

# *Aftersun*: A small film widely celebrated

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In Charlotte Wells's film drama *Aftersun*, set in the early 2000s, a father and daughter spend a holiday at a resort in Turkey. Calum (Paul Mescal), just turning 31, is Scottish originally but now resides in London, Sophie (Frankie Corio), 11, lives with her mother in Edinburgh.

Mescal has been nominated for an Academy Award for best actor. The award ceremony takes place Sunday.

We see portions of the holiday in *Aftersun* on video recordings. Everyday, ordinary things predominate during the course of the week: swimming, eating, playing games in the arcade, dancing, karaoke, tourist activities.

Things are never quite right, although the pair try their best. In one of the first scenes, Calum phones the front desk to complain that while he booked a room with two beds, there is only one in the room. He seems dispirited, semi-defeated throughout. He has mysterious injuries, a broken wrist (in a cast he eventually removes), a painful shoulder that he can't explain.

Calum has money issues apparently, although he tries to hide it from his daughter. When she loses an underwater mask, it obviously irks him. Another time, he offers to get her singing lessons, "if you wanted to learn." "Stop doing that," she says, "Offering to pay when you don't have the money."

We see him standing precariously on a hotel railing, walking into the waves at night. In one scene, when Calum's alone in the hotel room, he sobs.

Vicariously, Sophie watches a group of teenagers, drinking too much, gossiping, talking about sex. She eventually kisses a boy her own age, during an evening when she and Calum lose each other for a few hours.

Father and daughter are not in their own country, but Calum in particular feels out of place everywhere. Asked by Sophie whether he will ever move back to Scotland, he replies, "No. ... It's all in the past for me, that's all. And there's this feeling, once you leave

where you grew up, that you don't totally belong there again. Not really. But Edinburgh was never ... I never felt like I really did belong there."

To a certain extent, he's out of place, out of sorts, out of energy. He has self-help books, and books on meditation and Tai Chi. Twice in the film, Sophie asks her father, "When you were 11, what did you think you would be doing now?" The question clearly disturbs and upsets him. The second time, he refuses to answer and, irritated, makes her turn off the camera. When a local diving instructor tells Calum he's going to have a baby soon, the latter can only respond with: "Congratulations! A few years ago I thought I'd be at least 40 before all that, but ... I can't see myself at 40, to be honest. Surprised I made it to 30."

Life has been some sort of disappointment to Calum. A relationship with a woman named Claire, who Sophie admits to having liked, has not worked out. She "got back together" with a former boyfriend. "So does that mean you're not gonna open the caf?" Sophie asks. "No, not anymore." He has a vague plan, which we suspect will not work out either. "I got this new thing going with Keith." "What is it?" "We're still figuring it out exactly. But we're thinking of renting a house outside of London for work."

What Sophie indicates about her mood one afternoon, seems to be Calum's perpetual state, as we see on his face as she describes the mental state: "I just feel a bit down or something. ... Don't you ever feel like you've just done a whole amazing day, and then you come home and feel tired and down, and feel like your bones don't work? They're just tired and everything is tired. Like you're sinking."

At a karaoke night, Calum refuses to sing with Sophie. She performs, tunelessly, "Losing My Religion" by R.E.M. The lyrics, "That's me in the corner / That's

me in the spot-light / Losing my religion,” and her rendition suggests disillusionment, even some bitterness.

Calum tries a number of times to boost his own and Sophie’s spirits. “We’re here to have a good time,” he reminds them both. Another morning, he gets to his feet, with some difficulty, “Let’s do something, eh? Get this day going.” They do enjoy themselves in fits and starts. It’s not clear that anyone at the resort is carefree. The amusement often seems forced. The hotel guests, the teenagers, through no fault of their own, are rather vulgar; the events, the surroundings, tawdry.

The location shown to be an exception is a local carpet merchant’s. The small, windowless space is dark and quiet, with beautiful rugs and carpets taking up the floors and walls. Calum tells Sophie: “The man was telling me that each of these carpets tell a different story. The symbolism, the motifs, they represent different things.” The merchant brings them tea. The carpet Calum would like is expensive. Later, without Sophie, he returns to buy it. Alone in one of the shop’s rooms, he lies down and luxuriates on the carpet. Here is something authentic, gorgeous, comforting, artistic. Unlike everything else at the hotel and resort, unlike everything else in Calum’s life.

The ending suggests that Sophie will not see her father again, for unknown reasons. He has revealed suicidal tendencies or thoughts. As an adult, with a child of her own, Sophie watches the video of the holiday two decades earlier with some anxiety.

The film is small, discreet, intimate, a little coy—at times, a bit self-involved and inward-turning. The somewhat self-conscious insistence on the lack of great drama can be tedious at times. The narrow approach may also, unfortunately, help account for the great success of Wells’s work with the critics.

*Aftersun*, however, because it provides an honest picture does suggest broader things as well, whether Wells is fully conscious of it or not. The film hints at the state of British society in the post-Thatcher and Blair period. It points to a social malaise, a traditional society seriously traumatized, disoriented, off-kilter, even for those not impoverished or economically devastated. It suggests a generalized dispiritedness, depression, unease, loss of purpose. As such, of course, it’s a limited depiction, but one with affecting features and implications.



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