

## Never Rarely Sometimes Always

Abortion is a radioactive subject in America, unlike most other places in the world, and it has rarely been treated on film with such delicacy and candor as in this new film written and directed by Eliza Hittman. This may be as close as we can get in cinema to the real-life experiences of someone undertaking the dreaded procedure (except for the amazing—and raw--“4 Months, 3 weeks, and 2 Days,” made by the Romanian filmmaker Cristian Mungiu).

“Never Rarely Sometimes Always” is an intimate portrayal of two teenage girls living in small town Pennsylvania, one of whom, 17-year old Autumn (newcomer Sidney Flanigan) is faced with an unintended pregnancy but lacks any kind of local support. Knowing neither her parents nor her community could countenance her condition, she turns for help to her cousin and best friend Skylar (Talia Ryder). Autumn wants to abort the child, and she and Skylar decide to leave town clandestinely by bus for a night across state lines in Brooklyn, where Skylar has heard of an abortion clinic.

While their journey is fraught with anxiety and stress, the girls do find an abortion service (filmed in a real Planned Parenthood office) which treats Autumn with what might be called businesslike compassion. But there they learn that the procedure takes more than one day, creating another setback they had not counted on.

Schlepping a roller bag and a backpack, they are almost totally lost in the massive city, utterly naïve in this monotonous and confounding world. To kill time, they wander aimlessly through streets, subway stations, trains and other bleak public places, trying to stay safe while they fill the time between Autumn’s clinic appointments.

But the girls stay true to each other. Autumn, inarticulate and impassive, buries her fears and emotions deep. Her dialogue is limited; her plain, apprehensive face revealing much more than anything she says. Skylar, more open and social, does what she can to help her cousin, evinced through a lovely but worried mien as she pushes around their humble luggage. Besides the staff at the abortion clinic, the only other significant human interaction the girls have is with a garrulous and potentially sketchy kid named Jasper (Theodore Pellerin), who is taken with Skylar but whose intentions are unclear.

This plot line of “Never Rarely...” may seem slim, if not barren, but it’s Hittman’s direction and the restrained dialogue of her two protagonists that rings so true. In the naturalism of its actors, it is reminiscent of another

recent struggling teen, Kayla (played by Elsie Fisher) in the 2018 movie “Eight Grade” by Bo Burnham. But this film is no comedy, rather a straight-faced look at one of America’s most fraught dilemmas.

By the way, the handling of the abortion procedure is tactful and essentially off-screen, so the film earns a “PG-13” rating. The fact that the picture could thus be seen by teen-agers themselves argues that it might be a particularly worthwhile experience for youngsters—and their parents—to see, discuss, and argue about.

*(The film is rated “PG-13” and runs 95 mins.)*

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