

Jon
Krakauer

INTO THE
WILD

For Linda

AUTHOR'S NOTE

In April 1992, a young man from a well-to-do East Coast family hitchhiked to Alaska and walked alone into the wilderness north of Mt. McKinley. Four months later his decomposed body was found by a party of moose hunters.

Shortly after the discovery of the corpse, I was asked by the editor of *Outside* magazine to report on the puzzling circumstances of the boy's death. His name turned out to be Christopher Johnson McCandless. He'd grown up, I learned, in an affluent suburb of Washington, D.C., where he'd excelled academically and had been an elite athlete.

Immediately after graduating, with honors, from Emory University in the summer of 1990, McCandless dropped out of sight. He changed his name, gave the entire balance of a twenty-four-thousand-dollar savings account to charity, abandoned his car and most of his possessions, burned all the cash in his wallet. And then he invented a new life for himself, taking up residence at the ragged margin of our society, wandering across North America in search of raw, transcendent experience. His family had no idea where he was or what had become of him until his remains turned up in Alaska.

Working on a tight deadline, I wrote a nine-thousand-word article, which ran in the January 1993 issue of the magazine, but my fascination with McCandless remained long after that issue of *Outside* was replaced on the newsstands by more current journalistic fare. I was haunted by the particulars of the boy's starvation and by vague, unsettling parallels between events in his life and those in my own. Unwilling to let McCandless go, I spent more than a year retracing the convoluted path that led to his death in the Alaska taiga, chasing down details of his peregrinations with an interest that bordered on obsession. In trying to understand McCandless, I inevitably came to reflect on other, larger subjects as well: the grip wilderness has on the American imagination, the allure high-risk activities hold for young men of a certain mind, the complicated, highly charged bond that exists between fathers and sons. The result of this meandering inquiry is the book now before you.

I won't claim to be an impartial biographer. McCandless's strange tale struck a personal note that made a dispassionate rendering of the tragedy impossible. Through most of the book, I have tried—and largely succeeded, I think—to minimize my authorial presence. But let the reader be warned: I interrupt McCandless's story with fragments of a narrative drawn from my own youth. I do so in the hope that my experiences will throw some oblique light on the enigma of Chris McCandless.

He was an extremely intense young man and possessed a streak of stubborn idealism that did not mesh readily with modern existence. Long captivated by

the writing of Leo Tolstoy, McCandless particularly admired how the great novelist had forsaken a life of wealth and privilege to wander among the destitute. In college McCandless began emulating Tolstoy's asceticism and moral rigor to a degree that first astonished, and then alarmed, those who were close to him. When the boy headed off into the Alaska bush, he entertained no illusions that he was trekking into a land of milk and honey; peril, adversity, and Tolstoyan renunciation were precisely what he was seeking. And that is what he found, in abundance.

For most of the sixteen-week ordeal, nevertheless, McCandless more than held his own. Indeed, were it not for one or two seemingly insignificant blunders, he would have walked out of the woods in August 1992 as anonymously as he had walked into them in April. Instead, his innocent mistakes turned out to be pivotal and irreversible, his name became the stuff of tabloid headlines, and his bewildered family was left clutching the shards of a fierce and painful love.

A surprising number of people have been affected by the story of Chris McCandless's life and death. In the weeks and months following the publication of the article in *Outside*, it generated more mail than any other article in the magazine's history. This correspondence, as one might expect, reflected sharply divergent points of view: Some readers admired the boy immensely for his courage and noble ideals; others fulminated that he was a reckless idiot, a wacko, a narcissist who perished out of arrogance and stupidity—and was undeserving of the considerable media attention he received. My convictions should be apparent soon enough, but I will leave it to the reader to form his or her own opinion of Chris McCandless.

JON KRAKAUER
SEATTLE
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CHAPTER TWELVE

ANNANDALE

Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth. I sat at a table where were rich food and wine in abundance, an obsequious attendance, but sincerity and truth were not; and I went away hungry from the inhospitable board. The hospitality was as cold as the ices.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU, *WALDEN, OR LIFE IN THE WOODS* PASSAGE HIGHLIGHTED IN ONE OF THE BOOKS FOUND WITH CHRIS MCCANDLESS' S REMAINS.

AT THE TOP OF THE PAGE, THE WORD "TRUTH" HAD BEEN WRITTEN IN LARGE BLOCK LETTERS IN MCCANDLESS' S HAND.

For children are innocent and love justice, while most of us are wicked and naturally prefer mercy.

G. K. CHESTERTON

In 1986, on the sultry spring weekend that Chris graduated from Woodson High School, Walt and Billie threw a party for him. Walt's birthday was June 10, just a few days away, and at the party Chris gave his father a present: a very expensive Questar telescope.

"I remember sitting there when he gave Dad the telescope," says Carine. "Chris had tossed back a few drinks that night and was pretty blitzed. He got real emotional. He was almost crying, fighting back the tears, telling Dad that even though they'd had their differences over the years, he was grateful for all the things Dad had done for him. Chris said how much he respected Dad for starting from nothing, working his way through college, busting his ass to support eight kids. It was a moving speech. Everybody there was all choked up. And then he left on his trip."

Walt and Billie didn't try to prevent Chris from going, although they persuaded him to take Walt's Texaco credit card for emergencies and exacted a promise from their son to call home every three days. "We had our hearts in our mouths the whole time he was gone," says Walt, "but there was no way to stop him."

After leaving Virginia, Chris drove south and then west across the flat Texas plains, through the heat of New Mexico and Arizona, and arrived at the Pacific coast. Initially, he honored the agreement to phone regularly, but as the summer

wore on, the calls became less and less frequent. He didn't appear back home until two days before the fall term was to start at Emory. When he walked into the Annandale house, he had a scruffy beard, his hair was long and tangled, and he'd shed thirty pounds from his already lean frame.

"As soon as I heard he was home," says Carine, "I ran to his room to talk with him. He was on the bed, asleep. He was so thin. He looked like those paintings of Jesus on the cross. When Mom saw how much weight he'd lost, she was a total wreck. She started cooking like mad to try and put some meat back on his bones."

Near the end of his trip, it turned out, Chris had gotten lost in the Mojave Desert and had nearly succumbed to dehydration. His parents were extremely alarmed when they heard about this brush with disaster but were unsure how to persuade Chris to exercise more caution in the future. "Chris was good at almost everything he ever tried," Walt reflects, "which made him supremely overconfident. If you attempted to talk him out of something, he wouldn't argue. He'd just nod politely and then do exactly what he wanted.

"So at first I didn't say anything about the safety aspect. I played tennis with Chris, talked about other things, then eventually sat down with him to discuss the risks he'd taken. I'd learned by then that a direct approach—'By God, you better not try a stunt like that again!'—didn't work with Chris. Instead, I tried to explain that we didn't object to his travels; we just wanted him to be a little more careful and to keep us better informed of his whereabouts."

To Walt's dismay Chris bristled at this small dollop of fatherly advice. The only effect it seemed to have was to make him even less inclined to share his plans.

"Chris," says Billie, "thought we were idiots for worrying about him."

During the course of his travels, Chris had acquired a machete and a .30-06 rifle, and when Walt and Billie drove him down to Atlanta to enroll in college, he insisted on taking the big knife and the gun with him. "When we went with Chris up to his dorm room," Walt laughs, "I thought his roommate's parents were going to have a stroke on the spot. The roommate was a preppy kid from Connecticut, dressed like" Joe College, and Chris walks in with a scraggly beard and worn-out clothes, looking like Jeremiah Johnson, packing a machete and a deer-hunting rifle. But you know what? Within ninety days the preppy roommate had dropped out, while Chris had made the dean's list."

To his parents' pleasant surprise, as the school year stretched on, Chris seemed thrilled to be at Emory. He shaved, trimmed his hair, and readopted the clean-cut look he'd had in high school. His grades were nearly perfect. He started writing for the school newspaper. He even talked enthusiastically about going on to get a law degree when he graduated. "Hey," Chris boasted to Walt at one point, "I think my grades will be good enough to get into Harvard Law School."

The summer after his freshman year of college, Chris returned to Annandale and worked for his parents' company, developing computer software. "The program he wrote for us that summer was flawless," says Walt. "We still use it today and have sold copies of the program to many clients. But when I asked

Chris to show me how he wrote it, to explain why it worked the way it did, he refused. 'All you need to know is that it works,' he said. 'You don't need to know how or why.' Chris was just being Chris, but it infuriated me. He would have made a great CIA agent—I'm serious; I know guys who work for the CIA. He told us what he thought we needed to know and nothing more. He was that way about everything."

Many aspects of Chris's personality baffled his parents. He could be generous and caring to a fault, but he had a darker side as well, characterized by monomania, impatience, and unwavering self-absorption, qualities that seemed to intensify through his college years.

"I saw Chris at a party after his sophomore year at Emory," remembers Eric Hathaway, "and it was obvious he had changed. He seemed very introverted, almost cold. When I said 'Hey, good to see you, Chris,' his reply was cynical: 'Yeah, sure, that's what everybody says/ It was hard to get him to open up. His studies were the only thing he was interested in talking about. Social life at Emory revolved around fraternities and sororities, something Chris wanted no part of. I think when everybody started going Greek, he kind of pulled back from his old friends and got more heavily into himself."

The summer between his sophomore and junior years Chris again returned to Annandale and took a job delivering pizzas for Domino's. "He didn't care that it wasn't a cool thing to do," says Carine. "He made a pile of money. I remember he'd come home every night and do his accounting at the kitchen table. It didn't matter how tired he was; he'd figure out how many miles he drove, how much Domino's paid him for gas, how much gas actually cost, his net profits for the evening, how it compared to the same evening the week before. He kept track of everything and showed me how to do it, how to make a business work. He didn't seem interested in the money so much as the fact that he was good at making it. It was like a game, and the money was a way of keeping score."

Chris's relations with his parents, which had been unusually courteous since his graduation from high school, deteriorated significantly that summer, and Walt and Billie had no idea why. According to Billie, "He seemed mad at us more often, and he became more withdrawn—no, that's not the right word. Chris wasn't ever *withdrawn*. But he wouldn't tell us what was on his mind and spent more time by himself."

Chris's smoldering anger, it turns out, was fueled by a discovery he'd made two summers earlier, during his cross-country wanderings. When he arrived in California, he'd visited the El Segundo neighborhood where he'd spent the first six years of his life. He called on a number of old family friends who still lived there, and from their answers to his queries, Chris pieced together the facts of his father's previous marriage and subsequent divorce—facts to which he hadn't been privy.

Walt's split from his first wife, Marcia, was not a clean or amicable parting. Long after falling in love with Billie, long after she gave birth to Chris, Walt continued his relationship with Marcia in secret, dividing his time between two households, two families. Lies were told and then exposed, begetting more lies to explain away the initial deceptions. Two years after Chris was born, Walt

fathered another son—Quinn McCandless—with Marcia. When Walt’s double life came to light, the revelations inflicted deep wounds. All parties suffered terribly.

Eventually, Walt, Billie, Chris, and Carine moved to the East Coast. The divorce from Marcia was at long last finalized, allowing Walt and Billie to legalize their marriage. They all put the turmoil behind them as best they could and carried on with their lives. Two decades went by. Wisdom accrued. The guilt and hurt and jealous fury receded into the distant past; it appeared that the storm had been weathered. And then in 1986, Chris drove out to El Segundo, made the rounds of the old neighborhood, and learned about the episode in all its painful detail.

“Chris was the sort of person who brooded about things,” Carine observes. “If something bothered him, he wouldn’t come right out and say it. He’d keep it to himself, harboring his resentment, letting the bad feelings build and build.” That seems to be what happened following the discoveries he made in El Segundo.

Children can be harsh judges when it comes to their parents, disinclined to grant clemency, and this was especially true in Chris’s case. More even than most teens, he tended to see things in black and white. He measured himself and those around him by an impossibly rigorous moral code.

Curiously, Chris didn’t hold everyone to the same exacting standards. One of the individuals he professed to admire greatly over the last two years of his life was a heavy drinker and incorrigible philanderer who regularly beat up his girlfriends. Chris was well aware of this man’s faults yet managed to forgive them. He was also able to forgive, or overlook, the shortcomings of his literary heroes: Jack London was a notorious drunk; Tolstoy, despite his famous advocacy of celibacy, had been an enthusiastic sexual adventurer as young man and went on to father at least thirteen children, some of whom were conceived at the same time the censorious count was thundering in print against the evils of sex.

Like many people, Chris apparently judged artists and close friends by their work, not their life, yet he was temperamentally incapable of extending such lenity to his father. Whenever Walt McCandless, in his stern fashion, would dispense a fatherly admonishment to Chris, Carine, or their half siblings, Chris would fixate on his father’s own less than sterling behavior many years earlier and silently denounce him as *a. sanctimonious hypocrite*. Chris kept careful score. And over time he worked himself into a choler of self-righteous indignation that was impossible to keep bottled up.

After Chris unearthed the particulars of Walt’s divorce, two years passed before his anger began to leak to the surface, but leak it eventually did. The boy could not pardon the mistakes his father had made as a young man, and he was even less willing to pardon the attempt at concealment. He later declared to Carine and others that the deception committed by Walt and Billie made his “entire childhood seem like a fiction.” But he did not confront his parents with what he knew, then or ever. He chose instead to make a secret of his dark knowledge and express his rage obliquely, in silence and sullen withdrawal.

In 1988, as Chris’s resentment of his parents hardened, his sense of outrage over injustice in the world at large grew. That summer, Billie remembers, “Chris

started complaining about all the rich kids at Emory.” More and more of the classes he took addressed such pressing social issues as racism and world hunger and inequities in the distribution of wealth. But despite his aversion to money and conspicuous consumption, Chris’s political leanings could not be described as liberal.

Indeed, he delighted in ridiculing the policies of the Democratic Party and was a vocal admirer of Ronald Reagan. At Emory he went so far as to co-found a College Republican Club. Chris’s seemingly anomalous political positions were perhaps best summed up by Thoreau’s declaration in “Civil Disobedience”: “I heartily accept the motto—‘That government is best which governs least.’ “ Beyond that his views were not easily characterized.

As assistant editorial page editor of *The Emory Wheel*, he authored scores of commentaries. In reading them half a decade later, one is reminded how young McCandless was, and how passionate. The opinions he expressed in print, argued with idiosyncratic logic, were all over the map. He lampooned Jimmy Carter and Joe Biden, called for the resignation of Attorney General Edwin Meese, lambasted Bible-thumpers of the Christian right, urged vigilance against the Soviet threat, castigated the Japanese for hunting whales, and defended Jesse Jackson as a viable presidential candidate. In a typically immoderate declaration the lead sentence of McCandless’s editorial of March 1, 1988, reads, “We have now begun the third month of the year 1988, and already it is shaping up to be one of the most politically corrupt and scandalous years in modern history...” Chris Morris, the editor of the paper, remembers McCandless as “intense.”

To his dwindling number of confreres, McCandless appeared to grow more intense with each passing month. As soon as classes ended in the spring of 1989, Chris took his Datsun on another prolonged, extemporaneous road trip. “We only got two cards from him the whole summer,” says Walt. “The first one said, ‘Headed for Guatemala.’ When I read that I thought, ‘Oh, my God, he’s going down there to fight for the insurrectionists. They’re going to line him up in front of a wall and shoot him.’ Then toward the end of the summer, the second card arrived, and all it said was ‘Leaving Fairbanks tomorrow, see you in a couple of weeks.’ It turned out he’d changed his mind and instead of heading south had driven to Alaska.”

The grinding, dusty haul up the Alaska Highway was Chris’s first visit to the Far North. It was an abbreviated trip—he spent a short time around Fairbanks, then hurried south to get back to Atlanta in time for the start of fall classes—but he had been smitten by the vastness of the land, by the ghostly hue of the glaciers, by the pellucid subarctic sky. There was never any question that he would return.

During his senior year at Emory, Chris lived off campus in his bare, spartan room furnished with milk crates and a mattress on the floor. Few of his friends ever saw him outside of classes. A professor gave him a key for after-hours access to the library, where he spent much of his free time. Andy Horowitz, his close high school friend and cross-country teammate, bumped into Chris among the stacks early one morning just before graduation. Although Horowitz and McCandless were classmates at Emory, it had been two years since they’d seen

each other. They talked awkwardly for a few minutes, then McCandless disappeared into a carrel.

Chris seldom contacted his parents that year, and because he had no phone, they couldn't easily contact him. Walt and Billie grew increasingly worried about their son's emotional distance. In a letter to Chris, Billie implored, "You have completely dropped away from all who love and care about you. Whatever it is—whichever you're with—do you think this is right?" Chris saw this as meddling and referred to the letter as "stupid" when he talked to Carine.

"What does she mean 'whichever I'm with'?" Chris railed at his sister. "She must be fucking nuts. You know what I bet? I bet they think I'm a homosexual. How did they ever get that idea? What a bunch of imbeciles."

In the spring of 1990, when Walt, Billie, and Carine attended Chris's graduation ceremony, they thought he seemed happy. As they watched him stride across the stage and take his diploma, he was grinning from ear to ear. He indicated that he was planning another extended trip but implied that he'd visit his family in An-nandale before hitting the road. Shortly thereafter, he donated the balance of his bank account to OXFAM, loaded up his car, and vanished from their lives. From then on he scrupulously avoided contacting either his parents or Carine, the sister for whom he purportedly cared immensely.

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

Walt does not deny this. "There's no question in my mind," he says. "If we'd had any idea where to look—OK—I would have gone there in a flash, gotten a lock on his whereabouts, and brought our boy home."

As months passed without any word of Chris—and then years—the anguish mounted. Billie never left the house without leaving a note for Chris posted on the door. "Whenever we were out driving and saw a hitchhiker," she says, "if he looked anything like Chris, we'd turn around and circle back. It was a terrible time. Night was the worst, especially when it was cold and stormy. You'd wonder, 'Where is he? Is he warm? Is he hurt? Is he lonely? Is he OK?' "

In July 1992, two years after Chris left Atlanta, Billie was asleep in Chesapeake Beach when she sat bolt upright in the middle of the night, waking Walt. "I was sure I'd heard Chris calling me," she insists, tears rolling down her cheeks. "I don't know how I'll ever get over it. I wasn't dreaming. I didn't imagine it. I heard his voice! He was begging, 'Mom! Help me!' But I couldn't help him because I didn't know where he was. And that was all he said: 'Mom! Help me!'

