



Ministry of Education

15 - 19
YEARS

Andrew and Esther

Approved
By
K.I.C.D



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
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Government of
Azerbaijan

Andrew and Esther

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*The letter in this story was inspired by the book,
“Letters to my son” by Kent Nerburn*

The beginnings

Andrew looked down at the coffin being lowered into the freshly dug ground. This was his father and he felt no attachment, no pain, no regret at his passing. His mother cried beside him, her tears running down her cheeks. ‘Why is she crying?’ he thought in irritation, ‘he did nothing but beat her up, drink away all the money she struggled so hard to earn and left us. What is there to cry about? Till the end she looked after him. Even till the end, he turns up ill in



hospital and who goes to see him and take him food?’ The words of the preacher broke into his thoughts and he turned to lay an arm on his mother’s arm. She lean on him.

He looked at all the relatives gathered around. He saw Uncle Robert. He loved his uncle. His uncle had been there for him as a boy, taken him fishing, gave him his first bike, was there to help them move when his mother could no longer pay the rent for one little room they called ‘home.’ Uncle Robert had tried to talk to his father, to persuade him to stop the drinking and the stealing and the violence. But none of it had helped. And now, here he was, dead. Andrew nodded at everyone.

After the relatives had all gone back home, life returned to normal. Andrew went back to school. It was his final year and he hoped to graduate and then go on to college. He and his girlfriend had plans, big plans!

He wanted to see Esther. He had not had much time with her these days, she had been near his mother helping with the relatives, the cooking, and comforting his mother. ‘One day she will make a good wife,’ he thought, ‘when we finish our studies’. That was a long way, he was only seventeen and she was sixteen. It was a long way away, but it would happen one day, he thought. He smiled as he pictured the two of them in their own little place, with two little children: a girl for him and a boy for her. One day, it would all happen. He turned back to the present moment. His mother was so tired she had fallen asleep on the chair. He looked at her face, worn with worry and stress. But she was still beautiful. ‘She did not have much of a life,’ he thought. ‘I’ll make sure Esther never goes through this. Together we will look after her until her old age’.

The next few days and months were hard. There were the funeral bills to pay, and exams were coming up. Andrew got a job in the evening helping in one of the cafés. It meant less time for study but at least it helped with the expenses.

Andrew and Esther

After a couple of months, Andrew came home. His mother waited up for him and wanted to talk to him, but he did not want to talk. 'I'm tired mother,' he would say, 'here is the money you need', and he would stumble off to bed. She was glad his job paid well, but then it seemed to pay too well. Where was he getting all that money from? And why did he always look so tired and speak with a slur? Sometimes she smelt alcohol on his breath. He brushed her questions aside. 'Don't worry mother,' he would say when she asked, 'I have seen enough of what alcohol does. I would never do what my father did. Don't worry. I can look after you now'.

The truth was that there was a gang that had adopted Andrew at the café. 'Don't worry', they would tell him, 'here, have another smoke. Try a bit of bhang. This will make you feel good and stronger. You can work twice as much in the café and still not be tired. This will make you feel good!' Andrew had resisted at first, but then he was so tired and the work seemed endless and there was too much revision to be done at school and ...

So one day he gave in. He felt good smoking that stuff. 'I will try only once,' he told himself. The gang had other plans. 'Don't worry', they said, 'it's free. Have a bit more...'

Andrew found himself waiting for them to come in every evening. 'It's only because I like them. They are my friends', he told himself. But deep down he knew he waited for the drugs. Soon he was missing school. He needed those drugs.

But now his new friends changed their attitude. 'Listen we can't keep giving you the stuff for free. You want some, you pay. You earn well don't you?'

It became clear to Andrew that he did not earn well enough for his needs now. The money he brought home became less and less, and then none at all. His school results were bad. His teacher was worried

and tried to talk to him. ‘What is happening to you Andrew?’ she asked, ‘you were such a good student’. He would not say anything except ‘I’m sorry, I’ll try harder’. His teacher did not know what else to do. She thought about talking to his friends or his mother, but he was seventeen now, so what could his mother do? The teacher was not sure who his friends were anymore. She did not see him with his usual group.

‘Who needs school anyway?’ his new friends said. ‘Look we’ll show you how to make money. You get a few kids to smoke this stuff and we’ll pay you.... For every kid you bring us. Okay?’

Andrew knew this was wrong. What is more, Esther knew it too.

The Fallout

These days Esther did not like to be with him. He sometimes forgot where they had said they would meet after school, and when he was with her, he seemed not to focus on what they were talking about. ‘You’ve changed,’ she would tell him, it’s that café and those new friends. I don’t like them Andrew. I don’t think they are good for you. Why won’t you come with our usual group anymore?’

Andrew laughed. ‘They’re fine. You worry too much. Come, let me buy you a drink’.

Esther looked at him, ‘I don’t want one,’ she said, ‘thank you’.

‘Oh come on,’ said Andrew, ‘you never do anything fun, come have a drink, and pull your blouse down a bit lower’ he said. ‘Why can’t you dress like those bar girls?’ He pulled her into the shadows of the wall in an alleyway.

‘Don’t!’ said Esther. As he tried to lift her skirt. ‘I don’t want you to touch me like that. I don’t like it’.



‘Oh!, you will’, said Andrew, ‘just let me...’.

Esther pulled away. ‘I said No!’ she said more sharply, ‘leave me alone Andrew’. She fought and pulled away.

‘Come here,’ said Andrew, ‘who do you think you are Miss High and Mighty?’ He raised his hand to slap her.

Andrew and Esther

Esther froze and then she looked at him straight in the eye. She was afraid but she was not going to let him see that. 'No Andrew,' she said, 'if you don't stop, I am leaving. Leaving right now and leaving you'.

'Oh you are just saying that', he laughed, 'come here...you look beautiful when you are angry'.

Esther shook her head and moved back a bit. 'Oh! go then,' he said, 'if you don't want to, there are plenty of girls who will'.

'Go and find them then, your good time girls,' she said, her voice sharp and defiant. 'That is all they are. Fleeting friends! But if that is what you want then go find it. I thought you were different Andrew, but I was wrong. You always said you did not want to be like your father, and look at you now'. She looked at him with shock and sadness in her eyes. She turned and walked away.

Esther walked away before Andrew could see the hurt in her eyes. She had sounded tough while she was with him, but now the tears came; hot and burning tears. What had happened to her Andrew? They had had such a beautiful relationship. Yes, they had wanted to do more than hold hands but they had agreed to wait. They had plans. She wanted to be a lawyer to take up the cases of people in the slums where they lived. He wanted to be an accountant. He was good at mathematics and with people. 'But now he is not the same person,' she thought sadly, 'he is rough and loud and arrogant like those men in the bars'.

She sat under a tree and looked around. She realised that she had sat under 'their' tree. She remembered the first time Andrew had climbed that tree to get her a mango she wanted. He had got into a fight with a monkey who wanted the mango too, and almost tore his shorts coming down. She looked aside when he came down holding out the

mango with one hand and trying to cover the front of his body with the other. She had taken the mango from him with a very serious face and thanked him, but it was hard. She had tried to hold the laughter in and look away. He had tried to look down. But suddenly he burst out laughing and they both ended up laughing and eating the mango together.

She recalled a previous time when she was ill and Andrew had come to see her every day at home. Esther had fever and chicken pox that made her look awful. 'I don't care,' he had said, 'I love you for who you are, not how you look'. She smiled. 'Although,' he had added with a twinkle in his eye, 'it helps that you are so beautiful... yesterday that girl Stella was making eyes at me... but I did not even look at her,' he teased.

'Liar!' Esther had laughed and thrown a pillow at him. He had dodged it and laughed.

'You must be getting better,' her mother had said coming in through the open door with some soup for her. 'See aunty,' Andrew had added, 'she just pretends to be ill. She nearly had me on the floor there with that throw!' Esther's mother had laughed. 'I like Andrew', she later told Esther, 'he is a real man. He knows how to respect himself and others and he respects a woman too. He is focused on his studies and his future'.

Esther shook her head impatiently. What was the point of thinking about the past now? It was all over. She did not know, or like, this Andrew.

Andrew stood still after Esther left. He had not expected this. He thought, 'Oh!, let her go.' Andrew said to himself, 'as if I care'. But he did care. Esther was the one girl who knew him inside out. His

Andrew and Esther

mother liked her. 'She's the kind of girl who thinks for herself. She's good for you, she'll keep you straight', said his mother 'and she has a good heart as well as a lovely face'. It was true. Look how she had supported his mother through the funeral.

There was that other time... 'but what is the use?' he thought angrily, 'I can get ten girls if I want to'. He didn't want to. What he badly wanted was a smoke to help him forget, but he had no money. It was now quite dark and he heard footsteps. The old man who ran the *chai* house was going home. He would have some money... Before he knew it, Andrew had jumped on the old man, taken his money and disappeared down an alleyway leaving the old man on the ground bleeding from the nose.

'Give me a smoke,' he said to the dealer. 'It will cost you more than that', said the dealer counting the money. 'Why?' asked Andrew, 'this was the right price yesterday'. 'Prices go up my friend', said the dealer smoothly. 'You will have to find ways of getting more money if you want to smoke.'

Andrew gave up school, he gave up Esther or rather Esther gave him up. But he could not give up the drugs. He no longer went to work, he was always unsteady on his feet, drunk or drugged, and he shouted at his mother at the slightest hint of her trying to talk to him. Then one day it happened!

He seriously needed money. He went to where his mother kept her money but there was none there. He turned and found his mother standing there. 'There is no money to steal Andrew', she said in a flat voice. 'No money for food either, or for the rent'.

'It's your fault,' he shouted at her. 'You don't know how to budget. I gave you money last week'.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘and then you stole it the next day. Do you not think about how I manage now? Do you not wonder how there is food, how I manage it?’

‘I don’t care’, shouted Andrew. He banged his fist on the table. ‘There is no enough food and not enough money. You need to do more. You need to...to...’

‘To what?’ asked his mother. ‘Look at you Andrew. Your eyes are glazed, your clothes are torn, your manner is arrogant. What happened to my son? I no longer know you’.

‘Don’t talk to me like that woman!’ he shouted, and he slapped his mother across her face. She stepped back, her hand on her cheek, a stunned look on her face. He stopped his fist in mid-air. There was silence in the room. What had he done! He was shocked. He could not bear the accusation and the sadness in her eyes. ‘Mother...’ he began.

She stepped back again. ‘I am not your mother’, she said quietly. ‘Just leave’. Andrew left.

He roamed the streets that night. He drank and did not pay. Then he got into a big fight and broke someone’s nose and the police arrested him. The next day he found himself in one of those approved schools for youths who had gotten into trouble. His mother came to see him. She did not talk to him and he was too ashamed. She brought him food and took him clothes, but she could not talk to him or meet his eyes.

On the third day, Esther came in the evening. Esther looked beautiful, but sad and full of contempt for him. He did not know where to look due to shame and guilt. ‘I came on behalf of your mother’, said

Andrew and Esther

Esther, 'not for you. I came to support her in her difficulty'. He looked at his mother and for the first time he realised she was ill. She walked slowly, her face was flushed and her forehead had beads of sweat on it.

'You are ill Mother,' he said. She nodded but did not speak. He realised it was hard for her to speak.

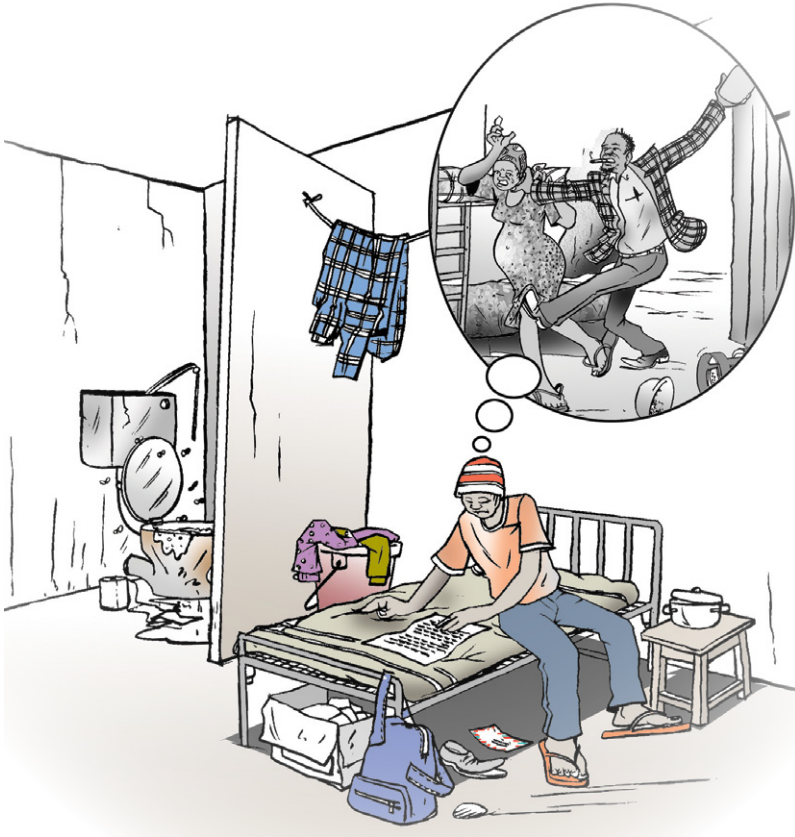
'Here is your food', said Esther coldly, 'Your real friends, the church members and I will now make sure your mother eats as well'. She looked at him full in the face. 'I hope you are proud of yourself Andrew', she said. 'This is the height of your achievement?' She took his mother's hand and walked away, but she pushed a letter towards him first.

The Letter

Andrew went back to his room. He looked around. The four walls imprisoning him were dirty, black with flies and filthy. The toilet near the door was full of pee and poo and smelt awful. He looked at his food which was still warm. He looked at his clothes, his hands. Suddenly he found himself in tears. What had happened? How had his dreams turned to ashes like this? He wiped the tears away and tried to eat. He had lost everything. His ambition, ability to think clearly, one little room that they called home, his mother, Esther, his friends and his future.

It was too late. He got up, thrust his hand in his pocket and found the letter. He did not remember picking it up but he must have had it. He looked at the writing. This was not Esther's writing. He had hoped for a moment... but it was stupid to even think that she would want to be with him again. What had he to offer her? Not a future, not anything at present. What would she want with a school drop-out, criminal, drug user? He looked at the writing on the letter again. It

looked strange. He opened it and began reading...



'My dear son', he read. A letter from his father. When did my father learn to write? He read on...

I am writing to you from very far away in the village, where I have time to think and to tell you about the many things that, I learned in my life and the mistakes I made. I did not get the chance to talk to you about these things because alcohol became my friend for a long time. Every time I had a problem or I was bored or wanted to forget my problems, I went to look for my friends 'tei' (alcohol) and sometimes bhang or chang'aa. The person who would sell me the

bhang would say, "oh! it will be good for you and it will make you have a good time, you will see, you will forget your problems and you will look like a cool 'msee' (dudel/guy) in front of your friends. You will laugh more and people will want to be around you." That was not true. These so called 'friends' (tei and bhang) slowly started taking over my days and nights. I felt confused, I could not see very well and I couldn't remember things. I lost my job. They took everything from me – my life, my family, my dignity and my health.

I am a sick mzae (old man) now and I have not got much time, so I want to tell you some important things about what it means to be male and to be a man. To be a man is not about strength – it is about strength of character. Boys should not measure themselves by their physical strength; that is sad and should not make you proud. Manhood is not about strength – the strength to master others, girls, emotions or the world around us. You do not need to do foolish things to prove that you are a man.'

Andrew put the letter down. He could not read any more, although he knew he would have to. He was exhausted and angry. Who was his father to tell him how to run his life? What had he ever done with his own life? Andrew let the anger wash over him. It was not right. He knew that. He was blaming his father for his own troubles. He was not being a man. He laughed bitterly. He did not have 'strength of character'. Andrew turned over on the hard, narrow bed, and tried to sleep.

Andrew woke up the next morning. 'No', he thought, 'it was not a nightmare'. Esther had come to visit, he had seen his mother was ill, and his father had written him a letter before he died. Yesterday's anger against his father was gone. Deep down he knew what he had done was just as bad as his father. Andrew took out the letter and continued reading.

Andrew and Esther

'As men, can we carry more, run faster, can we control another person physically? Does that mean we are stronger? Does that make us better men? No, we are better men when we have greatness of spirit, not greatness of physical strength or sexual powers.'

Do not mistake strength with force – they are two different things. You can do many things with force but that does not make you a strong person. You can do many more things with strength that is inside your heart not inside your hands. Every man has a different strength. You have to find your own strength. Strength is quiet – it is not loud and boastful, it is in your spirit and it is gentle and secret. You will come to know it and you will use it wisely. Do not let your strength be defined by fear and anger. That is not strength. Strength is when you overcome fear with your belief in yourself and you overcome anger with your conviction but not with force. Try and find this strength – it lies deep within you, below anger and the desire to dominate those weaker than you.'

Andrew put the letter away. He could not bear to read more. He had done these things to Esther, his mother, and to others. Even to his real friends who he had ignored and stopped talking to when he found his new 'friends'. His teacher who had tried to talk to him. The old man he robbed earlier. The way he had talked to Esther. He had never noticed his mother's troubles once he started smoking. What kind of monster had these drugs turned him into?

The letter would not let him rest. He picked it up again.

'Ask yourself, can you walk away from a fight when everyone is mocking and telling you that you are afraid? Can you stand up for a person who is being teased and bullied? If you can, then you will have found your strength. Can you stay away from your friend's girlfriend even though you want her? Can you refuse a drink or a smoke if you don't want one but someone is pressuring you? If you can do these

things with quiet calm, then you have found your strength. Then you are strong – far stronger than anyone who can beat you physically. Remember strength is not force – it is that which is in your heart. The opposite of true strength is not weakness and fear but confusion and lack of determination.

Remember that manhood has nothing to do with inflicting harm on someone else and winning some fight. The only true strength is the strength that people do not fear. It is what people recognise as kindness, respect and belief in yourself. Then you will have learnt to believe in manliness that is not defined by violence.

However, sometimes despite these beliefs, a fight will find you or you may have to defend your loved ones or a child, then you must face the fight without anger or the intent to hurt someone. Remember there are many good reasons to fight but no good fights. If you fight with the intent to hurt, then your fight is wrong.

Your mother has been a good wife and a good mother. Remember that, and I ask you to protect and look after her. One day you will have your own wife and I know you will not repeat my mistakes. You know Andrew, women are strong. We think of them as weak but believe me, they are far stronger than men in the way that matters most.'

Andrew thought of his mother and Esther. His father was right. Both were stronger than him. They had not tried to run from pain and difficulty. They had stayed together even when Esther had broken up with him. He read on...

'There are many things that I want to tell you about life, my son. About your mother and how things were between us. When I think of her, I am reminded of the African proverb that says "The axe forgets

Andrew and Esther

what the tree remembers". Son, I don't want you to be the axe that cuts the tree. You may forget the harm you do, but like the tree, the harmed person will always bear the scars. They will forgive but will never forget because the scars will hurt forever. I fear I have left those scars on your mother.

Sometimes we see such behaviour, especially towards women or girls, and we believe it is normal. Let me tell you, it is not normal. Women are not objects. We share our humanity with them and they are partners in life with us. We solve problems together and we share the burden of work every day. I believe "It is a happy man who marries someone whom he loves, but it is an even happier man who loves the woman he marries".'

Andrew thought of his mother and of Esther when he read that. He understood what his father was trying to tell him. If only he had been able to be with Esther. To listen to her when she was telling him that he was changing. They had shared so much and he had thrown it all away. He had not told her how hard it was to get the money he and his mother needed. He had wanted to be strong, act like a man. All he had managed to do was to give in weakly to drugs and ruin his life. Just like his father.

'My son, your generation has the chance to show a new kind of manhood. One that regards women as partners who can love, laugh and work with us. Men and women are biologically different but we are alike in many ways. We are equal as human beings but different in other ways. We are opposite sides of the equation that makes us whole. We have different but equal strengths. We may be physically strong, but they can show us much about comforting, protecting and finding that quiet strength of spirit that we seek. Celebrate those differences, and don't use force to show your strength or think that you are showing your manhood – that is not what a man is. God gave you physical strength, use wisely – don't disappoint him by harming

another human being just because you can.

It is you, my son, your friends and other young men who can make your society safe for the girls who will be the women of tomorrow. If you think that you cannot change things by yourself, I want to tell you of another African proverb that says "If you think you are too small to make a difference, then you have not spent a night with a mosquito". So, like a mosquito, spread this wisdom to everyone whose ear you can sting!

These are my parting words to you. Stay well and may God be with you and guide you. May your mother's and your life be blessed with the true strength to live well, to do the best you can for yourself, your family and your neighbours. Farewell my son.

Your father.'

Andrew sat still for a long time thinking 'Am I too small?, Is it too late?, Have I ruined everything?' He was not sure.

When visiting time came his mother did not come. 'She is too ill,' Esther told him. Andrew looked at the food that she had brought with her. 'Take it back,' he said, 'take it and give it to mother. I can't eat while she is sick. If she can't eat it, see if you can sell it to someone for something she can eat'.

Esther looked at him and quietly pushed the food towards him. 'Eat,' she said, 'the church has made sure your mother is eating and has the medicine she needs'.

Andrew looked at her. 'Thank you Esther,' he said awkwardly, but his eyes said more. She smiled just a little. 'If you really want to thank me, then give up this habit, Andrew', she said seriously. 'It can be done. Our teacher told me where to go for help and I have asked at

Andrew and Esther

the health clinic. I have talked with your uncle Robert, together we can help you. However you must be willing to go to a rehabilitation unit, you must be serious and you must be...’, she hesitated, ‘...you must be strong,’ she said finally, looking at him full in the face. ‘Do you think you can be strong? In the way it matters?’

Andrew looked at her. A second chance! He was being given a second chance! But what if the need for drugs was too strong? ‘I don’t know,’ he said, ‘I have not tested myself. But I will do it with your support’. He pulled out his father’s letter. ‘I want you to read this Esther. We used to share everything’. ‘Yes,’ she said, ‘before you got into that other crowd at the bar’.

He dropped his gaze. Then he lifted his eyes to her. ‘Forgive me, Esther’, he said, ‘I was wrong and stupid and...weak’. It was hard to say the word, but it was true. ‘But I am learning to be stronger...’, he paused, ‘read the letter, then you will see’.

She smiled more openly now. ‘You can be strong in the way it matters’, she said. This time she was trying to show him that she knew he was a person she could believe in.

He nodded. ‘If you are beside me, I can’, he said.

She nodded too. ‘I will be there’, she promised, ‘and so will others. Our real friends, our teacher, uncle Robert and your mother’.

Now he smiled. He thought of his father and understood – his father may have been weak in life but he had found his quiet strength before he died. He understood at last what his father had done for him. He had tried to pass on what he had learnt and to be a good father in the most important way in the end. He knew that his father had not had time with him, but before he died his father had tried to teach him

about respecting others, what it means to be a good husband and a good father, and how to make things better for his people in future. Writing that letter must have taken a lot of courage. Andrew turned the letter over in his hands. Yes, his father had found a great strength and a great courage. Now it was Andrew's turn.

‘Andrew and Esther’

This is for ‘level 3’ students (ages 15-19). Here, a young man finds his life – with all its promise of a golden future and a beautiful relationship – is shattered when he falls prey to substance abuse and puts himself, his mother and his girlfriend through the trauma of a life falling apart. He seems to be following in his father’s footsteps, despite fighting so hard to be different from his father. However, a letter that he finds from his father to him changes all that. The story also explores masculinity and femininity as well as gender-based violence, and it allows the reader to explore gender relations and challenge gender norms.