

Aftersun: What We Make of Nostalgia

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We often don't understand our parents until much later in our lives. For some, they served as friends, coaches, or pastors. For others, our parents were nothing more than ghosts fading in and out of our lives, neither asking to be reconciled nor purged. This clarity comes only after we've had a chance to live some semblance of what they may have experienced. No parent can ever seem to take on a purely parental role. When looking retrospectively, we also find that even our memories of them can't be trusted— their portraits drawn on crumbling plaster, often too fragmented to decipher and even involuntarily self-fabricated. As we learn to embrace— or rather cope with— our childhoods and the strangers who were tasked with raising us, we're forced to fill in the gaps hidden within our recollection. In doing so, we will ourselves through the often painful haze of nostalgia in search of finally recognizing the faces we've spent years of our lives around. For many people, this search proves useless as they are often left with a marginally more complete grasp of their past. However, even without a complete portrait there are still details that hint at the greater picture.

Charlotte Wells's debut feature film *Aftersun* (2022) is a shattering depiction of an attempt to create understanding through nostalgia. In it, we join thirty year-old Sophie as she watches a home video of her summer holiday at a Turkish resort with her father, Calum, for his 31st birthday. The footage follows Calum and eleven year-old Sophie as they enjoy their rare time together. The pair appear happy, with the occasional hiccup one may expect of a young father navigating his somewhat distant and awkward relationship with his daughter on a trip away from home (for the sake of clarity, I will refer to present-day Sophie as "Adult Sophie" and eleven year-old Sophie as just Sophie). For Adult Sophie, however, it's clear that Calum is no longer in her life at this point, and it is even hinted that Calum committed suicide sometime after the trip. The home video recording is combined with cinematic footage, which leads us to believe that these disjointed scenes may have been fabricated by Adult Sophie as she attempts to understand her father in a manner she couldn't as a child and look for signs of his depression. On top of this, the film is interspersed with flashing rave scenes that depict

Adult Sophie's battle to realize her father and reconcile him with the idealistic version she once believed she knew.

After amicably splitting from Sophie's mother and moving to London, Calum seems to be the ideal young father. He encourages her in young-spirited antics such as running from restaurant bills and dancing, while maintaining his fatherly gaze with respect to relationships, drugs, and adult social life. Beyond his relationship with her, however, we can see that he struggles deeply within his personal life. He's unable to find a suitable occupation as Sophie points out, nor is he able to establish meaningful relationships with those around him. Ultimately, this is the unending quake that causes Calum's character to crumble then collapse as he feels as though he is failing to create purpose in his life. This lack of purpose is what fuels his depression and subsequent suicide. For Sophie, she is oblivious to any signs of mental distress displayed by her father due to her young age as well as Calum's efforts to hide them from her. In revisiting the home video, Adult Sophie fills in these gaps by herself as she pieces together Calum's struggle during their final time together.

Calum's depression acts as an everlasting yet invisible malevolence. Stranded in the middle of his sea of emotions, he fights to stay afloat as waves batter him and storm clouds consolidate above. The home footage first subtly hints at his inner conflicts through Sophie's seemingly innocent question: "When you were eleven, what did you think you would be doing now?" The question takes Calum aback, but his reaction remains unnoticed by Sophie. He struggles to answer the question before he curtly tells Sophie to turn off the camera. The hotel room itself also hints at his underlying condition: Tai Chi guides and self-help books litter the drawers while he uses the patio to hide his smoking. A more concerning example comes a few days later after their scuba diving activity. While Sophie is away, Calum meets a young diving instructor who tells him that he's expecting to raise a child soon—much sooner than he ever expected. Still, the instructor maintains his charm and positive outlook on his future. Calum congratulates him and shares in his excitement, but also relents that he's surprised he's even made it to thirty and believes he won't reach forty. While the comment can seem harmless for a passing

conversation, the viewer, as well as Adult Sophie, comes to recognize how dangerous this admittance turns out to be. Calum himself even recognizes the disconcerting truth in this comment as he takes a moment to gather himself afterwards. There are further subtleties that Wells imbues in Calum's character, such as his carelessness when crossing a street and almost getting hit by a bus, as well as buying an £800 rug that he clearly cannot afford. A more evident hint comes during a moment of agitation when he spits at his own reflection in the mirror. Calum makes sure to hide his pain as these actions came only in solitude, where he is sure that Sophie cannot see. When the pair are together, life and concern seep back into Calum's eyes. He makes sure to hold Sophie's hand as they cross the street as well as teach her rudimentary self-defense after seeing a man drag his son away from the pool. While he does all this through his facade, it's clear that Sophie's presence saves him everyday without her even knowing the impact she has on his outlook on life.

Towards the end of the trip we are given a collection of direct glimpses into Calum's pain, the first occurring after a resort talent show. Unknown to Calum, Sophie had signed them up to sing. Calum tersely refuses, and Sophie is forced to sing by herself as he watches on. Upset at Calum for leaving her alone to perform, Sophie decides to spend the night down at the resort. Calum returns to the hotel room where he finds himself at his most vulnerable, allowing us to truly witness how damaged he is. He begins by rewatching footage from days prior, seemingly contemplating the impact he has had on his daughter during the trip so far. Slamming the camcorder shut, he quickly exits the room, refusing to face himself in the mirror while doing so. We see him walking down a street, picking up and smoking a used, but still lit, cigarette from off the road. Our first reaction is that he's looking for Sophie, hopefully to make amends and fix a broken night. However, we watch as he makes his way onto the deserted beach, dark and brooding, lit only partially by a nearby blue streetlamp. He steps briskly and confidently towards the water, stomping the sand in the process, but the camera does not follow. We stay on the shore, far from the unforgiving tide as he disappears into the darkness leaving us only with the sound of the crashing waves. Later in the night, we return to Sophie entering the hotel room with

the help of a bellhop where they find Calum naked, uncovered, and passed out on the bed. We aren't sure of how Calum got back, how long he stayed at the beach, or even what he did there. What we do know is that Calum's depression is far more severe than anyone may have suspected, and it's this perceived memory that allows Adult Sophie to paint a depiction of her father's condition.

The next day is Calum's birthday. He apologizes for the talent show and the two make up during a bus tour. Later in the afternoon, Sophie arranges the other tour members for a surprise rendition of "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow" in honor of Calum turning thirty-one. As they sing, the camera focuses on Calum's reaction, or lack thereof, from the perspective of the makeshift choir. Calum appears uncomfortable, not only because he's currently the center of attention but also because he can't fathom deserving such a performance especially from people he doesn't know. Sophie doesn't understand this non-expression on his face, but Adult Sophie realizes that it's his self-hatred that disallows him from enjoying any kind of appraisal from others. He remains unable to fake a smile and looks stoically down towards the crowd. As the song comes to a close, Calum becomes superimposed by a shot of him naked and sitting on the hotel bed, signaling he has just returned from the beach the night prior. We register only the back of his figure before we realize that he's crying. Slowly, his body begins to rock side to side in rhythm with the sobs. His cries grow raw as they turn from wistful weeping to guttural wails; he begins to choke on himself. He wishes to yell out for someone, anyone to save him, but he can't make any words out. Calum knows that he is doomed; that he is unable to save himself or the ones around him. The scene ends with a shot of letters addressed to Sophie strewn on the floor. The message is heartbreakingly simple:

Sophie,

I love you very much

never forget that.

Dad

We can assume that Calum never planned on returning from the aggressive waters, but either failed or pulled himself back at the last minute. This is why his cries seem more uncontrollable than natural, as well as why the room including himself is washed in a dark blue light, similar to the light that exposed the deserted beach. This little detail about that night makes a world of difference for Adult Sophie. She now understands that not only was her father depressed for a period including their trip, but he was already suicidal as well. In the context of the scene, the letter reads more as a suicide note than a normal letter, but it's unclear if these are letters that Sophie found at some point or if she is fabricating them. Regardless, it does more than enough to reveal to the viewer as well as Adult Sophie her father's intentions.

Later that evening, on the final night of the trip, Calum takes Sophie dancing to which she reluctantly agrees. Silhouetted by Queen and David Bowie's iconic "Under Pressure", Calum weaves in and out of the crowd as Sophie struggles to keep up. The scene is vibrantly joyful and we can feel the warmth emanating from both characters as they begin to share one last dance together. We are led to believe, and hope, that the dance is sure to form a happy memory for Sophie and that this could be a turning point for Calum's inner battle. However, the scene begins to interchange from the affectionate dance to a flashing rave, where we find Adult Sophie dazed and lost. Dark, frightening, and erratic, the rave reflects the obscurity that overtakes Sophie's relationship with her father. We watch as Adult Sophie struggles to reach Calum as he dances convulsively through a crowd. She begs him to stop but he can't hear her— no one can. The rave is a clear juxtaposition towards Sophie and Calum's last dance as both memories fight for control, begging for Adult Sophie to choose one or the other: remember her father in a naive, positive light, or relinquish him to a bleak conclusion but recognize him in full. The last dance is a bright, soft, and intimate goodbye where father and daughter are able to fully embrace each other, while the rave is brooding and intimidating, and not a place where one can stay for long. While Sophie has no trouble staying in Calum's embrace, Adult Sophie must fight her way through a bustling and flickering crowd until she finally grabs a hold of Calum in a manner that can only be deemed as

frantic, and violent. There is love, yes, but not the warm love she once had. Now, she has nothing left to give him other than a resentful, desperate love; a bastardized and perverted version of an innocent fondness. She pounds on his chest while he dances but he doesn't stop— at this point nothing can get him to stop for he is already gone. Finally yielding to her unmovable, unreachable father, Adult Sophie tries to take hold of him in one last embrace but he falls through her hands into a dark abyss. Unable to look away, we listen as the original version of “Under Pressure” becomes overtaken by Oliver Coate’s haunting score, and the once innocent song is now thrust into a harrowing light. We become fully aware of the lyrics as both versions of Sophie experience two very different goodbyes to their father:

Can't we give ourselves one more chance?

Why can't we give love that one more chance?

...

'Cause love's such an old-fashioned word

And love dares you

to care for

the people on the edge of the night

And love dares you

to change our way of

caring about ourselves

This is our last dance

This is our last dance

This is ourselves

As Sophie prepares to board her flight home, we watch through the camcorder from the perspective of her father. She takes her time, skipping behind walls and peeking around corners— all to Calum’s delight. Sophie waves goodbye to her father and the film suddenly freezes, signaling the end of the footage, at which point the camera pulls out to show that the recording has been playing on a television all along. Slowly, the camera pans in a circle revealing Adult Sophie’s apartment, where we find her on the couch with the plugged-in camcorder on her lap. She sits pensively, head resting on her fist staring at young Sophie who remains forever trapped within the digital recording. As the camera begins to turn back towards the television, we can see the wall morph back to the pale and once bustling airport terminal. We are left facing Calum, the camcorder still open, as he stands alone at the exit. He is expressionless; life has fully been drained out of him. There is no hope for him now. Once more washed in an exposing, pale blue light, he shuts the camcorder and turns toward the exit, refusing again to look up. The camera remains stationary as he makes his way through the doors where we can see flashes from the rave happening from within. Calum disappears inside and the doors swing by themselves until finally coming to a stop, ending the film.

Adult Sophie, prior to watching the home footage, clearly struggled with not only losing her father, but also feeling as though she never truly knew him. Even though the split between him and her mother made it so they rarely saw each other, she still considered him a special part of her life all throughout her childhood. Now, at the same age Calum had been during their trip and with a wife and child, we can see that his absence still haunts her in a manner not unlike a decrepit portrait, begging to be restored but the subject can no longer be found. Beyond his metaphysical impact, we can still see physical remnants of his life such as the expensive rug

that now rests on her bedroom floor. While the exact details beyond the footage are still unknown to her, she is comfortable accepting her fabricated memories as long as she is able to believe that Calum is no longer a mystery to her— that if she can grasp who he was, then she will be at peace. The fabrications allow her to step into her father's place and understand where things could've gone wrong for him. To understand him at his weakest, she needed to experience life from his perspective, even if it meant breaking positive memories she might've once cherished. Though she will continue to grieve for her father, she is now able to do so with the comfort of truly understanding him and his struggles.

Throughout the film, Adult Sophie is also hinted to wrestle with the same conflicts that plagued Calum. We recognize similarities between her and her father as she also sleeps restlessly, struggles to commemorate her birthday, and can only look onto the final frame of the footage with a stoic and detached stare. In fact, Adult Sophie does not speak once throughout the film, and the only time she attempts to do so we are unable to hear as she's overpowered by the rave. By making her an essentially mute character, Wells reduces Adult Sophie, like us, to a mere viewer regardless of her role in the story. It's too late for her to have a voice, and now she can only sit and watch. Deposed to silence, the experience for Adult Sophie is nothing if not deeply traumatizing. She was unsure of what she would find or who she would know her father to be afterwards. Though he may be nothing more than brittle bones now, the presence he absorbs in her mind remains tangibly debilitating. This is why she dared to embark on this journey— to free herself from the smoky apparition of her father and reconcile him once and for all, if only to begin to understand her own struggles. However, choosing to return to the trip meant she would have to embrace vulnerability, as the process calls for sacrificing the protection of unknowing. She could never come out of the process unscathed.

Nostalgia is a funny thing. We look to it for comfort, yet we often find ourselves feeling more empty than when we began. A prickly rose whose beauty draws us in with a feigning innocence, nostalgia proves difficult to yield. We are unable to realize this until the petals have wilted and we are already left bleeding but yet,

like an addiction, we return to grasp it time and time again. What are we looking to find? *What are we hoping will save us?* Looking to the past we yearn for a present truth. Just as Adult Sophie needed to understand her father to allow her to grieve and also understand herself, we also often need to look backwards in order to move forwards. Nostalgia offers us understanding at the expense of comfort. In deciding a balance between the two, we find ourselves at the mercy of recollection. Like most things in life, it asks us to be courageous in the face of past experiences, and promises a revelation in return; blinding or epiphanic.

Aftersun's extraordinary impact comes through its atmosphere. For a directorial debut, Wells does an incredible job of filling the story with moments that are allowed to speak for themselves. Whether it be a wordless shot of a paraglider reflecting the sun or hands from different pairs, almost touching yet ever so distant, these simple and intimate moments prove far more impactful than one might expect. Given time to breathe and grow, they allow for each of Sophie's memories to be fleshed out beyond a particular interaction, establishing a distinct ambience in the process. While they may not play directly into Calum or Sophie's characters, they allow us to better understand where Sophie's mind is and how she reacts to a certain remembrance. The result is a film that lingers far beyond the credits, far beyond the confines of the cinema, and far beyond recollection.