

Claire Facing North - Synopsis
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Logline

Claire returns to Iceland on a solo trip intending to confront her past and tend to a difficult task. There she meets Iris, a young, irreverent, somewhat irresponsible hitchhiker, and together they forge a bond neither will soon forget.

Long Synopsis

The film opens before dawn with a spirit gliding over several ruggedly beautiful Icelandic landscapes: A waterfall barely perceptible in the dark, sheep stand silently in a field shrouded in deep blue light, erupting lava churns and flows down a dark mountainside, ocean waves rhythmically lap against the sand, and an abandoned airplane rests alone on a black sand beach against daybreak. Claire sits quietly in her well-appointed living room, a small white box on the couch next to her; she peruses old photographs of her youthful travels and of her daughter, Catherine. An airplane passes overhead.

Claire hikes up an Icelandic mountainside, revealing determination and physical ability much younger than her actual age. As she rests at the apex, taking in the sublime landscape, we get the sense that all is not well in Claire's world. Later, she drives through the Icelandic landscape, passing beautiful black-sand deltas and green, water-drenched hillsides; the landscape provides her with a sense of security and serenity that is rare in her life at this time. Suddenly, she notices a young woman hitchhiking by the side of the road. Claire reluctantly pulls over to pick her up.

Iris introduces herself as an 18-year-old on her way to Scotland. Claire is dubious about her claimed age but not willing to engage with her. Claire is tight-lipped to the point of being unfriendly, and Iris is glib and inauthentic; each woman carries secrets and lies that neither is willing to reveal to the other. As they travel through the rugged and sublime Icelandic landscape, they learn more about one another and a fragile trust begins to grow between them.

Feeling a growing responsibility for this young stranger, Claire ultimately offers to take her to the ferry landing on the other side of the island so she can continue her travels to Europe. At the last moment, Claire turns off the road toward the Hverir mud pools, a location she visited decades earlier as a young woman. There she reveals to Iris that her daughter, Catherine, had recently committed suicide and her purpose for being in Iceland is to spread her daughter's ashes in the place she was conceived. Stunned by her story, Iris feels compassion for Claire. As they return on their journey to the ferry landing, they stop on the side of the road for a break. There Claire confronts Iris about lying about her age. Claire has calculated that Iris is about 10 years older than she claims. Iris is embarrassed and angry, and with their nascent mutual trust ruptured, she demands her belongings from the car. Iris storms off into the distance, leaving Claire alone.

Floating alone on a raft in a desolate iceberg lake, Claire resolves to finish the task that brought her to Iceland. As dawn breaks the next morning, she hikes far into the black sand field, returning to the decayed carcass of the crashed plane where Catherine was conceived decades earlier. As Claire reaches the airplane, we learn that she conceived Catherine with Magnus, a young man from the Faroe Islands whom she barely knew. Her emotional return to the site of Catherine's conception allows Claire to complete her journey to Iceland. Sometimes, letting go means going back.