

MINI SCRIPT IN DEPTH STUDIO STORY NOTES

Grade: 1.5 PASS

Log Line:

A young girl does everything she can to help her best friend escape from her abusive father.

Overall / Premise:

XXXXXXXXXXXXX is a family drama about two young girls who find that sometimes friendship is stronger than blood, and that when you truly love someone, you love them for who they are despite all else. It is an important story, both humorous and sad, with universal themes and lively characters.

What makes this script so unique is that it is told not from the point of view of the victim of abuse, but from her best friend who discovers it. This gives is a fresh perspective and focuses on issues not so often talked about: how to be compassionate but responsible; how to do what's right with dignity; and how to go against someone's wishes in order to save them.

That being said, the script suffers from two main problems: 1) As many shorts do, it tries to tell a feature script in a mere 34 pages, and 2) As with many scripts based on true stories, it appears to stick to the truth of what happened in such detail that the main story arc lacks focus. This script has a lot of potential however and is definitely worth pursuing further! Detailed notes and suggestions follow the synopsis below.

Synopsis:

In 1968 two young girls, JESSIE (a sassy tomboy) and JESSIE (clumsy but pretty), are best friends who frequently get into trouble, aren't afraid to taunt the neighborhood boys, and are not in any hurry to grow out of their pre-pubescent "idyllic" lives.

One afternoon Izzy insists they embark on a mission to alter the anatomy of Jessie's Barbie dolls by filing off the breasts, which leads them to do the equivalent to her younger brother, MARK's, G.I Joe's. The next day, a dejected Jessie complains of being grounded and that her dad was so mad, he let Mark completely destroy her dolls as payback.

A few days later at school, Izzy discovers that Jessie was actually severely beaten for the prank and is sporting welts and bruises all over her body. When Izzy acts horrified by Jessie's cavalier attitude toward the whole thing, the two have an argument, which quickly escalates into a fierce chase around the schoolyard. After hurtful taunts back and forth, Izzy realizes that last thing she wants to do is physically hurt her friend who was just abused, and she backs off. They make up and pretend nothing ever happened.

A few weeks later, Jessie gets a blonde wig she ordered in the mail. Izzy initially makes fun of it, then gets the grand idea to use it so Jessie can "disappear" and get away from her father. She pursues the notion with full-force by converting a crawl space under her house into a comfortable hideout where Jessie can stay during the night, after she's spent the day in wigged disguise.

Though she appreciates the thought, Jessie is adverse to the spider-ridden den, until she is once more mercilessly beaten after a poor report card. Izzy futilely tries to stop the thrashing, even to the point of begging her father to intervene. The next day she discovers Jessie curled up in a ball underneath the house, black and bloodied. Izzy successfully hides the terrified girl for days – bringing her food and things to pass the time. As they huddle together, they both frequently hear Jessie's father roaming the neighborhood, calling out her name.

Jessie begins to feel guilty for the worry she is causing, and Izzy feels a deep sense of disappointment and remorse when she hears her sneaking back home. This soon turns to fury however and she very publicly confronts Jessie's father in the street - in full view of the neighborhood - on his treatment of his daughter. Though no one, including Izzy's father, really tries to stop her, no one backs her up either. She only ceases when Jessie herself appears, hugs her father, and with barely a look to Izzy, takes him into the house.

In that moment, Izzy realizes there is nothing she can do but continue to be Jessie's friend in the way she always was, though she continues to keep the hideout ready and waiting, just in case.

Plot /Story Development / Structure:

The notes that follow take a look at the script as a whole *in and of itself*. The truth of what really happened only matters if it works on the page, and the accuracy of details is only relevant if they serve the main storyline that has been established. Sometimes changes are needed to make things more dramatic – here they may need to be made in order to bring focus to the piece and tie everything together as a cohesive whole. In this

case, there is plenty of drama, but it is being lost in the presence of too many extraneous details, characters, and scenes.

1) There is nothing overtly important about setting this in 1968. Kids these days still play with Barbie's and G.I. Joes, and parents in middle America can still be loathe to get involved in the private family matters of their neighbors. The only big difference perhaps is the way a school official or the police may react to repeated bruises on a child. However, one thing to consider is that setting it this far back creates a sort of "sentimental" tone of how things used to be (it has *The Wonder Years* written all over it), rather than an urgent tone highlighting that children are still abused in this day and age. If the script is to be a "call to act", then updating it to the present would better serve this purpose. It would raise the stakes even higher since we live in an age of more awareness as far as child abuse is concerned, but victims of it are still scared to death to stand up for themselves, ask for help, and suffer from the same psychological shame.

2) The most common problem with scripts based on true stories is deciding what is important enough to be included and what should be left out. More often than not, too much is left in - which feels like the case here. This story is extremely compelling, but the setup takes *a lot* of time, there are many extraneous characters, and several scenes don't move the plot forward in a meaningful way. This story could easily be written as a feature, but in its current format is not focused enough. For instance, we don't need both the bike down the stairs scene and the climbing the tree scene to establish the fact that Izzy is a tomboy. Having her climb up the tree with ease compared to Jessie using the ladder is more than enough. In order to make the scene on the stairs matter, use it to show Jessie's inordinate fear of getting hurt, beyond what would be considered normal. That would set up the tension for the main storyline and give the audience something to wonder about. But this could easily be done with the tree climbing as well and save valuable page time. The first two pages don't give us any information that actually ends up being important in the end.

3) To continue with the tree scene, it is way too long because it doesn't offer any thing significant leading to the main storyline. There are several issues here. First, in a short script it is very difficult to include subplots successfully without taking away from the main plot. For instance, Jessie liking Jeffrey never goes anywhere - he quickly disappears and we never see him again. Likewise, Frank doesn't serve any purpose whatsoever, though both these character could easily be useful in a feature version. The only one who has any impact is Mark (with the doll fiasco which leads to a beating), but even then it is never addressed whether or not he is beaten too. Point is - both Jeffrey and Frank could be cut completely without anything important being lost. This would help truncate the setup (including that first tree scene), and keep us focused on the girls. If you give the audience too much information (this is they guy she likes, this is the bratty little brother who pees his bed, this is the bossy older brother), they are not going to know what they are supposed to consider important. Again, different story for longer scripts, but you have to write for the format you have chosen.

4) There is so much time spent on Izzy's dislike for being a girl etc., but it never ties into the main story line or her character arc. It only serves to differentiate her from Jessie, but that can be done very quickly without any dwelling on the matter. Her dilemma is helping her friend, not becoming comfortable as a girl or accepting herself for being a tomboy. It leads the audience in the wrong direction so by the time the abuse shows its head on page 9 (which is quite late!), the reader isn't sure what is relevant anymore. The reversal itself is quite nice, but only if everything before it is so essential and integrated that when it happens the audience says, "Aaaahh!"

5) The scene with the dolls is odd for a couple of reasons. First, it seems out of character for Izzy to join in so willingly (so does the playing "tea party"). Second, it focuses on Izzy's distaste for being a girl (by filing the breasts), which doesn't concern the main plot *directly*. If the scene somehow revealed something about Jessie's inner turmoil with being beaten, it would be more integrated. For instance, perhaps she has wounded or cut-up the dolls in some way to mirror her own injuries. This would not only develop her character more, but give Jessie something to react to so that by the time we get to the abuse reveal, seemingly unconnected information can start to fall into place (that "Ah!" moment). If every seemingly random piece of information is tied up in this way, then it can be kept. In another example, if we find out that Mark is also being beaten because of the bedwetting, then that previous lighter moment when they joke about it suddenly takes on meaning and is not so funny anymore.

6) Consider dropping the scene in the school bathroom and have Izzy discover the abuse during the porch scene after the doll incident. First of all, the story is not about the girls being outcasts from the school crowd, so Jessie showing off her scars to them is confusing and out of character. Secondly, why she would show them when she was clearly hiding them from Jessie earlier? Thirdly, it takes up valuable time when it could be more poignantly and concisely done in the previous scene. Lastly, this story is told from Izzy's point of view, not Jessie's.

7) What is missing in this reveal is Izzy's sense of feeling guilty or betrayed. It seems like they've been friends for a long time, so for her to have not realized what has been going on should be a HUGE deal. Did Jessie not trust her? Could she have stopped it if she had realized earlier? And most importantly, why is Jessie so suddenly being so cavalier about it all when she had previously been hiding it all too well?

8) The moment in the schoolyard where the girls almost fight (which could happen on the neighborhood street if the bathroom scene is cut), is not yet earned. There has been absolutely no setup about Izzy's father to justify her anger at Jessie's taunts. The only thing in the script as it is now which may be rightly hurtful is referring to her meanly as a tomboy, or boy-hater, or something along those lines. Also, the climax of the scene is undercut when the narrator pops in to tell us what Izzy is feeling. It would be much better to show us through her actions and let the emotions play themselves out.

9) The scene at the movie theatre serves no purpose because again, the storyline of them not liking boys is not tied into the main arc. This is a scene that may work well in a feature version, but here it slows down the pace and is not relevant.

10) There are several references in the script to SAM. Is this a former name for Izzy that got missed when making changes?

11) The blonde wig subplot is not fully integrated yet. It is a good launching pad for Izzy to build the hideaway, but not so obvious why Jessie wants it in the first place. Perhaps by looking pretty she thinks it'll make her father think better of her. Or maybe a source of continuing conflict is that she is ultra-feminine and Izzy obviously is not. But this conflict must somehow inform the child abuse plot. For instance, perhaps Jessie has always been prettying herself up to hide bruises (which a luxurious wig could do), and Izzy always made fun of her for being so girly. Then when the truth comes out, Izzy would be confronted with her own ill-informed treatment of her friend, and the two storylines would be fully integrated.

12) The fear of spiders feels tacked on because we never see Jessie come into contact with one and have to face it at some point. It should either be purely a metaphor or fully played out.

13) On page 34, we should see the reaction Izzy has to discovering that Jessie no longer wants her help. It is the top of the climax and the story is told from her point of view. She has done everything she can to keep Jessie safe from her father, and yet she went straight back. This is going to affect Izzy in a significant way and is what will complete her character arc. It should be one of the MAJOR MOMENTS in the script!

14) In the final scene, we should see some sort of change in the how the girls interact with each other – even if things are back to “normal”. Otherwise the characters haven't changed in any way and there's no reason to tell the story.

Characters:

IZZY:

Many of her character issues have been mentioned above. She is likeable, sassy, the life of every scene, and the catalyst for the action – without her the abuse would continue as normal. Since we see the story through her eyes, she is the most important character and we must be able to follow her every move. Focus her character arc, include her big moment in the climax, and show us how she's changed when it's all over.

JESSIE:

Right now her inconsistencies appear to be more from scattered storytelling than classic victim behavior. If she is going to hide her abuse one moment then flaunt it the next, establish this type of erratic personality earlier. It will initially come across as a quirk then take on more meaning once the abuse is revealed.

MR. CALLAHAN / MR. CARTER:

It would be nice to give these two a bit more screen time to highlight the differences between them. Mr. Callahan could use at least one redeemable quality to make Jessie's forgiveness of him understandable. Mr. Carter could be seen to have more internal conflict about whether or not to intervene to add complexity to the story and to show Izzy that the problem can't be as easily solved as she thinks.

MARK:

He's included too much to completely disappear. Does he ever witness the abuse? Is he abused himself? Does he feel guilty when he's the cause of it? How does he feel when Jesse leaves – abandoned or glad? All he needs is a quick moment, but he should have it.

FRANK / JEFFREY:

Recommend to cut.

NARRATOR:

Not completely convinced the device is working as of yet. Many times, it is taking time away from showing the character experience the moment. Other times, it is used in scenes that are too expositional to begin with.

Dialogue:

The dialogue flows pretty well, but is fairly formal considering most of the characters are kids. For instance, casual-speak would sometimes read as doin' (doing), wanna (want to), yer (you're), what'dya (what do you), 'em (them). It's in there a bit, but could use a more.

If the script is updated to the present, throw in current lingo as well.

Marketability / Box Office Viability:

As a "message piece" this could do very well on the film festival circuit, but the story needs to be much more focused and hone in on a few memorable characters. It already has a nice balance of dark and light moments, which works in its favor and will make the final draft an enjoyable read.

As there is much more to the story than can be told in this short format, it could serve as a great calling card and pitch for a feature version.