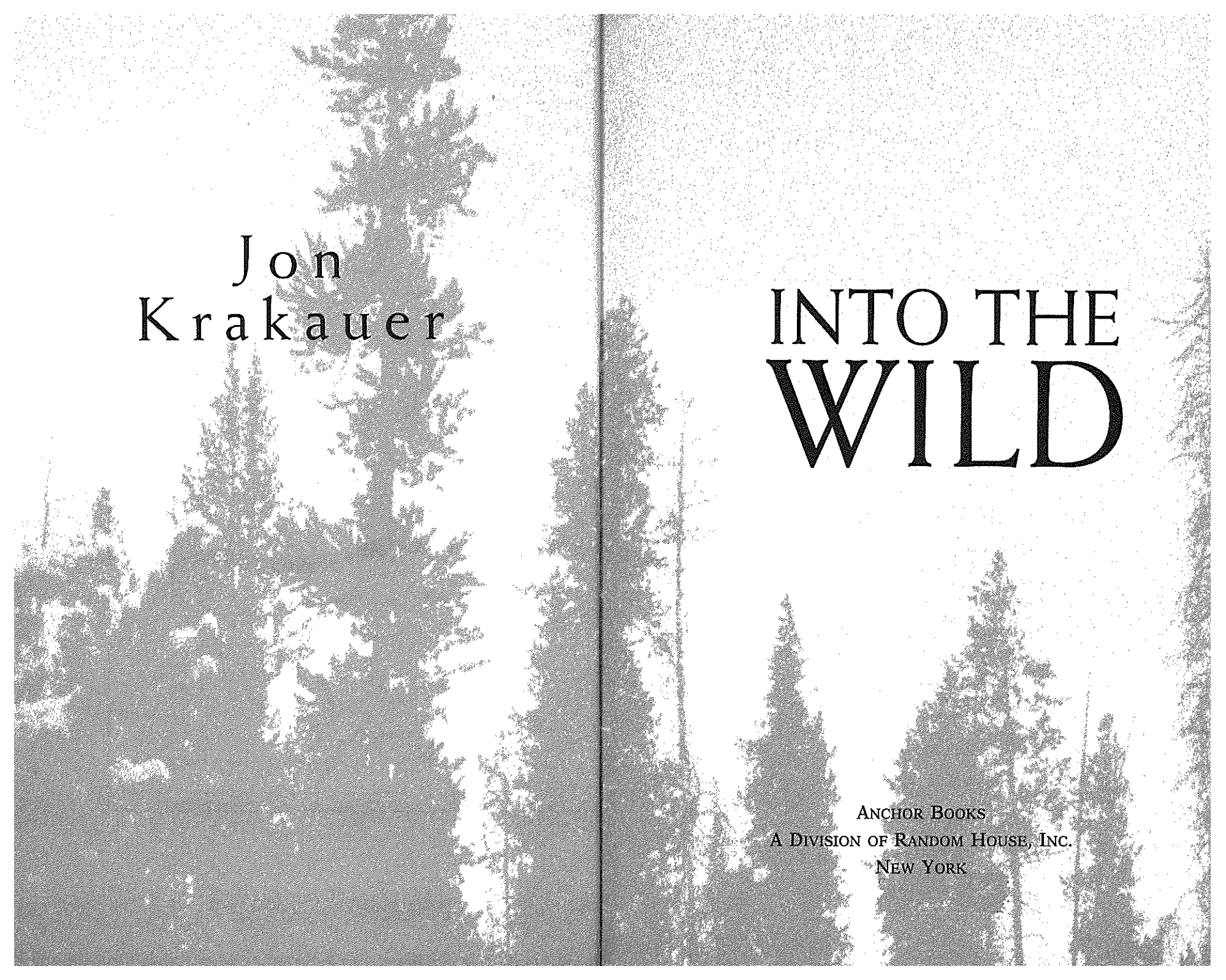




Jon
Krakauer

INTO THE
WILD

ANCHOR BOOKS
A DIVISION OF RANDOM HOUSE, INC.
NEW YORK

CHAPTER EIGHT

ALASKA

It may, after all, be the bad habit of creative talents to invest themselves in pathological extremes that yield remarkable insights but no durable way of life for those who cannot translate their psychic wounds into significant art or thought.

THEODORE ROSZAK,
"IN SEARCH OF THE MIRACULOUS"

We have in America "The Big Two-Hearted River" tradition: taking your wounds to the wilderness for a cure, a conversion, a rest, or whatever. And as in the Hemingway story, if your wounds aren't too bad, it works. But this isn't Michigan (or Faulkner's Big Woods in Mississippi, for that matter). This is Alaska.

EDWARD HOAGLAND,
"UP THE BLACK TO CHALKYTSIK"

When McCandless turned up dead in Alaska and the perplexing circumstances of his demise were reported in the news media, many people concluded that the boy must have been mentally disturbed. The article about McCandless in *Outside* generated a large volume of mail, and not a few of the letters heaped oppro-

Into the Wild

brium on McCandless—and on me, as well, the author of the story, for glorifying what some thought was a foolish, pointless death.

Much of the negative mail was sent by Alaskans. "Alex is a nut in my book," wrote a resident of Healy, the hamlet at the head of the Stampede Trail. "The author describes a man who has given away a small fortune, forsaken a loving family, abandoned his car, watch and map and burned the last of his money before traipsing off into the 'wilderness' west of Healy."

"Personally I see nothing positive at all about Chris McCandless's lifestyle or wilderness doctrine," scolded another correspondent. "Entering the wilderness purposefully ill-prepared, and surviving a near-death experience does not make you a better human, it makes you damn lucky."

One reader of the *Outside* piece wondered, "Why would anyone intending to 'live off the land for a few months' forget Boy Scout rule number one: Be Prepared? Why would any son cause his parents and family such permanent and perplexing pain?"

"Krakauer is a kook if he doesn't think Chris 'Alexander Supertramp' McCandless was a kook," opined a man from North Pole, Alaska. "McCandless had already gone over the edge and just happened to hit bottom in Alaska."

The most strident criticism came in the form of a dense, multipage epistle from Ambler, a tiny Inupiat village on the Kobuk River north of the Arctic Circle. The author was a white writer and schoolteacher, formerly from Washington, D.C., named Nick Jans. Warning that it was 1:00 A.M. and he was well into a bottle of Seagram's, Jans let fly:

Over the past 15 years, I've run into several McCandless types out in the country. Same story: idealistic, energetic young guys who overestimated themselves, underestimated the country, and ended up in trouble. McCandless was hardly unique; there's quite a few of these guys hanging around the state, so much alike that they're almost a collective cliché. The only difference is that McCandless ended up dead, with the story of his dumbassness splashed across the media. . . . (Jack London got it right in "To

Build a Fire. McCandless is, finally, just a pale 20th-century burlesque of London's protagonist, who freezes because he ignores advice and commits big-time hubris). . . .

His ignorance, which could have been cured by a USGS quadrant and a Boy Scout manual, is what killed him. And while I feel for his parents, I have no sympathy for him. Such willful ignorance . . . amounts to disrespect for the land, and paradoxically demonstrates the same sort of arrogance that resulted in the Exxon Valdez spill—just another case of underprepared, overconfident men bumbling around out there and screwing up because they lacked the requisite humility. It's all a matter of degree.

McCandless's contrived asceticism and a pseudoliterary stance compound rather than reduce the fault. . . . McCandless's postcards, notes, and journals . . . read like the work of an above average, somewhat histrionic high school kid—or am I missing something?

The prevailing Alaska wisdom held that McCandless was simply one more dreamy half-cocked greenhorn who went into the country expecting to find answers to all his problems and instead found only mosquitoes and a lonely death. Dozens of marginal characters have marched off into the Alaska wilds over the years, never to reappear. A few have lodged firmly in the state's collective memory.

There was the countercultural idealist who passed through the village of Tanana in the early 1970s, announcing that he intended to spend the rest of his life "communing with Nature." In mid-winter a field biologist discovered all his belongings—two rifles, camping gear, a diary filled with incoherent ranting about truth and beauty and recondite ecological theory—in an empty cabin near Tofty, its interior filled with drifted snow. No trace of the young man was ever found.

A few years later there was the Vietnam vet who built a cabin on the Black River east of Chalkyitsik to "get away from people." By February he'd run out of food and starved, apparently without making any attempt to save himself, despite the fact that there

was another cabin stocked with meat just three miles downstream. Writing about this death, Edward Hoagland observed that Alaska is "not the best site in the world for eremitic experiments or peace-love theatrics."

And then there was the wayward genius I bumped into on the shore of Prince William Sound in 1981. I was camped in the woods outside Cordova, Alaska, trying in vain to find work as a deckhand on a seine boat, biding my time until the Department of Fish and Game announced the first "opener"—the start of the commercial salmon season. One rainy afternoon while walking into town, I crossed paths with an unkempt, agitated man who appeared to be about forty. He wore a bushlike black beard and shoulder-length hair, which he kept out of his face with a headband made from a filthy nylon strap. He was walking toward me at a brisk clip, hunched beneath the considerable weight of a six-foot log balanced across one shoulder.

I said hello as he approached, he mumbled a reply, and we paused to chat in the drizzle. I didn't ask why he was carrying a sodden log into the forest, where there seemed to be plenty of logs already. After a few minutes spent exchanging earnest banalities, we went our separate ways.

From our brief conversation I deduced that I had just met the celebrated eccentric whom the locals called the Mayor of Hippie Cove—a reference to a bight of tidewater north of town that was a magnet for long-haired transients, near which the Mayor had been living for some years. Most of the residents of Hippie Cove were, like me, summer squatters who'd come to Cordova hoping to score high-paying fishing jobs or, failing that, find work in the salmon canneries. But the Mayor was different.

His real name was Gene Rosellini. He was the eldest stepson of Victor Rosellini, a wealthy Seattle restaurateur, and cousin of Albert Rosellini, the immensely popular governor of Washington State from 1957 to 1965. As a young man Gene had been a good athlete and a brilliant student. He read obsessively, practiced yoga, became expert at the martial arts. He sustained a perfect 4.0 grade-point average through high school and college. At the University of Washington and later at Seattle University, he im-

mersed himself in anthropology, history, philosophy, and linguistics, accumulating hundreds of credit hours without collecting a degree. He saw no reason to. The pursuit of knowledge, he maintained, was a worthy objective in its own right and needed no external validation.

By and by Rosellini left academia, departed Seattle, and drifted north up the coast through British Columbia and the Alaska panhandle. In 1977, he landed in Cordova. There, in the forest at the edge of town, he decided to devote his life to an ambitious anthropological experiment.

"I was interested in knowing if it was possible to be independent of modern technology," he told an *Anchorage Daily News* reporter, Debra McKinney, a decade after arriving in Cordova. He wondered whether humans could live as our forebears had when mammoths and saber-toothed tigers roamed the land or whether our species had moved too far from its roots to survive without gunpowder, steel, and other artifacts of civilization. With the obsessive attention to detail that characterized his brand of dogged genius, Rosellini purged his life of all but the most primitive tools, which he fashioned from native materials with his own hands.

"He became convinced that humans had devolved into progressively inferior beings," McKinney explains, "and it was his goal to return to a natural state. He was forever experimenting with different eras—Roman times, the Iron Age, the Bronze Age. By the end his lifestyle had elements of the Neolithic."

He dined on roots, berries, and seaweed, hunted game with spears and snares, dressed in rags, endured the bitter winters. He seemed to relish the hardship. His home above Hippie Cove was a windowless hovel, which he built without benefit of saw or ax: "He'd spend days," says McKinney, "grinding his way through a log with a sharp stone."

As if merely subsisting according to his self-imposed rules weren't strenuous enough, Rosellini also exercised compulsively whenever he wasn't occupied with foraging. He filled his days with calisthenics, weight lifting, and running, often with a load

of rocks on his back. During one apparently typical summer he reported covering an average of eighteen miles daily.

Rosellini's "experiment" stretched on for more than a decade, but eventually he felt the question that inspired it had been answered. In a letter to a friend he wrote,

I began my adult life with the hypothesis that it would be possible to become a Stone Age native. For over 30 years, I programmed and conditioned myself to this end. In the last 10 of it, I would say I realistically experienced the physical, mental, and emotional reality of the Stone Age. But to borrow a Buddhist phrase, eventually came a setting face-to-face with pure reality. I learned that it is not possible for human beings as we know them to live off the land.

Rosellini appeared to accept the failure of his hypothesis with equanimity. At the age of forty-nine, he cheerfully announced that he had "recast" his goals and next intended to "walk around the world, living out of my backpack. I want to cover 18 to 27 miles a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year."

The trip never got off the ground. In November 1991, Rosellini was discovered lying facedown on the floor of his shack with a knife through his heart. The coroner determined that the fatal wound was self-inflicted. There was no suicide note. Rosellini left no hint as to why he had decided to end his life then and in that manner. In all likelihood nobody will ever know.

Rosellini's death and the story of his outlandish existence made the front page of the *Anchorage Daily News*. The travails of John Mallon Waterman, however, attracted less attention. Born in 1952, Waterman was raised in the same Washington suburbs that gave shape to Chris McCandless. His father, Guy Waterman, is a musician and freelance writer who, among other claims to modest fame, authored speeches for presidents, ex-presidents, and other prominent Washington politicians. Waterman père also happens to be an expert mountaineer who taught his three

sons to climb at an early age. John, the middle son, went rock climbing for the first time at thirteen.

He was a natural. John headed to the crags at every opportunity and trained obsessively when he couldn't climb. He cranked out four hundred push-ups every day and walked two and a half miles to school, fast. After walking home in the afternoon, he'd touch the front door and head back to the school to make a second round-trip.

In 1969, as a sixteen-year-old, John climbed Mt. McKinley (which he called Denali, as most Alaskans do, preferring the peak's Athapaskan name), becoming the third-youngest person to stand atop the highest landform on the continent. Over the next few years he pulled off even more impressive ascents in Alaska, Canada, and Europe. By the time he enrolled in the University of Alaska at Fairbanks, in 1973, Waterman had established a reputation as one of the most promising young alpinists in North America.

Waterman was a small person, barely five feet three inches tall, with an elfin face and the sinewy, inexhaustible physique of a gymnast. Acquaintances remember him as a socially awkward man-child with an outrageous sense of humor and a squirrely, almost manic-depressive personality.

"When I first met John," says James Brady, a fellow climber and college friend, "he was prancing across campus in a long black cape and blue Elton John-type glasses that had a star between the lenses. He carried around a cheap guitar held together with masking tape and would serenade anybody who'd listen with long, off-key songs about his adventures. Fairbanks has always attracted a lot of weird characters, but he was wacky even by Fairbanks standards. Yeah, John was out there. A lot of people didn't know how to handle him."

It is not difficult to imagine plausible causes for Waterman's instability. His parents, Guy and Emily Waterman, divorced when he was a teen, and Guy, according to a source close to the family, "essentially abandoned his sons following the divorce. He would have nothing more to do with the boys, and it crippled

John badly. Not long after their parents split up, John and his older brother, Bill, went to visit their father—but Guy refused to see them. Shortly after that, John and Bill went to Fairbanks to live with an uncle. At one point while they were up there, John got very excited because he heard that his father was coming to Alaska to climb. But when Guy arrived in the state he never took the trouble to see his sons; he came and went without even bothering to visit. It broke John's heart."

Bill, with whom John had an extremely close relationship, lost a leg as a teenager trying to hop a freight train. In 1973, Bill posted an enigmatic letter alluding vaguely to plans for an extended trip and then disappeared without a trace; to this day nobody knows what became of him. And after John learned to climb, eight of his intimates and climbing partners were killed in accidents or committed suicide. It's not much of a stretch to posit that such a rash of misfortune dealt a serious blow to Waterman's young psyche.

In March 1978, Waterman embarked on his most astonishing expedition, a solo ascent of Mt. Hunter's southeast spur, an unclimbed route that had previously defeated three teams of elite mountaineers. Writing about the feat in *Climbing* magazine, the journalist Glenn Randall reported that Waterman described his companions on the climb as "the wind, the snow and death":

Cornices as airy as meringue jutting over voids a mile deep. The vertical ice walls were as crumbly as a bucket of ice-cubes half-thawed, then refrozen. They led to ridges so narrow and so steep on both sides that straddling was the easiest solution. At times the pain and loneliness overwhelmed him and he broke down and cried.

After eighty-one days of exhausting, extremely hazardous climbing, Waterman reached the 14,573-foot summit of Hunter, which rises in the Alaska Range immediately south of Denali. Another nine weeks were required to make the only slightly less harrowing descent; in total Waterman spent 145 days alone on the mountain. When he got back to civilization, flat broke, he

borrowed twenty dollars from Cliff Hudson, the bush pilot who'd flown him out of the mountains, and returned to Fairbanks, where the only work he could find was washing dishes.

Waterman was nevertheless hailed as a hero by the small fraternity of Fairbanks climbers. He gave a public slide show of the Hunter ascent that Brady calls "unforgettable. It was an incredible performance, completely uninhibited. He poured out all his thoughts and feelings, his fear of failure, his fear of death. It was like you were there with him." In the months following the epic deed, though, Waterman discovered that instead of putting his demons to rest, success had merely agitated them.

Waterman's mind began to unravel. "John was very self-critical, always analyzing himself," Brady recalls. "And he'd always been kind of compulsive. He used to carry around a stack of clipboards and notepads. He'd take copious notes, creating a complete record of everything he did during the course of each day. I remember running into him once in downtown Fairbanks. As I walked up, he got out a clipboard, logged in the time he saw me and recorded what our conversation was about—which wasn't much at all. His notes on our meeting were three or four pages down, behind all the other stuff he'd already scribbled that day. Somewhere he must have had piles and piles and piles of notes like that, which I'm sure would have made sense to no one except John."

Soon thereafter Waterman ran for the local school board on a platform promoting unrestricted sex for students and the legalization of hallucinogenic drugs. He lost the election, to nobody's surprise save his own, but immediately launched another political campaign, this time for the presidency of the United States. He ran 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 the south face of Denali, the mountain's steepest aspect, in winter, with a minimum of food. He wanted to underscore the waste and immorality of the standard American diet. As part of

his training regimen for the climb, he immersed himself in bathtubs filled with ice.

Waterman flew to the Kahiltna Glacier in December 1979 to begin the ascent but called it off after only fourteen days. "Take me home," he reportedly told his bush pilot. "I don't want to die." Two months later, however, he prepared for a second attempt. But in Talkeetna, a village south of Denali that is the point of embarkation for most mountaineering expeditions into the Alaska Range, the cabin he was staying in caught fire and burned to rubble, incinerating both his equipment and the voluminous accumulation of notes, poetry, and personal journals that he regarded as his life's work.

Waterman was completely unhelmed by the loss. A day after the fire he committed himself to the Anchorage Psychiatric Institute but left after two weeks, convinced there was a conspiracy afoot to put him away permanently. Then, in the winter of 1981, he launched yet another solo attempt on Denali.

As if climbing the peak alone in winter weren't challenging enough, this time he decided to up the ante even further by beginning his ascent at sea level, which entailed walking 160 hard, circuitous miles from the shore of Cook Inlet just to reach the foot of the mountain. He started plodding north from tidewater in February, but his enthusiasm fizzled on the lower reaches of the Ruth Glacier, still thirty miles from the peak, so he aborted the attempt and retreated to Talkeetna. In March, however, he mustered his resolve once more and resumed his lonely trek. Before leaving town, he told the pilot Cliff Hudson, whom he regarded as a friend, "I won't be seeing you again."

It was an exceptionally cold March in the Alaska Range. Late in the month Mugs Stump crossed paths with Waterman on the upper Ruth Glacier. Stump, an alpinist of world renown who died on Denali in 1992, had just completed a difficult new route on a nearby peak, the Mooses Tooth. Shortly after his chance encounter with Waterman, Stump visited me in Seattle and remarked that "John didn't seem like he was all there. He was acting spacey and talking some crazy shit. Supposedly he was

doing this big winter ascent of Denali, but he had hardly any gear with him. He was wearing a cheap one-piece snowmobile suit and wasn't even carrying a sleeping bag. All he had in the way of food was a bunch of flour, some sugar, and a big can of Crisco."

In his book *Breaking Point*, Glenn Randall writes:

For several weeks, Waterman lingered in the area of the Sheldon Mountain House, a small cabin perched on the side of the Ruth Glacier in the heart of the range. Kate Bull, a friend of Waterman's who was climbing in the area at the time, reported that he was run down and less cautious than usual. He used the radio he had borrowed from Cliff [Hudson] to call him and have him fly in more supplies. Then he returned the radio he had borrowed.

"I won't be needing this any more," he said. The radio would have been his only means of calling for help.

Waterman was last placed on the Northwest Fork of the Ruth Glacier on April 1. His tracks led toward the east buttress of Denali, straight through a labyrinth of giant crevasses, evidence that he had made no apparent effort to circumvent obvious hazards. He was not seen again; it is assumed he broke through a thin snow bridge and plummeted to his death at the bottom of one of the deep fissures. The National Park Service searched Waterman's intended route from the air for a week following his disappearance but found no sign of him. Some climbers later discovered a note atop a box of Waterman's gear inside the Sheldon Mountain House. "3-13-81," it read. "My last kiss 1:42 PM."

Perhaps inevitably, parallels have been drawn between John Waterman and Chris McCandless. Comparisons have also been drawn between McCandless and Carl McCunn, an affable absentminded Texan who moved to Fairbanks during the 1970s oil boom and found lucrative employment on the Trans-Alaska Pipeline construction project. In early March 1981, as Waterman was making his final journey into the Alaska Range, McCunn

hired a bush pilot to drop him at a remote lake near the Coleen River, about seventy-five miles northeast of Fort Yukon on the southern margin of the Brooks Range.

A thirty-five-year-old amateur photographer, McCunn told friends that the main reason for the trip was to shoot pictures of wildlife. He flew into the country with five hundred rolls of film, .22- and .30-30-caliber rifles, a shotgun, and fourteen hundred pounds of provisions. His intention was to remain in the wilderness through August. Somehow, though, he neglected to arrange for the pilot to fly him back to civilization at summer's end, and it cost McCunn his life.

This astounding oversight wasn't a great surprise to Mark Stoppel, a young Fairbanks resident who had come to know McCunn well during the nine months they worked on the pipeline together, shortly before the lanky Texan departed for the Brooks Range.

"Carl was a friendly, extremely popular, down-home sort of guy," Stoppel recalls. "And he seemed like a smart guy. But there was a side to him that was a little bit dreamy, a little bit out of touch with reality. He was flamboyant. He liked to party hard. He could be extremely responsible, but he had a tendency to wing it sometimes, to act impulsively, to get by on bravado and style. No, I guess it really doesn't surprise me that Carl went out there and forgot to arrange to be picked up. But then I'm not easily shocked. I've had several friends who drowned or got murdered or died in weird accidents. In Alaska you get used to strange stuff happening."

In late August, as the days grew shorter and the air turned sharp and autumnal in the Brooks Range, McCunn began to worry when nobody arrived to fly him out. "I think I should have used more foresight about arranging my departure," he confessed to his diary, significant portions of which were published posthumously in a five-part story by Kris Capps in the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*. "I'll soon find out."

Week by week he could feel the accelerating advance of winter. As his food supply grew meager, McCunn deeply regretted toss-

ing all but a dozen of his shotgun shells into the lake. "I keep thinking of all the shotgun shells I threw away about two months ago," he wrote. "Had five boxes and when I kept seeing them sitting there I felt rather silly for having brought so many. (Felt like a war monger.) . . . real bright. Who would have known I might need them just to keep from starving."

Then, on a brisk September morning, deliverance seemed to be at hand. McCunn was stalking ducks with what remained of his ammunition when the stillness was rocked by the buzz of an airplane, which soon appeared overhead. The pilot, spotting the camp, circled twice at a low altitude for a closer look. McCunn waved wildly with a fluorescent-orange sleeping-bag cover. The aircraft was equipped with wheels rather than floats and thus couldn't land, but McCunn was certain he'd been seen and had no doubt the pilot would summon a floatplane to return for him. He was so sure of this he recorded in the journal that "I stopped waving after the first pass. I then got busy packing things up and getting ready to break camp."

But no airplane arrived that day, or the next day, or the next. Eventually, McCunn looked on the back of his hunting license and understood why. Printed on the little square of paper were drawings of emergency hand signals for communicating with aircraft from the ground. "I recall raising my right hand, shoulder high and shaking my fist on the plane's second pass," McCunn wrote. "It was a little cheer—like when your team scored a touchdown or something." Unfortunately, as he learned too late, raising a single arm is the universally recognized signal for "all OK; assistance not necessary." The signal for "SOS; send immediate help," is two upraised arms.

"That's probably why after they flew somewhat away they returned for one more pass and on that one I gave no signal at all (in fact I may have even turned my back to the plane as it passed)," McCunn mused philosophically. "They probably blew me off as a weirdo."

By the end of September, snow was piling up on the tundra, and the lake had frozen over. As the provisions he'd brought ran

out, McCunn made an effort to gather rose hips and snare rabbits. At one point he managed to scavenge meat from a diseased caribou that had wandered into the lake and died. By October, however, he had metabolized most of his body fat and was having difficulty staying warm during the long, cold nights. "Certainly someone in town should have figured something must be wrong—me not being back by now," he noted. But still no plane appeared.

"It would be just like Carl to assume that somebody would magically appear to save him," says Stoppel. "He was a Teamster—he drove a truck—so he had plenty of downtime on the job, just sitting on his butt inside his rig, daydreaming, which is how he came up with the idea for the Brooks Range trip. It was a serious quest for him: He spent the better part of a year thinking about it, planning it, figuring it out, talking to me during our breaks about what gear to take. But for all the careful planning he did, he also indulged in some wild fantasies.

"For instance," Stoppel continues, "Carl didn't want to fly into the bush alone. His big dream, originally, was to go off and live in the woods with some beautiful woman. He was hot for at least a couple of different girls who worked with us, and he spent a lot of time and energy trying to talk Sue or Barbara or whoever into accompanying him—which in itself was pretty much pure fantasyland. There was no way it was going to happen. I mean, at the pipeline camp where we worked, Pump Station 7, there were probably forty guys for every woman. But Carl was a dreamin' kind of dude, and right up until he flew into the Brooks Range, he kept hoping and hoping and hoping that one of these girls would change her mind and decide to go with him."

Similarly, Stoppel explains, "Carl was the sort of guy who would have unrealistic expectations that someone would eventually figure out he was in trouble and cover for him. Even as he was on the verge of starving, he probably still imagined that Big Sue was going to fly in at the last minute with a planeload of food and have this wild romance with him. But his fantasy

world was so far off the scale that nobody was able to connect with it. Carl just got hungrier and hungrier. By the time he finally understood that nobody was going to come rescue him, he'd shriveled up to the point where it was too late for him to do anything about it."

As McCunn's food supply dwindled to almost nothing, he wrote in his journal, "I'm getting more than worried. To be honest, I'm starting to be a bit scared." The thermometer dipped to minus five degrees Fahrenheit. Painful, pus-filled frostbite blisters formed on his fingers and toes.

In November he finished the last of his rations. He felt weak and dizzy; chills racked his gaunt frame. The diary recorded, "Hands and nose continue to get worse as do feet. Nose tip very swollen, blistered, and scabbed. . . . This is sure a slow and agonizing way to die." McCunn considered leaving the security of his camp and setting out on foot for Fort Yukon but concluded he wasn't strong enough, that he would succumb to exhaustion and the cold long before he got there.

"The part of the interior where Carl went is a remote, very blank part of Alaska," says Stoppel. "It gets colder than hell there in the winter. Some people in his situation could have figured out a way to walk out or maybe winter over, but to do that, you'd have to be extremely resourceful. You'd really need to have your shit together. You'd have to be a tiger, a killer, a fuckin' animal. And Carl was too laid back. He was a party boy."

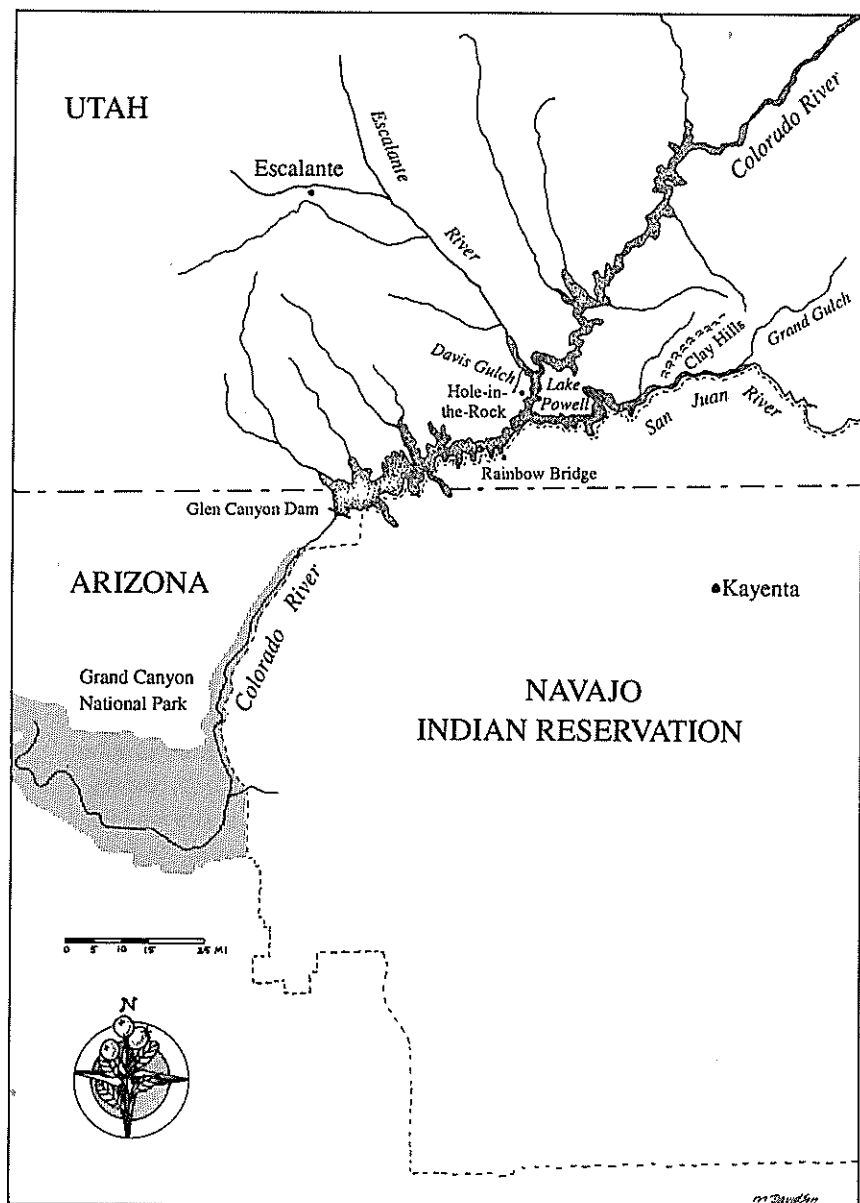
"I can't go on like this, I'm afraid," McCunn wrote sometime in late November near the end of his journal, which by now filled one hundred sheets of blue-lined loose-leaf notebook paper. "Dear God in Heaven, please forgive me my weakness and my sins. Please look over my family." And then he reclined in his wall tent, placed the muzzle of the .30-.30 against his head, and jerked his thumb down on the trigger. Two months later, on February 2, 1982, Alaska State Troopers came across his camp, looked inside the tent, and discovered the emaciated corpse frozen hard as stone.

There are similarities among Rosellini, Waterman, McCunn,

and McCandless. Like Rosellini and Waterman, McCandless was a seeker and had an impractical fascination with the harsh side of nature. Like Waterman and McCunn, he displayed a staggering paucity of common sense. But unlike Waterman, McCandless wasn't mentally ill. And unlike McCunn, he didn't go into the bush assuming someone would automatically appear to save his bacon before he came to grief.

McCandless didn't conform particularly well to the bush-casualty stereotype. Although he was rash, untutored in the ways of the backcountry, and incautious to the point of foolhardiness, he wasn't incompetent—he wouldn't have lasted 113 days if he were. And he wasn't a nutcase, he wasn't a sociopath, he wasn't an outcast. McCandless was something else—although precisely *what* is hard to say. A pilgrim, perhaps.

Some insight into the tragedy of Chris McCandless can be gained by studying predecessors cut from the same exotic cloth. And in order to do that, one must look beyond Alaska, to the bald-rock canyons of southern Utah. There, in 1934, a peculiar twenty-year-old boy walked into the desert and never came out. His name was Everett Ruess.



CHAPTER NINE

DAVIS GULCH

As to when I shall visit civilization, it will not be soon, I think. I have not tired of the wilderness; rather I enjoy its beauty and the vagrant life I lead, more keenly all the time. I prefer the saddle to the streetcar and star-sprinkled sky to a roof, the obscure and difficult trail, leading into the unknown, to any paved highway, and the deep peace of the wild to the discontent bred by cities. Do you blame me then for staying here, where I feel that I belong and am one with the world around me? It is true that I miss intelligent companionship, but there are so few with whom I can share the things that mean so much to me that I have learned to contain myself. It is enough that I am surrounded with beauty. . . .

Even from your scant description, I know that I could not bear the routine and humdrum of the life that you are forced to lead. I don't think I could ever settle down. I have known too much of the depths of life already, and I would prefer anything to an anticlimax.

THE LAST LETTER EVER RECEIVED FROM EVERETT RUESS,
TO HIS BROTHER, WALDO, DATED NOVEMBER 11, 1934

What Everett Ruess was after was beauty, and he conceived beauty in pretty romantic terms. We might be inclined to laugh at the extravagance of his beauty-worship if there were not something almost magnificent in his single-minded dedication to it. Esthetics as a parlor affectation is ludicrous and sometimes a little obscene; as a way of life it sometimes attains dignity. If we laugh at Everett Ruess we shall have to laugh at John Muir, because there was little difference between them except age.

WALLACE STEGNER,
MORMON COUNTRY

Davis Creek is only a trickle during most of the year and sometimes not even that. Originating at the foot of a high rock battlement known as Fiftymile Point, the stream flows just four miles across the pink sandstone slabs of southern Utah before surrendering its modest waters to Lake Powell, the giant reservoir that stretches one hundred ninety miles above Glen Canyon Dam. Davis Gulch is a small watershed by any measure, but a lovely one, and travelers through this dry, hard country have for centuries relied on the oasis that exists at the bottom of the slotlike defile. Eerie nine-hundred-year-old petroglyphs and pictographs decorate its sheer walls. Crumbling stone dwellings of the long-vanished Kayenta Anasazi, the creators of this rock art, nestle in protective nooks. Ancient Anasazi potsherds mingle in the sand with rusty tin cans discarded by turn-of-the-century stockmen, who grazed and watered their animals in the canyon.

For most of its short length, Davis Gulch exists as a deep, twisting gash in the slickrock, narrow enough in places to spit across, lined by overhanging sandstone walls that bar access to the canyon floor. There is a hidden route into the gulch at its lower end, however. Just upstream from where Davis Creek flows into Lake Powell, a natural ramp zigzags down from the canyon's west rim. Not far above the creek bottom the ramp ends, and a crude staircase appears, chiseled into the soft sandstone by Mormon cattlemen nearly a century ago.

The country surrounding Davis Gulch is a desiccated expanse of bald rock and brick-red sand. Vegetation is lean. Shade from the withering sun is virtually nonexistent. To descend into the confines of the canyon, however, is to arrive in another world. Cottonwoods lean gracefully over drifts of flowering prickly pear. Tall grasses sway in the breeze. The ephemeral bloom of a sego lily peeks from the toe of a ninety-foot stone arch, and canyon wrens call back and forth in plaintive tones from a thatch of scrub oak. High above the creek a spring seeps from the cliff face, irrigating a growth of moss and maidenhair fern that hangs from the rock in lush green mats.

Six decades ago in this enchanting hideaway, less than a mile

downstream from where the Mormon steps meet the floor of the gulch, twenty-year-old Everett Ruess carved his nom de plume into the canyon wall below a panel of Anasazi pictographs, and he did so again in the doorway of a small masonry structure built by the Anasazi for storing grain. "NEMO 1934," he scrawled, no doubt moved by the same impulse that compelled Chris McCandless to inscribe "Alexander Supertramp/May 1992" on the wall of the Sushana bus—an impulse not so different, perhaps, from that which inspired the Anasazi to embellish the rock with their own now-indecipherable symbols. In any case, shortly after Ruess carved his mark into the sandstone, he departed Davis Gulch and mysteriously disappeared, apparently by design. An extensive search shed no light on his whereabouts. He was simply gone, swallowed whole by the desert. Sixty years later we still know next to nothing about what became of him.

Everett was born in Oakland, California, in 1914, the younger of two sons raised by Christopher and Stella Ruess. Christopher, a graduate of Harvard Divinity School, was a poet, a philosopher, and a Unitarian minister, although he earned his keep as a bureaucrat in the California penal system. Stella was a headstrong woman with bohemian tastes and driving artistic ambitions, for both herself and her kin; she self-published a literary journal, the *Ruess Quartette*, the cover of which was emblazoned with the family maxim: "Glorify the hour." A tight-knit bunch, the Ruesses were also a nomadic family, moving from Oakland to Fresno to Los Angeles to Boston to Brooklyn to New Jersey to Indiana before finally settling in southern California when Everett was fourteen.

In Los Angeles, Everett attended the Otis Art School and Hollywood High. As a sixteen-year-old he embarked on his first long solo trip, spending the summer of 1930 hitchhiking and trekking through Yosemite and Big Sur, ultimately winding up in Carmel. Two days after arriving in the latter community, he brazenly knocked on the door of Edward Weston, who was sufficiently charmed by the overwrought young man to humor him. Over the

next two months the eminent photographer encouraged the boy's uneven but promising efforts at painting and block printing, and permitted Ruess to hang around his studio with his own sons, Neil and Cole.

At the end of the summer, Everett returned home only long enough to earn a high school diploma, which he received in January 1931. Less than a month later he was on the road again, tramping alone through the canyon lands of Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico, then a region nearly as sparsely populated and wrapped in mystique as Alaska is today. Except for a short, unhappy stint at UCLA (he dropped out after a single semester, to his father's lasting dismay), two extended visits with his parents, and a winter in San Francisco (where he insinuated himself into the company of Dorothea Lange, Ansel Adams, and the painter Maynard Dixon), Ruess would spend the remainder of his meteoric life on the move, living out of a backpack on very little money, sleeping in the dirt, cheerfully going hungry for days at a time.

Ruess was, in the words of Wallace Stegner, "a callow romantic, an adolescent esthete, an atavistic wanderer of the wastelands":

At eighteen, in a dream, he saw himself plodding through jungles, chinning up the ledges of cliffs, wandering through the romantic waste places of the world. No man with any of the juices of boyhood in him has forgotten those dreams. The peculiar thing about Everett Ruess was that he went out and did the things he dreamed about, not simply for a two-weeks' vacation in the civilized and trimmed wonderlands, but for months and years in the very midst of wonder. . . .

Deliberately he punished his body, strained his endurance, tested his capacity for strenuousness. He took out deliberately over trails that Indians and old timers warned him against. He tackled cliffs that more than once left him dangling halfway between talus and rim. . . . From his camps by the water pockets or the canyons or high on the timbered ridges of Navajo Mountain he wrote long, lush, enthusiastic letters to his family and friends,

damning the stereotypes of civilization, chanting his barbaric adolescent yawp into the teeth of the world.

Ruess churned out many such letters, which bore the postmarks of the remote settlements through which he passed: Kayenta, Chinle, Lukachukai; Zion Canyon, Grand Canyon, Mesa Verde; Escalante, Rainbow Bridge, Canyon de Chelly. Reading this correspondence (collected in W. L. Rusho's meticulously researched biography, *Everett Ruess: A Vagabond for Beauty*), one is struck by Ruess's craving for connection with the natural world and by his almost incendiary passion for the country through which he walked. "I had some terrific experiences in the wilderness since I wrote you last—overpowering, overwhelming," he gushed to his friend Cornel Tengel. "But then I am always being overwhelmed. I require it to sustain life."

Everett Ruess's correspondence reveals uncanny parallels between Ruess and Chris McCandless. Here are excerpts from three of Ruess's letters:

I have been thinking more and more that I shall always be a lone wanderer of the wilderness. God, how the trail lures me. You cannot comprehend its resistless fascination for me. After all the lone trail is the best. . . . I'll never stop wandering. And when the time comes to die, I'll find the wildest, loneliest, most desolate spot there is.

The beauty of this country is becoming part of me. I feel more detached from life and somehow gentler. . . . I have some good friends here, but no one who really understands why I am here or what I do. I don't know of anyone, though, who would have more than a partial understanding; I have gone too far alone.

I have always been unsatisfied with life as most people live it. Always I want to live more intensely and richly.

In my wanderings this year I have taken more chances and had more wild adventures than ever before. And what magnificent country I have seen—wild, tremendous wasteland stretches,

lost mesas, blue mountains rearing upward from the vermilion sands of the desert, canyons five feet wide at the bottom and hundreds of feet deep, cloudbursts roaring down unnamed canyons, and hundreds of houses of the cliff dwellers, abandoned a thousand years ago.

A half century later McCandless sounds eerily like Ruess when he declares in a postcard to Wayne Westerberg that "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." And echoes of Ruess can be heard, as well, in McCandless's last letter to Ronald Franz (see pages 56–58).

Ruess was just as romantic as McCandless, if not more so, and equally heedless of personal safety. Clayborn Lockett, an archaeologist who briefly employed Ruess as a cook while excavating an Anasazi cliff dwelling in 1934, told Rusho that "he was appalled by the seemingly reckless manner in which Everett moved around dangerous cliffs."

Indeed, Ruess himself boasts in one of his letters, "Hundreds of times I have trusted my life to crumbling sandstone and nearly vertical edges in the search for water or cliff dwellings. Twice I was nearly gored to death by a wild bull. But always, so far, I've escaped unscathed and gone forth to other adventures." And in his final letter Ruess nonchalantly confesses to his brother:

I have had a few narrow escapes from rattlers and crumbling cliffs. The last misadventure occurred when Chocolatero [his burro] stirred up some wild bees. A few more stings might have been too much for me. I was three or four days getting my eyes open and recovering the use of my hands.

Also like McCandless, Ruess was undeterred by physical discomfort; at times he seemed to welcome it. "For six days I've been suffering from the semi-annual poison ivy case—my sufferings are far from over," he tells his friend Bill Jacobs. He goes on:

For two days I couldn't tell whether I was dead or alive. I writhed and twisted in the heat, with swarms of ants and flies crawling over me, while the poison oozed and crusted on my face and arms and back. I ate nothing—there was nothing to do but suffer philosophically. . . .

I get it every time, but I refuse to be driven out of the woods.

And like McCandless, upon embarking on his terminal odyssey, Ruess adopted a new name or, rather, a series of new names. In a letter dated March 1, 1931, he informs his family that he has taken to calling himself Lan Rameau and requests that they "please respect my brush name. . . . How do you say it in French? *Nomme de brousse*, or what?" Two months later, however, another letter explains that "I have changed my name again, to Evert Rulan. Those who knew me formerly thought my name was freakish and an affectation of Frenchiness." and then in August of that same year, with no explanation, he goes back to calling himself Everett Ruess and continues to do so for the next three years—until wandering into Davis Gulch. There, for some unknowable reason, Everett twice etched the name Nemo—Latin for "nobody"—into the soft Navajo sandstone—and then vanished. He was twenty years old.

The last letters anyone received from Ruess were posted from the Mormon settlement of Escalante, fifty-seven miles north of Davis Gulch, on November 11, 1934. Addressed to his parents and his brother, they indicate that he would be incommunicado for "a month or two." Eight days after mailing them, Ruess encountered two sheepherders about a mile from the gulch and spent two nights at their camp; these men were the last people known to have seen the youth alive.

Some three months after Ruess departed Escalante, his parents received a bundle of unopened mail forwarded from the postmaster at Marble Canyon, Arizona, where Everett was long overdue. Worried, Christopher and Stella Ruess contacted the authorities in Escalante, who organized a search party in early March 1935. Starting from the sheep camp where Ruess was last seen, they began combing the surrounding country and very

quickly found Everett's two burros at the bottom of Davis Gulch, grazing contentedly behind a makeshift corral fashioned from brush and tree limbs.

The burros were confined in the upper canyon, just upstream from where the Mormon steps intersect the floor of the gulch; a short distance downstream the searchers found unmistakable evidence of Ruess's camp, and then, in the doorway of an Anasazi granary below a magnificent natural arch, they came across "NEMO 1934" carved into a stone slab. Four Anasazi pots were carefully arranged on a rock nearby. Three months later searchers came across another Nemo graffito a little farther down the gulch (the rising waters of Lake Powell, which began to fill upon the completion of Glen Canyon Dam, in 1963, have long since erased both inscriptions), but except for the burros and their tack, none of Ruess's possessions—his camping paraphernalia, journals, and paintings—was ever found.

It is widely believed that Ruess fell to his death while scrambling on one or another canyon wall. Given the treacherous nature of the local topography (most of the cliffs that riddle the region are composed of Navajo sandstone, a crumbly stratum that erodes into smooth, bulging precipices) and Ruess's penchant for dangerous climbing, this is a credible scenario. Careful searches of cliffs near and far, however, have failed to unearth any human remains.

And how to account for the fact that Ruess apparently left the gulch with a heavy load of gear but without his pack animals? These bewildering circumstances have led some investigators to conclude that Ruess was murdered by a team of cattle rustlers known to have been in the area, who then stole his belongings and buried his remains or threw them into the Colorado River. This theory, too, is plausible, but no concrete evidence exists to prove it.

Shortly after Everett's disappearance his father suggested that the boy had probably been inspired to call himself Nemo by Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*—a book Everett read many times—in which the purehearted protagonist, Captain Nemo, flees civilization and severs his "every tie upon the

earth." Everett's biographer, W. L. Rusho, agrees with Christopher Ruess's assessment, arguing that Everett's "withdrawal from organized society, his disdain for worldly pleasures, and his signatures as *NEMO* in Davis Gulch, all strongly suggest that he closely identified with the Jules Verne character."

Ruess's apparent fascination with Captain Nemo has fed speculation among more than a few Ruess mythographers that Everett pulled a fast one on the world after leaving Davis Gulch and is—or was—very much alive, quietly residing somewhere under an assumed identity. A year ago, while filling my truck with gas in Kingman, Arizona, I happened to strike up a conversation about Ruess with the middle-aged pump attendant, a small, twitchy man with flecks of Skoal staining the corners of his mouth. Speaking with persuasive conviction, he swore that "he knew a fella who'd definitely bumped into Ruess" in the late 1960s at a remote hogan on the Navajo Indian Reservation. According to the attendant's friend, Ruess was married to a Navajo woman, with whom he'd raised at least one child. The veracity of this and other reports of relatively recent Ruess sightings, needless to say, is extremely suspect.

Ken Sleight, who has spent as much time investigating the riddle of Everett Ruess as any other person, is convinced that the boy died in 1934 or early 1935 and believes he knows how Ruess met his end. Sleight, sixty-five years old, is a professional river guide and desert rat with a Mormon upbringing and a reputation for insolence. When Edward Abbey was writing *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, his picaresque novel about eco-terrorism in the canyon country, his pal Ken Sleight was said to have inspired the character Seldom Seen Smith. Sleight has lived in the region for forty years, visited virtually all the places Ruess visited, talked to many people who crossed paths with Ruess, taken Ruess's older brother, Waldo, into Davis Gulch to visit the site of Everett's disappearance.

"Waldo thinks Everett was murdered," Sleight says. "But I don't think so. I lived in Escalante for two years. I've talked with the folks who are accused of killing him, and I just don't think they did it. But who knows? You can't never really tell what a per-

son does in secret. Other folks believe Everett fell off a cliff. Well, yeah, he coulda done that. It be an easy thing to do in that country. But I don't think that's what happened.

"I tell you what I think: I think he drowned."

Years ago, while hiking down Grand Gulch, a tributary of the San Juan River some forty-five miles due east of Davis Gulch, Sleight discovered the name Nemo carved into the soft mud mortar of an Anasazi granary. Sleight speculates that Ruess inscribed this Nemo not long after departing Davis Gulch.

"After corralling his burros in Davis," says Sleight, "Ruess hid all his stuff in a cave somewhere and took off, playing Captain Nemo. He had Indian friends down on the Navajo Reservation, and that's where I think he was heading." A logical route to Navajo country would have taken Ruess across the Colorado River at Hole-in-the-Rock, then along a rugged trail pioneered in 1880 by Mormon settlers across Wilson Mesa and the Clay Hills, and finally down Grand Gulch to the San Juan River, across which lay the reservation. "Everett carved his Nemo on the ruin in Grand Gulch, about a mile below where Collins Creek comes in, then continued on down to the San Juan. And when he tried to swim across the river, he drowned. That's what I think."

Sleight believes that if Ruess had made it across the river alive and reached the reservation, it would have been impossible for him to conceal his presence "even if he was still playing his Nemo game. Everett was a loner, but he liked people too damn much to stay down there and live in secret the rest of his life. A lot of us are like that—I'm like that, Ed Abbey was like that, and it sounds like this McCandless kid was like that: We like companionship, see, but we can't stand to be around people for very long. So we go get ourselves lost, come back for a while, then get the hell out again. And that's what Everett was doing.

"Everett was strange," Sleight concedes. "Kind of different. But him and McCandless, at least they tried to follow their dream. That's what was great about them. They tried. Not many do."

In attempting to understand Everett Ruess and Chris McCandless, it can be illuminating to consider their deeds in a larger con-

text. It is helpful to look at counterparts from a distant place and a century far removed.

Off the southeastern coast of Iceland sits a low barrier island called Papós. Treeless and rocky, perpetually clobbered by gales howling off the North Atlantic, it takes its name from its first settlers, now long gone, the Irish monks known as *papar*. Walking this gnarled shore one summer afternoon, I blundered upon a matrix of faint stone rectangles embedded in the tundra: vestiges of the monks' ancient dwellings, hundreds of years older, even, than the Anasazi ruins in Davis Gulch.

The monks arrived as early as the fifth and sixth centuries A.D., having sailed and rowed from the west coast of Ireland. Setting out in small, open boats called curraghs, built from cowhide stretched over light wicker frames, they crossed one of the most treacherous stretches of ocean in the world without knowing what, if anything, they'd find on the other side.

The *papar* risked their lives—and lost them in untold droves—not in the pursuit of wealth or personal glory or to claim new lands in the name of any despot. As the great arctic explorer and Nobel laureate Fridtjof Nansen points out, "these remarkable voyages were . . . undertaken 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. The monks' response was to climb into their curraghs and row off toward Greenland. They were drawn across the storm-racked ocean, drawn west past the edge of the known world, by nothing more than a hunger of the spirit, a yearning of such queer intensity that it beggars the modern imagination.

Reading of these monks, one is moved by their courage, their reckless innocence, and the urgency of their desire. Reading of these monks, one can't help thinking of Everett Ruess and Chris McCandless.

eight pounds before her appetite finally returned. Walt reacted the other way, eating compulsively, and gained eight pounds.

A month later Billie sits at her dining room table, sifting through the pictorial record of Chris's final days. It is all she 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 kind of chances," Billie protests through her tears. "I just don't understand it at all."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE STIKINE ICE CAP

I grew up exuberant in body but with a nervy, craving mind. It was wanting something more, something tangible. It sought for reality intensely, always as if it were not there. . . .

But you see at once what I do. I climb.

JOHN MENLOVE EDWARDS,

"LETTER FROM A MAN"

I cannot now tell exactly, it was so long ago, under what circumstances I first ascended, only that I shuddered as I went along (I have an indistinct remembrance of having been out overnight alone),—and then I steadily ascended along a rocky ridge half clad with stunted trees, where wild beasts haunted, till I lost myself quite in the upper air and clouds, seeming to pass an imaginary line which separates a hill, mere earth heaped up, from a mountain, into a superterranean grandeur and sublimity. What distinguishes that summit above the earthly line, is that it is unhand-selled, awful, grand. It can never become familiar; you are lost the moment you set foot there. You know the path, but wander, thrilled, over the bare and pathless rock, as if it were solidified air and cloud. That rocky, misty summit, secreted in the clouds, was far more thrillingly awful and sublime than the crater of a volcano spouting fire.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU,

JOURNAL

In the final postcard he sent to Wayne Westerberg, McCandless had written, "If this adventure proves fatal and you don't ever

hear from me again I want you to know you're a great man. I now walk into the wild." When the adventure did indeed prove fatal, this melodramatic declaration fueled considerable speculation that the boy had been bent on suicide from the beginning, that when he walked into the bush, he had no intention of ever walking out again. I'm not so sure, however.

My suspicion that McCandless's death was unplanned, that it was a terrible accident, comes from reading those few documents he left behind and from listening to the men and women who spent time with him over the final year of his life. But my sense of Chris McCandless's intentions comes, too, from a more personal perspective.

As a youth, I am told, I was willful, self-absorbed, intermittently reckless, moody. I disappointed my father in the usual ways. Like McCandless, figures of male authority aroused in me a confusing medley of corked fury and hunger to please. If something captured my undisciplined imagination, I pursued it with a zeal bordering on obsession, and from the age of seventeen until my late twenties that something was mountain climbing.

I devoted most of my waking hours to fantasizing about, and then undertaking, ascents of remote mountains in Alaska and Canada—obscure spires, steep and frightening, that nobody in the world beyond a handful of climbing geeks had ever heard of. Some good actually came of this. By fixing my sights on one summit after another, I managed to keep my bearings through some thick postadolescent fog. Climbing *mattered*. The danger bathed the world in a halogen glow that caused everything—the sweep of the rock, the orange and yellow lichens, the texture of the clouds—to stand out in brilliant relief. Life thrummed at a higher pitch. The world was made real.

In 1977, while brooding on a Colorado barstool, picking unhappily at my existential scabs, I got it into my head to climb a mountain called the Devils Thumb. An intrusion of diorite sculpted by ancient glaciers into a peak of immense and spectacular proportions, the Thumb is especially imposing from the north: Its great north wall, which had never been climbed, rises

sheer and clean for six thousand feet from the glacier at its base, twice the height of Yosemite's El Capitan. I would go to Alaska, ski inland from the sea across thirty miles of glacial ice, and ascend this mighty *nordwand*. I decided, moreover, to do it alone.

I was twenty-three, a year younger than Chris McCandless when he walked into the Alaska bush. My reasoning, if one can call it that, was inflamed by the scattershot passions of youth and a literary diet overly rich in the works of Nietzsche, Kerouac, and John Menlove Edwards, the latter a deeply troubled writer and psychiatrist who, before putting an end to his life with a cyanide capsule in 1958, had been one of the preeminent British rock climbers of the day. Edwards regarded climbing as a "psycho-neurotic tendency"; he climbed not for sport but to find refuge from the inner torment that framed his existence.

As I formulated my plan to climb the Thumb, I was dimly aware that I might be getting in over my head. But that only added to the scheme's appeal. That it wouldn't be easy was the whole point.

I owned a book in which there was a photograph of the Devils Thumb, a black-and-white image taken by an eminent glaciologist named Maynard Miller. In Miller's aerial photo the mountain looked particularly sinister: a huge fin of exfoliated stone, dark and smeared with ice. The picture held an almost pornographic fascination for me. How would it feel, I wondered, to be balanced on that bladelike summit ridge, worrying over the storm clouds building in the distance, hunched against the wind and dunning cold, contemplating the drop on either side? Could a person keep a lid on his terror long enough to reach the top and get back down?

And if I did pull it off . . . I was afraid to let myself imagine the triumphant aftermath, lest I invite a jinx. But I never had any doubt that climbing the Devils Thumb would transform my life. How could it not?

I was working then as an itinerant carpenter, framing condominiums in Boulder for \$3.50 an hour. One afternoon, after nine hours of humping two-by-tens and driving sixteen-penny nails, I

told my boss I was quitting: "No, not in a couple of weeks, Steve; right now was more like what I had in mind." It took me a few hours to clear my tools and other belongings out of the crummy job-site trailer where I'd been squatting. And then I climbed into my car and departed for Alaska. I was surprised, as always, by how easy the act of leaving was, and how good it felt. The world was suddenly rich with possibility.

The Devils Thumb demarcates the Alaska-British Columbia border east of Petersburg, a fishing village accessible only by boat or plane. There was regular jet service to Petersburg, but the sum of my liquid assets amounted to a 1960 Pontiac Star Chief and two hundred dollars in cash, not even enough for one-way airfare. So I drove as far as Gig Harbor, Washington, abandoned the car, and inveigled a ride on a northbound salmon seiner.

The *Ocean Queen* was a stout, no-nonsense workboat built from thick planks of Alaska yellow cedar, rigged for long-lining and purse seining. In exchange for a ride north, I had only to take regular turns at the helm—a four-hour wheel watch every twelve hours—and help tie endless skates of halibut gear. The slow journey up the Inside Passage unfolded in a gauzy reverie of anticipation. I was under way, propelled by an imperative that was beyond my ability to control or comprehend.

Sunlight glinted off the water as we chugged up the Strait of Georgia. Slopes rose precipitously from the water's edge, bearded in a gloom of hemlock and cedar and devil's club. Gulls wheeled overhead. Off Malcolm Island the boat split a pod of seven orcas. Their dorsal fins, some as tall as a man, cut the glassy surface within spitting distance of the rail.

Our second night out, two hours before dawn, I was steering from the flying bridge when the head of a mule deer materialized in the spotlight's glare. The animal was in the middle of Fitz Hugh Sound, swimming through the cold black water more than a mile from the Canadian shore. Its retinas burned red in the blinding beam; it looked exhausted and crazed with fear. I swung the wheel to starboard, the boat slid past, and the deer bobbed twice in our wake before vanishing into the darkness.

Most of the Inside Passage follows narrow, fjordlike channels. As we passed Dundas Island, though, the vista suddenly widened. To the west now was open ocean, the full sweep of the Pacific, and the boat pitched and rolled on a twelve-foot westerly swell. Waves broke over the rail. In the distance off the starboard bow, a jumble of low, craggy peaks appeared, and my pulse quickened at the sight. Those mountains heralded the approach of my desideratum. We had arrived in Alaska.

Five days out of Gig Harbor, the *Ocean Queen* docked in Petersburg to take on fuel and water. I hopped over the gunwale, shouldered my heavy backpack, and walked down the pier in the rain. At a loss for what to do next, I took refuge under the eaves of the town library and sat on my load.

Petersburg is a small town, and prim by Alaska standards. A tall, loose-limbed woman walked by and struck up a conversation. Her name was Kai, she said, Kai Sandburn. She was cheerful, outgoing, easy to talk to. I confessed my climbing plans to her, and to my relief she neither laughed nor acted as though they were particularly strange. "When the weather's clear," she simply offered, "you can see the Thumb from town. It's pretty. It's over there, right across Frederick Sound." I followed her outstretched arm, which gestured to the east, at a low wall of clouds.

Kai invited me home for dinner. Later I unrolled my sleeping bag on her floor. Long after she fell asleep, I lay awake in the next room, listening to her peaceful exhalations. I had convinced myself for many months that I didn't really mind the absence of intimacy in my life, the lack of real human connection, but the pleasure I'd felt in this woman's company—the ring of her laughter, the innocent touch of a hand on my arm—exposed my self-deceit and left me hollow and aching.

Petersburg lies on an island; the Devils Thumb is on the mainland, rising from a frozen bald known as the Stikine Ice Cap. Vast and labyrinthine, the ice cap rides the spine of the Boundary Ranges like a carapace, from which the long blue tongues of numerous glaciers inch down toward the sea under the weight of the ages. To reach the foot of the mountain, I had to find a

ride across twenty-five miles of saltwater and then ski thirty miles up one of these glaciers, the Baird, a valley of ice that hadn't seen a human footprint, I was fairly certain, in many, many years.

I shared a ride with some tree planters to the head of Thomas Bay, where I was put ashore on a gravel beach. The broad, rubble-strewn terminus of the glacier was visible a mile away. Half an hour later I scrambled up its frozen snout and began the long plod to the Thumb. The ice was bare of snow and embedded with a coarse black grit that crunched beneath the steel points of my crampons.

After three or four miles I came to the snow line and there exchanged crampons for skis. Putting the boards on my feet cut fifteen pounds from the awful load on my back and made the going faster besides. But the snow concealed many of the glacier's crevasses, increasing the danger.

In Seattle, anticipating this hazard, I'd stopped at a hardware store and purchased a pair of stout aluminum curtain rods, each ten feet long. I lashed the rods together to form a cross, then strapped the rig to the hip belt of my backpack so the poles extended horizontally over the snow. Staggering slowly up the glacier beneath my overloaded pack, bearing this ridiculous metal cross, I felt like an odd sort of *penitente*. Were I to break through the veneer of snow over a hidden crevasse, though, the curtain rods would—I hoped mightily—span the slot and keep me from dropping into the frozen depths of the Baird.

For two days I slogged steadily up the valley of ice. The weather was good, the route obvious and without major obstacles. Because I was alone, however, even the mundane seemed charged with meaning. The ice looked colder and more mysterious, the sky a cleaner shade of blue. The unnamed peaks towering over the glacier were bigger and comelier and infinitely more menacing than they would have been were I in the company of another person. And my emotions were similarly amplified: The highs were higher; the periods of despair were deeper and darker. To a self-possessed young man inebriated with the unfolding drama of his own life, all of this held enormous appeal.

Three days after leaving Petersburg, I arrived beneath the Stikine Ice Cap proper, where the long arm of the Baird joins the main body of ice. Here the glacier spills abruptly over the edge of a high plateau, dropping seaward through a gap between two mountains in a phantasmagoria of shattered ice. As I stared at the tumult from a mile away, for the first time since leaving Colorado, I was truly afraid.

The icefall was crisscrossed with crevasses and tottering seracs. From afar it brought to mind a bad train wreck, as if scores of ghostly white boxcars had derailed at the lip of the ice cap and tumbled down the slope willy-nilly. The closer I got, the more unpleasant it looked. My ten-foot curtain rods seemed a poor defense against crevasses that were forty feet across and hundreds of feet deep. Before I could plot a logical course through the icefall, the wind came up, and snow began to slant hard out of the clouds, stinging my face and reducing visibility to almost nothing.

For the better part of the day, I groped blindly through the labyrinth in the whiteout, retracing my steps from one dead end to another. Time after time I'd think I'd found a way out, only to wind up in a deep-blue cul-de-sac or stranded atop a detached pillar of ice. My efforts were lent a sense of urgency by the noises emanating from beneath my feet. A madrigal of creaks and sharp reports—the sort of protest a large fir limb makes when it's slowly bent to the breaking point—served as a reminder that it is the nature of glaciers to move, the habit of seracs to topple.

I put a foot through a snow bridge spanning a slot so deep I couldn't see the bottom of it. A little later I broke through another bridge to my waist; the poles kept me out of the hundred-foot crevasse, but after I extricated myself, I bent double with dry heaves, thinking about what it would be like to be lying in a pile at the bottom of the crevasse, waiting for death to come, with nobody aware of how or where I'd met my end.

Night had nearly fallen by the time I emerged from the top of the serac slope onto the empty, wind-scoured expanse of the high glacial plateau. In shock and chilled to the core, I skied far enough past the icefall to put its rumblings out of earshot,

pitched the tent, crawled into my sleeping bag, and shivered myself into a fitful sleep.

I had planned on spending between three weeks and a month on the Stikine Ice Cap. Not relishing the prospect of carrying a four-week load of food, heavy winter camping gear, and climbing hardware all the way up the Baird on my back, I had paid a bush pilot in Petersburg \$150—the last of my cash—to have six cardboard cartons of supplies dropped from an airplane when I reached the foot of the Thumb. On his map I'd showed the pilot exactly where I intended to be and told him to give me three days to get there; he promised to fly over and make the drop as soon thereafter as the weather permitted.

On May 6, I set up a base camp on the ice cap just northeast of the Thumb and waited for the airdrop. For the next four days it snowed, nixing any chance for a flight. Too terrified of crevasses to wander far from camp, I spent most of my time recumbent in the tent—the ceiling was too low to allow my sitting upright—fighting a rising chorus of doubts.

As the days passed, I grew increasingly anxious. I had no radio nor any other means of communicating with the outside world. It had been many years since anyone had visited this part of the Stikine Ice Cap, and many more would likely pass before anyone would again. I was nearly out of stove fuel and down to a single chunk of cheese, my last package of Ramen noodles, and half a box of Cocoa Puffs. This, I figured, could sustain me for three or four more days if need be, but then what would I do? It would take only two days to ski back down the Baird to Thomas Bay, but a week or more might easily pass before a fisherman happened by who could give me a lift back to Petersburg (the tree planters with whom I'd ridden over were camped fifteen miles down the impassable headland-studded coast and could be reached only by boat or plane).

When I went to bed on the evening of May 10, it was still snowing and blowing hard. Hours later I heard a faint, momentary whine, scarcely louder than a mosquito. I tore open the tent door. Most of the clouds had lifted, but there was no airplane in sight.

The whine returned, more insistently this time. Then I saw it: a tiny red-and-white fleck high in the western sky, droning my way.

A few minutes later the plane passed directly overhead. The pilot, however, was unaccustomed to glacier flying, and he'd badly misjudged the scale of the terrain. Worried about flying too low and getting nailed by unexpected turbulence, he stayed at least a thousand feet above me—believing all the while he was just off the deck—and never saw my tent in the flat evening light. My waving and screaming were to no avail; from his altitude, I was indistinguishable from a pile of rocks. For the next hour he circled the ice cap, scanning its barren contours without success. But the pilot, to his credit, appreciated the gravity of my predicament and didn't give up. Frantic, I tied my sleeping bag to the end of one of the curtain rods and waved it for all I was worth. The plane banked sharply and headed straight at me.

The pilot buzzed my tent three times in quick succession, dropping two boxes on each pass; then the airplane disappeared over a ridge, and I was alone. As silence again settled over the glacier, I felt abandoned, vulnerable, lost. I realized that I was sobbing. Embarrassed, I halted the blubbing by screaming obscenities until I grew hoarse.

I awoke early on May 11 to clear skies and the relatively warm temperature of twenty degrees Fahrenheit. Startled by the good weather, mentally unprepared to commence the actual climb, I hurriedly packed up a rucksack nonetheless and began skiing toward the base of the Thumb. Two previous Alaska expeditions had taught me that I couldn't afford to waste a rare day of perfect weather.

A small hanging glacier extends out from the lip of the ice cap, leading up and across the north face of the Thumb like a catwalk. My plan was to follow this catwalk to a prominent rock prow in the center of the wall and thereby execute an end run around the ugly, avalanche-swept lower half of the face.

The catwalk turned out to be a series of fifty-degree ice fields blanketed with knee-deep powder snow and riddled with crevasses. The depth of the snow made the going slow and ex-

hausting; by the time I front-pointed up the overhanging wall of the uppermost *bergschrund*, some three or four hours after leaving camp, I was thrashed. And I hadn't even gotten to the real climbing yet. That would begin immediately above, where the hanging glacier gives way to vertical rock.

The rock, exhibiting a dearth of holds and coated with six inches of crumbly rime, did not look promising, but just left of the main prow was a shallow corner glazed with frozen meltwater. This ribbon of ice led straight up for three hundred feet, and if the ice proved substantial enough to support the picks of my ice axes, the route might be feasible. I shuffled over to the bottom of the corner and gingerly swung one of my tools into the two-inch-thick ice. Solid and plastic, it was thinner than I would have liked but otherwise encouraging.

The climbing was steep and so exposed it made my head spin. Beneath my Vibram soles the wall fell away for three thousand feet to the dirty, avalanche-scarred cirque of the Witches Cauldron Glacier. Above, the prow soared with authority toward the summit ridge, a vertical half mile above. Each time I planted one of my ice axes, that distance shrank by another twenty inches.

All that held me to the mountainside, all that held me to the world, were two thin spikes of chrome molybdenum stuck half an inch into a smear of frozen water; yet the higher I climbed, the more comfortable I became. Early on a difficult climb, especially a difficult solo climb, you constantly feel the abyss pulling at your back. To resist takes a tremendous conscious effort; you don't dare let your guard down for an instant. The siren song of the void puts you on edge; it makes your movements tentative, clumsy, herky-jerky. But as the climb goes on, you grow accustomed to the exposure, you get used to rubbing shoulders with doom, you come to believe in the reliability of your hands and feet and head. You learn to trust your self-control.

By and by your attention becomes so intensely focused that you no longer notice the raw knuckles, the cramping thighs, the strain of maintaining nonstop concentration. A trancelike state settles over your efforts; the climb becomes a clear-eyed dream.

Hours slide by like minutes. The accumulated clutter of day-to-day existence—the lapses of conscience, the unpaid bills, the bungled opportunities, the dust under the couch, the inescapable prison of your genes—all of it is temporarily forgotten, crowded from your thoughts by an overpowering clarity of purpose and by the seriousness of the task at hand.

At such moments something resembling happiness actually stirs in your chest, but it isn't the sort of emotion you want to lean on very hard. In solo climbing the whole enterprise is held together with little more than chutzpah, not the most reliable adhesive. Late in the day on the north face of the Thumb, I felt the glue disintegrate with a swing of an ice ax.

I'd gained nearly seven hundred feet of altitude since stepping off the hanging glacier, all of it on crampon front points and the picks of my axes. The ribbon of frozen meltwater had ended three hundred feet up and was followed by a crumbly armor of frost feathers. Though just barely substantial enough to support body weight, the rime was plastered over the rock to a thickness of two or three feet, so I kept plugging upward. The wall, however, had been growing imperceptibly steeper, and as it did so, the frost feathers became thinner. I'd fallen into a slow, hypnotic rhythm—swing, swing; kick, kick; swing, swing; kick, kick—when my left ice ax slammed into a slab of diorite a few inches beneath the rime.

I tried left, then right, but kept striking rock. The frost feathers holding me up, it became apparent, were maybe five inches thick and had the structural integrity of stale corn bread. Below was thirty-seven hundred feet of air, and I was balanced on a house of cards. The sour taste of panic rose in my throat. My eyesight blurred, I began to hyperventilate, my calves started to shake. I shuffled a few feet farther to the right, hoping to find thicker ice, but managed only to bend an ice ax on the rock.

Awkwardly, stiff with fear, I started working my way back down. The rime gradually thickened. After descending about eighty feet, I got back on reasonably solid ground. I stopped for a long time to let my nerves settle, then leaned back from my

tools and stared up at the face above, searching for a hint of solid ice, for some variation in the underlying rock strata, for anything that would allow passage over the frosted slabs. I looked until my neck ached, but nothing appeared. The climb was over. The only place to go was down.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE STIKINE ICE CAP

But we little know until tried how much of the uncontrollable there is in us, urging across glaciers and torrents, and up dangerous heights, let the judgement forbid as it may.

JOHN MUIR,

THE MOUNTAINS OF CALIFORNIA

But have you noticed the slight curl at the end of Sam II's mouth, when he looks at you? It means that he didn't want you to name him Sam II, for one thing, and for two other things it means that he has a sawed-off in his left pant leg, and a baling hook in his right pant leg, and is ready to kill you with either one of them, given the opportunity. The father is taken aback. What he usually says, in such a confrontation, is "I changed your diapers for you, little snot." This is not the right thing to say. First, it is not true (mothers change nine diapers out of ten), and second, it instantly reminds Sam II of what he is mad about. He is mad about being small when you were big, but no, that's not it, he is mad about being helpless when you were powerful, but no, not that either, he is mad about being contingent when you were necessary, not quite it, he is insane because when he loved you, you didn't notice.

DONALD BARTHELME,

THE DEAD FATHER

After coming down from the side of the Devils Thumb, heavy snow and high winds kept me inside the tent for most of the next

three days. The hours passed slowly. In the attempt to hurry them along, I chain-smoked for as long as my supply of cigarettes held out, and I read. When I ran out of reading matter, I was reduced to studying the ripstop pattern woven into the tent ceiling. This I did for hours on end, flat on my back, while engaging in a heated self-debate: Should I leave for the coast as soon as the weather broke, or should I stay put long enough to make another attempt on the mountain?

In truth my escapade on the north face had rattled me, and I didn't want to go up on the Thumb again at all. But the thought of returning to Boulder in defeat wasn't very appealing, either. I could all too easily picture the smug expressions of condolence I'd receive from those who'd been certain of my failure from the get-go.

By the third afternoon of the storm, I couldn't stand it any longer: the lumps of frozen snow poking me in the back, the clammy nylon walls brushing against my face, the incredible smell drifting up from the depths of my sleeping bag. I pawed through the mess at my feet until I located a small green sack, in which there was a metal film can containing the makings of what I'd hoped would be a sort of victory cigar. I'd intended to save it for my return from the summit, but what the hey—it wasn't looking like I'd be visiting the top anytime soon. I poured most of the can's contents onto a leaf of cigarette paper, rolled it into a crooked joint, and promptly smoked it down to the roach.

The marijuana of course only made the tent seem even more cramped, more suffocating, more impossible to bear. It also made me terribly hungry. I decided a little oatmeal would put things right. Making it, however, was a long, ridiculously involved process: A potful of snow had to be gathered outside in the tempest, the stove assembled and lit, the oatmeal and sugar located, the remnants of yesterday's dinner scraped from my bowl. I'd gotten the stove going and was melting the snow when I smelled something burning. A thorough check of the stove and its environs revealed nothing. Mystified, I was ready to chalk it up to my chemically enhanced imagination when I heard something crackle at my back.

I spun around in time to see a bag of garbage—into which I'd tossed the match I'd used to light the stove—flare into a small conflagration. Beating on the fire with my hands, I had it out in a few seconds, but not before a large section of the tent's inner wall vaporized before my eyes. The built-in fly escaped the flames, so it was still more or less weatherproof; now, however, it was approximately thirty degrees colder inside.

My left palm began to sting. Examining it, I noticed the pink welt of a burn. What troubled me most, though, was that the tent wasn't even mine: I'd borrowed the expensive shelter from my father. It was new before my trip—the hangtags had still been attached—and had been lent reluctantly. For several minutes I sat dumbstruck, staring at the wreckage of the tent's once-graceful form amid the acrid scent of singed hair and melted nylon. You had to hand it to me, I thought: I had a knack for living up to the old man's worst expectations.

My father was a volatile, extremely complicated person, possessed of a brash demeanor that masked deep insecurities. If he ever in his entire life admitted to being wrong, I wasn't there to witness it. But it was my father, a weekend mountaineer, who taught me to climb. He bought me my first rope and ice ax when I was eight years old and led me into the Cascade Range to make an assault on the South Sister, a gentle ten-thousand-foot volcano not far from our Oregon home. It never occurred to him that I would one day try to shape my life around climbing.

A kind and generous man, Lewis Krakauer loved his five children deeply, in the autocratic way of fathers, but his worldview was colored by a relentlessly competitive nature. Life, as he saw it, was a contest. He read and reread the works of Stephen Potter—the English writer who coined the terms *one-upmanship* and *gamesmanship*—not as social satire but as a manual of practical stratagems. He was ambitious in the extreme, and like Walt McCandless, his aspirations extended to his progeny.

Before I'd even enrolled in kindergarten, he began preparing me for a shining career in medicine—or, failing that, law as a poor consolation. For Christmas and birthdays I received such gifts as a microscope, a chemistry set, and the *Encyclopaedia Bri-*

tannica. From elementary school through high school, my siblings and I were hectored to excel in every class, to win medals in science fairs, to be chosen princess of the prom, to win election to student government. Thereby and only thereby, we learned, could we expect to gain admission to the right college, which in turn would get us into Harvard Medical School: life's one sure path to meaningful success and lasting happiness.

My father's faith in this blueprint was unshakable. It was, after all, the path he had followed to prosperity. But I was not a clone of my father. During my teens, as I came to this realization, I veered gradually from the plotted course, and then sharply. My insurrection prompted a great deal of yelling. The windows of our home rattled with the thunder of ultimatums. By the time I left Corvallis, Oregon, to enroll in a distant college where no ivy grew, I was speaking to my father with a clenched jaw or not at all. When I graduated four years later and did not enter Harvard or any other medical school but became a carpenter and climbing bum instead, the unbridgeable gulf between us widened.

I had been granted unusual freedom and responsibility at an early age, for which I should have been grateful in the extreme, but I wasn't. Instead, I felt oppressed by the old man's expectations. It was drilled into me that anything less than winning was failure. In the impressionable way of sons, I did not consider this rhetorically; I took him at his word. And that's why later, when long-held family secrets came to light, when I noticed that this deity who asked only for perfection was himself less than perfect, that he was in fact not a deity at all—well, I wasn't able to shrug it off. I was consumed instead by a blinding rage. The revelation that he was merely human, and frightfully so, was beyond my power to forgive.

Two decades after the fact I discovered that my rage was gone, and had been for years. It had been supplanted by a rueful sympathy and something not unlike affection. I came to understand that I had baffled and infuriated my father at least as much as he had baffled and infuriated me. I saw that I had been selfish and unbending and a giant pain in the ass. He'd built a bridge of priv-

ilege for me, a hand-paved trestle to the good life, and I repaid him by chopping it down and crapping on the wreckage.

But this epiphany occurred only after the intervention of time and misfortune, when my father's self-satisfied existence had begun to crumble beneath him. It began with the betrayal of his flesh: Thirty years after a bout with polio, the symptoms mysteriously flared anew. Crippled muscles withered further, synapses wouldn't fire, wasted legs refused to ambulate. From medical journals he deduced that he was suffering from a newly identified ailment known as post-polio syndrome. Pain, excruciating at times, filled his days like a shrill and constant noise.

In an ill-advised attempt to halt the decline, he started medicating himself. He never went anywhere without a faux leather valise stuffed with dozens of orange plastic pill bottles. Every hour or two he would fumble through the drug bag, squinting at the labels, and shake out tablets of Dexedrine and Prozac and deprenyl. He gulped pills by the fistful, grimacing, without water. Used syringes and empty ampoules appeared on the bathroom sink. To a greater and greater degree his life revolved around a self-administered pharmacopoeia of steroids, amphetamines, mood elevators, and painkillers, and the drugs addled his once-formidable mind.

As his behavior became more and more irrational, more and more delusional, the last of his friends were driven away. My long-suffering mother finally had no choice but to move out. My father crossed the line into madness and then very nearly succeeded in taking his own life—an act at which he made sure I was present.

After the suicide attempt he was placed in a psychiatric hospital near Portland. When I visited him there, his arms and legs were strapped to the rails of his bed. He was ranting incoherently and had soiled himself. His eyes were wild. Flashing in defiance one moment, in uncomprehending terror the next, they rolled far back in their sockets, giving a clear and chilling view into the state of his tortured mind. When the nurses tried to change his linens, he thrashed against his restraints and cursed them,

cursed me, cursed the fates. That his foolproof life plan had in the end transported him here, to this nightmarish station, was an irony that brought me no pleasure and escaped his notice altogether.

There was another irony he failed to appreciate: His struggle to mold me in his image had been successful after all. The old walrus in fact managed to instill in me a great and burning ambition; it had simply found expression in an unintended pursuit. He never understood that the Devils Thumb was the same as medical school, only different.

I suppose it was this inherited, off-kilter ambition that kept me from admitting defeat on the Stikine Ice Cap after my initial attempt to climb the Thumb had failed, even after nearly burning the tent down. Three days after retreating from my first try, I went up on the north face again. This time I climbed only 120 feet above the *bergschrand* before lack of composure and the arrival of a snow squall forced me to turn around.

Instead of descending to my base camp on the ice cap, though, I decided to spend the night on the steep flank of the mountain, just below my high point. This proved to be a mistake. By late afternoon the squall had metastasized into another major storm. Snow fell from the clouds at the rate of an inch an hour. As I crouched inside my bivouac sack under the lip of the *bergschrand*, spindrift avalanches hissed down from the wall above and washed over me like surf, slowly burying my ledge.

It took about twenty minutes for the spindrift to inundate my bivvy sack—a thin nylon envelope shaped exactly like a Baggies sandwich bag, only bigger—to the level of the breathing slit. Four times this happened, and four times I dug myself out. After the fifth burial, I'd had enough. I threw all my gear into my pack and made a break for the base camp.

The descent was terrifying. Because of the clouds, the ground blizzard, and the flat, fading light, I couldn't tell slope from sky. I worried, with ample reason, that I might step blindly off the top of a serac and end up at the bottom of the Witches Cauldron, a vertical half mile below. When I finally arrived on the frozen plain of the ice cap, I found that my tracks had long since drifted over.

I didn't have a clue as to how to locate the tent on the featureless glacial plateau. Hoping I'd get lucky and stumble across my camp, I skied in circles for an hour—until I put a foot into a small crevasse and realized that I was acting like an idiot—that I should hunker down right where I was and wait out the storm.

I dug a shallow hole, wrapped myself in the bivvy bag, and sat on my pack in the swirling snow. Drifts piled up around me. My feet became numb. A damp chill crept down my chest from the base of my neck, where spindrift had gotten inside my parka and soaked my shirt. If only I had a cigarette, I thought, a single cigarette, I could summon the strength of character to put a good face on this fucked-up situation, on the whole fucked-up trip. I pulled the bivvy sack tighter around my shoulders. The wind ripped at my back. Beyond shame, I cradled my head in my arms and embarked on an orgy of self-pity.

I knew that people sometimes died climbing mountains. But at the age of twenty-three, personal mortality—the idea of my own death—was still largely outside my conceptual grasp. When I decamped from Boulder for Alaska, my head swimming with visions of glory and redemption on the Devils Thumb, it didn't occur to me that I might be bound by the same cause-and-effect relationships that governed the actions of others. Because I wanted to climb the mountain so badly, because I had thought about the Thumb so intensely for so long, it seemed beyond the realm of possibility that some minor obstacle like the weather or crevasses or rime-covered rock might ultimately thwart my will.

At sunset the wind died, and the ceiling lifted 150 feet off the glacier, enabling me to locate my base camp. I made it back to the tent intact, but it was no longer possible to ignore the fact that the Thumb had made hash of my plans. I was forced to acknowledge that volition alone, however powerful, was not going to get me up the north wall. I saw, finally, that nothing was.

There still existed an opportunity for salvaging the expedition, however. A week earlier I'd skied over to the southeast side of the mountain to take a look at the route by which I'd intended to descend the peak after climbing the north wall, a route that Fred Beckey, the legendary alpinist, had followed in 1946 in making

the first ascent of the Thumb. During my reconnaissance, I'd noticed an obvious unclimbed line to the left of the Beckey route—a patchy network of ice angling across the southeast face—that struck me as a relatively easy way to achieve the summit. At the time, I'd considered this route unworthy of my attentions. Now, on the rebound from my calamitous entanglement with the *nordwand*, I was prepared to lower my sights.

On the afternoon of May 15, when the blizzard finally abated, I returned to the southeast face and climbed to the top of a slender ridge that abuts the upper peak like a flying buttress on a Gothic cathedral. I decided to spend the night there, on the narrow crest, sixteen hundred feet below the summit. The evening sky was cold and cloudless. I could see all the way to tidewater and beyond. At dusk I watched, transfixed, as the lights of Petersburg blinked on in the west. The closest thing I'd had to human contact since the airdrop, the distant lights triggered a flood of emotion that caught me off guard. I imagined people watching baseball on television, eating fried chicken in brightly lit kitchens, drinking beer, making love. When I lay down to sleep, I was overcome by a wrenching loneliness. I'd never felt so alone, ever.

That night I had troubled dreams, of a police bust and vampires and a gangland-style execution. I heard someone whisper, "I think he's in there. . . ." I sat bolt upright and opened my eyes. The sun was about to rise. The entire sky was scarlet. It was still clear, but a thin, wispy scum of cirrus had spread across the upper atmosphere, and a dark line of squalls was visible just above the southwestern horizon. I pulled on my boots and hurriedly strapped on my crampons. Five minutes after waking up, I was climbing away from the bivouac.

I carried no rope, no tent or bivouac gear, no hardware save my ice axes. My plan was to go light and fast, to reach the summit and make it back down before the weather turned. Pushing myself, continually out of breath, I scurried up and to the left, across small snowfields linked by ice-choked clefts and short rock steps. The climbing was almost fun—the rock was covered with large, incut holds, and the ice, though thin, never got steeper than sev-

enty degrees—but I was anxious about the storm front racing in from the Pacific, darkening the sky.

I didn't have a watch, but in what seemed like a very short time, I was on the distinctive final ice field. By now the entire sky was smeared with clouds. It looked easier to keep angling to the left but quicker to go straight for the top. Anxious about being caught by a storm high on the peak and without shelter, I opted for the direct route. The ice steepened and thinned. I swung my left ice ax and struck rock. I aimed for another spot, and once again it glanced off unyielding diorite with a dull clank. And again, and again. It was a reprise of my first attempt on the north face. Looking between my legs, I stole a glance at the glacier more than two thousand feet below. My stomach churned.

Forty-five feet above me the wall eased back onto the sloping summit shoulder. I clung stiffly to my axes, unmoving, racked by terror and indecision. Again I looked down at the long drop to the glacier, then up, then scraped away the patina of ice above my head. I hooked the pick of my left ax on a nickel-thin lip of rock and weighted it. It held. I pulled my right ax from the ice, reached up, and twisted the pick into a crooked half-inch fissure until it jammed. Barely breathing now, I moved my feet up, scrabbling my crampon points across the verglas. Reaching as high as I could with my left arm, I swung the ax gently at the shiny, opaque surface, not knowing what I'd hit beneath it. The pick went in with a solid *whunk!* A few minutes later I was standing on a broad ledge. The summit proper, a slender rock fin sprouting a grotesque meringue of atmospheric ice, stood twenty feet directly above.

The insubstantial frost feathers ensured that those last twenty feet remained hard, scary, onerous. But then suddenly there was no place higher to go. I felt my cracked lips stretch into a painful grin. I was on top of the Devils Thumb.

Fittingly, the summit was a surreal, malevolent place, an improbably slender wedge of rock and rime no wider than a file cabinet. It did not encourage loitering. As I straddled the highest point, the south face fell away beneath my right boot for twenty-five hundred feet; beneath my left boot the north face dropped

twice that distance. I took some pictures to prove I'd been there and spent a few minutes trying to straighten a bent pick. Then I stood up, carefully turned around, and headed for home.

One week later I was camped in the rain beside the sea, marveling at the sight of moss, willows, mosquitoes. The salt air carried the rich stink of tidal life. By and by a small skiff motored into Thomas Bay and pulled up on the beach not far from my tent. The man driving the boat introduced himself as Jim Freeman, a timber faller from Petersburg. It was his day off, he said; he'd made the trip to show his family the glacier and to look for bears. He asked me if I'd "been huntin', or what?"

"No," I replied sheepishly. "Actually, I just climbed the Devils Thumb. I've been over here twenty days."

Freeman fiddled with a deck cleat and said nothing. It became obvious that he didn't believe me. Nor did he seem to approve of my snarled, shoulder-length hair or the way I smelled after having gone three weeks without bathing or changing my clothes. When I asked if he could give me a lift back to town, however, he offered a grudging "I don't see why not."

The water was choppy, and the ride across Frederick Sound took two hours. Freeman gradually warmed to me as we talked. He still wasn't convinced I'd climbed the Thumb, but by the time he steered the skiff into Wrangell Narrows, he pretended to be. After docking the boat, he insisted on buying me a cheeseburger. That evening he invited me to spend the night in a junked step van parked in his backyard.

I lay down in the rear of the old truck for a while but couldn't sleep, so I got up and walked to a bar called Kito's Kave. The euphoria, the overwhelming sense of relief, that had initially accompanied my return to Petersburg faded, and an unexpected melancholy took its place. The people I chatted with in Kito's didn't seem to doubt that I'd been to the top of the Thumb; they just didn't much care. As the night wore on, the place emptied except for me and an old, toothless Tlingit man at a back table. I drank alone, putting quarters into the jukebox, playing the same five songs over and over until the barmaid yelled angrily, "Hey! Give it a fucking rest, kid!" I mumbled an apology, headed for the

door, and lurched back to Freeman's step van. There, surrounded by the sweet scent of old motor oil, I lay down on the floorboards next to a gutted transmission and passed out.

Less than a month after sitting on the summit of the Thumb, I was back in Boulder, nailing up siding on the Spruce Street Townhouses, the same condos I'd been framing when I left for Alaska. I got a raise, to four bucks an hour, and at the end of the summer moved out of the job-site trailer to a cheap studio apartment west of the downtown mall.

It is easy, when you are young, to believe that what you desire is no less than what you deserve, to assume that if you want something badly enough, it is your God-given right to have it. When I decided to go to Alaska that April, like Chris McCandless, I was a raw youth who mistook passion for insight and acted 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, of course, it changed almost nothing. But I came to appreciate that mountains make poor receptacles for dreams. And I lived to tell my tale.

As a young man, I was unlike McCandless in many important regards; most notably, I possessed neither his intellect nor his lofty ideals. But I believe we were similarly affected by the skewed relationships we had with our fathers. And I suspect we had a similar intensity, a similar heedlessness, a similar agitation of the soul.

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

At that stage of my youth, death remained as abstract a concept as non-Euclidean geometry or marriage. 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 dark mystery of mortality. I couldn't resist stealing up to the

edge of doom and peering over the brink. The hint of what was concealed in those shadows terrified me, but I caught sight of something in the glimpse, some forbidden and elemental riddle that was no less compelling than the sweet, hidden petals of a woman's sex.

In my case—and, I believe, in the case of Chris McCandless—that was a very different thing from wanting to die.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE ALASKA INTERIOR

I wished to acquire the simplicity, native feelings, and virtues of savage life; to divest myself of the factitious habits, prejudices and imperfections of civilization; . . . and to find, amidst the solitude and grandeur of the western wilds, more correct views of human nature and of the true interests of man. The season of snows was preferred, that I might experience the pleasure of suffering, and the novelty of danger.

ESTWICK EVANS,
A PEDESTRIOUS TOUR, OF FOUR THOUSAND MILES,
THROUGH THE WESTERN STATES AND TERRITORIES,
DURING THE WINTER AND SPRING OF 1818

Wilderness appealed to those bored or disgusted with man and his works. It not only offered an escape from society but also was an ideal stage for the Romantic individual to exercise the cult that he frequently made of his own soul. The solitude and total freedom of the wilderness created a perfect setting for either melancholy or exultation.

RODERICK NASH,
WILDERNESS AND THE AMERICAN MIND

On April 15, 1992, Chris McCandless departed Carthage, South Dakota, in the cab of a Mack truck hauling a load of sunflower seeds: His "great Alaskan odyssey" was under way. Three days later he crossed the Canadian border at Roosville, British Columbia, and thumbed north through Skookumchuck and Ra-

dium Junction, Lake Louise and Jasper, Prince George and Dawson Creek—where, in the town center, he took a snapshot of the signpost marking the official start of the Alaska Highway. MILE “0,” the sign reads, FAIRBANKS 1,523 MILES.

Hitchhiking tends to be difficult on the Alaska Highway. It’s not unusual, on the outskirts of Dawson Creek, to see a dozen or more doleful-looking men and women standing along the shoulder with extended thumbs. Some of them may wait a week or more between rides. But McCandless experienced no such delay. On April 21, just six days out of Carthage, he arrived at Liard River Hotsprings, at the threshold of the Yukon Territory.

There is a public campground at Liard River, from which a boardwalk leads half a mile across a marsh to a series of natural thermal pools. It is the most popular way-stop on the Alaska Highway, and McCandless decided to pause there for a soak in the soothing waters. When he finished bathing and attempted to catch another ride north, however, he discovered that his luck had changed. Nobody would pick him up. Two days after arriving, he was still at Liard River, impatiently going nowhere.

At six-thirty on a brisk Thursday morning, the ground still frozen hard, Gaylord Stuckey walked out on the boardwalk to the largest of the pools, expecting to have the place to himself. He was surprised, therefore, to find someone already in the steaming water, a young man who introduced himself as Alex.

Stuckey—bald and cheerful, a ham-faced sixty-three-year-old Hoosier—was en route from Indiana to Alaska to deliver a new motor home to a Fairbanks RV dealer, a part-time line of work in which he’d dabbled since retiring after forty years in the restaurant business. When he told McCandless his destination, the boy exclaimed, “Hey, that’s where I’m going, too! But I’ve been stuck here for a couple of days now, trying to get a lift. You mind if I ride with you?”

“Oh, jiminy,” Stuckey replied. “I’d love to, son, but I can’t. The company I work for has a strict rule against picking up hitchhikers. It could get me canned.” As he chatted with McCandless through the sulfurous mist, though, Stuckey began to reconsider: “Alex was clean-shaven and had short hair, and I could tell by the

language he used that he was a real sharp fella. He wasn’t what you’d call a typical hitchhiker. I’m usually leery of ‘em. I figure there’s probably something wrong with a guy if he can’t even afford a bus ticket. So anyway, after about half an hour I said, ‘I tell you what, Alex: Liard is a thousand miles from Fairbanks. I’ll take you five hundred miles, as far as Whitehorse; you’ll be able to get a ride the rest of the way from there.’”

A day and a half later, however, when they arrived in Whitehorse—the capital of the Yukon Territory and the largest, most cosmopolitan town on the Alaska Highway—Stuckey had come to enjoy McCandless’s company so much that he changed his mind and agreed to drive the boy the entire distance. “Alex didn’t come out and say too much at first,” Stuckey reports. “But it’s a long, slow drive. We spent a total of three days together on those washboard roads, and by the end he kind of let his guard down. I tell you what: He was a dandy kid. Real courteous, and he didn’t cuss or use a lot of that there slang. You could tell he came from a nice family. Mostly he talked about his sister. He didn’t get along with his folks too good, I guess. Told me his dad was a genius, a NASA rocket scientist, but he’d been a bigamist at one time—and that kind of went against Alex’s grain. Said he hadn’t seen his parents in a couple of years, since his college graduation.”

McCandless was candid with Stuckey about his intent to spend the summer alone in the bush, living off the land. “He said it was something he’d wanted to do since he was little,” says Stuckey. “Said he didn’t want to see a single person, no airplanes, no sign of civilization. He wanted to prove to himself that he could make it on his own, without anybody else’s help.”

Stuckey and McCandless arrived in Fairbanks on the afternoon of April 25. The older man took the boy to a grocery store, where he bought a big bag of rice, “and then Alex said he wanted to go out to the university to study up on what kind of plants he could eat. Berries and things like that. I told him, ‘Alex, you’re too early. There’s still two foot, three foot of snow on the ground. There’s nothing growing yet.’ But his mind was pretty well made up. He was champing at the bit to get out there and start hiking.”

Stuckey drove to the University of Alaska campus, on the west end of Fairbanks, and dropped McCandless off at 5:30 P.M.

"Before I let him out," Stuckey says, "I told him, 'Alex, I've driven you a thousand miles. I've fed you and fed you for three straight days. The least you can do is send me a letter when you get back from Alaska.' And he promised he would."

"I also begged and pleaded with him to call his parents. I can't imagine anything worse than having a son out there and not knowing where he's at for years and years, not knowing whether he's living or dead. 'Here's my credit card number,' I told him. 'Please call them!' But all he said was 'Maybe I will and maybe I won't.' After he left, I thought, 'Oh, why didn't I get his parents' phone number and call them myself?' But everything just kind of happened so quick."

After dropping McCandless at the university, Stuckey drove into town to deliver the RV to the appointed dealer, only to be told that the person responsible for checking in new vehicles had already gone home for the day and wouldn't be back until Monday morning, leaving Stuckey with two days to kill in Fairbanks before he could fly home to Indiana. On Sunday morning, with time on his hands, he returned to the campus. "I hoped to find Alex and spend another day with him, take him sightseeing or something. I looked for a couple of hours, drove all over the place, but didn't see hide or hair of him. He was already gone."

After taking his leave of Stuckey on Saturday evening, McCandless spent two days and three nights in the vicinity of Fairbanks, mostly at the university. In the campus book store, tucked away on the bottom shelf of the Alaska section, he came across a scholarly, exhaustively researched field guide to the region's edible plants, *Tanaina Plantlore/Dena'ina K'et'una: An Ethnobotany of the Dena'ina Indians of Southcentral Alaska* by Priscilla Russell Kari. From a postcard rack near the cash register, he picked out two cards of a polar bear, on which he sent his final messages to Wayne Westerberg and Jan Burres from the university post office.

Perusing the classified ads, McCandless found a used gun to

buy, a semiautomatic .22-caliber Remington with a 4-x-20 scope and a plastic stock. A model called the Nylon 66, no longer in production, it was a favorite of Alaska trappers because of its light weight and reliability. He closed the deal in a parking lot, probably paying about \$125 for the weapon, and then purchased four one-hundred-round boxes of hollow-point long-rifle shells from a nearby gun shop.

At the conclusion of his preparations in Fairbanks, McCandless loaded up his pack and started hiking west from the university. Leaving the campus, he walked past the Geophysical Institute, a tall glass-and-concrete building capped with a large satellite dish. The dish, one of the most distinctive landmarks on the Fairbanks skyline, had been erected to collect data from satellites equipped with synthetic aperture radar of Walt McCandless's design. Walt had in fact visited Fairbanks during the start-up of the receiving station and had written some of the software crucial to its operation. If the Geophysical Institute prompted Chris to think of his father as he tramped by, the boy left no record of it.

Four miles west of town, in the evening's deepening chill, McCandless pitched his tent on a patch of hard-frozen ground surrounded by birch trees, not far from the crest of a bluff overlooking Gold Hill Gas & Liquor. Fifty yards from his camp was the terraced road cut of the George Parks Highway, the road that would take him to the Stampede Trail. He woke early on the morning of April 28, walked down to the highway in the predawn gloaming, and was pleasantly surprised when the first vehicle to come along pulled over to give him a lift. It was a gray Ford pickup with a bumper sticker on the back that declared, I FISH THEREFORE I AM. PETERSBURG, ALASKA. The driver of the truck, an electrician on his way to Anchorage, wasn't much older than McCandless. He said his name was Jim Gallien.

Three hours later Gallien turned his truck west off the highway and drove as far as he could down an unplowed side road. When he dropped McCandless off on the Stampede Trail, the temperature was in the low thirties—it would drop into the low teens at

night—and a foot and a half of crusty spring snow covered the ground. The boy could hardly contain his excitement. He was, at long last, about to be alone in the vast Alaska wilds.

As he trudged expectantly down the trail in a fake-fur parka, his rifle slung over one shoulder, the only food McCandless carried was a ten-pound bag of long-grained rice—and the two sandwiches and bag of corn chips that Gallien had contributed. A year earlier he'd subsisted for more than a month beside the Gulf of California on five pounds of rice and a bounty of fish caught with a cheap rod and reel, an experience that made him confident he could harvest enough food to survive an extended stay in the Alaska wilderness, too.

The heaviest item in McCandless's half-full backpack was his library: nine or ten paperbound books, most of which had been given to him by Jan Burres in Niland. Among these volumes were titles by Thoreau and Tolstoy and Gogol, but McCandless was no literary snob: He simply carried what he thought he might enjoy reading, including mass-market books by Michael Crichton, Robert Pirsig, and Louis L'Amour. Having neglected to pack writing paper, he began a laconic journal on some blank pages in the back of *Tanaina Plantlore*.

The Healy terminus of the Stampede Trail is traveled by a handful of dog mushers, ski tourers, and snow-machine enthusiasts during the winter months, but only until the frozen rivers begin to break up, in late March or early April. By the time McCandless headed into the bush, there was open water flowing on most of the larger streams, and nobody had been very far down the trail for two or three weeks; only the faint remnants of a packed snow-machine track remained for him to follow.

McCandless reached the Teklanika River his second day out. Although the banks were lined with a jagged shelf of frozen overflow, no ice bridges spanned the channel of open water, so he was forced to wade. There had been a big thaw in early April, and breakup had come early in 1992, but the weather had turned cold again, so the river's volume was quite low when McCandless crossed—probably thigh-deep at most—allowing him to splash to the other side without difficulty. He never suspected that in so

doing, he was crossing his Rubicon. To McCandless's inexperienced eye, there was nothing to suggest that two months hence, as the glaciers and snowfields at the Teklanika's headwater thawed in the summer heat, its discharge would multiply nine or ten times in volume, transforming the river into a deep, violent torrent that bore no resemblance to the gentle brook he'd blithely waded across in April.

From his journal we know that on April 29, McCandless fell through the ice somewhere. It probably happened as he traversed a series of melting beaver ponds just beyond the Teklanika's western bank, but there is nothing to indicate that he suffered any harm in the mishap. A day later, as the trail crested a ridge, he got his first glimpse of Mt. McKinley's high, blinding-white bulwarks, and a day after that, May 1, some twenty miles down the trail from where he was dropped by Gallien, he stumbled upon the old bus beside the Sushana River. It was outfitted with a bunk and a barrel stove, and previous visitors had left the improvised shelter stocked with matches, bug dope, and other essentials. "Magic Bus Day," he wrote in his journal. He decided to lay over for a while in the vehicle and take advantage of its crude comforts.

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 REVOLUTION. 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

Reality, however, was quick to intrude on McCandless's reverie. He had difficulty killing game, and the daily journal entries during his first week in the bush 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 shoot anything else until May 9, when he bagged a single small squirrel, by which point he'd written "4th day famine" in the journal.

But soon thereafter his fortunes took a sharp turn for the better. By mid-May the sun was circling high in the heavens, flooding the taiga with light. The sun dipped below the northern horizon for fewer than four hours out of every twenty-four, and at midnight the sky was still bright enough to read by. Everywhere but on the north-facing slopes and in the shadowy ravines, the snowpack had melted down to bare ground, exposing the previous season's rose hips and lingonberries, which McCandless gathered and ate in great quantity.

He also became much more successful at hunting game and for the next six weeks feasted regularly on squirrel, spruce grouse, duck, goose, and porcupine. On May 22, a crown fell off one of his molars, but the event didn't seem to dampen his spirits much, because the following day he scrambled up the nameless, humplike, three-thousand-foot butte that rises directly north of the bus, giving him a view of the whole icy sweep of the Alaska Range and mile after mile of uninhabited country. His journal entry for the day is characteristically terse but unmistakably joyous: "CLIMB MOUNTAIN!"

McCandless had told Gallien that he intended to remain on the move during his stay in the bush. "I'm just going to take off and keep walking west," he'd said. "I might walk all the way to the Bering Sea." On May 5, after pausing for four days at the bus, he resumed his perambulation. From the snapshots recovered with his Minolta, it appears that McCandless lost (or intentionally left) the by now indistinct Stampede Trail and headed west and north through the hills above the Sushana River, hunting game as he went.

It was slow going. In order to feed himself, he had to devote a

large part of each day to stalking animals. Moreover, as the ground thawed, his route turned into a gauntlet of boggy muskeg and impenetrable alder, and McCandless belatedly came to appreciate one of the fundamental (if counterintuitive) axioms of the North: winter, not summer, is the preferred season for traveling overland through the bush.

Faced with the obvious folly of his original ambition, to walk five hundred miles to tidewater, he reconsidered his plans. On May 19, having traveled no farther west than the Toklat River—less than fifteen miles beyond the bus—he turned around. A week later he was back at the derelict vehicle, apparently without regret. He'd decided that the Sushana drainage was plenty wild to suit his purposes and that Fairbanks bus 142 would make a fine base camp for the remainder of the summer.

Ironically, the wilderness surrounding the bus—the patch of overgrown country where McCandless was determined "to become lost in the wild"—scarcely qualifies as wilderness by Alaska standards. Less than thirty miles to the east is a major thoroughfare, the George Parks Highway. Just sixteen miles to the south, beyond an escarpment of the Outer Range, hundreds of tourists rumble daily into Denali Park over a road patrolled by the National Park Service. And unbeknownst to the Aesthetic Voyager, scattered within a six-mile radius of the bus are four cabins (although none happened to be occupied during the summer of 1992).

But despite the relative proximity of the bus to civilization, for all practical purposes McCandless was cut off from the rest of the world. He spent nearly four months in the bush all told, and during that period he didn't encounter another living soul. In the end the Sushana River site was sufficiently remote to cost him his life.

In the last week of May, after moving his few possessions into the bus, McCandless wrote a list of housekeeping chores on a parchmentlike strip of birch bark: collect and store ice from the river for refrigerating meat, cover the vehicle's missing windows with plastic, lay in a supply of firewood, clean the accumulation of old ash from the stove. And under the heading "**LONG TERM**" he drew up a list of more ambitious tasks: map the area, impro-

vise a bathtub, collect skins and feathers to sew into clothing, construct a bridge across a nearby creek, repair mess kit, blaze a network of hunting trails.

The diary entries following his return to the bus catalog a bounty of wild meat. May 28: "Gourmet Duck!" June 1: "5 Squirrel." June 2: "Porcupine, Ptarmigan, 4 Squirrel, Grey Bird." June 3: "Another Porcupine! 4 Squirrel, 2 Grey Bird, Ash Bird." June 4: "A THIRD PORCUPINE! Squirrel, Grey Bird." On June 5, he shot a Canada goose as big as a Christmas turkey. Then, on June 9, he bagged the biggest prize of all: "MOOSE!" he recorded in the journal. Overjoyed, the proud hunter took a photograph of himself kneeling over his trophy, rifle thrust triumphantly overhead, his features distorted in a rictus of ecstasy and amazement, like some unemployed janitor who'd gone to Reno and won a million-dollar jackpot.

Although McCandless was enough of a realist to know that hunting game was an unavoidable component of living off the land, he had always been ambivalent about killing animals. That ambivalence turned to remorse soon after he shot the moose. It was relatively small, weighing perhaps six hundred or seven hundred pounds, but it nevertheless amounted to a huge quantity of meat. Believing that it was morally indefensible to waste any part of an animal that has been shot for food, McCandless spent six days toiling to preserve what he had killed before it spoiled. He butchered the carcass under a thick cloud of flies and mosquitoes, boiled the organs into a stew, and then laboriously excavated a burrow in the face of the rocky stream bank directly below the bus, in which he tried to cure, by smoking, the immense slabs of purple flesh.

Alaskan hunters know that the easiest way to preserve meat in the bush is to slice it into thin strips and then air-dry it on a makeshift rack. But McCandless, in his naïveté, relied on the advice of hunters he'd consulted in South Dakota, who advised him to smoke his meat, not an easy task under the circumstances. "Butchering extremely difficult," he wrote in the journal on June 10. "Fly and mosquito hordes. Remove intestines, liver, kidneys, one lung, steaks. Get hindquarters and leg to stream."

June 11: "Remove heart and other lung. Two front legs and head. Get rest to stream. Haul near cave. Try to protect with smoker."

June 12: "Remove half rib-cage and steaks. Can only work nights. Keep smokers going."

June 13: "Get remainder of rib-cage, shoulder and neck to cave. Start smoking."

June 14: "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."

At that point he gave up on preserving the bulk of the meat and abandoned the carcass to the wolves. Although he castigated himself severely for this waste of a life he'd taken, a day later McCandless appeared to regain some perspective, for his journal notes, "henceforth will learn to accept my errors, however great they be."

Shortly after the moose episode McCandless began to read Thoreau's *Walden*. In the chapter titled "Higher Laws," in which Thoreau ruminates on the morality of eating, McCandless highlighted, "when I had caught and cleaned and cooked and eaten my fish, they seemed not to have fed me essentially. It was insignificant and unnecessary, and cost more than it came to."

"THE MOOSE," McCandless wrote in the margin. And in the same passage he marked,

The repugnance to animal food is not the effect of experience, but is an instinct. It appeared more beautiful to live low and fare hard in many respects; and though I never did so, I went far enough to please my imagination. I believe that every man who has ever been earnest to preserve his higher or poetic faculties in the best condition has been particularly inclined to abstain from animal food, and from much food of any kind. . . .

It is hard to provide and cook so simple and clean a diet as will not offend the imagination; but this, I think, is to be fed when we feed the body; they should both sit down at the same table. Yet perhaps this may be done. The fruits eaten temperately need not make us ashamed of our appetites, nor interrupt the worthiest

pursuits. But put an extra condiment into your dish, and it will poison you.

"YES," wrote McCandless and, two pages later, "Consciousness of food. Eat and cook with concentration. . . . Holy Food." On the back pages of the book that served as his journal, he declared:

I am reborn. This is my dawn. Real life has just begun.

Deliberate Living: Conscious attention to the basics of life, and a constant attention to your immediate environment and its concerns, example→ A job, a task, a book; anything requiring efficient concentration (Circumstance has no value. It is how one relates to a situation that has value. All true meaning resides in the personal relationship to a phenomenon, what it means to you).

*The Great Holiness of **FOOD**, the Vital Heat.*

Positivism, the Insurpassable Joy of the Life Aesthetic.

Absolute Truth and Honesty.

Reality.

Independence.

Finality—Stability—Consistency.

As McCandless gradually stopped rebuking himself for the waste of the moose, the contentment that began in mid-May resumed and seemed to continue through early July. Then, in the midst of this idyll, came the first of two pivotal setbacks.

Satisfied, apparently, with what he had learned during his two months of solitary life in the wild, 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, talk philosophy, enthrall strangers with tales of what he'd done. He seemed to have moved beyond his need to assert so adamantly his autonomy, his need to separate himself from his parents. Maybe he was prepared to forgive their imperfections; maybe he was even prepared to forgive some of his own. McCandless seemed ready, perhaps, to go home.

Or maybe not; we can do no more than speculate about what he intended to do after he walked out of the bush. There is no question, however, that he intended to walk out.

Writing on a piece of birch bark, he made a list of things to do before he departed: "Patch Jeans, Shave!, Organize pack. . . ." Shortly thereafter he propped his Minolta on an empty oil drum and took a snapshot of himself brandishing a yellow disposable razor and grinning at the camera, clean-shaven, with new patches cut from an army blanket stitched onto the knees of his filthy jeans. He looks healthy but alarmingly gaunt. Already his cheeks are sunken. The tendons in his neck stand out like taut cables.

On July 2, McCandless finished reading Tolstoy's "Family Happiness," having marked several passages that moved him:

He was right in saying that the only certain happiness in life is to live for others. . . .

I have lived through much, and now I think I have found what is needed for happiness. A quiet secluded life in the country, with the possibility of being useful to people to whom it is easy to do good, and who are not accustomed to have it done to them; then work which one hopes may be of some use; then rest, nature, books, music, love for one's neighbor—such is my idea of happiness. And then, on top of all that, you for a mate, and children, perhaps—what more can the heart of a man desire?

Then, on July 3, he shouldered his backpack and began the twenty-mile hike to the improved road. Two days later, halfway there, he arrived in heavy rain at the beaver ponds that blocked access to the west bank of the Teklanika River. In April they'd been frozen over and hadn't presented an obstacle. Now he must have been alarmed to find a three-acre lake covering the trail. To avoid having to wade through the murky chest-deep water, he scrambled up a steep hillside, bypassed the ponds on the north, and then dropped back down to the river at the mouth of the gorge.

When he'd first crossed the river, sixty-seven days earlier in the freezing temperatures of April, it had been an icy but gentle knee-deep creek, and he'd simply strolled across it. On July 5, however, the Teklanika was at full flood, swollen with rain and snowmelt from glaciers high in the Alaska Range, running cold and fast.

If he could reach the far shore, the remainder of the hike to the highway would be easy, but to get there he would have to negotiate a channel some one hundred feet wide. The water, opaque with glacial sediment and only a few degrees warmer than the ice it had so recently been, was the color of wet concrete. Too deep to wade, it rumbled like a freight train. The powerful current would quickly knock him off his feet and carry him away.

McCandless was a weak swimmer and had confessed to several people that he was in fact afraid of the water. Attempting to swim the numbingly cold torrent or even to paddle some sort of improvised raft across seemed too risky to consider. Just downstream from where the trail met the river, the Teklanika erupted into a chaos of boiling whitewater as it accelerated through the narrow gorge. Long before he could swim or paddle to the far shore, he'd be pulled into these rapids and drowned.

In his journal he now wrote, "Disaster. . . . Rained in. River look impossible. Lonely, scared." He concluded, correctly, that he would probably be swept to his death if he attempted to cross the Teklanika at that place, in those conditions. It would be suicidal; it was simply not an option.

If McCandless had walked a mile or so upstream, he would have discovered that the river broadened into a maze of braided channels. If he'd scouted carefully, by trial and error he might have found a place where these braids were only chest-deep. As strong as the current was running, it would have certainly knocked him off his feet, but by dog-paddling and hopping along the bottom as he drifted downstream, he could conceivably have made it across before being carried into the gorge or succumbing to hypothermia.

But it would still have been a very risky proposition, and at that point McCandless had no reason to take such a risk. He'd

been fending for himself quite nicely in the country. He probably understood that if he was patient and waited, the river would eventually drop to a level where it could be safely forded. After weighing his options, therefore, he settled on the most prudent course. He turned around and began walking to the west, back toward the bus, back into the fickle heart of the bush.

THE STAMPEDE TRAIL

Nature was here something savage and awful, though beautiful. I looked with awe at the ground I trod on, to see what the Powers had made there, the form and fashion and material of their work. This was that Earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night. Here was no man's garden, but the unhand-selled globe. It was not lawn, nor pasture, nor mead, nor woodland, nor lea, nor arable, nor waste land. It was the fresh and natural surface of the planet Earth, as it was made forever and ever,—to be the dwelling of man, we say,—so Nature made it, and man may use it if he can. Man was not to be associated with it. It was Matter, vast, terrific,—not his Mother Earth that we have heard of, not for him to tread on, or to be buried in,—no, it were being too familiar even to let his bones lie there,—the home, this, of Necessity and Fate. There was clearly felt the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man. It was a place of heathenism and superstitious rites,—to be inhabited by men nearer of kin to the rocks and to wild animals than we. . . . What is it to be admitted to a museum, to see a myriad of particular things, compared with being shown some star's surface, some hard matter in its home! I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me. I fear not spirits, ghosts, of which I am one,—that my body might,—but I fear bodies, I tremble to meet them. What is this Titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries! Think of our life in nature,—daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it,—rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the solid earth! the actual world! the common sense! Contact! Contact! Who are we? where are we?

HENRY DAVID THOREAU,
"KTAADN"

A year and a week after Chris McCandless decided not to attempt to cross the Teklanika River, I stand on the opposite bank—the eastern side, the highway side—and gaze into the churning water. I, too, hope to cross the river. I want to visit the bus. I want to see where McCandless died, to better understand why.

It is a hot, humid afternoon, and the river is livid with runoff from the fast-melting snowpack that still blankets the glaciers in the higher elevations of the Alaska Range. Today the water looks considerably lower than it looks in the photographs McCandless took twelve months ago, but to try to ford the river here, in thundering midsummer flood, is nevertheless unthinkable. The water is too deep, too cold, too fast. As I stare into the Teklanika, I can hear rocks the size of bowling balls grinding along the bottom, rolled downstream by the powerful current. I'd be swept from my feet within a few yards of leaving the bank and pushed into the canyon immediately below, which pinches the river into a boil of rapids that continues without interruption for the next five miles.

Unlike McCandless, however, I have in my backpack a 1:63,360-scale topographic map (that is, a map on which one inch represents one mile). Exquisitely detailed, it indicates that half a mile downstream, in the throat of the canyon, is a gauging station that was built by the U.S. Geological Survey. Unlike McCandless, too, I am here with three companions: Alaskans Roman Dial and Dan Solie and a friend of Roman's from California, Andrew Liske. The gauging station can't be seen from where the Stampede Trail comes down to the river, but after twenty minutes of fighting our way through a snarl of spruce and dwarf birch, Roman shouts, "I see it! There! A hundred yards farther."

We arrive to find an inch-thick steel cable spanning the gorge, stretched between a fifteen-foot tower on our side of the river and an outcrop on the far shore, four hundred feet away. The cable was erected in 1970 to chart the Teklanika's seasonal fluctuations; hydrologists traveled back and forth above the river by means of an aluminum basket that is suspended from the cable with pulleys. From the basket they would drop a weighted plumb line to measure the river's depth. The station was decommis-

sioned nine years ago for lack of funds, at which time the basket was supposed to be chained and locked to the tower on 'our side—the highway side—of the river. When we climbed to the top of the tower, however, the basket wasn't there. Looking across the rushing water, I could see it over on the distant shore—the bus side—of the canyon.

Some local hunters, it turns out, had cut the chain, ridden the basket across, and secured it to the far side in order to make it harder for outsiders to cross the Teklanika and trespass on their turf. When McCandless tried to walk out of the bush one year ago the previous week, the basket was in the same place it is now, on his side of the canyon. If he'd known about it, crossing the Teklanika to safety would have been a trivial matter. Because he had no topographic map, however, he had no way of conceiving that salvation was so close at hand.

Andy Horowitz, one of McCandless's friends on the Woodson High cross-country team, had mused that Chris "was born into the wrong century. He was looking for more adventure and freedom than today's society gives people." In coming to Alaska, McCandless yearned to wander uncharted country, to find a blank spot on the map. In 1992, however, there were no more blank spots on the map—not in Alaska, not anywhere. But Chris, with his idiosyncratic logic, came up with an elegant solution to this dilemma: He simply got rid of the map. In his own mind, if nowhere else, the *terra* would thereby remain *incognita*.

Because he lacked a good map, the cable spanning the river also remained incognito. Studying the Teklanika's violent flow, McCandless thus mistakenly concluded that it was impossible to reach the eastern shore. Thinking that his escape route had been cut off, he returned to the bus—a reasonable course of action, given his topographical ignorance. But why did he then stay at the bus and starve? Why, come August, didn't he try once more to cross the Teklanika, when it would have been running significantly lower, when it would have been safe to ford?

Puzzled by these questions, and troubled, I am hoping that the rusting hulk of Fairbanks bus 142 will yield some clues. But to

reach the bus, I, too, need to cross the river, and the aluminum tram is still chained to the far shore.

Standing atop the tower anchoring the eastern end of the span, I attach myself to the cable with rock-climbing hardware and begin to pull myself across, hand over hand, executing what mountaineers call a Tyrolean traverse. This turns out to be a more strenuous proposition than I had anticipated. Twenty minutes after starting out, I finally haul myself onto the outcrop on the other side, completely spent, so wasted I can barely raise my arms. After at last catching my breath, I climb into the basket—a rectangular aluminum car two feet wide by four feet long—disconnect the chain, and head back to the eastern side of the canyon to ferry my companions across.

The cable sags noticeably over the middle of the river; so when I cut loose from the outcrop, the car accelerates quickly under its own weight, rolling faster and faster along the steel strand, seeking the lowest point. It's a thrilling ride. Zipping over the rapids at twenty or thirty miles per hour, I hear an involuntary bark of fright leap from my throat before I realize that I'm in no danger and regain my composure.

After all four of us are on the western side of the gorge, thirty minutes of rough bushwhacking returns us to the Stampede Trail. The ten miles of trail we have already covered—the section between our parked vehicles and the river—were gentle, well marked, and relatively heavily traveled. But the ten miles to come have an utterly different character.

Because so few people cross the Teklanika during the spring and summer months, much of the route is indistinct and overgrown with brush. Immediately past the river the trail curves to the southwest, up the bed of a fast-flowing creek. And because beavers have built a network of elaborate dams across this creek, the route leads directly through a three-acre expanse of standing water. The beaver ponds are never more than chest deep, but the water is cold, and as we slosh forward, our feet churn the muck on the bottom into a foul-smelling miasma of decomposing slime.

The trail climbs a hill beyond the uppermost pond, then rejoins the twisting, rocky creek bed before ascending again into a jungle of scrubby vegetation. The going never gets exceedingly difficult, but the fifteen-foot-high tangle of alder pressing in from both sides is gloomy, claustrophobic, oppressive. Clouds of mosquitoes materialize out of the sticky heat. Every few minutes the insects' piercing whine is supplanted by the boom of distant thunder, rumbling over the taiga from a wall of thunderheads rearing darkly on the horizon.

Thickets of buckbrush leave a crosshatch of bloody lacerations on my shins. Piles of bear scat on the trail and, at one point, a set of fresh grizzly tracks—each print half again as long as a size-nine boot print—put me on edge. None of us has a gun. "Hey, Griz!" I yell at the undergrowth, hoping to avoid a surprise encounter. "Hey, bear! Just passing through! No reason to get riled!"

I have been to Alaska some twenty times during the past twenty years—to climb mountains, to work as a carpenter and a commercial salmon fisherman and a journalist, to goof off, to poke around. I've spent a lot of time alone in the country over the course of my many visits and usually relish it. Indeed, I had intended to make this trip to the bus by myself, and when my friend Roman invited himself and two others along, I was annoyed. Now, however, I am grateful for their company. There is something disquieting about this Gothic, overgrown landscape. It feels more malevolent than other, more remote corners of the state I know—the tundra-wrapped slopes of the Brooks Range, the cloud forests of the Alexander Archipelago, even the frozen, gale-swept heights of the Denali massif. I'm happy as hell that I'm not here alone.

At 9:00 P.M. we round a bend in the trail, and there, at the edge of a small clearing, is the bus. Pink bunches of fireweed choke the vehicle's wheel wells, growing higher than the axles. Fairbanks bus 142 is parked beside a coppice of aspen, ten yards back from the brow of a modest cliff, on a shank of high ground overlooking the confluence of the Sushana River and a smaller tributary.

It's an appealing setting, open and filled with light. It's easy to see why McCandless decided to make this his base camp.

We pause some distance away from the bus and stare at it for a while in silence. Its paint is chalky and peeling. Several windows are missing. Hundreds of delicate bones litter the clearing around the vehicle, scattered among thousands of porcupine quills: the remains of the small game that made up the bulk of McCandless's diet. And at the perimeter of this boneyard lies one much larger skeleton: that of the moose he shot, and subsequently agonized over.

When I'd questioned Gordon Samel and Ken Thompson shortly after they'd discovered McCandless's body, both men insisted—adamantly and unequivocally—that the big skeleton was the remains of a caribou, and they derided the greenhorn's ignorance in mistaking the animal he killed for a moose. "Wolves had scattered the bones some," Thompson had told me, "but it was obvious that the animal was a caribou. The kid didn't know what the hell he was doing up here."

"It was definitely a caribou," Samel had scornfully piped in. "When I read in the paper that he thought he'd shot a moose, that told me right there he wasn't no Alaskan. There's a big difference between a moose and a caribou. A real big difference. You'd have to be pretty stupid not to be able to tell them apart."

Trusting Samel and Thompson, veteran Alaskan hunters who've killed many moose and caribou between them, I duly reported McCandless's mistake in the article I wrote for *Outside*, thereby confirming the opinion of countless readers that McCandless was ridiculously ill prepared, that he had no business heading into any wilderness, let alone into the big-league wilds of the Last Frontier. Not only did McCandless die because he was stupid, one Alaska correspondent observed, but "the scope of his self-styled adventure was so small as to ring pathetic—squatting in a wrecked bus a few miles out of Healy, potting jays and squirrels, mistaking a caribou for a moose (pretty hard to do). . . . Only one word for the guy: incompetent."

Among the letters lambasting McCandless, virtually all those I

received mentioned his misidentification of the caribou as proof that he didn't know the first thing about surviving in the back-country. What the angry letter writers didn't know, however, was that the ungulate McCandless shot was exactly what he'd said it was. Contrary to what I reported in *Outside*, the animal was a moose, as a close examination of the beast's remains now indicated and several of McCandless's photographs of the kill later confirmed beyond all doubt. The boy made some mistakes on the Stampede Trail, but confusing a caribou with a moose wasn't among them.

Walking past the moose bones, I approach the vehicle and step through an emergency exit at the back. Immediately inside the door is the torn mattress, stained and moldering, on which McCandless expired. For some reason I am taken aback to find a collection of his possessions spread across its ticking: a green plastic canteen; a tiny bottle of water-purification tablets; a used-up cylinder of Chap Stick; a pair of insulated flight pants of the type sold in military-surplus stores; a paperback copy of the best-seller *O Jerusalem!*, its spine broken; wool mittens; a bottle of Muskol insect repellent; a full box of matches; and a pair of brown rubber work boots with the name Gallien written across the cuffs in faint black ink.

Despite the missing windows, the air inside the cavernous vehicle is stale and musty. "Wow," Roman remarks. "It smells like dead birds in here." A moment later I come across the source of the odor: a plastic garbage bag filled with feathers, down, and the severed wings of several birds. It appears that McCandless was saving them to insulate his clothing or perhaps to make a feather pillow.

Toward the front of the bus, McCandless's pots and dishes are stacked on a makeshift plywood table beside a kerosene lamp. A long leather scabbard is expertly tooled with the initials R. F.: the sheath for the machete Ronald Franz gave McCandless when he left Salton City.

The boy's blue toothbrush rests next to a half-empty tube of Colgate, a packet of dental floss, and the gold molar crown that, according to his journal, fell off his tooth three weeks into his so-

journ. A few inches away sits a skull the size of a watermelon, thick ivory fangs jutting from its bleached maxillae. It is a bear skull, the remains of a grizzly shot by someone who visited the bus years before McCandless's tenure. A message scratched in Chris's tidy hand brackets a cranial bullet hole: ALL HAIL THE PHANTOM BEAR, THE BEAST WITHIN US ALL. ALEXANDER SUPERTRAMP. MAY 1992.

Looking up, I notice that the sheet-metal walls of the vehicle are covered with graffiti left by numerous visitors over the years. Roman points out a message he wrote when he stayed in the bus four years ago, during a traverse of the Alaska Range: NOODLE EATERS EN ROUTE TO LAKE CLARK 8/89. Like Roman, most people scrawled little more than their names and a date. The longest, most eloquent graffito is one of several inscribed by McCandless, the proclamation of joy that begins with a nod to his favorite Roger Miller song: 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. . . .

Immediately below this manifesto squats the stove, fabricated from a rusty oil drum. A twelve-foot section of a spruce trunk is jammed into its open doorway, and across the log are draped two pairs of torn Levi's, laid out as if to dry. One pair of jeans—waist thirty, inseam thirty-two—is patched crudely with silver duct tape; the other pair has been repaired more carefully, with scraps from a faded bedspread stitched over gaping holes in the knees and seat. This latter pair also sports a belt fashioned from a strip of blanket. McCandless, it occurs to me, must have been forced to make the belt after growing so thin that his pants wouldn't stay up without it.

Sitting down on a steel cot across from the stove to mull over this eerie tableau, I encounter evidence of McCandless's presence wherever my vision rests. Here are his toenail clippers, over there his green nylon tent spread over a missing window in the front door. His Kmart hiking boots are arranged neatly beneath the stove, as though he'd soon be returning to lace them up and hit the trail. I feel uncomfortable, as if I were intruding, a voyeur who has slipped into McCandless's bedroom while he is momen-

tarily away. Suddenly queasy, I stumble out of the bus to walk along the river and breathe some fresh air.

An hour later we build a fire outside in the fading light. The rain squalls, now past, have rinsed the haze from the atmosphere, and distant, backlit hills stand out in crisp detail. A stripe of incandescent sky burns beneath the cloud base on the northwestern horizon. Roman unwraps some steaks from a moose he shot in the Alaska Range last September and lays them across the fire on a blackened grill, the grill McCandless used for broiling his game. Moose fat pops and sizzles into the coals. Eating the gristly meat with our fingers, we slap at mosquitoes and talk about this peculiar person whom none of us ever met, trying to get a handle on how he came to grief, trying to understand why some people seem to despise him so intensely for having died here.

By design McCandless came into the country with insufficient provisions, and he lacked certain pieces of equipment deemed essential by many Alaskans: a large-caliber rifle, map and compass, an ax. This has been regarded as evidence not just of stupidity but of the even greater sin of arrogance. Some critics have even drawn parallels between McCandless and the Arctic's most infamous tragic figure, Sir John Franklin, a nineteenth-century British naval officer whose smugness and hauteur contributed to some 140 deaths, including his own.

In 1819, the Admiralty assigned Franklin to lead an expedition into the wilderness of northwestern Canada. Two years out of England, winter overtook his small party as they plodded across an expanse of tundra so vast and empty that they christened it the Barrens, the name by which it is still known. Their food ran out. Game was scarce, forcing Franklin and his men to subsist on lichens scraped from boulders, singed deer hide, scavenged animal bones, their own boot leather, and finally one another's flesh. Before the ordeal was over, at least two men had been murdered and eaten, the suspected murderer had been summarily executed, and eight others were dead from sickness and starvation. Franklin was himself within a day or two of expiring when he and the other survivors were rescued by a band of métis.

An affable Victorian gentleman, Franklin was said to be a good-natured bumbler, dogged and clueless, with the naïve ideals of a child and a disdain for acquiring backcountry skills. He had been woefully unprepared to lead an Arctic expedition, and upon returning to England, he was known as the Man Who Ate His Shoes—yet the sobriquet was uttered more often with awe than with ridicule. He was hailed as a national hero, promoted to the rank of captain by the Admiralty, paid handsomely to write an account of his ordeal, and, in 1825, given command of a second Arctic expedition.

That trip was relatively uneventful, but in 1845, hoping finally to discover the fabled Northwest Passage, Franklin made the mistake of returning to the Arctic for a third time. He and the 128 men under his command were never heard from again. Evidence unearthed by the forty-odd expeditions sent to search for them eventually established that all had perished, the victims of scurvy, starvation, and unspeakable suffering.

When McCandless turned up dead, he was likened to Franklin not simply because both men starved but also because both were perceived to have lacked a requisite humility; both were thought to have possessed insufficient respect for the land. A century after Franklin's death, the eminent explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson pointed out that the English explorer had never taken the trouble to learn the survival skills practiced by the Indians and the Eskimos—peoples who had managed to flourish "for generations, bringing up their children and taking care of their aged" in the same harsh country that killed Franklin. (Stefansson conveniently neglected to mention that many, many Indians and Eskimos have starved in the northern latitudes, as well.)

McCandless's arrogance was not of the same strain as Franklin's, however. Franklin regarded nature as an antagonist that would inevitably submit to force, good breeding, and Victorian discipline. Instead of living in concert with the land, instead of relying on the country for sustenance as the natives did, he attempted to insulate himself from the northern environment with ill-suited military tools and traditions. McCandless, on the other hand, went too far in the opposite direction. He tried to live en-

tirely off the country—and he tried to do it without bothering to master beforehand the full repertoire of crucial skills.

It probably misses the point, though, to castigate McCandless for being ill prepared. He was green, and he overestimated his resilience, but he was sufficiently skilled to last for sixteen weeks on little more than his wits and ten pounds of rice. And he was fully aware when he entered the bush that he had given himself a perilously slim margin for error. He knew precisely what was at stake.

It is hardly unusual for a young man to be drawn to a pursuit considered reckless by his elders; engaging in risky behavior is a rite of passage in our culture no less than in most others. Danger has always held a certain allure. That, in large part, is why so many teenagers drive too fast and drink too much and take too many drugs, why it has always been so easy for nations to recruit young men to go to war. It can be argued that youthful derring-do is in fact evolutionarily adaptive, a behavior encoded in our genes. McCandless, in his fashion, merely took risk-taking to its logical extreme.

He had a need to test himself in ways, as he was fond of saying, “that mattered.” He possessed grand—some would say grandiose—spiritual ambitions. According to the moral absolutism that characterizes McCandless’s beliefs, a challenge in which a successful outcome is assured isn’t a challenge at all.

It is not merely the young, of course, who are drawn to hazardous undertakings. John Muir is remembered primarily as a no-nonsense conservationist and the founding president of the Sierra Club, but he was also a bold adventurer, a fearless scrambler of peaks, glaciers, and waterfalls whose best-known essay includes a riveting account of nearly falling to his death, in 1872, while ascending California’s Mt. Ritter. In another essay Muir rapturously describes riding out a ferocious Sierra gale, by choice, in the uppermost branches of a one-hundred-foot Douglas fir:

[N]ever before did I enjoy so noble an exhilaration of motion. The slender tops fairly flapped and swished in the passionate torrent,

bending and swirling backward and forward, round and round, tracing indescribable combinations of vertical and horizontal curves, while I clung with muscles firm braced, like a bobolink on a reed.

He was thirty-six years old at the time. One suspects that Muir wouldn’t have thought McCandless terribly odd or incomprehensible.

Even staid, prissy Thoreau, who famously declared that it was enough to have “traveled a good deal in Concord,” felt compelled to visit the more fearsome wilds of nineteenth-century Maine and climb Mt. Katahdin. His ascent of the peak’s “savage and awful, though beautiful” ramparts shocked and frightened him, but it also induced a giddy sort of awe. The disquietude he felt on Katahdin’s granite heights inspired some of his most powerful writing and profoundly colored the way he thought thereafter about the earth in its coarse, undomesticated state.

Unlike Muir and Thoreau, McCandless went into the wilderness not primarily to ponder nature or the world at large but, rather, to explore the inner country of his own soul. He soon discovered, however, what Muir and Thoreau already knew: An extended stay in the wilderness inevitably directs one’s attention outward as much as inward, and it is impossible to live off the land without developing both a subtle understanding of, and a strong emotional bond with, that land and all it holds.

The entries in McCandless’s journal contain few abstractions about wilderness or, for that matter, few ruminations of any kind. There is scant mention of the surrounding scenery. Indeed, as Roman’s friend Andrew Liske points out upon reading a photocopy of the journal, “These entries are almost entirely about what he ate. He wrote about hardly anything except food.”

Andrew is not exaggerating: The journal is little more than a tally of plants foraged and game killed. It would probably be a mistake, however, to conclude thereby that McCandless failed to appreciate the beauty of the country around him, that he was unmoved by the power of the landscape. As cultural ecologist Paul Shepard has observed,

The nomadic Bedouin does not dote on scenery, paint landscapes, or compile a nonutilitarian natural history. . . . [H]is life is so profoundly in transaction with nature that there is no place for abstraction or esthetics or a "nature philosophy" which can be separated from the rest of his life. . . . Nature and his relationship to it are a deadly-serious matter, prescribed by convention, mystery, and danger. His personal leisure is aimed away from idle amusement or detached tampering with nature's processes. But built into his life is awareness of that presence, of the terrain, of the unpredictable weather, of the narrow margin by which he is sustained.

Much the same could be said of McCandless during the months he spent beside the Sushana River.

It would be easy to stereotype Christopher McCandless as another boy who felt too much, a loopy young man who read too many books and lacked even a modicum of common sense. But the stereotype isn't a good fit. McCandless wasn't some feckless slacker, adrift and confused, racked by existential despair. To the contrary: His life hummed with meaning and purpose. But the meaning he wrested from existence lay beyond the comfortable path: McCandless distrusted the value of things that came easily. He demanded much of himself—more, in the end, than he could deliver.

Trying to explain McCandless's unorthodox behavior, some people have made much of the fact that like John Waterman, he was small in stature and may have suffered from a "short man's complex," a fundamental insecurity that drove him to prove his manhood by means of extreme physical challenges. Others have posited that an unresolved Oedipal conflict was at the root of his fatal odyssey. Although there may be some truth in both hypotheses, this sort of posthumous off-the-rack psychoanalysis is a dubious, highly speculative enterprise that inevitably demeans and trivializes the absent analysand. It's not clear that much of value is learned by reducing Chris McCandless's strange spiritual quest to a list of pat psychological disorders.

Roman and Andrew and I stare into the embers and talk about

McCandless late into the night. Roman, thirty-two, inquisitive and outspoken, has a doctorate in biology from Stanford and an abiding distrust of conventional wisdom. He spent his adolescence in the same Washington, D.C., suburbs as McCandless and found them every bit as stifling. He first came to Alaska as a nine-year-old, to visit a trio of uncles who mined coal at Usibelli, a big strip-mine operation a few miles east of Healy, and immediately fell in love with everything about the North. Over the years that followed, he returned repeatedly to the forty-ninth state. In 1977, after graduating from high school as a sixteen-year-old at the top of his class, he moved to Fairbanks and made Alaska his permanent home.

These days Roman teaches at Alaska Pacific University, in Anchorage, and enjoys statewide renown for a long, brash string of backcountry escapades: He has—among other feats—traveled the entire 1,000-mile length of the Brooks Range by foot and paddle, skied 250 miles across the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in subzero winter cold, traversed the 700-mile crest of the Alaska Range, and pioneered more than thirty first ascents of northern peaks and crags. And Roman doesn't see a great deal of difference between his own widely respected deeds and McCandless's adventure, except that McCandless had the misfortune to perish.

I bring up McCandless's hubris and the dumb mistakes he made—the two or three readily avoidable blunders that ended up costing him his life. "Sure, he screwed up," Roman answers, "but I admire what he was trying to do. Living completely off the land like that, month after month, is incredibly difficult. I've never done it. And I'd bet you that very few, if any, of the people who call McCandless incompetent have ever done it either, not for more than a week or two. Living in the interior bush for an extended period, subsisting on nothing except what you hunt and gather—most people have no idea how hard that actually is. And McCandless almost pulled it off.

"I guess I just can't help identifying with the guy," Roman allows as he pokes the coals with a stick. "I hate to admit it, but not so many years ago it could easily have been me in the same kind of predicament. When I first started coming to Alaska, I think I

was probably a lot like McCandless: just as green, just as eager. And I'm sure there are plenty of other Alaskans who had a lot in common with McCandless when they first got here, too, including many of his critics. Which is maybe why they're so hard on him. Maybe McCandless reminds them a little too much of their former selves."

Roman's observation underscores how difficult it is for those of us preoccupied with the humdrum concerns of adulthood to recall how forcefully we were once buffeted by the passions and longings of youth. As Everett Ruess's father mused years after his twenty-year-old son vanished in the desert, "The older person does not realize the soul-flights of the adolescent. I think we all poorly understood Everett."

Roman, Andrew, and I stay up well past midnight, trying to make sense of McCandless's life and death, yet his essence remains slippery, vague, elusive. Gradually, the conversation lags and falters. When I drift away from the fire to find a place to throw down my sleeping bag, the first faint smear of dawn is already bleaching the rim of the northeastern sky. Although the mosquitoes are thick tonight and the bus would no doubt offer some refuge, I decide not to bed down inside Fairbanks 142. Nor, I note before sinking into a dreamless sleep, do the others.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE STAMPEDE TRAIL

It is nearly impossible for modern man to imagine what it is like to live by hunting. The life of a hunter is one of hard, seemingly continuous overland travel. . . . A life of frequent concerns that the next interception may not work, that the trap or the drive will fail, or that the herds will not appear this season. Above all, the life of a hunter carries with it the threat of deprivation and death by starvation.

JOHN M. CAMPBELL,
THE HUNGRY SUMMER

Now what is history? It is the centuries of systematic explorations of the riddle of death, with a view to overcoming death. That's why people discover mathematical infinity and electromagnetic waves, that's why they write symphonies. Now, you can't advance in this direction without a certain faith. You can't make such discoveries without spiritual equipment. And the basic elements of this equipment are in the Gospels. What are they? To begin with, love of one's neighbor, which is the supreme form of vital energy. Once it fills the heart of man it has to overflow and spend itself. And then the two basic ideals of modern man—without them he is unthinkable—the idea of free personality and the idea of life as sacrifice.

BORIS PASTERNAK,
DOCTOR ZHIVAGO

PASSAGE HIGHLIGHTED IN ONE OF THE BOOKS FOUND
WITH CHRISTOPHER McCANDLESS'S REMAINS;
UNDERSCORING BY McCANDLESS

After his attempt to depart the wilderness was stymied by the Teklanika's high flow, McCandless arrived back at the bus on July 8. It's impossible to know what was going through his mind at that point, for his journal betrays nothing. Quite possibly he was unconcerned about his escape route's having been cut off; indeed, at the time there was little reason for him to worry: It was the height of summer; the country was a fecund riot of plant and animal life, and his food supply was adequate. He probably surmised that if he bided his time until August, the Teklanika would subside enough to be crossed.

Reestablished in the corroded shell of Fairbanks 142, McCandless fell back into his routine of hunting and gathering. He read Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilych" and Michael Crichton's *Terminal Man*. He noted in his journal that it rained for a week straight. Game seems to have been plentiful: In the last three weeks of July, he killed thirty-five squirrels, four spruce grouse, five jays and woodpeckers, and two frogs, all of which he supplemented with wild potatoes, wild rhubarb, various species of berries, and large numbers of mushrooms. But despite this apparent munificence, the meat he'd been killing was very lean, and he was consuming fewer calories than he was burning. After subsisting for three months on an exceedingly marginal diet, McCandless had run up a sizable caloric deficit. He was balanced on a precarious edge. And then, in late July, he made the mistake that pulled him down.

He had just finished reading *Doctor Zhivago*, a book that incited him to scribble excited notes in the margins and underline several passages:

Lara walked along the tracks following a path worn by pilgrims and then turned into the fields. Here she stopped and, closing her eyes, took a deep breath of the flower-scented air of the broad expanse around her. It was dearer to her than her kin, better than a lover, wiser than a book. For a moment she rediscovered the purpose of her life. She was here on earth to grasp the meaning of its wild enchantment and to call each thing by its

right name, or, if this were not within her power, to give birth out of love for life to successors who would do it in her place.

"NATURE/PURITY," he printed in bold characters at the top of the page.

Oh, how one wishes sometimes to escape from the meaningless dullness of human eloquence, from all those sublime phrases, to take refuge in nature, apparently so inarticulate, or in the wordlessness of long, grinding labor, of sound sleep, of true music, or of a human understanding rendered speechless by emotion!

McCandless starred and bracketed the paragraph and circled "refuge in nature" in black ink.

Next to "And so it turned out that only a life similar to the life of those around us, merging with it without a ripple, is genuine life, and that an unshared happiness is not happiness. . . . And this was most vexing of all," he noted, "HAPPINESS ONLY REAL WHEN SHARED."

It is tempting to regard this latter notation as further evidence that McCandless's long, lonely sabbatical had changed him in some significant way. It can be interpreted to mean that he was ready, perhaps, to shed a little of the armor he wore around his heart, that upon returning to civilization, he intended to abandon the life of a solitary vagabond, stop running so hard from intimacy, and become a member of the human community. But we will never know, because *Doctor Zhivago* was the last book Chris McCandless would ever read.

Two days after he finished the book, on July 30, there is an ominous entry in the journal: "EXTREMELY WEAK. FAULT OF POT. SEED. MUCH TROUBLE JUST TO STAND UP. STARVING. GREAT JEOPARDY." Before this note there is nothing in the journal to suggest that McCandless was in dire circumstances. He was hungry, and his meager diet had pared his body down to a feral scrawn of gristle and bone, but he seemed to be in rea-

sonably good health. Then, after July 30, his physical condition suddenly went to hell. By August 19, he was dead.

There has been a great deal of conjecture about what caused such a precipitous decline. In the days following the identification of McCandless's remains, Wayne Westerberg vaguely recalled that Chris might have purchased some seeds in South Dakota before heading north, including perhaps some potato seeds, with which he intended to plant a vegetable garden after getting established in the bush. According to one theory, McCandless never got around to planting the garden (I saw no evidence of a garden in the vicinity of the bus) and by late July had grown hungry enough to eat the seeds, which poisoned him.

Potato seeds are in fact mildly toxic after they've begun to sprout. They contain solanine, a poison that occurs in plants of the nightshade family, which causes vomiting, diarrhea, headache, and lethargy in the short term, and adversely affects heart rate and blood pressure when ingested over an extended period. This theory has a serious flaw, however: In order for McCandless to have been incapacitated by potato seeds, he would have had to eat many, many pounds of them; and given the light weight of his pack when Gallien dropped him off, it is extremely unlikely that he carried more than a few grams of potato seeds, if he carried any at all.

But other scenarios involve potato seeds of an entirely different variety, and these scenarios are more plausible. Pages 126 and 127 of *Tanaina Plantlore* describe a plant that is called wild potato by the Dena'ina Indians, who harvested its carrotlike root. The plant, known to botanists as *Hedysarum alpinum*, grows in gravelly soil throughout the region.

According to *Tanaina Plantlore*, "The root of the wild potato is probably the most important food of the Dena'ina, other than wild fruit. They eat it in a variety of ways—raw, boiled, baked, or fried—and enjoy it especially dipped in oil or lard, in which they also preserve it." The citation goes on to say that the best time to dig wild potatoes "is in the spring as soon as the ground thaws. . . . During the summer they evidently become dry and tough."

Priscilla Russell Kari, the author of *Tanaina Plantlore*, ex-

plained to me that "spring was a really hard time for the Dena'ina people, particularly in the past. Often the game they depended on for food didn't show up, or the fish didn't start running on time. So they depended on wild potatoes as a major staple until the fish came in late spring. It has a very sweet taste. It was—and still is—something they really like to eat."

Above ground the wild potato grows as a bushy herb, two feet tall, with stalks of delicate pink flowers reminiscent of miniature sweet-pea blossoms. Taking a cue from Kari's book, McCandless started to dig and eat wild potato roots on June 24, apparently without ill effect. On July 14, he began consuming the pealike seed pods of the plant as well, probably because the roots were becoming too tough to eat. A photograph he took during this period shows a one-gallon Ziploc plastic bag stuffed to overflowing with such seeds. And then, on July 30, the entry in his journal reads, "EXTREMELY WEAK. FAULT OF POT. SEED. . . ."

One page after *Tanaina Plantlore* enumerates the wild potato, it describes a closely related species, wild sweet pea, *Hedysarum mackenzii*. Although a slightly smaller plant, wild sweet pea looks so much like wild potato that even expert botanists sometimes have trouble telling the species apart. There is only a single distinguishing characteristic that is absolutely reliable: On the underside of the wild potato's tiny green leaflets are conspicuous lateral veins; such veins are invisible on the leaflets of the wild sweet pea.

Kari's book warns that because wild sweet pea is so difficult to distinguish from wild potato and "is reported to be poisonous, care should be taken to identify them accurately before attempting to use the wild potato as food." Accounts of individuals being poisoned from eating *H. mackenzii* are nonexistent in modern medical literature, but the aboriginal inhabitants of the North have apparently known for millennia that wild sweet pea is toxic and remain extremely careful not to confuse *H. alpinum* with *H. mackenzii*.

To find a documented poisoning attributable to wild sweet pea, I had to go all the way back to the nineteenth-century annals of Arctic exploration. I came across what I was looking for in the

journals of Sir John Richardson, a famous Scottish surgeon, naturalist, and explorer. He'd been a member of the hapless Sir John Franklin's first two expeditions and had survived both of them; it was Richardson who executed, by gunshot, the suspected murderer-cannibal on the first expedition. Richardson also happened to be the botanist who first wrote a scientific description of *H. mackenzii* and gave the plant its botanical name. In 1848, while leading an expedition through the Canadian Arctic in search of the by then missing Franklin, Richardson made a botanical comparison of *H. alpinum* and *H. mackenzii*. *H. alpinum*, he observed in his journal,

furnishes long flexible roots, which taste sweet like the liquorice, and are much eaten in the spring by the natives, but become woody and lose their juiciness and crispness as the season advances. The root of the hoary, decumbent, and less elegant, but larger-flowered Hedysarum mackenzii is poisonous, and nearly killed an old Indian woman at Fort Simpson, who had mistaken it for that of the preceding species. Fortunately, it proved emetic; and her stomach having rejected all that she had swallowed, she was restored to health, though her recovery was for some time doubtful.

It was easy to imagine Chris McCandless making the same mistake as the Indian woman and becoming similarly incapacitated. From all the available evidence, there seemed to be little doubt that McCandless—rash and incautious by nature—had committed a careless blunder, confusing one plant for another, and died as a consequence. In the *Outside* article, I reported with great certainty that *H. mackenzii*, the wild sweet pea, killed the boy. Virtually every other journalist who wrote about the McCandless tragedy drew the same conclusion.

But as the months passed and I had the opportunity to ponder McCandless's death at greater length, the less plausible this consensus seemed. For three weeks beginning on June 24, McCandless had dug and safely eaten dozens of wild potato roots without mistaking *H. mackenzii* for *H. alpinum*; why, on July 14, when he

started gathering seeds instead of roots, would he suddenly have confused the two species?

McCandless, I came to believe with increasing conviction, scrupulously steered clear of the toxic *H. mackenzii* and never ate its seeds or any other part of the plant. He was indeed poisoned, but the plant that killed him wasn't wild sweet pea. The agent of his demise was wild potato, *H. alpinum*, the species plainly identified as nontoxic in *Tanaina Plantlore*.

The book advises only that the roots of the wild potato are edible. Although it says nothing about the seeds of the species being edible, it also says nothing about the seeds being toxic. To be fair to McCandless, it should be pointed out that the seeds of *H. alpinum* have never been described as toxic in any published text: An extensive search of the medical and botanical literature yielded not a single indication that any part of *H. alpinum* is poisonous.

But the pea family (*Leguminosae*, to which *H. alpinum* belongs) happens to be rife with species that produce alkaloids—chemical compounds that have powerful pharmacological effects on humans and animals. (Morphine, caffeine, nicotine, curare, strychnine, and mescaline are all alkaloids.) And in many alkaloid-producing species, moreover, the toxin is strictly localized within the plant.

"What happens with a lot of legumes," explains John Bryant, a chemical ecologist at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks, "is that the plants concentrate alkaloids in the seed coats in late summer, to discourage animals from eating their seeds. Depending on the time of year, it would not be uncommon for a plant with edible roots to have poisonous seeds. If a species does produce alkaloids, as fall approaches, the seeds are where the toxin is most likely to be found."

During my visit to the Sushana River, I collected samples of *H. alpinum* growing within a few feet of the bus and sent seed pods from this sample to Tom Clausen, a colleague of Professor Bryant's in the Chemistry Department at the University of Alaska. Conclusive spectrographic analysis has yet to be completed, but preliminary testing by Clausen and one of his graduate students,

Edward Treadwell, indicates that the seeds definitely contains traces of an alkaloid. There is a strong likelihood, moreover, that the alkaloid is swainsonine, a compound known to ranchers and livestock veterinarians as the toxic agent in locoweeds.

There are some fifty varieties of toxic locoweeds, the bulk of which are in the genus *Astragalus*—a genus very closely related to *Hedysarum*. The most obvious symptoms of locoweed poisoning are neurological. According to a paper published in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medicine Association*, among the signs of locoweed poisoning are “depression, a slow staggering gait, rough coat, dull eyes with a staring look, emaciation, muscular incoordination, and nervousness (especially when stressed). In addition, affected animals may become solitary and hard to handle, and may have difficulty eating and drinking.”

With the discovery by Clausen and Treadwell that wild potato seeds may be repositories of swainsonine or some similarly toxic compound, a compelling case can be made for these seeds having caused McCandless's death. If true, it means that McCandless wasn't quite as reckless or incompetent as he has been made out to be. He didn't carelessly confuse one species with another. The plant that poisoned him was not known to be toxic—indeed, he'd been safely eating its roots for weeks. In his state of hunger, McCandless simply made the mistake of ingesting its seed pods. A person with a better grasp of botanical principles would probably not have eaten them, but it was an innocent error. It was, however, sufficient to do him in.

The effects of swainsonine poisoning are chronic—the alkaloid rarely kills outright. The toxin does the deed insidiously, indirectly, by inhibiting an enzyme essential to glycoprotein metabolism. It creates a massive vapor lock, as it were, in mammalian fuel lines: The body is prevented from turning what it eats into a source of usable energy. If you ingest too much swainsonine, you are bound to starve, no matter how much food you put into your stomach.

Animals will sometimes recover from swainsonine poisoning after they stop eating locoweeds, but only if they are in fairly robust condition to begin with. In order for the toxic compound to be ex-

creted in the urine, it first has to bind with available molecules of glucose or amino acid. A large store of proteins and sugars must be present to mop up the poison and wring it from the body.

“The problem,” says Professor Bryant, “is that if you're lean and hungry to begin with, you're obviously not going to have any glucose and protein to spare; so there's no way to flush the toxin from your system. When a starving mammal ingests an alkaloid—even one as benign as caffeine—it's going to get hit much harder by it than it normally would because they lack the glucose reserves necessary to excrete the stuff. The alkaloid is simply going to accumulate in the system. If McCandless ate a big slug of these seeds while he was already in a semi-starving condition, it would have been a setup for catastrophe.”

Laid low by the toxic seeds, McCandless discovered that he was suddenly far too weak to hike out and save himself. He was now too weak even to hunt effectively and thus grew weaker still, sliding closer and closer toward starvation. His life was spiraling out of control with awful speed.

There are no journal entries for July 31 or August 1. On August 2, the diary says only, “TERRIBLE WIND.” Autumn was just around the corner. The temperature was dropping, and the days were becoming noticeably shorter: Each rotation of the earth held seven fewer minutes of daylight and seven more of cold and darkness; in the span of a single week, the night grew nearly an hour longer.

“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, HAVE LITERALLY BECOME TRAPPED IN THE WILD.—NO GAME.”**

If McCandless had possessed a U.S. Geological Survey topographic map, it would have alerted him to the existence of a Park Service cabin on the upper Sushana River, six miles due south of the bus, a distance he might have been able to cover even in his severely weakened state. The cabin, just inside the boundary of Denali National Park, had been stocked with a small amount of emergency food, bedding, and first-aid supplies for the use of

backcountry rangers on their winter patrols. And although they aren't marked on the map, two miles even closer to the bus are a pair of private cabins—one owned by the well-known Healy dog mushers Will and Linda Forsberg; the other, by an employee of Denali National Park, Steve Carwile—where there should have been some food as well.

McCandless's apparent salvation, in other words, seemed to be only a three-hour walk upriver. This sad irony was widely noted in the aftermath of his death. But even if he had known about these cabins, they wouldn't have delivered McCandless from harm: At some point after mid-April, when the last of the cabins was vacated as the spring thaw made dog mushing and snow-machine travel problematic, somebody broke into all three cabins and vandalized them extensively. The food inside was exposed to animals and the weather, ruining it.

The damage wasn't discovered until late July, when a wildlife biologist named Paul Atkinson made the grueling ten-mile bush-whack over the Outer Range, from the road into Denali National Park to the Park Service shelter. He was shocked and baffled by the mindless destruction that greeted him. "It was obviously not the work of bear," Atkinson reports. "I'm a bear technician, so I know what bear damage looks like. This looked like somebody had gone at the cabins with a claw hammer and bashed everything in sight. From the size of the fireweed growing up through mattresses that had been tossed outside, it was clear that the vandalism had occurred many weeks earlier."

"It was completely trashed," Will Forsberg says of his cabin. "Everything that wasn't nailed down had been wrecked. All the lamps were broken and most of the windows. The bedding and mattresses had been pulled outside and thrown in a heap, ceiling boards yanked down, fuel cans were punctured, the wood stove was removed—even a big carpet had been hauled out to rot. And all the food was gone. So the cabins wouldn't have helped Alex much even if he had found them. Or then again, maybe he did."

Forsberg considers McCandless the prime suspect. He believes McCandless blundered upon the cabins after arriving at the bus during the first week of May, flew into a rage over the intrusion

of civilization on his precious wilderness experience, and systematically wrecked the buildings. This theory fails to explain, however, why McCandless didn't, then, also trash the bus.

Carwile also suspects McCandless. "It's just intuition," he explains, "but I get the feeling he was the kind of guy who might want to 'set the wilderness free.' Destroying the cabins would be a way of doing that. Or maybe it was his intense dislike of the government: He saw the sign on the Park Service cabin identifying it as such, assumed all three cabins were government property, and decided to strike a blow against Big Brother. That certainly seems within the realm of possibility."

The authorities, for their part, don't think McCandless was the vandal. "We really hit a blank on who might have done it," says Ken Kehrer, chief ranger for Denali National Park. "But Chris McCandless isn't considered a suspect by the National Park Service." In fact, there is nothing in McCandless's journal or photographs to suggest he went anywhere near the cabins. When McCandless ventured beyond the bus in early May, his pictures show that he headed north, downstream along the Sushana, the opposite direction of the cabins. And even if he had somehow chanced upon them, it's difficult to imagine him destroying the buildings without boasting of the deed in his diary.

There are no entries in McCandless's journal for August 6, 7, and 8. On August 9, he notes that he shot at a bear but missed. On August 10, he saw a caribou but didn't get a shot off, and he killed five squirrels. If a sufficient amount of swainsonine had accumulated in his body, however, this windfall of small game would have provided little nourishment. On August 11, he killed and ate one ptarmigan. On August 12, he dragged himself out of the bus to forage for berries, after posting a plea for assistance in the unlikely event that someone would stop by while he was away. Written in meticulous block letters on a page torn from Gogol's *Taras Bulba*, it reads:

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.

He signed the note "CHRIS MCCANDLESS. AUGUST?" Recognizing the gravity of his predicament, he had abandoned the cocky moniker he'd been using for years, Alexander Supertramp, in favor of the name given to him at birth by his parents.

Many Alaskans have wondered why, in his desperation, McCandless didn't start a forest fire at this point, as a distress signal. There were two nearly full gallons of stove gas in the bus; presumably, it would have been a simple matter to start a conflagration large enough to attract the attention of passing airplanes or at least burn a giant SOS into the muskeg.

Contrary to common belief, however, the bus doesn't lie beneath any established flight path, and very few planes fly over it. Over the four days I spent on the Stampede Trail, I didn't see a single aircraft overhead, other than commercial jets flying at altitudes greater than twenty-five thousand feet. Small planes did no doubt pass within sight of the bus from time to time, but McCandless would probably have had to start a fairly large forest fire to be sure of attracting their attention. And as Carine McCandless points out, "Chris would never, ever, intentionally burn down a forest, not even to save his life. Anybody who would suggest otherwise doesn't understand the first thing about my brother."

Starvation is not a pleasant way to expire. In advanced stages of famine, as the body begins to consume itself, the victim suffers muscle pain, heart disturbances, loss of hair, dizziness, shortness of breath, extreme sensitivity to cold, physical and mental exhaustion. The skin becomes discolored. In the absence of key nutrients, a severe chemical imbalance develops in the brain, inducing convulsions and hallucinations. Some people who have been brought back from the far edge of starvation, though, report that near the end the hunger vanishes, the terrible pain dissolves, and the suffering is replaced by a sublime euphoria, a sense of calm accompanied by transcendent mental clarity. It would be nice to think McCandless experienced a similar rapture.

On August 12, he wrote what would prove to be the final words in his journal: "Beautiful Blueberries." 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 of the page were some lines 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.
The mountains are dead stone, the people
Admire or hate their stature, their insolent quietness,
The mountains are not softened or troubled
And a few dead men's thoughts have the same temper.*

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 sewn for him and slipped into unconsciousness. He probably died on August 18, 112 days after he'd walked into the wild, 19 days before six Alaskans would happen across the bus and discover his body inside.

One of his last acts was to take a picture of himself, standing near the bus under the high Alaska sky, one hand holding his final note toward the camera lens, the other raised in a brave, beatific farewell. His face is horribly emaciated, almost skeletal. But if he pitied himself in those last difficult hours—because he was so young, because he was alone, because his body had betrayed him and his will had let him down—it's not apparent from the photograph. He is smiling in the picture, and there is no mistaking the look in his eyes: Chris McCandless was at peace, serene as a monk gone to God.