Affirmation Andy

-2016 -

It had been four years since 27 year old Andrew Merriman had been in a committed relationship, but it wasn't due to his lack of trying. Andrew had discovered two things about himself since becoming single: first, that he was good at talking to people, but he was especially good at talking to women. Andy was naturally charismatic and charming, but not overly full of himself–he had never felt like he was *anything special* in the looks department (not that *that* really matters, at least it shouldn't…) and he always thought that getting to know other people was more interesting than finding out new things about himself; these attributes made him an easy person to talk to, and when coupled with his genuine nature and quick wits, a great friend and confidant.

The other thing that Andy had learned about himself was that, as good as he was at talking to women, he was equally *horrible* at moving past being their friend. He would often make the same mistake too: painting himself into too much of a supporting role to them. While he had what some would call an "alpha personality" or "main character energy", he just *wasn't* good at selling himself *or* making any of the women he was friends with see him as a potential love interest. Andy was the type of guy that got asked (a painful amount of times actually) "where can a girl find a good guy?" Instead of having the confidence to respond with something confident like "right here" or "you've been talking with one", Andy would say "don't worry, they are out there." Before long, his girl friends would meet other guys, and while some of them remained his friend for a while, most of them would just disappear, leaving Andy feeling incredibly depressed about missing out on yet another chance at romance. Despite being happy

for his friends' happiness, he began to refer to himself as "Affirmation Andy" due to his seemingly awesome ability to "build women up" for other guys.

Andy had started a new job in September of 2015–a job that pretty significantly changed his life; he went from working overnight at a grocery store making crap money, to working traditional hours with better pay at a small, family owned hydraulics company. Andy felt like he had hit the jackpot, and with so much newly found free time (and a respectable, disposable income) he decided that to start the new year, he was going to make an effort to really get back into the dating pool, regardless of where it took him. Andy wanted to completely bypass the "affirmation" thing–*this time* his intentions to find a mate were going to be made clear! So Andy did what any respectable, eligible bachelor would do: he made up a personal ad for himself and posted it on Craig's List.

It's a Saturday night, and Andy is home again with zero plans. In the time that he spent working overnights and weekends he had segregated himself from a lot of his friends, so while he now had weekends completely open, he had little else to do but hang out at home alone with all of his friends now occupied with their own lives. Andy decides to put on a black dress shirt with a red and black checkered tie, spike up his short black hair, and snap a few photos on his cellphone. He thinks that it would be hilarious to have a "big reveal" about himself at the end of his mini photo collage, so he snaps a few "action" photos: one where he puts up his index finger so as to say "wait", one where he has undone his tie and it hangs loosely around his collar, one where he has completely removed the tie and unbuttoned two of his dress shirt buttons to reveal that he is wearing another shirt underneath, and lastly, one where the dress shirt is completely open to reveal the full graphic on the second shirt–the yellow and black Batman symbol. He

assembles the pictures into the order he wants them to show up (like one of those old action flipbooks), fills out a miniature "about me" detailing his likes and dislikes, and puts in his screen name for an app called KIK (a hold over from one of the girl friends he had lost along the way) as well as his e-mail address. Andy laughs as he posts the ad, thinking that it will just be a silly thing that maybe elicits a laugh or two for some other people, maybe makes him a few new chat buddies, etc.

He could never imagine that that silly little advertisement will end up changing his life forever…

Over 120 miles away from Bellingswood and Andy, in the city of South Bend, Indiana resided 31 year old Rebecca Swats. The past three years had been a time of great change for Rebecca, starting with the sudden, tragic loss of her father to a heart attack in 2013. Rebecca's grief over her father's death, coupled with her desire to be there for her then three year old son, motivated her to begin taking her own health more seriously. Over the course of the next two years, Rebecca fought hard to lose the required amount of weight in order to undergo a gastric bypass procedure. In August of 2015, Rebecca underwent what she thought was a successful surgery. After patting himself on the back, the performing surgeon, being one of those vain, self-obsessed types, not only dictated to Rebecca the outpatient protocol, but also instructed her as to how she should feel, then outlined a schedule of follow-up consultations before sending Rebecca on her way.

A week later Rebecca went to the emergency room complaining of pains indicative of an infection in her gastric sleeve. Despite her literal gut telling her that the diagnosis she was being given was wrong, Rebecca was told multiple times, by multiple doctors including her surgeon,

that “she was fine”, before once again being sent on her way. Three days later. Rebecca *again* went to the emergency room–and this time she was admitted. A different doctor met with her ,and it was discovered that not only was the gastric sleeve itself indeed infected *the entire time*, but the infection had gotten so out of control in the ensuing days that Rebecca was now septic, and her entire stomach had filled with so much infection that it would have to be urgently removed!

The plan was for a completely different surgeon to go in, remove the infected gastric sleeve *and* the stomach itself, then connect the large and small intestines together in an effort to create some semblance of a digestive tract. However, the sepsis coursing through Rebecca’s body had *other* plans: the havoc that it had already wrought upon her body now caused her to go into Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome (ARDS) during the surgery. ARDS occurs when the air sacs of the lungs are damaged, allowing fluid to leak into the lungs themselves. In order to save Rebecca’s life, the surgeon had to place her in a medically induced coma, perform an emergency Tracheostomy, and finally hook her up to a ventilator. Thankfully, Rebecca was not alone in the fight to save her life–her mother, Diane, stood faithfully by her daughter’s side, being her voice and fighting to ensure that the best possible care be taken of her daughter. It was Diane that fought to have Rebecca transferred to a hospital which was better suited to provide her the care she required, namely a Rotoprone bed. Securing a Rotoprone bed for Rebecca was paramount to any hope for her recovery, as it would keep changing her positioning while she was comatose–her only shot at fully ridding herself of the infection.

Rebecca remained in a medically induced coma for three weeks. At the end of the three weeks, the hospital staff are finally given the okay to remove her from the Rotobed, and transfer

her to a rehabilitation facility where she would have a chance to fully recover. During this ambulance transport, Rebecca woke up!

With her mind in a complete fog, her eyes began to adjust to the inside of the ambulance. She tried to open her mouth to speak in an attempt to ask for her mother, but Rebecca discovered that she was incapable of speech! Panic began to set in, and her anxiety shot through the roof when she realized that she was hooked up to a ventilator! The medic riding in the back of the ambulance instantly sprang into action, and attempted to calm Rebecca down. “Gramps”, as he told her to call him, told her to take calm, deep breaths, and then tried to explain the situation to her. The ambulance eventually pulled over to the side of the road, and “Gramps” opened the doors to allow Diane (who had been following the transport vehicle) inside to reassure her daughter that everything was *finally* going to be okay, and that she could relax for the rest of the ride.

The trip would all be made worth it a few days later: once she had gotten fully situated at the rehab facility, Rebecca got to see her son for the first time in three weeks! Even though she was still unable to do more than whisper to her boy, she told him he was the reason that she fought to survive, and that he would be the reason that she would continue fighting to reclaim her body each and every day! The young boy smiled at her, gave her a hug, and handed her a picture that he had colored–a brown fox (with a few extra colors thrown in for added effect). Rebecca stared at that fox picture every day for the next two months as she relearned to walk, talk, eat, and everything else in-between! By the end of 2015, Rebecca was an entirely new person! Upon fully recovering and being released from the rehab center she had even decided to take a new job

working triage for a Hospice company! She made a promise to herself that 2016 was going to be *her* year!

It is Monday January 25, 2016. With eleven hours still to go in her shift, Rebecca sits at her desk, her face buried in her phone, trying to waste some time, waiting for calls to come in. The nighttime triage gig varies night-to-night (an aspect she is grateful for): some nights are extremely busy, offering zero downtime, while other nights are all about keeping herself occupied for most of the shift. Tonight (so far) is starting out mild in terms of call frequency. *Maybe all of our patients are already comfortably tucked in*, she muses to herself with a smile. *Wishful thinking*. Rebecca decides to put her phone away, opting instead to begin surfing the web on her laptop, looking for nothing in particular. She scopes out upcoming events near South Bend, hoping she can find something fun to take her son to. She bookmarks a few events, then begins looking through Craigslist for deals–a new addiction for her after recently finding an amazing Lego table for her son for dirt cheap. Any time she spent looking for things to keep him occupied was time well spent!

Once she looks through all of the new "for sale" listings, she decides to check out the personals section. *Sometimes it's just fun to see what people are posting, what they are looking for…* She reads through a few of the posts; Rebecca is a smart girl–she can decipher someone looking for something real from someone just looking for a hookup. She is about to close the site entirely when she stumbles upon a post from the past Saturday. She reads the post–a personal ad from a guy named Andy in a suburb outside of Chicago. She chuckles at some of his answers, thinking that he is different from the other guys she's checked out: *he isn't so stuffy and serious, has a self-deprecating sense of humor, seems like he's respectful, etc*. Rebecca is intrigued before

she even makes it to his pictures. *Oh he's really cute*, she thinks. The big selling point for her though ends up being that he has KIK–*no one usually has KIK, so if he ends up actually being a creep, I can just move along*! Rebecca opens up the app on her phone, types in his screen name, but then gets nervous and hesitates, setting her phone down without sending a message.

For the next hour, Rebecca's mind keeps going back-and-forth, debating whether or not to actually message Andy. *Fuck it*, she finally decides, picking up her phone again. **Saw your ad on CL** she types. **Wanted to reach out and say "hey". So… hey.** She hits send, immediately feeling silly about the whole thing. *Hey is so lame!* Just then a call comes in, completely taking her mind off of the entire interaction.

:The call ends up being one of Rebecca's favorite patients: a pianist named Martha. Rebbeca does her best to try to put Martha at ease, but all she can really do as a triage nurse is determine whether or not the patient should be attended to by a visiting nurse. Martha is extremely agitated (she usually is in the night right before bed), and asking for a nurse visit. Rebecca talks Martha down, telling her that she has already been administered her pain medicine for the night, and that she is due a visit in the morning (due to a previous incident, Martha now receives a daily nurse visit so that she is being given the correct medications). It pains Rebecca to not be able to *ensure* that a patient receives whatever help they are asking for, especially considering that she knows what it feels like to ask for help and not receive it. Rebecca fantasizes about moving up from triage to being a visit nurse, but for right now, the best she can do is offer Martha assurances that she will receive her visit in the morning. This calms Martha down enough so that she eventually agrees to go to sleep without requiring a visit. Rebecca wishes Martha a good night, and then hangs up the call. *Whew, good job Rebecca*, she smiles to herself. Her smile grows even wider when she sees the little KIK icon in the top left corner of her phone!

Hey yourself the message reads. **So I'm Andy… as you already know…**

AKA Batman? She cheekily responds back.

Shhh, that's a secret only reserved for privileged people…

Ah, well my name is Rebecca. Am I privileged?

Lol I guess so. It's nice to meet you, Rebecca. What are you up to tonight?

And just like that, these two are off to the races! They make idle smalltalk about their jobs–Andy mentions that he is still awake because his internal clock still has his body adjusted to working overnight, making him keep weird hours. **I just started working as a triage nurse for a Hospice care service a few months ago** Rebecca responds, mentioning that there might be lulls in the conversation at times if she is on a call.

Wow, Hospice huh? What's that like? Andy asks.

So far I love it! There are a few slow nights here and there, but mostly I stay pretty busy. Rebecca responds. **I don't mind working overnights, although sometimes it is kind of eerie being in the office alone. I like to take this one office in the middle of the building because it is tucked away from the windows lol. There is a certain stigma attached to working in this field though. People just assume that when I say "I work in hospice" it 100% means that someone is going to die soon, and that isn't always the case…** Rebecca holds off for now diving into her recent past, figuring that her job is a heavy enough revelation *already*. The conversation rolls pretty naturally from there, and they continue to exchange messages for the next few hours. She takes a picture of herself at her desk and sends it to Andy. **So you have a visual on who you are talking to.** Andy thanks her for the visual.

Even though the dark beige scrubs are hideous, you are stunningly beautiful! Rebecca laughs at the jab over the scrubs.

The scrubs are company issued– I had no choice over the color!

Yikes… lol he responds.

Eventually Andy texts saying that unfortunately, he has to try to get some sleep. **Can I message you in the morning** he asks.

Yes, I'm on call until 7 A.M. my time. It's 1:15 A.M. here right now!

It's 12:15 here, so you're an hour ahead. I will call first thing before I head off to work.

Hope the rest of your night is smooth sailing! Goodnight!

The rest of the night, it turns out, is smooth sailing–a few calls, two nurses sent out, nothing major.

True to his word, Andy texts her a morning greeting right away. By now it is normal business hours at Harbor Light Hospice, and the office has started to fill up with staff. For the final hour of her shift, Rebecca simply reviews the overnight calls with her boss and the nursing staff. She texts Andy telling him as much: **Can't talk for the next hour, gotta debrief the team, but I will text you ASAP!**

That final hour feels like it just drags on. Rebecca watches the clock, eagerly awaiting her freedom. Once her shift is over, Rebecca drives over to her ex's house to pick up her son (they have taken to alternating the times of the day which they have him for now–an arrangement that has worked out wonderfully since Rebecca started working overnights) so that she can take him

to school. Before leaving the school parking lot, she texts Andy, telling him she's off now, and that the night did end up going smoothly.

That's cool, glad it was easy! Andy responds almost instantly. **I'm just awaiting my own marching orders here, seeing where I have to go for the day!** Rebecca laughs at how chipper Andy is this early in the morning.

That is so not me in the A.M. I'm often pretty cranky when I first wake up!

Ah, yeah idk. I'm just happy I guess Andy texts back. **Life is going pretty well lately!**

Rebecca drops the news about having a child, figuring that before this goes any further she needs to know that that isn't a dealbreaker for Andy. Much to her delight, he is completely cool with it!

The pair continue to text throughout the afternoon, finding more and more things that they have in common. Rebecca is really enjoying their conversation thus far, but once she picks up her son from school and drops him off back to his father, it is now her time to be the one to bow out of the conversation so that she can sleep. She tells Andy that she will text him when she wakes up, and then lays down in her bed, quickly dozing off.

As soon as she wakes herself up enough to see her phone, Rebecca texts Andy. She makes a tiny self-deprecating joke, saying that she "hopes he hasn't lost interest in her while she was asleep". Andy responds immediately that he hasn't, and that he hopes that she had a good rest. She says that she did, but now she has to get ready for work. She decides to be bold and ask if maybe they can actually talk *on the phone* while she's driving to work, saying that it's late, and she really doesn't like "feeling alone" on her ride into work. She sets her phone down to go shower, keeping her fingers crossed that he will agree to the phone call. After she gets out of the

shower, Rebecca checks her phone, and is pleasantly surprised to see that Andy has agreed to talking on the phone, giving her his number and telling her to "call whenever". *Wow, moving past KIK in a day, that's a good sign!* She plugs the number into her phone feeling both hopeful and apprehensive, opting to focus on getting ready to calm her nerves.

Once she's settled into her car (a 2010 Scion xB she lovingly calls the "Grimace Mobile" on account of its purple color) she dials Andy's number. He answers after two rings. "Batman speaking," he says coyly. She immediately cracks a smile.

"Yes, Batman, this is Rebecca Swats…" They both begin laughing. Andy expresses his excitement about the phone call despite his insistence that he *hates* talking on the phone. "Why?"

"I hate my voice," he says. "I think I sound like a goober…" Rebecca chuckles. *He sounds sexy to me I don't know…*

"I don't think you sound like a goober at all…"

"Well thanks, I *suppose* we can keep talking on the phone then," he responds, his smile almost audible through the phone. "So how far away is your job from your house?"

The fifteen minute car ride completely breezes by as the pair exchange little flirtations and laughs. Rebecca feels a pang of sadness as she pulls into the Harbor Light parking lot. "So what do you think, can we talk on the phone again?"

"Yes," Andy emphatically answers. "I look forward to it!" Rebecca smiles, tells him that she will text him if she gets free, then hangs up the call. She stuffs her phone into her work bag, then watches the Harbor Light door for Janice, the afternoon triage nurse. Once Janice appears, Rebecca gets out of her car, and heads into the office. She quickly greets Janice as she approaches the door, telling her to have a good night, locking the door behind her, then turning back around to watch that Janice makes it safely to her car. Once Janice is in her car, Rebecca

makes her way towards her desk, gets out her spiral notebook to take her call notes, sets up her laptop, logs into the work server, and then opens up the nurses' notes from the day. Normally, Rebecca breezes right through the nurse's notes, but tonight she's distracted. She feels like a big dork being this giddy over someone after only a day… *Not even a full day! C'mon Becs!* She pulls her phone out and texts Andy (actual texts, not KIK)**. It was nice talking to you. Contrary to your own feelings, I really like your voice!** *Oh my God Rebecca, you're doing wayyyyy too much right now…* Her phone dings indicating she has a new message.

Thanks, I like your voice too! The text causes Rebecca's heart to flutter. *Ugh, so melty* she thinks, a big cheesy grin spreading across her face. She re-reads the nurses' notes again so that she feels better inundated with the day, and then her first call of the night comes in.

Once she wraps up on the call, she texts Andy asking if he's still up and wants to have another phone conversation, but with the caveat that it could be interrupted at any given time. Andy says he is up for it, and they continue their conversation, learning more and more about one another in between Rebecca taking work calls.

This method of communication continues over the next couple of days. and when the pair are not sneaking in phone conversations during their work hours, they are texting one another nonstop. The constant communication is something Andy is not used to–he doesn't feel like he is simply there to placate Rebecca–that she is just as interested in finding out about him as he is finding out about her! They spend the days exchanging tidbits about one another: their musical preferences (she confesses to having a subscription to a karaoke app called Smule where she has covered a lot of her favorite songs) favorite movies (he is delighted that when he tells her that his favorite movie of all time is *Halloween* that she also enjoys it, and has met the actor who played

the unmasked Michael Myers), etc. The conversation takes an interesting turn when he broaches the topic of his favorite foods. “I love pasta,” he says. “All pasta, without discrimination.” Rebecca doesn’t immediately respond with her preferences, but instead responds with a deep sigh.

“So I have something to tell you,” she says, uncertain about what will happen when she admits to all of her medical issues. She hesitates, not fully knowing whether or not she will be given the chance to fully explain everything, but hopeful that she will. *Put up or shut up Rebecca*. “It pertains to food and eating I swear, but it’s long, so bear with me!”

“Alright…”

“In August of last year…”

Over the next ten minutes, she does her best to recount her harrowing tale, without skipping over a single detail. “... So I do *like* to eat, but it has to be very small portions at a time…”

Andy’s mind is completely blown at her entire ordeal. He takes a few seconds to really think about how to respond. Rebecca’s heart races, as a few seconds of silence feels like it speaks louder than a lifetime of words. She closes her eyes tightly, almost beginning to anticipate some form of backpeddling…

“... You could have just told me you liked pasta too…” Andy says, following it up with a deep, exasperated sigh. His joke makes her laugh, easing the tension a little, which sets Rebecca back at ease. “I’m so fucking glad you made it though all of that– that’s INSANE!”

“You aren’t put off by the fact that I have a trach?” Andy can hear the sadness and apprehension in her voice.

“Pft, not even a little bit! You’re a badass! The only scars I have are from a mishap I had on a bike as a kid…”

So when can we meet up in person? The text causes Andy’s heart to skip a beat. *It’s too soon isn’t it*, his mind races. *I am so totally into this girl, but are we moving too fast? This is exactly what I wanted though, and she’s exactly the type of person I have been waiting for: goal oriented, compassionate, funny, intelligent, kind, beautiful, can hold a conversation, etc, so why hesitate?*

It just so happens I am free this weekend, his heart takes over, doing its best to keep his excitement at bay.

Well it just so happens that I will be about an hour closer to you on Saturday she responds.

I am going to brunch with a few of my friends from nursing school in Merrillville. It’s my son’s dad’s weekend though, so I am completely free after… The response prompts Andy to pull up info about things to do around Merrillville.

Meet up after? He crosses his fingers, despite feeling like she’s already given her answer by detailing where she will be. *Never count your chips while still sitting at the table* he reminds himself of an old gambler’s parable about “jumping the gun”.

I’d be down for that she quickly responds, causing Andy to smile and fist pump the air.

<u>See you</u> in two days then he quickly responds, trying to sound cool.

It’s a date! **No funny business though, until I know you are serious…** she playfully adds to the end of the text. *Wow* he thinks. *That's a good sign if she’s already hinting that we could be more than friends…*

Andy's excitement over the upcoming "date" (especially the little 'no funny business' quip) quickly gives way to all of his feelings of uncertainty, despite the conversation between them continuing to get better and better. All of the "what ifs" flood his brain: *what if she doesn't find me funny in person? What if she's not funny? What if we don't click? What if she is catfishing me*…

He does his best in the days leading up to their meeting to quell his nerves, but once he awakes on the Saturday morning of the date, and starts the process of getting ready, he can't stop being overcome with doubt–a constant problem for him. It rears its ugly head right away as Andy debates what to wear. He knows Rebecca already has a mental image of how he often dresses–jeans and tee shirts–but he feels like he should at least *try* to jazz himself up a bit. *Dress for the part you want,* he thinks. *but also be yourself!* He decides upon a striped polo shirt and dark black jeans. For the end of January in the midwest, the weather is forecasted to be surprisingly warm–mid-to-high 40's throughout the day. Andy showers and brushes his teeth like normal, but then the process stalls as he gives himself a quick once over in the bathroom mirror. He contemplates whether to shave *again*, despite just having done so a few days ago. *Nah, a little scruff is good*! He runs a comb through his short black hair (*that* he decided to get cut yesterday, opting to avoid fiddling with his longer, naturally curly hair. *Never been able to properly spike it anyways–one of the "curses" of being half Mexican*. He puts on his decided upon outfit with a black, tight-fitting Spring lightweight jacket over his shirt, and says something akin to a "Hail Mary" before he leaves his house.

The drive feels long– an hour and fifteen minutes–marred by *awful* backed up traffic at the Illinois/Indiana border–but Andy uses the time to further try to calm his nerves, listening to one of his favorite "hype me up" albums, *Blue Sky Noise* by Circa Survive. His headspace *feels* good as he pulls into the IHOP parking lot. He immediately sees Rebecca's purple Scion, and pulls into the spot next to it. He checks his hair in his overhead mirror, pops a few winterfresh Altoids into his mouth, then gets out of his car, posting up against it, trying to look cool for Rebecca's first in person glance at him.

His heart skips multiple beats when he sees a group of women exiting the restaurant, instantly recognizing Rebecca's dark auburn, shoulder length hair and her small rectangular glasses. *God, she's beautiful!* She looks over in his direction. He fights to regain his composure as he watches her wish her friends farewell–hugging each woman one-by-one. Once they have all said their goodbyes, she turns back to face him, flashing him a smile as she begins her approach. That smile almost undoes him once again, and despite being able to "reel it in", he can't stop himself from smiling back at her. Once she is within speaking distance, he goes to officially greet her. *You've thought about this moment nonstop* his mind races. *Be cool, say something cool!* "Hey gorgeous." The pale skin of Rebecca's cheeks instantly flush with color red enough to overpower the lipstick that she's wearing

"Hey yourself," she says back, stretching her arms out for a hug. They embrace: their bodies touching for the first time sends a shockwave throughout Andy's entire body, unlike anything he's ever experienced before. The hug lasts much longer than the typical "introductory hug". Completely feeling the weight of the moment, as the hug ends, Andy reaches his hand out, allowing it to hang freely in the air, but hoping to feel hers. Rebecca's hand instantly rises, interlocking with his, giving him an additional jolt of adrenaline and confidence.

“So, I have to ask,” he begins to speak, staring into her eyes so deeply that it almost makes him tear up. Despite his heart pounding in his chest, and his mind silently spewing expletives at the uncertainty of it all, he does not choke on his words. “Is it alright if I kiss my girl?” It’s blunt, brimming with expectation, confidence, and hope. For the first of many times, her red lips flash a smile which renders him awe struck all over again. Without answering his question, she stands up taller and kisses him.