The ending, version fourteen

Thirteen endings nobody will ever read, a red pen, and one stranger laughing on the L at the part I almost cut.

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4 MIN READ

I finally finished the ending. I want to say that first so it feels real. It's done. It's up. If you read The Plus One on Monday, the ending you read was version fourteen. There were thirteen others. I'm going to tell you about some of them, because otherwise I'll just keep thinking about them alone at 3am.

If you didn't read it, it's the one with Emily and the fake boyfriend and the firehouse calendar and the Christmas weekend in Connecticut. I wrote the whole thing in about two weeks. Then I wrote the last page for about four.

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The first ending was at the train station in New Haven. She's leaving, he runs down the platform, the doors are closing. I wrote it in one night and I loved it. I read it again in the morning and realized I'd seen it in about forty movies, and so have you, and so has Emily, honestly. She'd roll her eyes at it. So that one went.

Version two, he shows up at her parents' party the next year. Too long. You'd have to wait a whole year. Nobody wants to wait a year, I don't even want to wait a year.

Version three, it snows. I'm not proud of version three. Everybody stands in the snow and says what they mean. People don't do that. People stand in the snow and say "it's cold," and mean everything else. I kept one line from it, though. That's how it goes, you keep one line from every bad version and pretend it was your plan.

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Version six is when I printed the whole thing out. Real paper, from the library on Bedford, twenty cents a page, which adds up when you're printing the same ending over and over. I spread it all over the kitchen table and went through it with a red pen like a teacher. Megan came by to borrow my drill and saw the table and said "are you okay." I said I was editing. She said "it looks like a crime scene." It kind of did.

Version eight had a speech. Jake gives this big speech about how he fell for her. It was a really good speech. I worked on it for two nights. And then I read it out loud, on the fire escape, to nobody, and it sounded like a guy who'd worked on a speech for two nights. Jake doesn't do speeches. Jake fixes things and sells calendars. So I cut every word of it, and I'm still a little sad about it.

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I'm not proud of it, but around version eleven I kind of stopped sleeping. More than usual, I mean, which is saying something. I'd be at the table at 3am with the one lamp on, moving a single sentence up a paragraph and then back down, and I'd catch myself talking to the characters. Out loud. "What do you want. Where do you want to be." They never said anything. Characters are like that until they're not.

I called my mom on Sunday and she asked how the story was going and I said I'm writing the same kiss for the thirteenth time. She said "well, is it a good kiss?" I said I didn't know anymore. She said "then stop writing it and let them do it." I laughed. Then I thought about it for way too long.

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So for version fourteen I went back to the very beginning. Not the first ending, the first page. The story starts with Emily in a stairwell at her office, hiding from her life, listening to a voicemail from her mom. And I thought, that's where she'd go. Not a train station. Not the snow. Back to the place she was hiding, except this time she's not hiding.

So he shows up at her office. In the lobby, under the bad lights, next to a ficus that's been dying since 2019. The security guard applauds. Nobody hung any mistletoe. Then her mom texts, because of course her mom texts.

That's it. No speech. I kept the ficus from version five and the security guard from version nine and the mom from version one, kind of, and I took out everything that was me trying too hard. It was short. I sent it to Megan at 4am and she wrote back "FINALLY" in capitals, and then "the ficus," and then a crying face. I took that as a yes.

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The best part happened Wednesday. I was on the L, going into the city, standing, and the girl sitting in front of me was reading something on her phone. I wasn't trying to look. I was kind of trying to look. And it was the story. My story. I could see Jake's name.

I didn't say anything. Obviously I didn't say anything, what would I even say. I just stood there holding the pole and watched her get to the end. She got to the ficus and she laughed, out loud, on the L, at

eight in the morning, the little surprised laugh, not the polite one. Then she read the mom's text and she put her hand over her mouth.

Then she got off at Union Square and I'll never see her again.

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I think about that a lot. Thirteen endings nobody will ever read, and one girl laughing on a train at the part I almost cut. That's the whole job, I think. Writing the bad ones so you can find the one that's true, and then being on the train when it works, and not saying anything.

Version fourteen. I'm keeping the red pen. I'm going to need it.

— Shay

Thanks for reading. There are more of these on my site, one every couple of weeks.