



## Death of an Innocent

How Christopher McCandless lost his way in the wilds

*By Jon Krakauer*

---

James Gallien had driven five miles out of Fairbanks when he spotted the hitchhiker standing in the snow beside the road, thumb raised high, shivering in the gray Alaskan dawn. A rifle protruded from the young man's pack, but he looked friendly enough; a hitchhiker with a Remington semiautomatic isn't the sort of thing that gives motorists pause in the 49th state. Gallien steered his four-by-four onto the shoulder and told him to climb in.

The hitchhiker introduced himself as Alex. "Alex?" Gallien responded, fishing for a last name.

"Just Alex," the young man replied, pointedly rejecting the bait. He explained that he wanted a ride as far as the edge of Denali National Park, where he intended to walk deep into the bush and "live off the land for a few months." Alex's backpack appeared to weigh only 25 or 30 pounds, which struck Gallien, an accomplished outdoorsman, as an improbably light load for a three-month sojourn in the backcountry, especially so early in the spring. Immediately Gallien began to wonder if he'd picked up one of those crackpots from the Lower 48 who come north to live out their ill-considered Jack London fantasies. Alaska has long been a magnet for unbalanced souls, often outfitted with little more than innocence and desire, who hope to find their footing in the unsullied enormity of the Last Frontier. The bush, however, is a harsh place and cares nothing for hope or longing. More than a few such dreamers have met predictably unpleasant ends.

As they got to talking during the three-hour drive, though, Alex didn't strike Gallien as your typical misfit. He was congenial, seemed well educated, and peppered Gallien with sensible questions about "what kind of small game lived in the country, what kind of berries he could eat, that kind of thing."

Still, Gallien was concerned: Alex's gear seemed excessively slight for the rugged conditions of the interior bush, which in April still lay buried under the winter snowpack. He admitted that the only food in his pack was a ten-pound bag of rice. He had no compass; the only navigational aid in his possession was a tattered road map he'd scrounged at a gas station, and when they arrived where Alex asked to be dropped off, he left the map in Gallien's truck, along with his watch, his comb, and all his money, which amounted to 85 cents. "I don't want to know what time it is," Alex declared cheerfully. "I don't want to know what day it is, or where I am. None of that matters."

During the drive south toward the mountains, Gallien had tried repeatedly to dissuade Alex from his plan, to no avail. He even offered to drive Alex all the way to Anchorage so he could at least buy the kid some decent gear. "No, thanks anyway," Alex replied. "I'll be fine with what I've got." When Gallien asked whether his parents or some friend knew what he was up to--anyone who could sound

the alarm if he got into trouble and was overdue--Alex answered calmly that, no, nobody knew of his plans, that in fact he hadn't spoken to his family in nearly three years. "I'm absolutely positive," he assured Gallien, "I won't run into anything I can't deal with on my own."

"There was just no talking the guy out of it," Gallien recalls. "He was determined. He couldn't wait to head out there and get started." So Gallien drove Alex to the head of the Stampede Trail, an old mining track that begins ten miles west of the town of Healy, convinced him to accept a tuna melt and a pair of rubber boots to keep his feet dry, and wished him good luck. Alex pulled a camera from his backpack and asked Gallien to snap a picture of him. Then, smiling broadly, he disappeared down the snow-covered trail. The date was Tuesday, April 28, 1992.

More than four months passed before Gallien heard anything more of the hitchhiker. His real name turned out to be Christopher J. McCandless. He was the product of a happy family from an affluent suburb of Washington, D.C. And although he wasn't burdened with a surfeit of common sense and possessed a streak of stubborn idealism that did not readily mesh with the realities of modern life, he was no psychopath. McCandless was in fact an honors graduate of Emory University, an accomplished athlete, and a veteran of several solo excursions into wild, inhospitable terrain.

An extremely intense young man, McCandless had been captivated by the writing of Leo Tolstoy. He particularly admired the fact that the great novelist had forsaken a life of wealth and privilege to wander among the destitute. For several years he had been emulating the count's asceticism and moral rigor to a degree that astonished and occasionally alarmed those who knew him well. When he took leave of James Gallien, McCandless entertained no illusions that he was trekking into Club Med; peril, adversity, and Tolstoyan renunciation were what he was seeking. And that is precisely what he found on the Stampede Trail, in spades.

For most of 16 weeks McCandless more than held his own. Indeed, were it not for one or two innocent and seemingly insignificant blunders he would have walked out of the Alaskan woods in July or August as anonymously as he walked into them in April. Instead, the name of Chris McCandless has become the stuff of tabloid headlines, and his bewildered family is left clutching the shards of a fierce and painful love.

On the northern margin of the Alaska Range, just before the hulking escarpments of Denali and its satellites surrender to the low Kantishna plain, a series of lesser ridges known as the Outer Ranges sprawls across the flats like a rumpled blanket on an unmade bed. Between the flinty crests of the two outermost Outer Ranges runs an east-west trough, maybe five miles across, carpeted in a boggy amalgam of muskeg, alder thickets, and scrawny spruce. Meandering through this tangled, rolling bottomland is the Stampede Trail, the route Chris McCandless followed into the wilderness.

Twenty or so miles due west of Healy, not far from the boundary of Denali National Park, a derelict bus--a blue and white, 1940s-vintage International from the Fairbanks City Transit System--rusts incongruously in the fireweed beside the Stampede Trail. Many winters ago the bus was fitted with bedding and a crude barrel stove, then skidded into the bush by enterprising hunters to serve as a backcountry shelter. These days it isn't unusual for nine or ten months to pass without the bus seeing a human visitor, but on September 6, 1992, six people in three separate parties happened to visit it on the same afternoon, including Ken Thompson, Gordon Samel, and Ferdie Swanson, moose hunters who drove in on all-terrain vehicles.

When they arrived at the bus, says Thompson, they found "a guy and a girl from Anchorage standing 50 feet away, looking kinda spooked. A real bad smell was coming from inside the bus, and there was this weird note tacked by the door." The note, written in neat block letters on a page torn from a novel by Gogol, read: "S.O.S. I need your help. I am injured, near death, and too weak to hike out of here. I am all alone, this is no joke. In the name of God, please remain to save me. I am out collecting berries close by and shall return this evening. Thank you, Chris McCandless. August?"

The Anchorage couple had been too upset by the implications of the note to examine the bus's interior, so Thompson and Samel steeled themselves to take a look. A peek through a window revealed a .22-caliber rifle, a box of shells, some books and clothing, a backpack, and, on a makeshift bunk in the rear of the vehicle, a blue sleeping bag that appeared to have something or someone inside it.

"It was hard to be absolutely sure," says Samel. "I stood on a stump, reached through a back window, and gave the bag a shake. There was definitely something in it, but whatever it was didn't weigh much. It wasn't until I walked around to the other side and saw a head sticking out that I knew for certain what it was." Chris McCandless had been dead for some two and a half weeks.

The Alaska State Troopers were contacted, and the next morning a police helicopter evacuated the decomposed body, a camera with five rolls of exposed film, and a diary--written across the last two pages of a field guide to edible plants--that recorded the young man's final weeks in 113 terse, haunting entries. An autopsy revealed no internal injuries or broken bones. Starvation was suggested as the most probable cause of death. McCandless's signature had been penned at the bottom of the S.O.S. note, and the photos, when developed, included many self-portraits. But because he had been carrying no identification, the police knew almost nothing about who he was or where he was from.

Carthage, South Dakota, population 274, is a sleepy little cluster of clapboard houses, weathered brick storefronts, and shaded yards that rises humbly from the immensity of the northern plains, adrift in time. It has one grocery, one bank, a single gas station, a lone bar--the Cabaret, where Wayne Westerberg, a hyperkinetic man with thick shoulders and a rakish black goatee, is sipping a White Russian, chewing on a sweet cigar, and remembering the enigmatic young man he knew as Alex. "These are what Alex used to drink," says Westerberg with a smile, hoisting his glass. "He used to sit right there at the end of the bar and tell us these amazing stories of his travels. He could talk for hours."

Westerberg owns a grain elevator in town but spends every summer running a custom combine crew that follows the harvest from Texas north to Montana. In September 1990 he'd been in Montana cutting barley when, on the highway east of Cut Bank, he'd given a ride to a hungry-looking hitchhiker, a friendly young man who said his name was Alex McCandless. They hit it off immediately, and before they went their separate ways Westerberg told Alex to look him up in Carthage if he ever needed a job. "About two weeks later," says Westerberg, "he thumbed into town, moved into my house, and went to work at the elevator. He was the hardest worker I've ever seen. And totally honest--what you'd call extremely ethical. He set pretty high standards for himself.

"You could tell right away that Alex was intelligent," Westerberg continues. "In fact, I think maybe part of what got him into trouble was that he did too much thinking. Sometimes he tried too hard to make sense of the world, to figure out why people were bad to each other so often. A couple of

times I tried to tell him it was a mistake to get too deep into that kind of stuff, but Alex got stuck on things. He always had to know the absolute right answer before he could go on to the next thing."

McCandless didn't stay in Carthage long--by the end of October he was on the road again--but he dropped Westerberg a postcard every month or two in the course of his travels. He also had all his mail forwarded to Westerberg's house and told everybody he met thereafter that he was from South Dakota.

In truth McCandless had been raised in the comfortable, upper-middle-class environs of Annandale, Virginia. His father, Walt, was an aerospace engineer who ran a small but very prosperous consulting firm with Chris's mother, Billie. There were eight children in the extended family: Chris; a younger sister, Carine, with whom Chris was extremely close; and six older half-siblings from Walt's first marriage.

McCandless had graduated in June 1990 from Emory University in Atlanta, where he distinguished himself as a history/anthropology major and was offered but declined membership in Phi Beta Kappa, insisting that titles and honors were of no importance. His education had been paid for by a college fund established by his parents; there was some \$20,000 in this account at the time of his graduation, money his parents thought he intended to use for law school. Instead, he donated the entire sum to the Oxford Famine Relief Fund. Then, without notifying any friends or family members, he loaded all his belongings into a decrepit yellow Datsun and headed west without itinerary, relieved to shed a life of abstraction and security, a life he felt was removed from the heat and throb of the real world. Chris McCandless intended to invent a new life for himself, one in which he would be free to wallow in unfiltered experience.

In July 1990, on a 120-degree afternoon near Lake Mead, his car broke down and he abandoned it in the Arizona desert. McCandless was exhilarated, so much so that he decided to bury most of his worldly possessions in the parched earth of Detrital Wash and then--in a gesture that would have done Tolstoy proud--burned his last remaining cash, about \$160 in small bills. We know this because he documented the conflagration, and most of the events that followed, in a journal/snapshot album he would later give to Westerberg. Although the tone of the journal occasionally veers toward melodrama, the available evidence indicates that McCandless did not misrepresent the facts; telling the truth was a credo he took very seriously.

McCandless tramped around the West for the next two months, spellbound by the scale and power of the landscape, thrilled by minor brushes with the law, savoring the intermittent company of other vagabonds he met along the way. He hopped trains, hitched rides, and walked the trails of the Sierra Nevada before crossing paths with Westerberg in Montana.

In November he sent Westerberg a postcard from Phoenix, urging him to read *War and Peace* ("It has things in it that I think you will understand, things that escape most people") and complaining that thanks to the money Westerberg had paid him, tramping had become too easy. "My days were more exciting when I was penniless and had to forage around for my next meal," he wrote. "I've decided that I'm going to live this life for some time to come. The freedom and simple beauty of it is just too good to pass up. One day I'll get back to you, Wayne, and repay some of your kindness."

Immediately after writing that card, McCandless bought a secondhand aluminum canoe near the head of Lake Havasu and decided to paddle it down the Colorado River all the way to the Gulf of California. En route he sneaked into Mexico by shooting the spillway of a small dam and got lost

repeatedly. But he made it to the gulf, where he struggled to control the canoe in a violent squall far from shore and, exhausted, decided to head north again.

On January 16, 1991, McCandless left the stubby metal boat on a hummock of dune grass southeast of Golfo de Santa Clara and started walking north up the deserted beach. He had not seen or talked to another soul in 36 days. For that entire period he had subsisted on nothing but five pounds of rice and what he could pull from the sea, an experience that would later convince him he could survive on similarly meager rations when he went to live in the Alaskan bush. Back at the border two days later, he was caught trying to slip into the United States without ID and spent a night in custody before concocting a story that got him across.

McCandless spent most of the next year in the Southwest, but the last entry in the journal he left with Westerberg is dated May 10, 1991, and so the record of his travels in this period is sketchy. He slumped his way through San Diego, El Paso, and Houston. To avoid being rolled and robbed by the unsavory characters who ruled the streets and freeway overpasses where he slept, he learned to bury what money he had before entering a city, then recover it on the way out of town. Snapshots in the album document visits to Bryce and Zion, the Grand Canyon, Joshua Tree, Palm Springs. For several weeks he lived with "bums, tramps, and winos" on the streets of Las Vegas.

When 1991 drew to a close McCandless was in Bullhead City, Arizona, where for three months he lived in a tent and flipped burgers at McDonald's. A letter from this period reveals that "a girl Tracy" had a crush on him. In a note to Westerberg he admitted that he liked Bullhead City and "might finally settle down and abandon my tramping life, for good. I'll see what happens when spring comes around, because that's when I tend to get really itchy feet."

Itchy feet prevailed. He soon called Westerberg and said that he wanted to work in the grain elevator for a while, just long enough to put together a little grubstake. He needed money to buy some new gear, he said, because he was going to Alaska.

When McCandless arrived back in Carthage on a bitter February morning in 1992, he'd already decided that he would depart for Alaska on April 15. He wanted to be in Fairbanks by the end of April in order to have as much time as possible in the North before heading back to South Dakota to help out with the autumn harvest. By mid-April Westerberg was shorthanded and very busy, so he asked McCandless to postpone his departure date and work a week or two longer. But, Westerberg says, "Once Alex made up his mind about something there was no changing it. I even offered to buy him a plane ticket to Fairbanks, which would have let him work an extra ten days and still get to Alaska by the end of April. But he said, 'No, I want to hitch north. Flying would be cheating. It would wreck the whole trip.'"

McCandless left Carthage on April 15. In early May Westerberg received a postcard of a polar bear, postmarked April 27. "Greetings from Fairbanks!" it read.

*This is the last you shall hear from me Wayne. Arrived here 2 days ago. It was very difficult to catch rides in the Yukon Territory. But I finally got here. Please return all mail I receive to the sender.*

*It might be a very long time before I return South. If this adventure proves fatal and you don't ever hear from me again, I want you to know your a great man. I now walk into the wild.*

McCandless's last postcard to Westerberg fueled widespread speculation, after his adventure did prove fatal, that he'd intended suicide from the start, that when he walked into the bush alone he had no intention of ever walking out again. But I for one am not so sure.

In 1977, when I was 23--a year younger than McCandless at the time of his death--I hitched a ride to Alaska on a fishing boat and set off alone into the backcountry to attempt an ascent of a malevolent stone digit called the Devils Thumb, a towering prong of vertical rock and avalanching ice, ignoring pleas from friends, family, and utter strangers to come to my senses. Simply reaching the foot of the mountain entailed traveling 30 miles up a badly crevassed, storm-wracked glacier that hadn't seen a human footprint in many years. By choice I had no radio, no way of summoning help, no safety net of any kind. I had several harrowing shaves, but eventually I reached the summit of the Thumb.

When I decided to go to Alaska that April, I was an angst-ridden youth who read too much Nietzsche, mistook passion for insight, and functioned according to an obscure gap-ridden logic. I thought climbing the Devils Thumb would fix all that was wrong with my life. In the end it changed almost nothing, of course. I came to appreciate, however, that mountains make poor receptacles for dreams. And I lived to tell my tale.

As a young man, I was unlike Chris McCandless in many important respects--most notably I lacked his intellect and his altruistic leanings--but I suspect we had a similar intensity, a similar heedlessness, a similar agitation of the soul.

The fact that I survived my Alaskan adventure and McCandless did not survive his was largely a matter of chance; had I died on the Stikine Icecap in 1977 people would have been quick to say of me, as they now say of him, that I had a death wish. Fifteen years after the event, I now recognize that I suffered from hubris, perhaps, and a monstrous innocence, certainly, but I wasn't suicidal.

At the time, death was a concept I understood only in the abstract. I didn't yet appreciate its terrible finality or the havoc it could wreak on those who'd entrusted the deceased with their hearts. I was stirred by the mystery of death; I couldn't resist stealing up to the edge of doom and peering over the brink. The view into that swirling black vortex terrified me, but I caught sight of something elemental in that shadowy glimpse, some forbidden, fascinating riddle.

That's a very different thing from wanting to die.

Westerberg heard nothing else from McCandless for the remainder of the spring and summer. Then, last September 13, he was rolling down an empty ribbon of South Dakota blacktop, leading his harvest crew home to Carthage after wrapping up a four-month cutting season in northern Montana, when the VHF barked to life. "Wayne!" an anxious voice crackled over the radio from one of the crew's other trucks. "Quick--turn on your AM and listen to Paul Harvey. He's talking about some kid who starved to death up in Alaska. The police don't know who he is. Sounds a whole lot like Alex."

As soon as he got to Carthage, a dispirited Westerberg called the Alaska State Troopers and said that he thought he knew the identity of the hiker. McCandless had never told Westerberg anything about his family, including where they lived, but Westerberg unearthed a W-4 form bearing McCandless's Social Security number, which led the police to an address in Virginia. A few days after the Paul Harvey broadcast, an Alaskan police sergeant made a phone call to the distant suburbs of the nation's capital, confirming the worst fears of Walt and Billie McCandless and raining a flood of confusion and grief down upon their world.

Walt McCandless, 56, dressed in gray sweatpants and a rayon jacket bearing the logo of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, is a stocky, bearded man with longish salt-and-pepper hair combed straight back from a high forehead. Seven weeks after his youngest son's body turned up in Alaska wrapped in a blue sleeping bag that Billie had sewn for Chris from a kit, he studies a sailboat scudding beneath the window of his waterfront townhouse. "How is it," he wonders aloud as he gazes blankly across Chesapeake Bay, "that a kid with so much compassion could cause his parents so much pain?"

Four large pieces of posterboard covered with dozens of photos documenting the whole brief span of Chris's life stand on the dining room table. Moving deliberately around the display, Billie points out Chris as a toddler astride a hobbyhorse, Chris as a rapt eight-year-old in a yellow slicker on his first backpacking trip, Chris at his high school commencement. "The hardest part," says Walt, pausing over a shot of his son clowning around on a family vacation, "is simply not having him around any more. I spent a lot of time with Chris, perhaps more than with any of my other kids. I really liked his company, even though he frustrated us so often."

It is impossible to know what murky convergence of chromosomal matter, parent-child dynamics, and alignment of the cosmos was responsible, but Chris McCandless came into the world with unusual gifts and a will not easily deflected from its trajectory. As early as third grade, a bemused teacher was moved to pull Chris's parents aside and inform them that their son "marched to a different drummer." At the age of ten, he entered his first running competition, a 10k road race, and finished 69th, beating more than 1,000 adults. By high school he was effortlessly bringing home A's (punctuated by a single F, the result of butting heads with a particularly rigid physics teacher) and had developed into one of the top distance runners in the region.

As captain of his high school cross-country team he concocted novel, grueling training regimens that his teammates still remember well. "Chris invented this workout he called Road Warriors," explains Gordy Cucullu, a close friend from those days. "He would lead us on long, killer runs, as far and as fast as we could go, down strange roads, through the woods, whatever. The whole idea was to lose our bearings, to push ourselves into unknown territory. Then we'd run at a slightly slower pace until we found a road we recognized, and race home again at full speed. In a certain sense, that's how Chris lived his entire life."

McCandless viewed running as an intensely spiritual exercise akin to meditation. "Chris would use the spiritual aspect to try to motivate us," recalls Eric Hathaway, another friend on the team. "He'd tell us to think about all the evil in the world, all the hatred, and imagine ourselves running against the forces of darkness, the evil wall that was trying to keep us from running our best. He believed doing well was all mental, a simple matter of harnessing whatever energy was available. As impressionable high school kids, we were blown away by that kind of talk."

McCandless's musings on good and evil were more than a training technique; he took life's inequities to heart. "Chris didn't understand how people could possibly be allowed to go hungry, especially in this country," says Billie McCandless, a small woman with large, expressive eyes--the same eyes Chris is said to have had. "He would rave about that kind of thing for hours."

For months he spoke seriously of traveling to South Africa and joining the struggle to end apartheid. On weekends, when his high school pals were attending keggers and trying to sneak into Georgetown bars, McCandless would wander the seedier quarters of Washington, chatting with pimps and hookers and homeless people, buying them meals, earnestly suggesting ways they might

improve their lives. Once, he actually picked up a homeless man from downtown D.C., brought him to the leafy streets of Annandale, and secretly set him up in the Airstream trailer that his parents kept parked in the driveway. Walt and Billie never even knew they were hosting a vagrant.

McCandless's personality was puzzling in its complexity. He was intensely private but could be convivial and gregarious in the extreme. And despite his overdeveloped social conscience, he was no tight-lipped, perpetually grim do-gooder who frowned on fun. To the contrary, he enjoyed tipping a glass now and then and was an incorrigible ham who would seize any excuse to regale friends and strangers with spirited renditions of Tony Bennett tunes. In college he directed and starred in a witty video parody of Geraldo Rivera opening Al Capone's vault. And he was a natural salesman: Throughout his youth McCandless launched a series of entrepreneurial schemes (a photocopying service, among others), some of which brought in impressive amounts of cash.

Upon graduating from high school, he took the earnings he'd socked away, bought a used Datsun B210, and promptly embarked on the first of his extemporaneous transcontinental odysseys. For half the summer he complied with his parents' insistence that he phone every three days, but he didn't check in at all the last couple of weeks and returned just two days before he was due at college, sporting torn clothes, a scruffy beard, and tangled hair and packing a machete and a .30-06 rifle, which he insisted on taking with him to school.

With each new adventure, Walt and Billie grew increasingly anxious about the risks Chris was taking. Before his senior year at Emory he returned from a summer on the road looking gaunt and weak, having shed 30 pounds from his already lean frame; he'd gotten lost in the Mojave Desert, it turned out, and had nearly succumbed to dehydration. Walt and Billie urged their son to exercise more caution in the future and pleaded with him to keep them better informed of his whereabouts; Chris responded by telling them even less about his escapades and checking in less frequently when he was on the road. "He thought we were idiots for worrying about him," Billie says. "He took pride in his ability to go without food for extended periods, and he had complete confidence that he could get himself out of any jam."

"He was good at almost everything he ever tried," says Walt, "which made him supremely overconfident. If you attempted to talk him out of something, he wouldn't argue. He'd just nod politely and then do exactly what he wanted."

McCandless could be generous and caring to a fault, but he had a darker side as well, characterized by monomania, impatience, and unwavering self-absorption, qualities that seemed to intensify throughout his college years. "I saw Chris at a party after his freshman year at Emory," remembers Eric Hathaway, "and it was obvious that he had changed. He seemed very introverted, almost cold. Social life at Emory revolved around fraternities and sororities, something Chris wanted no part of. And when everybody started going Greek, he kind of pulled back from his old friends and got more heavily into himself."

When Walt and Billie went to Atlanta in the spring of 1990 for Chris's college graduation, he told them that he was planning another summerlong trip and that he'd drive up to visit them in Annandale before hitting the road. But he never showed. Shortly thereafter he donated the \$20,000 in his bank account to Oxfam, loaded up his car, and disappeared. From then on he scrupulously avoided contacting either his parents or Carine, the sister for whom he purportedly cared immensely.



"We were all worried when we didn't hear from him," says Carine, "and I think my parents' worry was mixed with hurt and anger. But I didn't really feel hurt. I knew that he was happy and doing what he wanted to do. I understood that it was important for him to see how independent he could be. And he knew that if he wrote or called me, Mom and Dad would find out where he was, fly out there, and try to bring him home."

In September--by which time Chris had long since abandoned the yellow Datsun in the desert and burned his money--Walt and Billie grew worried enough to hire a private investigator. "We worked pretty hard to trace him," says Walt. "We eventually picked up his trail on the northern California coast, where he'd gotten a ticket for hitchhiking, but we lost track of him for good right after that, probably about the time he met Wayne Westerberg." Walt and Billie would hear nothing more about Chris's whereabouts until their son's body turned up in Alaska two years later.

After Chris had been identified, Carine and their oldest half-brother, Sam, flew to Fairbanks to bring home his ashes and those few possessions--the rifle, a fishing rod, a Swiss Army knife, the book in which he'd kept his journal, and not much else--that had been recovered with the body, including the photographs he'd taken in Alaska. Sifting through this pictorial record of Chris's final days, it is all Billie can do to force herself to examine the fuzzy snapshots. As she studies the pictures she breaks down from time to time, weeping as only a mother who has outlived a child can weep, betraying a sense of loss so huge and irreparable that the mind balks at taking its measure. Such bereavement, witnessed at close range, makes even the most eloquent apologia for high-risk activities ring fatuous and hollow.

"I just don't understand why he had to take those kinds of chances," Billie protests through her tears. "I just don't understand it at all."

When news of McCandless's fate came to light, most Alaskans were quick to dismiss him as a nut case. According to the conventional wisdom he was simply one more dreamy, half-cocked greenhorn who went into the bush expecting to find answers to all his problems and instead found nothing but mosquitoes and a lonely death.

Dozens of marginal characters have gone into the Alaskan backcountry over the years, never to reappear. A few have lodged firmly in the state's collective memory. There is, for example, the sad tale of John Mallon Waterman, a visionary climber much celebrated for making one of the most astonishing first ascents in the history of North American mountaineering--an extremely dangerous 145-day solo climb of Mount Hunter's Southeast Spur. Upon completing this epic deed in 1979, though, he found that instead of putting his demons to rest, success merely agitated them.

In the years that followed, Waterman's mind unraveled. He took to prancing around Fairbanks in a black cape and announced he was running for president under the banner of the Feed the Starving Party, the main priority of which was to ensure that nobody on the planet died of hunger. To publicize his campaign he laid plans to make a solo ascent of Denali, in winter, with a minimum of food.

After his first attempt on the mountain was aborted prematurely, Waterman committed himself to the Anchorage Psychiatric Institute but checked out after two weeks, convinced that there was a conspiracy afoot to put him away permanently. Then, in the winter of 1981, he launched another solo attempt on Denali. He was last placed on the upper Ruth Glacier, heading unroped through the middle of a deadly crevasse field en route to the mountain's difficult East Buttress, carrying neither

sleeping bag nor tent. He was never seen after that, but a note was later found atop some of his gear in a nearby shelter. It read, "3-13-81 My last kiss 1:42 PM."

Perhaps inevitably, parallels have been drawn between John Waterman and Chris McCandless. Comparisons have also been made between McCandless and Carl McCunn, a likable, absentminded Texan who in 1981 paid a bush pilot to drop him at a lake deep in the Brooks Range to photograph wildlife. He flew in with 500 rolls of film and 1,400 pounds of provisions but forgot to arrange for the pilot to pick him up again. Nobody realized he was missing until state troopers came across his body a year later, lying beside a 100-page diary that documented his demise. Rather than starve, McCunn had reclined in his tent and shot himself in the head.

There are similarities among Waterman, McCunn, and McCandless, most notably a certain dreaminess and a paucity of common sense. But unlike Waterman, McCandless was not mentally unbalanced. And unlike McCunn, he didn't go into the bush assuming that someone would magically appear to bring him out again before he came to grief.

McCandless doesn't really conform to the common bush-casualty stereotype: He wasn't a kook, he wasn't an outcast, and although he was rash and incautious to the point of foolhardiness, he was hardly incompetent or he would never have lasted 113 days. If one is searching for predecessors cut from the same exotic cloth, if one hopes to understand the personal tragedy of Chris McCandless by placing it in some larger context, one would do well to look at another northern land, in a different century altogether.

Off the southeastern coast of Iceland sits a low barrier island called Papos. Treeless and rocky, perpetually knocked by gales howling off the North Atlantic, the island takes its name from its first settlers, now long gone, the Irish monks known as papar. They arrived as early as the fifth and sixth centuries A.D., having sailed and rowed from the western coast of Ireland. Setting out in small open boats called currachs, made from cowhide stretched over light wicker frames, they crossed one of the most treacherous stretches of ocean in the world without knowing what they'd find on the other side.

The papar risked their lives--and lost them in untold droves--but not in the pursuit of wealth or personal glory or to claim new lands in the name of a despot. As the great Arctic explorer Fridtjof Nansen points out, they undertook their remarkable voyages "chiefly from the wish to find lonely places, where these anchorites might dwell in peace, undisturbed by the turmoil and temptations of the world." When the first handful of Norwegians showed up on the shores of Iceland in the ninth century, the papar decided the country had become too crowded, even though it was still all but uninhabited. They climbed back into their currachs and rowed off toward Greenland. They were drawn west across the storm-wracked ocean, past the edge of the known world, by nothing more than hunger of the spirit, a queer, pure yearning that burned in their souls.

Reading of these monks, one is struck by their courage, their reckless innocence, and the intensity of their desire. And one can't help thinking of Chris McCandless.

On April 25, 1992, ten days after leaving South Dakota, McCandless rode his thumb into Fairbanks. After perusing the classified ads, he bought a used Remington Nylon 66--a semiautomatic .22-caliber rifle with a 4x20 scope and a plastic stock that was favored by Alaskan trappers for its light weight and reliability.

When James Gallien dropped McCandless off at the head of the Stampede Trail on April 28 the temperature was in the low thirties--it would drop into the low teens at night--and a foot of crusty spring snow covered the ground. As he trudged expectantly down the trail in a fake-fur parka, the heaviest item in McCandless's half-full backpack was his library: nine or ten paperbacks ranging from Michael Crichton's *The Terminal Man* to Thoreau's *Walden* and Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. One of these volumes, *Tanaina Plantlore*, by Priscilla Russel Kari, was a scholarly, exhaustively researched field guide to edible plants in the region; it was in the back of this book that McCandless began keeping an abbreviated record of his journey.

From his journal we know that on April 29 McCandless fell through the ice--perhaps crossing the frozen surface of the Teklanika River, perhaps in the maze of broad, shallow beaver ponds that lie just beyond its western bank--although there is no indication that he suffered any injury. A day later he got his first glimpse of Denali's gleaming white ramparts, and a day after that, about 20 miles down the trail from where he started, he stumbled upon the bus and decided to make it his base camp.

He was elated to be there. Inside the bus, on a sheet of weathered plywood spanning a broken window, McCandless scrawled an exultant declaration of independence:

*Two years he walks the earth. No phone, no pool, no pets, no cigarettes. Ultimate freedom. An extremist. An aesthetic voyager whose home is the road. Escaped from Atlanta. Thou shalt not return, 'cause "the West is the best." And now after two rambling years comes the final and greatest adventure. The climactic battle to kill the false being within and victoriously conclude the spiritual pilgrimage. Ten days and nights of freight trains and hitchhiking bring him to the Great White North. No longer to be poisoned by civilization he flees, and walks alone upon the land to become lost in the wild.*

*Alexander Supertramp  
May 1992*

But reality quickly intruded. McCandless had difficulty killing game, and the daily journal entries during his first week at the bus include "weakness," "snowed in," and "disaster." He saw but did not shoot a grizzly on May 2, shot at but missed some ducks on May 4, and finally killed and ate a spruce grouse on May 5. But he didn't kill any more game until May 9, when he bagged a single small squirrel, by which point he'd written "4th day famine" in the journal.

Soon thereafter McCandless's fortunes took a sharp turn for the better. By mid-May the snowpack was melting down to bare ground, exposing the previous season's rose hips and lingonberries, preserved beneath the frost, which he gathered and ate. He also became much more successful at hunting and for the next six weeks feasted regularly on squirrel, spruce grouse, duck, goose, and porcupine. On May 22 he lost a crown from a tooth, but it didn't seem to dampen his spirits much, because the following day he scrambled up the nameless 3,000-foot butte that rose directly north of the bus, giving him a view of the whole icy sweep of the Alaska Range and mile after mile of stunning, completely uninhabited country. His journal entry for the day is characteristically terse but unmistakably joyous: "CLIMB MOUNTAIN!"

Although McCandless was enough of a realist to know that hunting was an unavoidable component of living off the land, he had always been ambivalent about killing animals. That ambivalence turned to regret on June 9, when he shot and killed a large caribou, which he mistakenly identified as a

moose in his journal. For six days he toiled to preserve the meat, believing that it was morally indefensible to waste any part of an animal that has been killed for food. He butchered the carcass under a thick cloud of flies and mosquitoes, boiled the internal organs into a stew, and then laboriously dug a cave in the rocky earth in which he tried to preserve, by smoking, the huge amount of meat that he was unable to eat immediately. Despite his efforts, on June 14 his journal records, "Maggots already! Smoking appears ineffective. Don't know, looks like disaster. I now wish I had never shot the moose. One of the greatest tragedies of my life."

Although he recriminated himself severely for this waste of a life he had taken, a day later McCandless appeared to regain some perspective--his journal notes, "henceforth will learn to accept my errors, however great they be"--and the period of contentment that began in mid-May resumed and continued until early July. Then, in the midst of this idyll, came the first of two pivotal setbacks.

Satisfied, apparently, with what he had accomplished during his two months of solitary existence, McCandless decided to return to civilization. It was time to bring his "final and greatest adventure" to a close and get himself back to the world of men and women, where he could chug a beer, discuss philosophy, enthrall strangers with tales of what he'd done. He seemed to have turned the corner on his need to assert his autonomy from his parents. He seemed ready, perhaps, to go home. On a parchmentlike strip of birch bark he drew up a list of tasks to do before he departed: "patch jeans, shave!, organize pack." Then, on July 3--the day after a journal entry that reads, "Family happiness"--he shouldered his backpack, departed the bus, and began the 30-mile walk to the highway.

Two days later, halfway to the road, he arrived in heavy rain on the west bank of the Teklanika River, a major stream spawned by distant glaciers on the crest of the Alaska Range. Sixty-seven days earlier it had been frozen over, and he had simply strolled across it. Now, however, swollen with rain and melting snow, the Teklanika was running big, cold, and fast.

If he could reach the far shore, the rest of the hike to the highway would be trivial, but to get there he would have to negotiate a 75-foot channel of chest-deep water that churned with the power of a freight train. In his journal McCandless wrote, "Rained in. River look impossible. Lonely, scared." Concluding that he would drown if he attempted to cross, he turned around and walked back toward the bus, back into the fickle heart of the bush.

McCandless got back to the bus on July 8. It's impossible to know what was going through his mind at that point, believing that his escape had been cut off, for his journal betrays nothing. Actually, he wasn't cut off at all: A quarter-mile downstream from where he had tried to cross, the Teklanika rushes through a narrow gorge spanned by a hand-operated tram--a metal basket suspended from pulleys on a steel cable. If he had known about it, crossing the Teklanika to safety would have been little more than a casual task. Also, six miles due south of the bus, an easy day's walk up the main fork of the Sushana, the National Park Service maintains a cabin stocked with food, bedding, and first-aid supplies for the use of backcountry rangers on their winter patrols. This cabin is plainly marked on most topographic maps of the area, but McCandless, lacking such a map, had no way of knowing about it. His friends point out, of course, that had he carried a map and known the cabin was so close, his muleheaded obsession with self-reliance would have kept him from staying anywhere near the bus; rather, he would have headed even deeper into the bush.

So he went back to the bus, which was a sensible course of action: It was the height of summer, the country was fecund with plant and animal life, and his food supply was still adequate. He probably

surmised that if he could just bide his time until August, the Teklanika would subside enough to be forded.

For the rest of July McCandless fell back into his routine of hunting and gathering. His snapshots and journal entries indicate that over those three weeks he killed 35 squirrels, four spruce grouse, five jays and woodpeckers, and two frogs, which he supplemented with wild potatoes, wild rhubarb, various berries, and mushrooms. Despite this apparent munificence, the meat he'd been killing was very lean, and he was consuming fewer calories than he was burning. After three months on a marginal diet, McCandless had run up a sizable caloric deficit. He was balanced on a precarious, razor-thin edge. And then, on July 30, he made the mistake that pulled him down.

His journal entry for that date reads, "Extremely weak. Fault of pot[ato] seed. Much trouble just to stand up. Starving. Great Jeopardy." McCandless had been digging and eating the root of the wild potato--*Hedysarum alpinum*, a common area wildflower also known as Eskimo potato, which Kari's book told him was widely eaten by native Alaskans--for more than a month without ill effect. On July 14 he apparently started eating the pealike seedpods of the plant as well, again without ill effect. There is, however, a closely related plant--wild sweet pea, *Hedysarum mackenzii*--that is very difficult to distinguish from wild potato, grows beside it, and is poisonous. In all likelihood McCandless mistakenly ate some seeds from the wild sweet pea and became gravely ill.

Laid low by the poisonous seeds, he was too weak to hunt effectively and thus slid toward starvation. Things began to spin out of control with terrible speed. "DAY 100! MADE IT!" he noted jubilantly on August 5, proud of achieving such a significant milestone, "but in weakest condition of life. Death looms as serious threat. Too weak to walk out."

Over the next week or so the only game he bagged was five squirrels and a spruce grouse. Many Alaskans have wondered why, at this point, he didn't start a forest fire as a distress signal; small planes fly over the area every few days, they say, and the Park Service would surely have dispatched a crew to control the conflagration. "Chris would never intentionally burn down a forest, not even to save his life," answers Carine McCandless. "Anybody who would suggest otherwise doesn't understand the first thing about my brother."

Starvation is not a pleasant way to die. In advanced stages, as the body begins to consume itself, the victim suffers muscle pain, heart disturbances, loss of hair, shortness of breath. Convulsions and hallucinations are not uncommon. Some who have been brought back from the far edge of starvation, though, report that near the end their suffering was replaced by a sublime euphoria, a sense of calm accompanied by transcendent mental clarity. Perhaps, it would be nice to think, McCandless enjoyed a similar rapture.

From August 13 through 18 his journal records nothing beyond a tally of the days. At some point during this week, he tore the final page from Louis L'Amour's memoir, *Education of a Wandering Man*. On one side were some lines that L'Amour had quoted from Robinson Jeffers's poem "Wise Men in Their Bad Hours":

*Death's a fierce meadowlark: but to die having made  
Something more equal to the centuries  
Than muscle and bone, is mostly to shed weakness.*

On the other side of the page, which was blank, McCandless penned a brief adios: "I have had a happy life and thank the Lord. Goodbye and may God bless all!"

Then he crawled into the sleeping bag his mother had made for him and slipped into unconsciousness. He probably died on August 18, 113 days after he'd walked into the wild, 19 days before six hunters and hikers would happen across the bus and discover his body inside.

One of his last acts was to take a photograph of himself, standing near the bus under the high Alaskan sky, one hand holding his final note toward the camera lens, the other raised in a brave, beatific farewell. He is smiling in the photo, and there is no mistaking the look in his eyes: Chris McCandless was at peace, serene as a monk gone to God.

[\*Jon Krakauer\*](#), a contributing editor of *Outside*, is the author of *Eiger Dreams: Ventures Among Men and Mountains*.