

Little Girls,
BIG Dreams



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Iris Apfel



The Barrels were a Jewish family from New York who had an only child: Iris. From an early age, Iris loved fabrics. She watched her mother work magic with accessories and scarves every day.



Iris' grandmother kept dozens of bags full of the most wonderful treasures: little scraps of fabrics in all shapes, colours and patterns. Iris spent long evenings playing with them, picking her favourites to take home.



When teenage Iris got money from her mother to buy an outfit, she was in her element. Finding the perfect dress for her wardrobe was fun, but doing it at the right price was even better. With the money left, she could also have lunch!



One day, while studying art history at New York University, a lady told Iris something phenomenal. “Young lady, you are not pretty, and you may never be pretty. But you have something much more important: you have style.”



But Iris never dressed to be stared at – she dressed to express herself. Sometimes, getting ready for a party was more fun than being at the party itself. There was a sense of wonder and excitement in every outfit she created.



Her first job was an assistant to an interior designer. Soon, Iris stepped out on her own as a decorator. She loved searching for materials and figuring out how they would look in her clients' homes.



When Iris met Carl, it took her an hour to realise that, together, every day was a holiday. He always celebrated his wife's success, and they shared the same sense of humour – the secret ingredient for long-lasting happiness.



They opened a boutique that became known for its unique materials and beautiful textiles. After dressing the home of nine presidents at the White House – everyone called Iris “The First Lady of Fabric”.



Iris and Carl travelled the world looking for something extraordinary. They knew it could be found anywhere, hidden in a busy Moroccan market or in a fashion studio in Milan.



Wherever they went,
Iris always found a new
piece to add to her
wardrobe.



After 60 years of collecting flea market finds and mixing them with high fashion, Iris' wardrobe had become the most extraordinary collection of clothes. She was 84 when The Metropolitan Museum of Art asked her to display it.



When the exhibition opened, the public fell in love with those outfits and the accessories – and the woman who dared to wear them. Suddenly, Iris was a global fashion icon! She became the star of a documentary, and made it to the cover of the best fashion magazines.



She even wrote a book about her life. And of course she found time to celebrate her 90th birthday as the new face of a make-up company.



And the being the rarest bird in the world of fashion, little Iris showed the world just how fun and wonderful life can be when you let yourself shine.



Born 1921



Born in Astoria, New York, little Iris Barrel arrived to Samuel and his Russian born wife, Sadye. Her parents owned a fashion boutique and glass-and-mirror business, and Iris grew up close to her grandparents, who fed her passion for style.



Riding the subway for just a nickel, she explored New York, falling in love with the eccentricities of the city's street style. She studied art history at New York University and attended art school at the University of Wisconsin.



As a young woman, Iris worked for Women's Wear Daily – a fashion magazine – as well as for interior designer, Elinor Johnson and illustrator Robert Goodman.



Iris met her husband Carl Apfel when she was 27, and soon afterwards launched their textile firm, Old World Weavers. There, she took part in major restoration projects, including work at The White House.



Throughout the life of their business, Iris and Carl travelled the world, buying pieces of unusual textiles and handmade clothes, sometimes from tiny communities in remote villages. Back in New York, she wore these pieces to high society parties and fashion events, expressing her love for world culture.



But although she was well-loved in New York circles, it was a call from the curator at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2005 that propelled Iris to the world stage. Aged 84, Iris' wardrobe went on display in an exhibition for everyone to see: hundreds of necklaces, jackets, dresses and shoes.



The show was styled by Iris, and people fell in love with her personality – and her wacky combinations. Almost overnight, Iris' star grew to be one that the world could learn from: how to have fun, be good to others and express yourself, whatever your age.





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