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Anguish. Hope. *Short Term 12*

Art comes in many different forms. It can be mindless, entertaining, inspiring, beautiful, tragic. In any of these, occasionally pieces can be found that touch a person to their core. The film *Short Term 12* (2013), directed and written by Destin Daniel Cretton, is one of these pieces. The film follows Grace (Brie Larson) on a captivating and emotional rollercoaster as she attempts to navigate her internal trauma, as well as her precarious relationship with co-worker and boyfriend Mason (John Gallagher Jr.). All while attempting to fulfill the responsibilities of being a senior staff member looking after troubled children and teens. Among others, the film introduces Jayden (Kaitlyn Dever), a mid-teen with an eerily similar backstory to Grace, and Marcus (Keith Stanfield), a haunted older teen who is facing aging out of the program. *Short Term 12* tells a beautiful story of the anguish and hope that so many people experience.

While *Short Tern 12* maintains a light-hearted, upbeat thread, one must remember this story revolves around a mental facility. None of these characters are there because their lives are peachy and wonderful.

When Grace is introduced, she seems perfectly put together. A supervisor that has been there and done that; with the relaxed attitude that comes from years of experience, and a quiet, unshakable confidence. From Peter Debruge, Chief Film Critic for *Variety,* “At work, she insists the teens learn to communicate their emotions, but she’s suppressed her own for so long, she doesn’t even recognize the hypocrisy.” This is first hinted to the viewer when Grace is at a doctor’s office. Prior to making the appointment there for a pregnancy test, she had already taken seven at-home tests; all positive. When it is revealed that this test is also positive, she insists on making an appointment for an abortion, refusing information about other options. Shortly thereafter, during a stay-in date night with Mason, Grace initiates what soon becomes a hot and heavy scene. Almost immediately after penetration, she has a breakdown, and slaps Mason hard enough to bloody his nose. Nearing the climax of the movie, during her rock bottom, she tells Mason that she cannot emotionally open up to him, will not marry him, and reveals her scheduled abortion. After their conversation, she goes to Jayden’s father’s house, where she commits two felonies. First, she breaks into his home, grabs a baseball bat, and stands over the father while he’s asleep, contemplating violence. She’s only stopped by Jayden, who leads her outside, where they both smash the windows on the father’s luxury sedan. It is in this scene where the viewer learns that, like Jayden, Grace has also been both physically and sexually abused by her father.

Soon after arriving at the facility, Jayden has a birthday. Her father is supposed to pick her up and take her home for the weekend, but he never shows up. Feeling abandoned, unwanted, and overwhelmed, she digs her fingernails into her skin hard enough to draw blood, before having a massive breakdown. Later that night, she runs away from the facility. Followed by Grace, they walk and ride a bus to reach her father’s house. Seeing that it is empty, Jayden deflates and allows herself to be taken back to the facility. Once they return, she opens up to Grace, telling her an abstracted story that hints at the abuse that she has suffered at the hands of her father.

Marcus was used and abused by his mother from a very young age. As an outlet, he writes rap songs; he plays one with Mason. In it, he reveals that his mother not only physically abused him constantly, but she also forced him to sell drugs instead of hanging out with other 10-year-old children. He goes on to string together many horrible names for his mother, before proclaiming that she is just a body in a ditch to him. Marcus has been in the program for nearly three years and is facing aging-out of the facility. This causes him great distress, leading him to act out by assaulting one of the other children and hiding a bag of weed in his mattress. Despite his actions, Grace wants to throw him a going-away party, so she asks if he has any requests; he wants to have his head shaved. During this process, he is unable to look at himself in the mirror, terrified of what he might see. Marcus reveals that he has spent his entire life with longer hair because his mother used to hit him on his head hard enough to cut and leave welts. With Grace and Mason assuring him there are no such marks, Marcus wills himself to look into the mirror. He breaks down into tears when he sees his head no longer carries the signs of his abuse. At a later point, after his beloved pet fish dies, Marcus attempts suicide.

While every person experiences a different level of trauma and proceeding anguish, there is always hope for the future, if they continue to strive forward.

Grace shows the audience that despite her life crumbling around her, she can gather the pieces and press on. She is beginning therapy, and while she is initially reluctant to share information, she does begin to give small insights into her emotional state. It is also shown that she has decided to stay with Mason, intending to marry him, and have their baby.

After the incident with her father’s car, Grace convinces Jayden to talk with her therapist at the facility about the abuse she has been experiencing. Doing so enables her to finally take control of her life, separate herself from her father, and keep her safe.

Surviving his suicide attempt, Marcus leaves the facility. During the ending scene, the viewer is given a story of Marcus and where he is at in life. It is revealed that he is not only working at an aquarium, but that he is also applying to classes for the upcoming semester. In addition, he is in a budding relationship with an alumnus from the facility.

R. Kurt Osenlund, film critic for *Slant,* belittles Marcus’ ending, brushing it off as “something that would happen in the movies,” as if it is impossible for someone to overcome their trauma, past, or placement in life. These seeming shortcomings can be faced, overcome, and used as fuel in the fire of ambition, pushing a person to excel beyond their so-called better-off peers.

Beautiful stories are not always easy to hear. Occasionally, they contain great darkness within. *Short Term 12* is a difficult story; full of anguish but laced with hope. Despite Grace’s trauma and breakdowns, she is eventually able to face her issues, open up, and dedicate herself to starting a family. Though Jayden suffers deeply, she brings herself to verbalize her trauma, facilitating her separation from her abusive father. Overcoming both his past and his suicide attempt, Marcus finds that he can not only go out into the world, but succeed, establishing himself in the workplace, beginning his formal education, and entering the beginnings of a romantic relationship.

Works Cited

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