

BLANK PAGES



ANDREW and HIS FAMILY

Andrew drew something with pencils in his album, and Amanda, his mother, peered intently into a hodgepodge of colored lines. For her, it still looked like just a combination of different colors, but she knew that a few more strokes, and Andrew would turn the chaotic stripes into a harmonious picture.. In fact, a couple more minutes, and out of the mess a sultry red-and-yellow desert and a string of camels wandering along it began to emerge.

– What are you drawing, Andrew? Amanda was surprised. – Where did you see such a beautiful desert with camels? Have you seen this on TV?

Andrew said nothing, he was too absorbed in his occupation.

Amanda is the mother of a special needs child, Andrew, and a regular girl, Christy. When Andrew was only three, doctors diagnosed him with autism, then still under a question mark. In the small town where Amanda lived, it sounded like a verdict.

She was greatly supported by her beloved husband, who patiently supported her hope for the best and helped with everything he could. His love for his son was truly boundless. He could talk quietly with Andrew for hours, telling him what a

beautiful and smart boy he was, that when he grew up, he could become big and strong like his dad. Boy smiled, occasionally, and simply listened attentively to his father.

Every year his traits manifested themselves. He rejected physical and eye contact and did not respond to his name. He was afraid of loud noises, and a dog barking could drive him into hysterics and tears. He could not stand sudden changes and was terribly upset if someone rearranged his things. Everything had to be in place. When he was upset, the only things which could calm him down was drawing and calm music. When alone, or in the company of his younger sister, he could draw on paper with pencils for a long time. The color fascinated him.

Father gave him a small separate room, where nobody touched any of his things, which greatly improved his situation. It was also patiently explained to him that in other parts of the apartment he needed to live according to what was expected there.

If the children drew in the living room and Christy did something that Andrew did not like, his mother suggested that he go to his room, where he would not have to be upset. He had a choice: to be alone where there was complete order around, or to endure the violation of order to be with his sister. Andrew preferred the latter, and gradually his obsession with order noticeably lost ground.

His speech problems, unfortunately, did not contribute to communication, although the boy clearly wanted contact with other children. He spoke quickly and was very difficult to understand. At the same time, his voice was very quiet, indistinct, with unusual, sometimes even mournful intonations. His six-year-old sister was already chatting with friends but for Andrew it had big issues.

Of course, in the family circle, Andrew was understood by all household members. The problem of communication and misunderstanding by the outside world manifested with him at an early age in kindergarten, where his parents sent their son at the age of three, before they learned about autism.

There were many children in the group, and the teachers did not have the opportunity to pay attention to each of the children separately. In addition, they did not know at all how to work with such a child. He could not interact with other children in the group; he ate only food prepared separately for him, and often threw tantrums.

In those moments when he was upset, surprised, or delighted with something, he

began waving his arms in a funny way. Outwardly this looked odd, but only until he started crying. Only then did adults understand that something had happened, and the child needed help. But they could not figure out his problem and he could not explain it to them. His speech abilities at that time were very limited. Over time, the children began to fear, avoid and offend him.

Repeatedly, the parents took their tearful son out of the kinder-garden, although every morning he planned to go there. At first, this desire for them was incomprehensible and seemed very strange. However, gradually the parents got used to the fact that they had to deal with strange things. Their own views about the world began to change noticeably under the influence of Andrew. They loved their sweet, strange son very much.

After several weeks of daily grief, with the kindergarten staff categorically refusing to read books about the characteristics of such children, Andrew's parents sadly realised that the kindergarten was not the best solution for their son. Amanda began to take work home to be with Andrew.

Amanda, who grew up on books, of course, read a lot of literature, talked with other parents who had similar problems. Parents experimented a lot with different approaches and gradually achieved improvements with food, behavior, and the development of simple, but necessary life skills for the child. Andrew had simple household duties, which he diligently performed.

Since Andrew sought to communicate with other children, he tried to participate in some games - with Christy and the boy next door, Bob, the same age as Andrew.

FIRST DAY at SCHOOL

Time passed, Andrew grew up, and the time came when it was no longer possible to postpone entering school. Amanda's mild hope that her child would be able to somehow adapt to school collapsed on the very first day.

Andrew was the oldest in the class, and the only child with autism in the whole school. At first the children did not know how to react to this. They were embarrassed that he was different from them. They were alarmed by his strange low voice, the way he waved his arms, and the fact that he was frightened by loud noises.

During the first break, a crowd of first-graders surrounded Andrew. They shouted and pulled him. Andrew was scared. Amanda, who had not yet left school, noticed this and arrived almost on time. However, the first day of school ended in tears and grief.

Andrew really wanted to go to school, influenced by his friend, attending there. This was not a feature of autistic children, because they are usually satisfied with their inner world, however he wanted to be with other children.

This little heroism was very touching. He was also appreciated by Andrew's first teacher, Mrs Morton. She was fascinated by this blond-haired boy who knew how to listen to her explanations so carefully and understandingly, but at the same time did all the tasks in his own way.

- You know, Amanda, it seems to me that your son is a very gifted boy. Of course, he has some problems with his peers, however this is because the children simply do not understand him.

They find his way of speaking and behaving strange. To be honest, I have no problems working with Andrew, and enjoy teaching him. I spoke to my students so nobody would offend or bother him. However, his main problem could be different. It seems that Andrew is lonely at school. I wish he had friends. Let's think about how to help him with this.

At dinner, Amanda told her husband about her conversation with the teacher and he looked worried. He said he would think about what he could do for his son and went to bed early. Amanda did not

FATHER'S IDEA

The next day, father returned home cheerful. In the evening, when the females got together in the kitchen to prepare supper, he took out his old camera.

He followed Andrew, taking photos of him: how the boy played with fiends, how he helped his sister, how he drew and did his household chores. Andrew paid no attention to his father. The camera never interested him. However, when father showed a picture of his room on the camera screen, where things were laid out in perfect order, he saw surprise and interest in his son's face.

- Do you want to try it yourself? - taking advantage of the moment, suggested the father.

Doubts were reflected on Andrew's face, so the father considered it necessary to cheer up his son.

-Come on son, it's easy. Do you want me to show you how it's done?

Andrew turned out to be a good student and very quickly mastered the camera.

In the evening, father told his wife:

- I think I'll take Andrew, print out the photos, and you take them to school so that the children can see what their classmates can be. After all, at home he is

completely different. He's a cool guy, albeit a weird one. But I love him so much that I don't notice anything anymore. I thought maybe seeing him through my eyes would make the kids feel the same way about him.

Amanda laid her head on her husband's shoulder.

- You are my most... brilliant person!

- And imagine, Andrew himself became interested in the camera. Well, I taught him. He has a vision of an artist; he grasps such things on the fly. He's already taken good pictures. Tomorrow morning we decided to go outside to take pictures with him. We will take pictures while the lighting is good. We will walk around the city, and the park. Prepare us a couple of sandwiches, please.

Tomorrow was a day off, and the father and son spent it in a very exciting way. Andrew chose an object of interest to him, and then photographed it from different angles. He planned the shot for a long time and in detail before clicking the camera button. Distinguished by high attention to detail, the boy found a lot of interesting things. They had a wonderful day, and the camera became the undivided property of Andrew.

The next day they drove out of town. Sister Christy accompanied the men, who talked about photography in such an adult way and at the same time so cheerfully. In the evening, she enthusiastically told her mother about the walk in detail.

When in a few days, with the words: "Take it, son. Take them apart! - father brought home printed photographs, Andrew's face, usually serious, lit up with a smile, and with a pack of newfound treasures, he hurried to his room. The parents looked at each other cheerfully.

– I think a whole story about Andrew should be made from these photographs, this will make a better impression on children than individual photographs.

What do you think? - In general, Amanda was an avid reader, and she also loved to write short stories. She saw a creative perspective for herself and her son.

-Well done, mother. You are the best!!! I'll go and see what Andrew is doing there. He returned very soon

- He is arranging pictures in stacks: people, nature and the city separately. Here's the guy! Have you already discussed your idea about the story with him?

- Haven't done it yet. Maybe he already knows how to read our thoughts from a distance, which is unlikely ... Although, if you think carefully, everything can be expected from our son, - Amanda laughed.

- He loves to put everything on the shelves and is very organised. You and I would do well to learn from him.

The next morning, Amanda went to the store and returned with a large bag of colorful folders, paper and paint. Andrew's favorite pencils, coloured tape and many other things which could decorate a homemade photobook.

- Andrew, I had an idea when I saw how well you sorted all the photos. What if we make a real photo book out of your pictures, a story from photographs? Let's create chapters in it, for example, "Neighbourhood", "Park", "My house", "My room", "My favorite activities and games".. Also "My family", where we will put your photos there and combine them into one story. You can decorate the book with your own drawings and favorite stickers. It will be very beautiful!

ANDREW GOT INSPIRED

The boy very quickly understood the essence of the project, and it was then impossible to tear him away from the new activity. He specially drew the capital letter of each chapter beautifully. He designed each page in a special way.

Sometimes he was so carried away that he did not notice anything around him. He looked calm and happy. Now he did not even notice the loud noises which had frightened him before.

This is how a large fascinating photo book gradually increased in which the main moments of Andrew's daily life were captured. Thanks to his artistic talent, the project became more and more colorful every day. For family members, this was a special occasion to see and praise Andrew's talents, and he flourished, feeling such support.

The book was entirely devoted to the boy's life, so they decided to call it "Andrew's World". All family members took part in its creation. Sister helped decorate the pages, father and son chose and discussed photographs taken by Andrew, and mother helped to come up with names and texts for these photos. She laid out photos and selected text for them so that the result was a fascinating story.

Amanda felt that the work would soon be ready, and already mentally imagined how she would take it to school. She leafed through the almost finished photo book, once again enjoying the results of her extraordinary child's work and thought about a possible spectacular end to the resulting story, which had not yet occurred. Suddenly she noticed blank pages added at the end of the book. At the top, in Andrew's neat handwriting, was written: "My school friends." Below was a drawing of the school building - and nothing else. No photographs, no

pictures. Like a gaping spot of emptiness in a bright and warm book.

Amanda thought deeply. It seemed unfair and wrong that her smart and talented boy could not find school friends. She realised that this was the spectacular end of the story book.

The next day, bringing Andrew to school early, she looked into the teachers' room and found her son's teacher there:

- Alina, I would like to show you something ... Here. - Amanda put Andrew's photo book in front of her.

Mrs. Morton leafed through it for a long time. She looked at the pages, not hiding her admiration, then opened the blank sheets and looked up at Amanda. For a few seconds the women looked at each other in silence.

- Amanda, leave me your photobook. I think I know how to help. Can I show your photobook to the class?

- Yes, of course ... Only now I'm worried about how Andrew will react to this.

-I'll take care of it,- the teacher said,-leave it to me.

At recess, Mrs. Morton approached her special student.

- Andrew, today I talked with your mother and found out what a wonderful photo project you have done. I want to thank you for the idea: this is exactly what I need. Now I know the class hour tomorrow will be special. I will talk about the art of photography. So I really need your photo book to show it to the kids. Will you let me do this?

After a moment's hesitation, the boy agreed and was visibly excited.

LESSON ABOUT PHOTOGRAPHY

The next morning, the teacher promised the class that an unusual lesson would be waiting for them at class today.

The teacher did not deceive their expectations. The lesson was devoted to the art of photography. She talked about how delicate and creative work it is. About the importance of angle and light. She showed the creations of professional photographers, true masters of their craft.

“Women particularly love the work of photographers,” she joked, “because it depends on the photographer how beautiful you turn out in the photo.

The girls whispered excitedly. Each of them wanted to see themselves as beautiful. Every boy in class dreamed of being a photographer.

“Now I want to show you something. You already have a real photographer among you. He is very modest, as befits a real master, but his work is very

talented. The teacher flicked the switch, and an image from Andrew's photobook appeared on the demonstration screen.

The story showed a picturesque place where a small, but cosy town was located, with a large beautiful park, shops, and a library, etc. And in one very quiet area there was a pretty house where a friendly family lived, where everyone loved and helped each other. The teacher clicked the remote and the children saw the next photo. Amanda, her husband, and their daughter were depicted there. This warm and homely photograph breathed the comfort of a family hearth. Andrew's parents did not know that they were being filmed, and therefore looked very touching and at ease. They smiled at each other and also spoke. The photo was framed with small applications that emphasised its beauty.

- Wow. Did someone from our class do this? - Asked the cool ringleader Alla. Mrs. Morton switched the page, and the children saw a room where things were laid out in perfect order, and then a photograph of the owner of this room. She looked at Andrew, who was staring at the screen without looking up. He looked a little frightened, as if he was afraid of being scolded.

- This is our Andrew!,- the children murmured.

- You are right. This is Andrew. – the teacher gladly introduced the author of the work.

The eyes of all the children in the class turned to Andrew. The boy, not accustomed to universal admiration, clearly felt uncomfortable. The teacher even thought that now he would get up and run away.

She walked over to his desk.

-Thanks, Andrew. Your photo book made me very happy. I love beautiful things and I think that all the children in this class liked your work too. It was very inspiring. I think that now I will also start taking pictures more often. Alla got up, went to Andrew and looked at him with curiosity, pleading: “Can you take a picture of me the way you took a picture of your sister?”

Hesitantly, almost timidly, Andrew looked up at her and nodded uncertainty. And, it seems, even smiled. And then the class was filled with joyful womanish exclamations, everyone hurried to Andrew's desk to tell how much they liked his photos. And of course, asked him to take their photos, everyone wanted to feel like a model. The boys enthusiastically asked him how the camera works, because few of them knew how to handle it. And, strangely, Andrew was not at

all frightened by the noise. He looked at other children and for the first time was not wary and nor saw aggression. He liked it!

END of BLANK PAGES!

A couple of weeks later, Andrew approached his mother.

"Mrs. Morton said to give this to you," and he handed her a bundle. Amanda was surprised and a little alarmed, but she tried to hide these feelings from her son. She took the package.

"Thank you, Andrew, I'll look later," she waited for the boy to come out and unfolded the bundle.

Amanda looked at the contents and felt a lump rising to her throat. There were photographs inside. On some of them, her son ate in the school cafeteria and talked enthusiastically about something with the girl Anna. On others he played at recess with other boys. With trembling hands, Amanda sorted through the photographs. Many of Andrew's classmates were depicted laughing or serious. At the end, a note from the teacher was attached.

"Tatyana Ivanovna, I allowed Andrew to shoot with my camera. Most of these wonderful portraits he made himself."

Mom brushed away happy tears and left the room.

- Andrew, actually this is for you. You can use these photos for your photobook. And I think that you should take your camera to school to shoot there. Dad doesn't mind.

A few days later, Amanda again looked at Andrew's photo book. She smiled as she noticed that her son had to put in a few new pages for the "My School Friends" section. There were so many photographs that all of them simply did not fit on one spread.

Laughing, dancing, reading children looked at her from the pictures. The section itself was decorated with bright pictures depicting a school, notebooks, desks, and happy children.

About a week later, walking past the schoolyard, Amanda suddenly saw Andrew there with his classmates and friend Bob. The son busily handed out balloons to everyone and showed where to stand. In his hands he had a new camera, a gift from his father. It seems that the children started a photo project dedicated to Teacher's Day. They laughed and jokingly threw balloons at each other. Andrew clicked the camera and, like a real photographer, caught good moments.

He gave instructions to friends, and it seems that no one was embarrassed by the peculiarities of his voice. However, every day the boy spoke better and more confidently. Amanda smiled, realising that she was proud of her son and happy like never before.

At that moment, she suddenly realised that a new page had been opened in her family life. The world shone in a new light. Her thoughts were confused, but she was in a wonderful, amazing state, which was difficult to put into words. At home, she took the photographs that were not included in Andrew's book, opened a completely new folder and started her own photobook. Amanda brought out the title on the cover:

"The road of our son to the Big World."