

“Perennials Versus Annuals”

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Most guys decorated the walls of their dorm rooms (if they decorated at all) with posters of their favorite bands or sports teams. Matthew filled his room with plants. Every spot the sun touched hosted something green. The rich, primeval smell reminded him of a forest after a storm. During his only visit to Vermont (peak foliage will get even the most indoorsy outside), Matthew’s boyfriend Liam wondered aloud if this is what celibacy did to a man.

Matthew chuckled. “You do know I’m a botany major, right?”

Circling the room in quick steps, Liam’s head swiveled to take stock of his surroundings.

“Well,” Liam said, “at least plants don’t smell like cowshit.”

Matthew closed the gap between them. “Oh, don’t worry - I know how to get dirty.”

Liam grinned, fingers playing with the top button of Matthew’s shirt. “Oh, I’m very well aware.”

After they’d extricated themselves from Matthew’s narrow bed, Liam freshened up in the shower while Matthew tended to his small jungle. The geraniums needed to be deadheaded, same with the basil. Plus, he wanted to make sure the spider plant Liam requested was in tip top shape before he took it back to Boston. A ping blared. Liam’s phone glowed on the bed. Another ping. Then a third.

Leave it, Matthew thought. It’s none of my business.

The image of his parents freely passing their phones to each other, checking messages and answering, pushed back. He looked down at his geranium, once again flowering after a dormant cycle

If we’re together, we got to trust each other.

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Matthew dropped the geranium’s dead leaves into the trash and walked to the bed. Tapping Liam’s phone screen, the notification reappeared. The three purple rectangles weren’t texts, but DMs from a dating app.

THICCCVIC: Hey dude, what time r u back in town?

THICCCVIC: We can meet at my place, my roommates out

THICCCVIC: So we have plenty of time to play hehe

Matthew dropped the phone as if it were poison ivy. Like an SOS signal, the two sentences looped over and over within his mind, swallowing any other thoughts. The door to his room swung upon. Liam entered, a towel around his waist.

“All clean. Thanks again for the plant, I’ll be thinkin’ of you whenever I look it.” He picked up his phone, holding it close to his face to unlock the screen. When Matthew didn’t respond, his eyes darted up as his thumb typed away. “Hey, you okay? You look like you’re gonna be sick. Please don’t say you’re sick. I can’t handle that.”

Matthew remained silent. How could he speak when Liam’s thumb continued to dance.

A puff of wind threw fat snowflakes against the window. They slid down the glass, melting into water by the time they dipped out of view behind Matthew’s plants.

Swiveling in his chair, phone balanced in his hand, Matthew waited for his brother to pick up. As it continued to ring, his foot began to bounce.

Two months. It’d been two months since Liam dismissed Matthew’s questions about the DMs - and his pleas.

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“You know I love you, Liam, and that I’m serious about us - we both are. So why are you doing this?”

The speed of Liam’s answer, and his shrug, had been infuriating. “Did you really think a relationship at our age was going to last forever? Life is a series of connections, most of them temporary. That’s reality. Don’t you get it?”

In the moment, Matthew had no answer to the naked, cynical question; the resulting fight that ended with Liam’s car peeling out of the parking lot toward the interstate meant he never got a chance to make one. The next day, after he’d overthought his answer to death and had a response ready to go, he discovered Liam had blocked his number.

Matthew glanced down at his phone, still ringing.

Come on, Michael, don’t leave me hanging.

The other end of the line came alive and a photo of Michael’s face, the same as his own, appeared on the phone screen. While they ran through a series of pleasantries, Matthew opened a dating app where an intimidating slate of blank boxes awaited. When Michael finished a long-winded story about some random frat party, Matthew jumped in before his brother could spin off another tale.

“So, random question - what do you think the key to a successful dating profile is?”

After a short pause, Michael’s voice, hollow with static, burst into a staccato cadence. “You’re finally moving on from Liam, huh? Dude, that’s awesome. Two months on the sidelines is enough. Gotta ask though, do you know what a profile is for?”

“You think I grew up under a rock? Yes, I know. Just asking for help.”

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“I mean, it might be different for guys, but if I’m looking for something long term, I focus on showing girls I actually have a brain. Sure, the pics get them to click, but they only swipe right if they think you’re interesting.”

The cursor blinked on the screen, asking Matthew’s name.

The first lie is the toughest.

His fingers began to type.

“Yeah, it’s the same for guys, but only if you’re looking for something serious.”

The sound on the other side of the line scratched and garbled as Michael sat up. “Are you just lookin’ to hook up?”

Feeling his face get hot, Matthew pinched the bridge of his nose. “If you weren’t my twin, I’d hang up.”

“Nothin’ wrong with hookin’ up. That’s a whole different game.”

“What do you mean?”

Michael’s staccato quickened - show off the best pics, choose multiple angles to activate the imagination, be coy but assertive, don’t be afraid to show what you want.

“I mean, don’t get me wrong, even I only get a nibble once a week at best. It takes dedication. People are people - it’s gotta work for guys as well.”

It better or this little catfishing expedition will have been for nothing.

After filling out the basic information, Matthew switched over to Google and typed in a few key words. He started scrolling through pictures of guys his age.

“Thanks, I think I got it.”

“Want me to review it?” Michael asked.

Matthew blanched. “God, no.”

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“Good. Cause that’d be fucking weird.”

Matthew laughed and hung up. Clicking on one picture led to an inactive blog littered with the author’s beach and bathroom selfies. He noted the blogger’s appearance - athletic without being bulky, clean shaven, a stylish, swept haircut. Just Liam’s type. After uploading six photos, Matthew reread the fake profile he’d created.

Patrick Allen, age 20, majoring in pre-med, loves working out and running, living life to the fullest, and spontaneous adventures.

Rubbing the back of his head, Matthew grimaced.

What am I doing? This is dumb idea. Dumb, dumb, dumb.

Closing his eyes, a tightness in his chest stilled his breath.

“Fuck it.”

He activated the account and searched for Liam’s profile.

A warm August breeze drifted off the harbor. Even here on the tip of Cape Cod the nights held onto the day’s heat. Matthew led Liam away from the Provincetown’s debauched nightlife atmosphere to the causeway on the edge of town. A mile-long, the arrow straight pathway of stones bridged the town to the dunes on the far side of the harbor. The night, inky and clear, wrapped around them.

Liam caught his toe between two boulders. “How can you see?”

“There’s more than enough moonlight.”

“Easy for you to say. You only had two Long Island Iced Teas.”

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Halfway down the causeway, Matthew stopped on a huge, table-like slab of granite. This would do. He helped Liam sit and began massaging his legs, sore from their afternoon jog in the dunes.

Liam groaned. “What’d you drag me out here for?”

“Just wait. In about an hour the sun’s gonna start coming up and you’ll see the show.”

“You didn’t tell me *Family Guy* was on.”

Matthew laughed. “I mean a real show - one only nature can provide.”

“You’re such a nerd.”

He knew Liam was messing with him, everything serious was met with a joke, a jibe.

“Be patient.”

“You ask a lot of a drunk man, Matty.”

Matthew rolled his eyes. *He better not call me Matty in front of the family. Michael will never let me live it down.*

The breeze hugged them. Their arms grew goosebumps and Liam complained he was cold. Matthew cradled him in his arms, kissing the side of his neck. The resulting moan sent a shiver down Matthew’s spine.

Looking up, the first hints of red-orange had begun to banish the night sky. The stars, so bright just even ten minutes ago, grew distant from the morning’s intrusion.

“Look up,” Matthew whispered.

Liam’s head rolled back. “Woah. Wait. Where’d the stars go?”

Their hands met and Matthew kissed the nape of Liam’s neck again. “Keep watching.”

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Over the course of the next half hour, the sky overhead went from purple to violet. Matthew instructed Liam to look left, where the night still reigned, then right where the new day was dawning.

“God’s opening his eyelid.”

Liam shook his head. “I never thought of God as something beautiful before.”

Matthew squeezed Liam tighter. “I’m glad I could show you this.”

“Me too.”

Kissing Liam’s cheek, scratchy with day old stubble, Matthew gave Liam another hard hug.

“Love you, Liam.”

“I know.”

When composing his initial message to Liam on the dating app, one of Michael’s maxims ran through Matthew’s head: bullshit can be great fertilizer.

Liam’s profile featured pictures of him in stylish tracksuits, gratuitous gym selfies, and action shots from his soccer squad. He listed a few favorite television shows (Jesus, how’d he ever fall for someone who loved *Family Guy*?) and under the question “where can you be found on a Saturday night?” he answered with “trying something new” (i.e. he didn’t know what he liked). Under normal circumstances, those two strikes would’ve been enough for Matthew to skim past a profile. Instead, “Patrick” spread some manure:

PATRICK: Dude! U like family guy?! Brian’s the best. Which chicken fight is ur favorite?

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After hitting send, he sat back in his chair. The breeze pressed against his dorm window again. The melting snowflakes had begun to freeze against the glass. Matthew walked over to his plants. All of his flowering species, the geraniums and the African violet, had gone dormant once they felt the cold seep in through the glass. He caressed one of the leaves.

Turning back to his phone, Matthew tapped the screen to check for notifications. In the two minutes since he'd sent the message, Liam hadn't answered "Patrick's" message.

“Don't be pathetic,” Matthew muttered.

He threw on his cold weather running gear and jogged through the quad towards the cross-country trails encircling campus. Cruel winter winds had stripped the red maples and American beeches of the autumnal glory, leaving barren, slumbering branches. He took even, steady breaths as he ran - in through the nose, out through the mouth, arms tight against his chest to conserve energy. Cold air burned in his lungs, contrasting with the wet snowflakes splatting against his skin. How had he not noticed these sensations in his daily walks to class? He ran harder, the burn intensifying. Maybe there was more to life than Liam.

There is?

From the moment he discovered Liam had blocked his number, the desire for one last chat had become a seed which sprouted into an elaborate fantasy in which Liam sat across from him at a table, contrite and tense while Matthew unleashed a series of probing questions.

“Wasn't I enough for you? Wasn't what we had enough? What's missing inside of you that you need more - always more!”

Liam never answered in fantasy. How could he? The point of a question is to seek out what you don't know.

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Maybe, just maybe, Matthew thought, this stupid profile can give me some answers.

Returning home from his run, he skipped the showers and headed straight to his room. Not bothering to take off his soaked clothes, he snatched his phone off his desk. A message awaited. Adrenaline reanimating his tired muscles, he typed a response, backtracking frequently to correct multiplying typos. The whooshing sound of the sent message left him heavy, limbs triply weighted from the run, the rush - and post adrenaline clarity.

What am I doing?

He bargained with himself in the shower - if Liam messaged back, he wouldn't answer. He would delete the profile. Forget this happened. That plan disintegrated the moment he opened the app to find another message from Liam to “Patrick”. He should've deleted the profile right then and there. Instead he sent another “final” message. Liam replied instantly.

He never hesitated when he wanted something, Matthew mused.

As messages flew back and forth, Matthew kept Michael's advice in mind - be coy, yet assertive; hint at what you want, but don't be crude.

PATRICK: Oh wow, are u serious! I was a striker in high school

LIAM: A fast one, eh? Did u score a lot? ;-)

PATRICK: Oh, don't worry - I scored plenty hehe

LIAM: Nice. My ex is a nerd, so it's nice to meet a guy who's cool

Matthew winced at the careless digs. Had Liam always been so thoughtless? Yet, the criticisms sloughed off the instant a new message pinged, the continual microdoses of endorphins smothering periodic aches.

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The old rhythm of their alchemy animated Matthews fingers; games reemerged, such as playing dumb (Liam loved the chase). More than once Matthew mentioned his affection for something Liam hated, just to give him the pleasure of convincing “Patrick” of the superiority of his opinion.

As darkness fell, the expected proposition came.

LIAM: Hey, u seem rlly cool and ur pics are fine. U lookin to meet up at all?

PATRICK: Of course. I'd like to meet at a coffee shop, make sure you're not a serial killer and all lol

LIAM: Totally fair. Where u thinkin?

PATRICK: U know Beacon Hill Brews?

LIAM: Nah but I luv trying new places

PATRICK: Nice. I'm free Thurs afternoons after class. U?

LIAM: This is freaky - I'm totally free Thurs

PATRICK: Time?

LIAM: 3?

PATRICK: Done

LIAM: Sweet. See u there, lookin forward to seein if the pics match the actual

PATRICK: Don't worry - they do ;-)

Setting his phone on his desk, Matthew went to take a second shower, hoping to wash away the scummy feeling oozing from his pores. His mind whirred. In order to pull this off, he'd have to lie to his parents about why he was coming home for the weekend - not to mention the

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two hundred bucks he'd be down just for the Amtrak tickets. And when Liam showed up at the pie shop, then what? Beg Liam to take him back? Convince him nights in the forest serenaded by crickets meant more than the thrill of surreptitious sex? That his love, their love, mattered.

Matthew bent under the showerhead, lungs tight from the fear pumping through his veins.

“This isn't who you are.”

The words, swallowed by the endless stream of water, slid down the drain at his feet.

The cool June night air, sweetened by hemlock, filled Matthew's nose as he jogged down the forest path. Behind him Liam's own measured breathing puffed in his ears. The trail weaved through the evergreens, wide as a car and impossible to miss thanks to the full moon filtering through the forest canopy.

“How much farther?” Liam said.

“Just a few minutes, we're almost there.”

Energy crackled in Matthew's arms as they ran. The trail narrowed and they slowed to a walk. Reaching back, Matthew took Liam's warm, soft hand.

“We're here.”

The path opened to a glade filled with waist high ferns. In its center a massive tree lay on its side, opening the canopy to the moonlight. Matthew led Liam to the center of the glade.

“Look up.”

The full moon filled the hole in the canopy where the old tree had been, so bright and clear they could pick out the craters and fault lines on its scarred surface. Matthew's eyes turned

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downward to Liam’s handsome face. He licked his lips, parched and thirsty, and smirked at Liam’s obvious desire.

“So,” Liam whispered, “did you drag me out here to look at the moon or for some other ulterior motive?”

“Yes.”

Liam rested his hand on Matthew’s cheek. “Good. Cause if you didn’t make the first move, I was going to.”

The heat of their skin kept away the night’s chill. The moonlight, watery and shimmering, brought out the freckles sprinkled upon Liam’s arms and chest. Matthew traced them with his finger as they lay upon the soft bed of ferns. Liam flinched at the touch.

“What are you doing?”

“Connecting the dots.”

Liam shifted his body away. “You’re weird.”

“No, seriously. They lead the way to a treasure.”

Starting just below Liam’s navel, Matthew traced a circuitous route across Liam’s abs, up to his muscled chest to where his heart lay. Matthew’s finger made an X.

“See, treasure.”

“You’re such a dork.”

Matthew placed Liam’s hand on his own chest. “Trace mine.”

Liam’s hand, tracing the sea of freckles on Matthew’s torso, slid downward instead.

“I think I found a different treasure.”

Inhaling sharply at Liam’s touch, Matthew bit his lower lip. “Now who’s the dork.”

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Before they left, Matthew plucked the top of a fern and slid it into his pocket so he could press it between the pages of a book later.

Beacon Hill Brews, located on the corner of Chestnut and Charles, had been a pizza joint in Matthew’s childhood. He remembered tugging at his mother’s hand whenever they walked by so he could revel in the smells escaping the open door. The current business was four years old.

Matthew sat by the window, a latte cooling next to an untouched slice of blueberry pie. The murmur of the shop, like the innocuous music whispering from an unseen speaker, didn’t register in Matthew’s ears. His attention was split between examining each person passing by the window and tapping on the screen of his phone, making sure no message went unnoticed.

Stop it.

He shoved his hands into his hoodie pocket, eyes skittering around until they zeroed in on a neglected spider plant overflowing with tan and brown leaves on a windowsill. Transferring it to his table, he picked through the mess while muttering assurances it would feel better once he was done with it.

The hollow thud of heavy boots scraped to a stop by his side. Matthew’s stomach threatened to jump straight up out of his mouth. Squeezing his lips tight, he looked up. His own face stared back at him, though with a different haircut and freckle pattern.

“Well, this is a surprise,” Michael said.

Matthew’s hands clutched the spider plant’s pot. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“I could ask the same of you. You trying to surprise me by popping up at dinner tonight at Mom and Dad’s house?”

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Eyes darting outside, Matthew’s brain spun into warp drive - pinging back and forth between Liam’s impending arrival and how to get Michael to leave. The pause (let's be honest, deer-in-the-headlights freeze) gave his twin the room to sit down and steal the untouched slice of pie. Michael grinned and cocked his head.

“What’s the matter? Not happy to see my ugly mug?”

Grinding his teeth, Matthew balled his fists. “Careful. It’s my face, too.”

“Yeah, but mine has less freckles - therefore it’s better. We established this back in fourth grade.”

Maybe I can say I’m heading to the bathroom, Matthew thought, and instead meet Liam outside and go into the Common.

“Seriously,” Michael said, “why are you here? Christmas break is around the corner, so why come home this weekend? Can’t be to rescue that plant.”

Matthew turned the pot, making a show doing a final inspection. A purple notification popped up on his screen, the loud chime a dentist’s drill in his ear. His hand shot out and silenced the notification. Michael, slowing between bites, looked down and chortled.

“I see now.” His words, mangled around the food in his mouth, grated. “Must be someone special to travel this far for. Do I know him?”

Matthew tucked his head into his shoulders, wishing the hoodie would turn him into a turtle. Loading up another forkful of pie, Michael cocked his head.

“The profile worked, huh?”

“Jesus fuck, Michael.”

“What? I can’t offer my congratulations?”

Matthew’s face bloomed as red as his hair. “You can congratulate me by leaving.”

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“Fair enough. Do I at least get a name?”

The cafe door opened behind their booth. The sight of a blue track suit and pomaded black hair nearly made Matthew vomit. Liam strode straight to the cashier, a man on a mission. Unable to control himself, Matthew’s eyes fixed his former paramour, who was now scrolling through his phone.

Michael followed Matthew’s fixed gaze and tilted up his chin.

“That the guy?”

Whatever words Matthew hoped to say dissipated as soon as he opened his mouth. He shoved the plant aside and buried his head in his hands.

This can’t be happening.

Michael’s fork clinked on the plate. “Hey, you know what? I’m sorry. I’ll get going and see you at dinner.”

The bungee constricting Matthew’s chest loosened. Raising his head, he closed his eyes to keep tears from welling over.

Michael’s eyes narrowed. “You okay?”

“Matty!”

The nasally, high-A pronunciation of Liam’s New Jersey accent cut through the ambient cafe noise. As the brothers turned in unison, Liam’s face shifted from jovial to astonishment.

“Woah. Woah, woah, woah. This is freaky.”

Matthew fought the reflexive urge to burst from his seat, shove Liam aside, and run until he was hiding under his bed in his Vermont dorm. The awkwardness wrapped around the three of them like a jungle vine. Liam pointed a finger to and fro.

“Which one is which?”

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The churning in Matthew’s stomach boiled away into anger. *Jesus, do I need to take off my shirt - or have you seen too many torsos too?*

Michael put forward his hand and introduced himself. “And you are?”

“Liam.”

At the turn of Michael’s head, Matthew wiped his sweaty hand on the table.

“What are you doing here, Liam?”

The casual shrug of the shoulders, as casual as answering those purple DMs, increased the heat under the boil in Matthew’s head.

“Let me guess - you’re meeting someone.”

Another shrug. “What’s brunch for, right? How about you?”

A thought itched underneath Matthew’s rage. Now. Now is the time for the speech, the questions Matthew had nurtured for months. However, Liam’s walnut brown eyes smothered the itch under memories of ferns, God’s eyelid, a purple rectangle. A spider plant. Beneath his hand, the pile of dead leaves from the cafe’s plant pricked against his palm.

“What did you do with the plant I gave you when you visited me in Vermont?”

Liam blinked. “What?”

Matthew repeated the question, watching Liam’s mouth move as he either tried to remember or to formulate an excuse. Finally, he shrugged again.

“Didn’t water it and it died. What do you think happened?”

Shooting a glance at Michael, Matthew extended his hand. “Take care Liam. Hope whoever you’re meeting shows up.”

After Liam exited, Matthew slumped against the hardwood back of the booth, leaden limbs hanging loose. Michael leaned down to meet Matthew’s gaze.

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“Matty?”

Slumping further, Matthew did a face palm. “Fucking Christ.”

“Don’t tell me he was the guy you were coming to see.”

Matthew’s phone chimed and another purple rectangle popped up on the screen. The humor drained from Michael’s face. With a quickness required from a Division I shortstop, Michael snatched the phone before Matthew could react. Reading the message, then looking back to the door where Liam had exited, Michael tossed the phone into his brother’s chest.

“What’s wrong with you?”

Matthew slammed the phone on the table.

“He wouldn’t see me.” Even as his volume spiked, Matthew’s voice cracked under the weight of the confession. “He wouldn’t even text me back. Nothing. I was...nothing. And he was...”

Michael crossed his arms. “All that and a bag of chips.”

Chin quivering, Matthew wiped his face. Snuffling back a nose full of snot, he rattled out a calming breath.

“Right. All that and a bag of chips.”

“Well,” Michael said, “I wouldn’t mourn him too much. Not only did he call you Matty, he managed to kill a spider plant.”

Matthew groaned. That said everything, didn’t it? He’d chosen a spider plant because it required the bare minimum of attention to keep it alive.

Picking up the phone, Matthew read Liam’s message.

LIAM: Hey, u still coming?

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Matthew shook his head, more at himself than the phone. *No. I'm not.*

Going into the app's settings, he deleted his account and slid the phone into his hoodie pocket.

“Is your spider plant still alive? The one I gave you back in 8th grade?”

Michael scraped up the final crumbs of pie from his plate. “Yup. I actually set a reminder on my phone to give it half a cup of water every week.”

“Actually?”

Michael nodded and, channeling their father's gesture of comfort, clasped Matthew's shoulder.

Matthew smirked.

“What?” Michael said.

“I was just thinking, I'd love to see Liam's face when he tries to send another message and bounces back saying ‘this user is no longer registered’.”

Michael's laugh burst like a bomb blast. “Dude, what did you ever see in a guy who wears tracksuits?”

Matthew snorted. “Your guess is as good as mine.”