from *Death of an Innocent*
How Christopher McCandless lost his way in the wilds
By Jon Krakauer

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

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

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

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

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

During the drive south toward the mountains, Gallien had tried repeatedly to dissuade Alex from his plan, to no avail. He even offered to drive Alex all the way to Anchorage so he could at least buy the kid some decent gear. "No, thanks anyway," Alex replied. "I'll be fine with what I've got." When Gallien asked whether his parents or some friend knew what he was up to—anyone who could sound the alarm if he got into trouble and was overdue—Alex answered calmly that, no, nobody knew of his plans, that in fact he hadn't spoken to his family in nearly three years.
"I'm absolutely positive," he assured Gallien, "I won't run into anything I can't deal with on my own."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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