

THE CHICKEN WHO SAVED US

THE REMARKABLE STORY OF
ANDREW AND FRIGHTFUL

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Prologue

Sue walked into a scene right out of a nightmare. Vomit covered the walls, soaked the bed, and was dripping onto the floor as fast as the IV pump could push formula through the feeding tube. I was shouting, Andrew was gagging, and the dogs were fighting in the hallway.

“Please stay down, Andrew!” I begged, pushing my sixteen-year-old son back onto the bed. Having thrown up with such force, the bottom end of the feeding tube had come out of his stomach and now hung from his mouth. The other end was still threaded through his nose and taped to his face where it attached to the pump. I detached that end from the pump and went about trying to peel the tape off his face. He jerked, grabbing for my hand.

“Please,” I asked softly this time, tucking him in between two dry towels and aiming the fan directly at his hot skin. He had taken all his clothes off in an attempt to get cool—an escape from the fever that burned in him day and night. His usual lean body had become anorexic, bony, and dry, and his skin sagged on wasting muscles.

Sue stood in the corner while I picked at the tape again.

Andrew exploded off the bed. “I have to get up now! I’m gonna be sick!”

Sue reached for him and led him to the bathroom where he lay on the cold tile, naked. Deep guttural moans ricocheted off the bathroom walls, ripping me to my core. We’d been doing this for months, for years actually, and it was only getting worse. I wondered how much a person could take before they said, “That’s it, I quit!”

Andrew screamed again and I heard a splash on the tile.

Sue waved an arm in my direction. "I can handle this. I want you to leave, take the dogs for a walk, and don't come back for a while."

I obeyed without protest, barreling out the door with two jacked up dogs at my heels. I would get as far from the house as I could, far enough away that even if I had bionic ears, there would be no way I could hear the sounds of pain coming from my home. I clipped a leash to each dog and took off at a dead run, down the block and to the next, until I couldn't breathe and my own pain felt like ecstasy.

An hour later I came back, tear-streaked and sweaty, ready to walk back into my life. I didn't know what to expect when I opened the door, but I didn't expect this.

Sue was sitting quietly on a low-slung IKEA chair next to Andrew, the rumble of laundry in the next room was music to my fried brain. Andrew was passed out on the downstairs playroom floor on a makeshift bed. Figuring it was the only place in the house cool enough to survive the July heat, Jon and I had fashioned a bed out of sofa cushions and sleeping bags, topped with an old foam bunk-bed mattress, which we shoved next to a north-facing window. I noticed Andrew's feeding tube had been removed and his face was washed. Sue was praying, or what I took to be praying, because her eyes were closed and her lips moved as if she were having a secret conversation. She told me once she prayed for Andrew, prayed for mercy, grace, and healing for this boy she'd grown to love. Conversing with God wasn't new to her, but this level of misery was, and it pained her in a way that broke her heart.

Andrew stirred and opened one eye.

"Should we read a new book now, Andrew?" Sue asked, leaning forward to pull a thin cotton blanket over his legs.

Andrew didn't respond, but she could see his eyes were open now, unblinking, staring out the window. She sat quietly, and waited.

The day Sue arrived as our respite care provider, Andrew's pain had been so intense that he could barely speak above a whisper. When she asked what he liked to do, he'd replied, "I like hero stories."

So she began to tell him made-up stories using characters from old Judy Blume books she found in Andrew's closet. But her stories weren't regular stories. These stories included superheroes Andrew had fashioned in his own mind. These stories transported him to an imaginary world where he could escape the nightmare that had become his life. And Sue was the one who took him there, to the only place he felt safe.

After a moment, Andrew raised a quivering hand in which he clutched a mini SEGA action figure named Shadow.

"Okay. Let's put Shadow in this book instead," Sue said.

She settled back into her chair and opened Judy Blume's *Super Fudge*, to the place where Fudge was teaching his mynah bird, Uncle Feather, to talk.

"This reminds me a little of you and Frightful, right, Andrew?" she asked.

Andrew nodded, then sighed and kicked the blanket off his legs. Moments later he began the slow grind of pedaling his feet up and down the mattress against the pain.

Sue placed a hand across his thin, wiry legs. "Be still my friend. What are Shadow and Fudge doing? Describe it to me."

Andrew remained still, but made no effort to talk. Outside, a brood of hens scratched at Jon's newly planted flowerbeds, sending showers of fresh mulch across the walkway. A small, bronze and black colored hen hopped up on a broken flowerpot that had been pushed against the window.

"Tick. Tick."

I am here.

Andrew groaned and rubbed at his chapped and swollen face. At sixteen, he was tall—nearly five foot ten—but he weighed little more than one hundred pounds. For months,

sudden fevers, pain and nausea had become constant companions that we battled with a combination of anti-emetics, narcotics, Advil, and Tylenol. During the night, another fever had fingered its way up his body, leaving his skin dry and splotchy and bathing his cheeks and lips in a deep crimson. Even his usual shimmery red hair seemed faded and dull, plastered to his face in salty clumps.

“Tick. Tick. Tap.”

Look at me.

Frightful, the bronze-colored hen, pressed her body next to the window and turned her head to the side, regarding Andrew with one yellow raptor-eye. Although she was a petite hen, she queened over the others, puffing her feathers to appear larger, while throwing back her head in a loud *squawk!* if any hen dared to challenge her. She reminded me of the red-tailed hawks we frequently saw circling the tops of the evergreens in our yard, and she had an attitude to match. A low rumble came from Frightful’s chest as she rocked from foot to foot before mashing her chest to the windowpane.

“Tap-tap-tap...KACK!!”

Look at me...NOW!

Andrew turned to face the window. With a slender white finger, he circled the chicken’s gold, caramel, and black feathers, tracing the areas where the little hen had left a trail of chicken snot in her attempt to get his attention. He pressed the dirty pane with the pad of his pointer finger, saying, “I hear you, Frightful.”

The chicken backed off, shook violently, and settled her feathers back into place. She made an elaborate show of easing her body down on top of the broken flower pot where she perched while never breaking eye contact with her best friend.

“I’m here, Frightful,” Andrew repeated again before falling back into sleep.

While Sue read her newly formed story starring Fudge and Shadow, I crept down the hallway into Jon’s office and crawled

under the desk. A litany of horrors tackled me as I thought about what was happening to our lives. Would we survive? How many blows could a person take before they curled up and died? I wondered. Although Sue came for a few hours each day to provide me respite, the truth was I was almost always too scared to leave the house. Fear had pinned me to the floor.

Sue's gentle voice broke into my thoughts.

"I'm leaving now, Andrew. I'll see you in the morning. Think about what we should read next. Maybe some Harry Potter?"

I listened as she gathered her things, dreading the hours I would be alone with Andrew until Jon came home from work. When I heard her footsteps in the hallway, I ventured out of my cave only to knock my head on the corner of Jon's desk. I waited for her to leave before taking her spot in the chair next to Andrew, where I stared at my son for a long time, feeling terrified and helpless. Flipping through a stack of books on the windowsill, I wondered how Sue did it. What magic did she have that drew Andrew back from wherever he was? She even seemed to take away his pain, or at least make him forget about it for a little while.

I thought about all the specialists Jon and I had taken him to over the years, and still we had no answers. Our son was desperately ill. Besides Sue, his only friend on this earth was a chicken named Frightful. As I sat there for what felt like eternity, Frightful continued her flowerpot vigil. She occasionally flicked a beady bird-eye in my direction as if to say, "*DO something!*"

Crawling onto the floor, I squeezed next to Andrew's frail body on the little twin bed—my desperate attempt to protect him from the darkness creeping into the room. He was dead still, his breath barely a whisper on my bare arm. A sudden wave of anxiety assaulted me, penetrating deep into my bones, making me feel as if my whole body was freezing over. I squeezed Andrew hard in terror.

Frightful shrieked and flew at the window.

“Kuh-kuh-kuh-kuh-KACK!!”

Do SOMETHING!!

Startled, I reached for the phone in my pocket and dialed Jon at work. “You have to come home. NOW!”

Chapter 1

My son was kicked out of preschool because he kicked a visiting clown in the balls. His teacher called me at work and suggested we find another school that would better suit his needs. It would have been really funny except for the fact that this wasn't the first time we'd been asked to find a more suitable place for our son.

"He's non-compliant," his teacher said over the phone after sharing all the gory details about my child taking down a clown with one swift kick. "Andrew won't sit in circle-time with the other students, and he's always wandering around the room. He covers his ears when I try to talk to him and...well, I just can't have that."

"What do you expect a three-year-old boy to do? Maybe he doesn't like clowns?" I asked. I was secretly impressed with Andrew—I hated clowns, too.

I heard an exaggerated exhale on the other end of the line. "You need to get him right now. And by the way, I think he might be coming down with something."

At the time, I was working as an art director in a rapidly exploding dot.com company in downtown Seattle. It was fast-paced and I loved it, although I was putting in long hours each week. Without asking to leave, I waved my keys at my boss and skipped down the stairs, hoping to beat the rush hour traffic across Lake Washington. When I arrived at the school, Andrew stood rigid in the foyer with his coat zipped and his backpack at his feet. He clutched his plastic dinosaur, T-Rex, to his chest like he expected someone to wrestle him for it.

His teacher waited for me to be within earshot before saying, "Here's your balloon, Andrew. It's a puppy."

She handed him a pale blue twisty balloon of a wiener dog. Andrew dropped it on the floor and tore across the parking lot to our van. I said a curt goodbye and followed him, wanting to get out of there just as badly as he did. When I strapped him in the car seat, I noticed his lip had a tiny blister on it that wasn't there in the morning.

"Does it hurt?" I asked.

He shook his head, no.

During the twenty-minute drive home, I studied Andrew in the rearview mirror. He was staring out the window, wide-eyed and unblinking, while rubbing a thumb across the bumpy hide of the plastic dinosaur. I noticed his usual shimmery red hair was stuck in sweaty points around the edge of his face and that his cheeks had taken on a deep shade of pink. Maybe he *was* getting sick? Was that why he was so upset by the clown? I couldn't figure him out. He was so different from his baby sister Hannah, who at three months was already cooing and babbling with us like she had too many things to say and not enough time to say them. Andrew wasn't talking yet. But Jon and I had become so adept at reading his body language and gestures that it didn't seem to be a problem.

"Sorry about the clown, buddy," I said into the rearview mirror. "We don't have to go back."

Andrew raised T-Rex up to his face and pecked its oversized head at the back of my seat. I smiled back, knowing both he and T-Rex agreed.

We drove the rest of the way in silence while I thought about the difference between my job as a designer and my job as a mother. Mothering required just as much creative energy as my art director position, but ten times as much emotional energy. Being a mom meant that nothing was ever perfect, nothing was ever complete. There were no rewards for a job well done, no kudos wrapped up in a fat paycheck from a

happy client. No, this new job of mine was most positively imperfect.

So I tried to be the perfect parent, enrolling Andrew in the Mommy & Me socialization classes that were popular in the mid-nineties: Baby Gymboree, KinderMusic, and special readings at the library. Unfortunately for me, the giant colorful parachute in the gym terrified him, the music hurt his ears, and although he loved stories, the library was too crowded. Jon and I were living in the era of Beanie Babies, Playmobil, Pokemon, and Barney the Dinosaur. A time when our home was a rubble of Legos and Little Tykes construction equipment, yet all Andrew wanted was a velveteen bear named Ben, and a green plastic T-Rex dinosaur.

During this time I made frequent trips to the pediatrician, where my growing list of questions was never quite answered. Questions like: Is it normal for babies to get sick all the time? Shouldn't he be walking by now? Why doesn't he talk yet? He won't look at me. Am I doing something wrong? Through all this, I became a germophobe, one of those psycho overprotective mothers who never let their children out of their sight without a packet of antibacterial wipes. I had become the kind of parent I loathed. I wondered, *was that person still me?*

Turning up the hill towards our home on the east side of Seattle, more memories with Andrew passed through my mind. There were sweet memories of lazy summer afternoons at Puget Sound, dragging long ropes of kelp across the sand, shrieks of laughter and gap-toothed smiles from a three-year-old scrambling down the beach after gulls, and Sunday drives to the mountains just to stomp our feet in the snow.

I also remembered Andrew in the pediatrician's office—fevered, frustrated, and angry. I pictured the doctor moving his stiff limbs one by one, like a doll. I listened as he chattered, cooed, and tickled Andrew. I watched as Andrew stared, unblinking at a fixed object across the room. Through all this, a

seed of doubt was planted in the back of my mind. I wondered if I had done something wrong.

"Did you know we were asked to find another preschool?" I told the pediatrician one afternoon during a well-baby check.

"I'm really sorry," he said with a genuine look of concern.

Tears pricked at the back of my eyes. He was a kind man and had always been honest when answering my questions, even when he was just as puzzled as I was.

"You're doing a great job, you know. But I think it's clear we both have some questions."

His comment made me uneasy. After three years of questioning, I wasn't sure I wanted the answers anymore. It's absurd, I know, but I'd found something comforting, something reassuring even, in remaining naive.

In the end, the pediatrician scribbled a name and phone number on a slip of paper. "I'd like Andrew to visit this neurologist. I think he can provide some answers."

That night, I asked Jon what he thought of the doctor's observations—his concerns about Andrew's lack of responsiveness, stiff joints, and delayed speech. He shrugged and reached out to draw me in an embrace while reminding me that Andrew was only three.

"And don't forget," he said. "Andrew *does* smile and laugh, and he *does* talk to us—just not with words yet."

Two months later, I walked into the neurologist's office, took one look at him, and considered backing out the door. He was a short, rectangular man with thick, heavy-lidded eyes that made him look like he hadn't slept in years, and his oversized ears refused to be hidden by an overgrown haircut. His mouth had forgotten how to smile, and by the expression on his face, it was clear he was painfully bored with his job.

He motioned for us to sit, so I placed Andrew on the exam table and waited. He said nothing to me, nor did he engage with

Andrew, yet I noticed he was keenly aware of the way my son sat on the examination table—straight backed, with arms and legs rigidly poking out in front of him.

The neurologist paced the room while tapping on his watch face. Every so often he would stop, glance at the time, then pace again. I could only imagine what Andrew was thinking. Did he sense the doctor's disinterest like I did?

"Aren't you going to examine him?" I asked after we'd been sitting there for fifteen minutes.

He responded by asking me a few questions about my health history, my pregnancy, and the delivery while continuing to watch Andrew. During the hour-long appointment, he never directly touched him, and at no time did Andrew look at or acknowledge the doctor's presence.

"Ok. We're finished now," he said at the end of our allotted time.

"But what do you think?" I asked, desperate for a quick and easy answer.

He was halfway out the door before he said, "I'll have my secretary send you my notes in a few weeks."

I was shocked, and sure he had made all sorts of wrongful assumptions about my lack of parenting skills. Without a word, I pulled T-Rex from my purse and tucked him under Andrew's arm before snuggling him to my hip and walking through the door.

That neurologist visit was weeks ago, and now, here I was driving home in the middle of the day after my son had been kicked out of preschool—the last in a series of concerning things that I couldn't explain or fix. I wondered if maybe I *was* doing a terrible job at this mothering thing.

As I pulled in the driveway, I glanced back at Andrew in his car seat. He waved T-Rex at me this time, and I smiled. "Hey Andrew! Clowns suck, don't they?" I said.

His eyes widened and he let out a giggle before dropping T-Rex to the floor.

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