

Out of Hours Film

THE CLOSER WE GET

Written and Directed by Karen Guthrie
Director of Photography Nina Pope

On UK general release, certificate PG

'You can choose your friends but you can't choose your family.'

As sayings go, it's one my mother has always been fond of quoting, normally when an aunt or a cousin does something particularly sociopathic.

It's also a painful, unspoken truth that lies at the heart of artist and filmmaker Karen Guthrie's *The Closer We Get*, a documentary portrait of her family that begins almost as a study of Guthrie's mother Ann's experience of stroke and how it affects the family before twisting away into less familiar territory, becoming an investigation of the paradox that is her glibly charming father Ian.

When a massive stroke leaves Ann paralysed and wheelchair-bound, her artist daughter Karen returns to her childhood hometown Largs to care for her mother only to find that her father Ian, who years before walked out on his wife, has moved back into the family home and has appointed himself primary caregiver to his estranged former spouse.

Stubborn, pig-headed, and insensitive, Ian is an infuriating and fascinating character

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as capable of great acts of kindness as he is thoughtless selfishness. Guthrie's film peels back the layers of his relationships with her, his ex-wife, and the rest of the family over 40 years that saw him raise a family with Ann before abandoning the safety of the comfortable middle-class life he'd built for a middle-aged adventure as an engineer working in the Horn of Africa. In that time he had also fathered a mixed-race son, Campbell, whose existence he kept secret from his Scottish family for 5 years before nonchalantly introducing him by rather insensitively bringing the boy home with him on holiday.

Genial and funny, Ian is an impulsive, self-entitled whirlwind, wreaking quiet havoc on his family, completely unaware of the emotional devastation he leaves in

his wake, his true intentions ultimately unknowable even to him. Guthrie's film, although obviously an act of catharsis for the director and the family, never judges him but also never quite gets to the bottom of what makes him tick. Now in her 40s and a successful artist and film director, Guthrie is still the little girl wondering if her father will be coming home. But can a child ever truly know their parent?

Unfolding more like a detective mystery as Guthrie digs ever deeper into her parents' relationship and reminiscent of Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell*, *The Closer We Get* is a quietly shattering, ultimately hopeful portrait of redemptive love.

David Watson,

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Karen and her father Ian. Photograph by N. Pope.

