

## The Ends of the Earth

Line felt Christopher's little hand on her shoulder and woke up, late, as usual. All she could see out the window was the grey sky, as thick fog lay banked over the city.

"Good morning Christy," said Line.

"Morning," said Christopher. "Milk," he said simply, standing there in his little cotton shirt and night-time diaper.

Line smiled. "Okay, come on," she said. Christopher was too little to open the refrigerator, though he did try to climb on chairs and get the cereal in the cupboard. Line stretched and wrapped a blanket around her shoulders as she went out to the kitchen. Her bare feet were chilled on the wooden floor.

The presence of sleeping people could be felt all over the house. It was Saturday and, when Line came in from work the night before, Marty, Erik and their guests were still smoking and drinking, talking, a Bob Dylan record playing in the front room, Christopher asleep on the mattress in Line's room. In the bathroom Line had smelled a sickly sweet, burnt smell, as if someone had been cooking something.

Two mud-encrusted 10-speed bikes rested along the walls in the hall with pannier bags disheveled and open. Their owners, a brother and sister, had ridden clear across the country from New York State. Line had opened the door to them the day before. She was impressed at how quiet they were, both in body and language. Spent and silent, they introduced themselves as Erik's friends and asked for water.

Line did not even want to ask them questions. All those days of riding, even over the mountains. She left them to spread out in the front room, packed up Christopher and went to work as she normally did.

The big unfurnished house creaked and echoed in the cold July fog. Line sat at the wooden table in the center of the spacious kitchen, drinking coffee and eating toast as Christopher downed bowl after bowl of cereal and milk. She had found a health food store nearby, and Christopher's cereal was mostly oats, raisins and other toasted grains. No sugar in it at all.

Line often wondered why rooms felt cold and melancholy when it was foggy, even when they were inhabited. Eerie mumbling and voices preceded Richard and Rosalyn as they entered the kitchen. "Coffee?" Line asked the two athletic, wind and sun-burned people who loomed over her. She stood up and turned on the gas below the teakettle.

In a moment, Marty was there, in thick socks and a long quilted robe, now ragged at the sleeves, threads hanging off it where the quilting was separating. Bright and smiley, she took over making coffee and put slices of slices of wheatberry bread in the toaster for the guests. Line retreated, listening.

"We are going to run out to the coast today," said Rosalyn, smiling. "Sort of finish the ocean to ocean ride."

"It's only a couple of miles away," said Marty.

"I don't want to stop riding," Rosalyn said. "It's like I don't know anything else!"

"There's the concert tomorrow," said Richard. There were free rock concerts every Sunday in Golden Gate Park. Line didn't pay much attention to them.

"Yeah!" Marty appeared to be excited by this, but Line knew she would probably get a headache. Marty got sick migraine headaches so bad she had to retreat to a dark room until they subsided. Marty associated them with sunlight, but there were other reasons too. Line felt apprehensive.

"I'll be working tonight," Line said looking at Marty. She did not have to say what she was thinking.

"Don't worry," said Marty. "I'm not going anywhere today. We'll be fine, won't we Christopher," she said, hugging him. "Other people can go to the grocery store."

"Good," said Line. "Thank you, Marty." She liked some of the people who turned up, but not all of them. Richard and Rosalyn were good people.

Stephen called that morning. "I'm in Santa Cruz!" he said. "Finally!" His mother had died and he was scouting a place to live before beginning his doctoral program at the University that fall.

"Oh?" asked Line.

"Just let me get settled and I'll come and see you."

"Come and see me?" Line shook her head and hung up the phone. When Stephen called back immediately, she did not answer. It was hard to explain even to herself the depth of her unhappiness about the limbo she was in because of Stephen. She both longed for him and had a black anger toward him that she was afraid to bring to the surface. She also thought of Bill, the gardener who had taken a shine to her. She could hardly go to the arboretum any more without him turning up in his green uniform. It was all such a mess.

That night when Line got home from work, she was appalled to find a man sitting at the kitchen table with two large pearl-handled pistols in front of him. Erik sat across from him, lazily slouched in his chair, as if he were very relaxed, the essence of cool. Marty stood to one side under the lamp over the stove, watching, an expression of mixed pride and fear on her face. Erik reached up and ran his hands through his thick, blonde hair, calming himself.

"This is Javier," said Marty, who seemed hypnotized. "He came to see Erik." But then she looked guilty and came over to Line. "Christopher's been in bed for an hour," she said low.

The man was attractive, with a thick dark mustache and dark eyebrows in a handsome face. He stood up, gallantly bowing to Line. "I must go," he said in a thick Hispanic accent, wrapping the six-guns in cloth and putting them in a leather shoulder pack. "I came to introduce myself to Senor Erik, whom I've heard about. A fine man."

Erik stood up and followed Javier out the front door.

"He wanted to talk 'business,' he said," whispered Marty to Line.

"I'm not staying here," said Line sharply. "It's no place for a kid." Marty looked guilty, but she did not reply.

Line went down the hall to her bedroom, and there, indeed was Christopher, his little chest rising and falling as he breathed. She put her head down on the pillow beside him and wept.

The next morning she called the phone number in Alaska Paul had given them for emergencies. He didn't have his own phone, but he lived in a cabin near a family who had one.

"Paul's out in the bush, doing carpentry," said the woman who answered the phone. "But we can put your message out on the radio, the bush telegraph." She laughed warmly. "He'll probably come straight home when he hears you're in Fairbanks. His cabin is empty this summer," she said. "I'm Carol. I would love to meet Paul's sister!"

Line was heartened by the lovely, rich voice. "I'll call again when I get my plane ticket," she said. "Thank you so much!"

While everyone else was in the park, singing and dancing, she began packing her few things together. On Monday morning, she left a message for her supervisor at the hospital

saying that she had to leave and wasn't sure when she'd be coming back. She took Christopher with her to a travel agent and bought an airplane ticket to Fairbanks.

Erik and Marty drove them to the airport. Marty wore a long face. "I'm sorry, Line," she said, hugging Line goodbye.

"Don't worry, Marty," said Line, looking steadily at her with love. "Nothing works forever. You have helped us so much." She was feeling lighthearted by this time, ready for the new. Christopher's big eyes followed the huge planes moving beyond the glass windows of the airport lounge. "Airplanes," said Line. "We're going to fly in an airplane to see Paul. Remember Paul?"

Erik knelt down, his face next to Christopher. "No hard feelings, little man," he said. "See you soon."

"I'll miss you, Christy," said Marty, gathering him in her arms and lifting him up. "You're getting so heavy!" she said as she handed him to Line, moisture in her eyes.

"Remember how we said goodbye to Paul just a year ago?" asked Line. Christopher was almost too big to put on her hip any more.

"Wow," said Marty. "It doesn't feel that long ago!"

Line carried Christopher toward the exit door and waved to Erik, who touched two fingers to his forehead in salute, and Marty, whose face was as sad as if they were leaving forever.

Line wasn't sad. She was excited. Alaska, the land of the midnight sun. It was probably warmer there than in San Francisco.

Line's eyes were glued to the window as she sat with Christopher sleeping in her lap. Far below were islands, the sea, tiny towns. As the plane lowered itself into Fairbanks, Line saw snow-covered mountains on every side. Fairbanks looked tiny, strung out along a wide river. But it was indeed warm when Line and Christopher walked down the steps and across the tarmac to the low, ugly airport.

Line spotted Paul's ruddy face coming toward them. A quizzical smile split his face, embedded in shaggy hair and beard. "What are you doing here?" he asked the mystified little boy, lifting him up.

"I don't know," said Christopher.

Paul laughed. "You will soon! You're putting your foot in it, Christopher, and no mistake!" He chortled.

"Is it okay?" asked Line. She had never been able to speak to Paul. "Is it okay that we came?" She reached up to hug his weathered soul. He had an odd, fragrant smell. But Line was impressed at how confidently he moved.

"Sure!" said Paul. "But we'll put you to work. There's so much to do in the summer, because now there's enough light. I have to get back tomorrow. I left the tractor at the rail stop, and I'm hoping you'll come. There are a couple of kids out there, where I'm working. Five and three. I think Christopher will love it."

"Wow!" said Line. "Kids! And I can help?"

"You're not a-kidding," said Paul. "We'll go shopping tonight, stay at my cabin and then take the Peddler out early tomorrow morning. It's a freight train. It was kind of convenient I came in. We needed cement, and I've got a grocery list too."

They waited until Line's poor taped-together suitcase was unloaded from the hold of the plane, and then walked over to where the old green Mikkelson station wagon was parked. Line was amazed. "It still runs?" she asked.

"She was in hibernation all winter," said Paul. "But she does run."

Fairbanks looked flat, spread out and ugly, compared to the packed together tall buildings of San Francisco with its lush parks, hills and ocean views. Paul stopped first at a lumberyard and hefted two 50-pound bags of cement into the back of the station wagon. At the grocery store, Line noticed how expensive everything was. She wished she had thought to bring food. The vegetables looked small and bruised. Paul bought flour, graham crackers, rice, steel cut oats, a bag of onions, raisins and chocolate.

“There’s plenty of green stuff in the woods, if you know what you’re doing,” Paul said. “Little did I know Euell Gibbons would one day serve me in good stead!” he laughed.

Paul moved fast and decisively, while Line felt bewildered. She yawned. According to the clock over the checkout stands, it was 10 p.m. but it looked like late afternoon. “The stores stay open this late?” she asked. There were few people in the store.

“Everything stays open!” said Paul. “Trying to make hay while the sun shines. There’s a sense of urgency in the summer. Sheila’s getting berry fever, she says! You’ll probably have to pick berries for jam and syrup. My friends will be out there, living in their cabins all winter, depending on that syrup!”

“And you’ll be here?” asked Line. “Teaching?”

“Yup,” said Paul. “How long are you staying?” He lifted Christopher up in his strong arms. “Are you a good berry picker?” he asked. Christopher was all eyes. He appeared to love Paul, patting his beard to see what was under it.

Line looked crestfallen. She had come without a plan. None at all. “I really don’t know, Paul,” she said. “I don’t know what I’m doing. It’s crazy at Marty’s place, people, drugs, music. It wasn’t good for us, though I love San Francisco. I guess I just thought I would hang out for the summer, take a break, see what happens.”

“That’s fine!” said Paul. “There are so many people our age around. It’s exciting! But everyone’s short of cash, helping each other out. Maybe you could fish. No one even has time, and we’d love some fish to eat.”

“Great,” said Line. “It sounds great.”

Paul’s cabin smelled musty, shut up in the heat and damp of the summer. Line carried Christopher in and laid him on the bed. He was probably hungry, but she didn’t want to wake him.

“I wonder how my fox is doing,” said Paul. “There’s a red fox who hung around all winter. I hope he stays.” He started a fire in the wood stove. “I just want to dry the place out,” he said, opening all the doors and windows.

It was a small log room with the stove, a table, shelves for a few dishes and books and the single bed against the wall. “You can have the bed,” said Paul as he fed sticks into the iron belly. “I’m used to the floor now. I set my tent up on the floor of one of the unfinished cabins in the bush, as a mosquito net! But it is kind of small.”

Line gave him an anguished sigh. “Paul! I’m completely unprepared! I just didn’t think!” She looked out the window at the purple twilight finally settling over the night.

“Don’t worry,” said Paul. “We’ll figure it out. I’ll bet Arvi has a tent we can borrow, and sleeping bags. That’s all you need. I hope they’re still up!”

Paul carried the sleeping Christopher in his arms and they walked over to a neighboring cabin which was much bigger and more spread out.

At a spacious wooden table, kids were eating popcorn and drinking a cool drink Carol had made from wild rose hips, leaves and petals. Line was surprised at how good it tasted. The room was dry and fragrant with the smell of the fruit jam Carol’s oldest daughter was cooking.

“The hips we’re drinking are from last year,” said Carol. “Wild roses are in bloom right now. It’s beginning to be berry time,” she said. “Dina’s making crowberry jam. The crowberries are the first to come out. They’re a little like a blueberry, but they’re not good raw, kind of bitter and tannic tasting. Their flavor really comes out when they’re cooked!” She turned to Dina. “Give Line a taste.” Dina dipped a spoon into the boiling liquid and handed it to Line, who held it out to cool.

“There are some poisonous berries,” said Arvi. “Any white berries. If you’re going berry picking, make sure somewhat shows you what to pick! Paul’s pretty good. He can spot a mushroom at 50 feet!”

“Also bears,” said Carol. “Bears are after berries just like you!”

“Bears?!” said Line. She looked at Christopher, who was stuffing popcorn in his mouth. She licked the hot spoon of jam. The taste was a little like blueberries, but Dina had put cinnamon and honey in the mix.

“Plenty of berries to go around,” said Arvi. “You seen any bears in your area, Paul?”

“We do have one, that we know of,” said Paul. “I saw him once from a distance.” He looked at Line. “Don’t worry. They don’t see us as food,” he said. “They’re just like us, wanting to fatten up for the winter. And they do like berries.”

In a crowded storage area, Arvi found an army surplus tent for Line and sleeping bags. “Nobody ever throws anything away out here,” he said. “It all comes in handy sometime.”

“Thank you so much,” said Line. Christopher was falling asleep in her arms.

“You’re welcome,” said Arvi. “One thing we’ve learned from the Eskimo: Property doesn’t mean much. They don’t worry about it at all. If someone needs something, it’s theirs.”

“Some of us are learning that,” said Paul, smiling. “I know quite a few people who aren’t!” He and Arvi exchanged knowing glances.

The night felt short to Line. In the morning, clouds and fog obscured the mountains. Paul drove the few miles into Fairbanks and stopped to pick up his friend Brian.

“So this is your sister!” said Brian. “Paul’s told us a lot about you!” Brian would drive the station wagon to his place and park it until Paul returned.

On the train, they loaded everything Paul had picked up into a box car. Only one railroad car had seats in it for people. Line and Christopher pressed their noses to the glass as the train wound through the misty mountains, the forests, along rivers through intermittent rain.

Paul was euphoric nevertheless. “I love this run!” he said. “I’d love to be a train man, if I weren’t teaching.” He was eating a peanut butter sandwich, just as Line had when coming across country from Chicago to San Francisco.

“How’s teaching?” asked Line.

“It’s getting there,” said Paul, evenly. “I think next year will be better than last.”

At the flag stop, they loaded everything into a wagon at the back of the tractor, covering it with a dirty blue tarp. “I’m worried about the cement,” said Paul. “I don’t want it to get it too wet. You can sit under the tarp if you want to.”

Line looked at him as if he were crazy. “What do you think Christy,” she asked. “Do you like the rain?”

“Rain, rain!” said Christopher, looking up at the sky. It was just misting, but dark clouds hung around the mountains to the west.

“That’s the Alaska Range,” said Paul, following their eyes. “Mt. McKinley towers above our lake. It’ll be out one of these days, and you’ll see it in all of its majesty. Denali, the Indians call it. The great one.”

“We’re fine,” said Line. She sat on the hump of cement bag under the tarp, holding her son.

“This is the worst part,” said Paul. “There’s no road, so we’re going to go right through the bush. I have to go slowly. It’ll take a few hours, even though we’re only going eleven miles.”

Line twisted and turned with the load as they wended their way over roots, fallen logs, boggy places. It was like riding a horse. There seemed to be a track Paul was following, but it was hard to tell. The engine ground along so loud Line couldn’t hear much else.

The rain squalled, coming down harder, but it didn’t bother Christy. He opened his mouth, trying to catch raindrops and so did Line! When it stopped, their hair was plastered against their heads. Line shivered, but it wasn’t terribly cold.

They stopped for a snack in an open meadow. Paul dug up a salami and cut chunks off it. The woods didn’t look too different from what Line was used to near Lake Michigami, witchy looking spruces, birch and poplar, but the lower plants were unfamiliar.

“That’s your crowberry right there,” said Paul pointing to a plant with evergreen-like leaves. “That’s fireweed. It changes color all summer. And that’s cotton grass. Lots of different kinds.”

It was still as they sat. All they could hear was the dripping of water off the leaves. All of a sudden Paul pointed silently. In the misty distance was a large moose, its great flared antlers opened toward them.

“It’s a moose,” said Paul to Christopher. “Moose.”

“That’s a lot of antler,” said Line, looking at the breadth of the rack on the animal. “How do they sleep with all that on their heads?”

Paul laughed. “Good question! But, according to observers, they lie on their sides and let one antler touch the ground.” The moose was moving along the trees at the edge of the open space. “The antlers drop off every year. Moose need to eat a lot of vegetation!”

Slowly the moose disappeared into trees. “What a majestic animal!” said Line. None of them could take their eyes off it. The moose animated the terrain.

They hadn’t seen many animals. Mostly the track wound through thick brush and trees. Line felt drier when they got back in the wagon and Paul started up the engine again.

At last they arrived at a collection of cabins near the edge of a lake. It was late afternoon and the weather was clearing, though the forest dripped with moisture. Line smelled meat cooking as Paul directed her into a large cabin, carrying groceries.

“Hey!” said a woman with warm, enveloping arms. “I can’t believe you came all this way,” she said. She looked to be about the same age as Line.

Line was sore and happy not to be moving. “I’m so glad to be here!” she said.

“We usually cook together,” said Sheila. “It’s just more fun when everyone’s working so hard. Bonnie and Ed have their own cabin, but tonight I’m cooking for everyone.” She stood beside an amazing old wood stove, with painted doors and porcelain handles on the ovens below and cupboards above. Line could imagine it bumping through the bush, lashed to a cart behind the tractor. It was the only way it could have gotten there. The cabin looked cozy, with shelves of canned goods, books, curtains on the windows.

“They have two kids,” said Paul. “We have to keep a good eye on them and that’s a communal job too. Someone’s always the dedicated kid-watcher.”

Line laughed a little hysterically. She was tired. “Remember when Mother used to divvy up chores?” she said to Paul. “I can see her handwriting on the paper taped to the refrigerator. Paul – little kids. Line – dishes. Marty – set the table.”

“How many kids were there?” asked Sheila. “Did you bring an onion, Paul? I sure could use an onion.”

“Yep!” said Paul. He fished in the grocery bags and found the bag of onions.

“There were six of us,” said Line. “Ellie was way ahead of us. She’s married and has two kids now. Then me, Marty and Paul ganged together. And then came ‘the little kids,’ Kristen and Hanna. They’re still at home. They were the ones we had to watch.”

“It sounds like a blast,” said Sheila. “I grew up in Montana, with a brother and ranch hands all around. Kind of different. My mother was sick a lot, but my grandmother lived with us. She taught me everything I know.”

“Which was a lot,” said Paul.

“We were here last year,” said Sheila. “So things are starting to be under control. It was a lot more primitive last year! Not a thing here!”

“You’ll be a guest tonight,” Paul said to Line. “But tomorrow!” he threatened teasingly.

“I’ll do whatever you need,” said Line. “I’ll be so glad to help.”

“Let’s go find the others,” said Paul, catching Christopher up in his arms and carrying him out the door.

Outdoors the air smelled lush and fragrant. Along the horizon was a piece of blue sky, but the mountain was so large it was already obscuring any sunshine that might slip through. Paul showed Line the lodge, which rose high, two stories, with spaces for windows and doors. The roof was on, but the windows gaped open. “We’re waiting for the road,” Paul said. “They expect to finish it in September or so. When the road comes, everything will be easy.”

Jack and Ed were building a sauna. “The best way to get clean!” said Paul. “Seeing these buildings go up gives me such a sense I could do it myself! Or almost by myself. A great feeling of independence!”

Bonnie and her kids, Jason and Anita were, yes, picking berries! “Some blueberries,” said Bonnie. “And a few raspberries. I’m marking out the areas.”

“I’ll help tomorrow,” said Line. “Or whatever you need me to do.”

Anita walked right up to Christopher and offered him a handful of the low blueberries. She had on cotton shirts, shorts and mudboots on her sturdy little legs, but Line could see evidence of bites on her deeply sun-browned skin.

“Mosquitoes?” asked Line.

“Not too bad here,” said Bonnie. “We’re lucky. And it’s getting better. The fall is the best time here. Short but sweet.”

“Fall? Already?” asked Line.

“Not quite,” said Bonnie. “But we can feel it. It’s like a shadow falling, making us all hurry.”

In the next few days Line didn’t know whether she or Christopher was happier. He did get mosquito bites, which Sheila plastered with herbal lotion. Line stuck with the kids, picking quarts of berries, outdoors most of the day. Sheila and Bonnie boiled them into syrups and jams. The men worked into the evenings, roofing, fitting, chinking, planing. After supper they lay in a row on the floor of Jack and Sheila’s cabin, spent, listening to the Northwind, the ‘bush telegraph’ as people called it.

One night Line sorted through herbal specimens she and Bonnie had collected. They would be dried for tea and various purposes. All of a sudden, they all heard it on the radio: “Line Mikkelson Cohen, your husband is in Fairbanks at the Gold Rush Motor Lodge. Please meet him as soon as you can. Line Mikkelson Cohen, your husband is waiting for you at the Gold Rush Motor Lodge.”

Line stood there gaping, herbs in hand. All of a sudden she knew it was why she had come. She had wanted Stephen to come to the ends of the earth to find her. And here he was. He had done it. Wiping away tears, she slipped out into the cool air of the evening with everyone’s eyes upon her.