auxiliary would chose odorless poinsettias for this annual service. At least on Easter, the women chose bright lilies for the day. They had more aroma than the Christmas flower, but they were big, bright, and had little stems peeking out at Evan's front row seat.

As the robe-clad minister approached the pulpit, organ music played, and the choir from the back of the church began their procession to the altar. As the singers brushed past Evan, he jumped; every week they startled him. Every week Katy clutched his tiny hand harder. A few minutes into the service Katy nudged Evan dozing next to her. When his eyes opened, he tried to pay attention to what Minister Howe was saying; soon, however, his eyes turned to every other direction of the church. He noticed the pastel hats on the old Charton sisters, the new cream colored dress Mrs. Wade was wearing, and the fancy gold-embossed lettering on the bald man's Bible behind him.

After surveying the worshippers, Evan felt his mother squeezing his hand. It was now time for the children to go to their Sunday-school lesson, while Minister Howe gave the weekly sermon. Simultaneously, Katy and Evan's eyes met, and without communicating, they understood each other. Again, Evan's head turned, this time to watch the boys and girls scurrying to the classes. The older children clutched Bibles in their hands, while the younger ones carried colored paper, crayons, and markers. As a red-headed boy about Evan's age passed the front pew, his huge Crayola box of crayons caught Evan's eye. Evan always wondered what all the boys and girls made whenever they brought their supplies with them. Following these Sundays, he was unusually eager to arrive at the church's lobby to see the bulletin board displaying all of their colorful creations.

Now, as his eyes focused on the tiny sharpener on the crayon box headed for the archway, Katy's grip loosened; Evan scooted in closer to his mother.

The week moved in as most others for Katy and Evan Ayers. Katy, up at five a.m. did some morning housework before preparing herself and her son for their prospective days. Soon, Katy would change from mother/cleaner to executive secretary. Her job downtown satisfied her in most every way except salary. She knew she couldn't expect much with only a year of college behind her, but she needed money to raise her son. Evan's father helped financially, but when his legal obligations were finished, he was finished with his family. Katy's husband was never ready to handle the challenges or pressures that came along with Evan, but since he had gone, the twosome had managed to survive. When he left and

moved out of state, he sent checks to Katy with no explanations, no letters, no messages to Evan. When Katy received the first check wrapped coldly in blank, white paper, she became even more determined to be not only mother and playmate for Evan, but now father as well.

This Monday morning, Katy finished some laundry, paid the thirty-dollar electric bill, selected the dinner meat to be thawed from the refrigerator, and hauled some trash out to the curb. Katy had been combining roles for so many months now, she had forgotten what she did every morning when the nuclear family numbered three.

With the morning duties finished, Katy yawned as she went to awaken her son. Opening the white blinds was always the best way to get Evan stirring. With a quick pull of the blinds' string, the morning sunlight would usually cast instant shadows in the boy's room. Katy's housekeeping skills were enough to make any full-time housewife envious, and Evan's white room was a perfect example. Like a hospital room, Evan's surroundings were clean, scrubbed, and white. White walls with a simple teddy-bear papered pattern above the chair-rail held pictures of bears at play. His white sheets and bed cover against the stark window blinds were simple decorating, but fresh and simple. Adding color to the bed were a one-eyed purple and white polka-dot giraffe and a long, yellow snake with bulging black eyes coiled now around Evan's sleeping head. From beneath his white blanket, a tuft of Evan's hair blended into the whiteness of the cover. Then, as Katy's hand released the blinds, his forehead and eyes emerged into the white world surrounding him.

As if he was sacrificing them, Evan moved his friends the snake and one-eyed giraffe to the side of the bed; he outstretched his arms to Katy. Hugging Evan tightly, Katy knew her life, for now, was full. When Evan's eyes focused on Katy's, she remembered for the countless time how dependent he was on her; her decisions structured his life. Not only was Katy Evan's set of parents, but she was his best friend, his rival at foot-races, his only guest at his sixth birthday party last year.

Katy knew Evan's life centered around her and she was beginning to reshape her days with this knowledge. A sigh of relief escaped from Katy whenever she opened an envelope from Evan's father. She always recognized his messy handwriting instantly, and her heart would begin to race. Twice a month, it was the same; her long nails would dig into the envelope as she'd say a quick prayer that the mailing would include only a check — a message from his father would only complicate Katy and Evan's comfortable duet.

With Evan dressed and fed, Katy and he squeezed into her tiny Toyota to begin their Monday morning. On their way to Evan's school, Katy zipped past other neighborhood first-graders at the corner bus stop. Neither Katy nor her son waved to the nameless students assembling near the stop sign; instead, Katy caught Evan's eye and winked at her son.

As always, Katy walked her son to his school's doorway and then greeted his teacher and her other few students. Today, as any other day, Evan gripped his mother's hand with intensity. Then, as he became more comfortable, he slowly

released her hand and headed for the Legos waiting for his creative hand across the room. Halfway to the blocks, Evan changed his course and ran back to Katy; She knelt as Evan kissed her goodbye.

On her way out the door, Katy noticed chipping paint and a dented gutter surrounding Evan's school; with half of her paycheck paying for Evan's education here, she wished the building looked a little more respectable. Still, Katy knew this was one of the only places for her Evan.

As usual, Katy arrived back at the school at 4:50 that afternoon. Katy always checked her watch when pulling into Evan's school; since his school had no bells to signify the end of class, Katy's only knowledge of when to begin looking for her son was her trusted Timex. Almost immediately, she spotted Evan's tiny, red Izod windbreaker turn the corner and pick up speed as he saw the curb-side Toyota. After a hard peck hit Katy's cheek, she pulled away and asked Evan if he wanted to go shopping; his bobbing, white bangs moving with his affirmative nod told Katy to drive to the mall.

Poe's was the favorite store of both members of the Ayers family. Katy liked the selection of professional dresses, and Evan loved the toys: intertwining train sets, dolls with real hair, red and blue soldier statues, and Matchbox cars and trucks of every color of the rainbow. Walking between the toy department aisles, Katy noticed her son's eyes widening, his pace quickening. Then, after every interesting toy had been examined, Katy and Evan took the escalator down to the better dresses. Evan used to be scared of the moving grills, but at the last trip to the mall, Katy taught Evan to coordinate his steps on the moving stairway. Now, Evan pulled his mother's arm to show off his new skill.

In the dress section, Katy rushed. She needed a few new outfits and usually the clearance rack had one or two items she could use. First, though, she checked some tags on other items: a navy dress with a white sailor collar, a black suit with a double-breasted jacket, a red and royal blue plaid skirt ensemble. Then, she hurried to the sales racks; she wanted to get out of the department store soon to get Evan's dinner. Katy grabbed a size nine, red pleated skirt for \$29.99 and decided to try it on at home; now, her thoughts were on feeding Evan's hungry mouth pork chops and a baked potato.

Suddenly, Katy noticed her skirt was in one hand, her purse in the other — Evan was gone. Immediately, she tossed the skirt on a nearby rack and frantically scanned the section. She then began asking sales clerks and shoppers if they had seen her son. Next, she again surveyed the dress department, ran frantically through the adjacent juniors department, and continued. She ran through the accessories area next, then skipped every other step on the escalator to the toys department, and eventually ended up again in the home-base of the better-dresses department.

Katy's heart raced, her palms and arm pits sweated, and her eyes welled with tears. At each stop she asked shoppers if they had seen her son. "A little boy?," she kept repeating. "Red jacket, white pants, and high tops — blond hair?" Each gave a disappointing shake of the head or a quick "sorry." An older woman asked what the boy's name was, but Katy had no time for pointless questions; she

continued her jog, scanning behind tall racks. Finally, Katy found herself in the middle of the better-dresses section alone, crying, helpless. She rummaged her fingers through her hair, turned her head in each direction, and felt the warm tears falling down her cheeks. Fear filled her body; panic overtook her. She made circles around the dress racks where their hands had parted and thought about finding security personnel, anyone who could bring her son back to her.

Katy felt a sudden crash against her leg, and instantly the panic left her body. She whipped her head to see her son, his arms squeezing her leg, his eyes red from crying. She embraced her son harder than she ever had, and he held on tightly. Finally a spectacled saleswoman cleared her throat to get Katy's attention. Katy gratefully looked up from her crouched position and smiled.

"I kept asking his name, but he's a shy one," said the woman whose name tag read "Bernadette."

"Thank you," answered Katy wanting to be rid of her, to be out of the store, wanting only to be home now with her son. Still bent down by Evan, Katy pulled away slightly and looked him squarely in the eye. She tugged her arms loose from his clutch and brought them close to her chest. Using American Sign Language, Katy signed "let's go home?" to her son. He smiled and frantically nodded outstretching his arms again to his mother. She decided that's all she needed to tell her son for now and occupied her hands now scooping up her boy.

Evan's fingers intertwined around Katy's neck until she pushed through Poe's heavy doors. There, outside the store, and in his mother's arms he released his fingers; behind Katy's head, Evan smiled and signed a quick "thank you" to the clouds overhead.