

Extract taken from the start of 'But for Herr Hitler'

Iris got her name from a great aunt, whose phone was tapped during the Red Scare. Agents took pictures of the house through gaps in the fence. Great Aunt Iris spoke pig Latin on the phone and buried cigar boxes under the cabbage and spinach.

“They get salary,” she said to her namesake later. “So they must vork for it.”

Iris thought the name was old-fashioned. Eric liked old-fashioned. “Iris, yes, Iris.” They met on opposite sides of a bowl of peanuts. She said he looked familiar. She liked his crew cut, his right arm without a hand, and the smell of his earlobe when she leaned in, speaking into him over the crowd. Iris set his hook on the bar by her beer. A punk band played over his shoulder. He watched her eyes drift from bass to drummer. She rolled his sleeve back to the bicep, revealing a Norse god blurred at the edges.

“Thor,” Eric said.

“You’re kidding,” Iris said, and crossed her fishnet legs.

“Gods are handy,” he said. “If he comes in, I’ll introduce you.”

“Where’d the hand go?” she said.

“Some raghead’s got it,” Eric said.

They fucked the first night in her little blue car, yes yes, whatever you want—his hand on her inner thigh, her finger on his defenselessness. She climbed on top.

“What are you?” he said. “You’re perfect.”

She gazed out the back seat window. The alley, lit by a security spotlight, was only average filthy, beer-can scent and rotting fish. Puget Sound sloshed between buildings. The dumpster was empty. The garbage strike was finally over.

“Let’s run away,” she said. “To some big shiny life.”

He crawled out from under.

“A big life,” he said. “Someplace big.”

His father had said, *Think big or stay home*, one then another apartment in the projects.

She got pregnant the third or fourth time.

The car had dents in the fender, cracked and wilting wiper blades.

“I couldn’t find the pills,” she said.

He took the key. He slid into the driver’s side. The car had come to her when Great Aunt Iris died. “She refused to eat,” Iris told him. “She pushed the tray of mashed potatoes off the bed, shook her head sorry for the mess, asked for her stash of pills from her political days. Tried to tell me with her eyes where the pills were.”

“I want land,” he said. “Lots of it.”

“Fine,” she said.

“The smell of pine.”

“Wonderful.”

She strapped the seat belt over her belly, pulled the visor to block the sun. They left Seattle.

“We’ll buy it from an old man with whiskers,” he said. “Shotgun on the porch, dogs in the yard.”

She petted the bristles on his neck. “Just get me out of here.”

The road crossed into Canada, cut through a thousand miles of mountains, then a thousand more of marshy flat, a continent of black spruce. Her earrings hung to her clavicles. They swung at ruts, knocked her jawbone.

Dead bugs slicked the windshield. They stopped at creeks to scrub the glass. “I want a hot tub,” she said, knee-deep in ferns. “I want sliding doors to the patio.”

“You will be a queen,” he said.

They crossed out of Canada at Beaver Creek, which consisted of low, scanty prefab clusters. Border City was smaller. A gas pump and an American flag. The road was potholes and humps with washed-out places. The land was too wide for cameras. Signs on gravel roads pointed to national parks she'd never heard of. They passed log cabins and stick-frame houses with airstrips and small planes in driveways. They passed Moose Creeks, Bear Creeks, Bad Luck Rivers. They passed teepee gift shops with split-rail fences and twenty-foot chiefs standing with hatchets, warpath feathers, and painted foreheads, cheeks, and noses—gold, white, and blue—their right hands raised in peace signs.

She sniffed the big sky stretching to the far-off mountains. "I don't smell anything."

Telephone poles were very thin men walking in line.

Trees were trees. Trees. Trees.

"Who could live in all this *nothing*?" she said.

"The pioneers," he said.

The tire blew at Tok. She handed him a lug wrench. He lay on the shoulder. They rolled the tire to the liquor store, past a double-wide church, a hardware store, and a tiny pet shop CLOSED FOR THE SEASON. They shared a bottle of rum on the step. An Athabaskan boy patched the puncture. He was slow to speak, to answer questions.

"I don't think he likes us," Iris said, sipping backwash.

Eric spat at the gravel between his boots. "Why would he?"

They'd heard land was two hundred an acre near Delta. They borrowed the money from Iris's mother. "We'll pay back every penny."

They bought eighty acres with a butte at half price. Iris wanted the butte for the view.

"An impossible driveway," the realtor warned, but he'd come from California.

Eric bought dynamite. On weekends, he rented a pile driver and bored holes, set fuses behind boulders. A neighbor came with a Bobcat and cleared the rubble. "No better reason

for a party,” he said and slapped the backs of new arrivals. Others brought shovels and earplugs. They sat on tailgates, muddy boots dangling.

More people arrived. Blasting rock walls for new roads seemed the best kind of entertainment. Iris stood on the double-yellow lines with the other onlookers. They all knew each other. There were few cars, but the cars that came flashed their brights, slowed, and asked Iris her due date.

One neighbor woman came on foot, appeared through the trees, up the trail from the glacier. Her kids followed, scattered.

“Blast away,” the woman said. “Welcome to the neighborhood.”

Trucks pulled in. Engines ticked and cooled. Evening was blue, full of blast dust.

“Need a hand?” someone called.

Eric waved his hook. She’d never seen him laugh like that.

“My advice,” said the woman, pointing at Iris’s belly. “School that baby at home. No one comes to Alaska for other people’s opinions. Learn to love moose and salmon.”

The woman slugged Coke from a two-liter bottle. She swatted her kids when they begged for a sip. The sun was pink well after dinnertime. Scorched leaves, pulverized rock, sweat, bug spray, a whiff of sulfur. It was still midsummer, but new snow dusted the peaks and saddles.

“You like it here yet?” the woman said.

“I hate bugs,” Iris said.

“Too bad for you,” said the woman.

“We’re living in a tent,” Iris said.

“Everyone starts in a tent.”

The woman offered Coke, and Iris drank some. When parts of the wall exploded, the noise echoed off distant cliffs. Men leaped and laughed in the showers of dust.

“All the quiet’s the hardest getting used to,” said the woman. “And if you don’t like trees, best divorce him now.”

“I like trees,” Iris said.

A trooper rolled by. Men leaned in his window, played with his radio.

“Dark winters,” the woman said. “Some people blow their brains out. Drink.”

“I don’t mind the dark,” Iris said. “We get along.”

“Don’t get fat,” said the woman. “Don’t get ugly.”

They swatted mosquitoes. They sat in lawn chairs at midnight. The sun rolled across serrated peaks. Kids leaned under hoods in headlights. They poured jugs of water on steaming engines. They threw snowballs from patches left in ditches. Eric in the middle of everything, pointing and directing—taller than ever before, she thought.

They were drinking coffee at six. Someone had brought a potful from the lodge. The woman was counting kids, finally heading home. A happy, tired family.

“Why in hell do you live here?” Iris said.

“Come see my glacier,” said the woman.

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