



'CHILDHOOD'

Extracts from CHAPTER 11

Both Chris and Carine shared Walt's musical aptitude. Chris took up the guitar, piano, French horn. "It was strange to see in a kid his age," says Walt, "but he loved Tony Bennett. He'd sing numbers like 'Tender Is the Night' while I accompanied him on piano. He was good."

A gifted (*doué*) French-horn (*cor*) player, as a teen he was a member of the American University Symphony but quit,

according to Walt, after objecting to rules imposed by a high school band leader. Carine recalls that there was more to it than that: "He quit playing partly because he didn't like being told what to do but also because of me. I wanted to be like Chris, so I started to play French horn, too. And it turned out to be the one thing I was better at than he was."

Chris inherited Billie's angelic *features (traits)*, most notably her eyes, the black depths of which betrayed (*trahir*) his every emotion. Although he was small—in school photographs he is always in the front row, the shortest kid in the class—Chris was strong for his size and well coordinated. He tried his hand at many sports but had little patience for learning the finer points of any of them. When he went skiing during family vacations in Colorado, he seldom bothered to turn; he'd simply crouch in a gorilla tuck, feet spread wide for stability, and point the boards straight down the hill.

When Chris was twelve, Walt and Billie bought Carine a puppy, a Shetland sheepdog named Buckley, and Chris fell into the habit of taking the pet with him on his daily training runs. "Buckley was supposedly my dog," says Carine, "but he and Chris became inseparable. Buck was

fast, and he'd always beat Chris home when they went running. I remember Chris was so excited the first time he made it home before Buckley. He went tearing all over the house yelling (*en criant*) 'I beat Buck! I beat Buck!'"

At W. T. Woodson High School—a large public institution in Fairfax, Virginia, with a reputation for high academic standards and winning athletic teams—Chris was the captain of the crosscountry squad.

“He was really into pushing himself,” explains Gordy Cucullu, a younger member of the team. “Chris invented this workout (*exercice*) he called Road Warriors: He would lead us on long, killer runs through places like farmers’ fields and construction sites, places we weren’t supposed to be, and intentionally try to get us lost. We’d run as far and as fast as we could, down strange roads, through the woods, whatever. The whole idea was to lose ourselves, to push ourselves into unknown territory. Then we’d run at a slower pace until we found a road we recognized and race home again at full speed. In a certain sense that’s how Chris lived his entire life.”

McCandless viewed running as an intensely spiritual exercise, verging on religion. “Chris would use the spiritual aspect to try to motivate us,” recalls Eric Hathaway, another friend on the team. “He’d tell us to think about all the evil in the world, all the hatred (*haine*), and imagine ourselves running against the forces of darkness, the evil wall that was trying to keep us from running our best. He believed doing well was all mental, a simple matter of harnessing (*maîtriser*) whatever energy was available. As impressionable high school kids, we were blown away by that kind of talk.” But running wasn’t exclusively an affair of the spirit; it was a competitive undertaking as well. When McCandless ran, he ran to

win. “Chris was really serious about running,” says Kris Maxie Gillmer, a female teammate who was perhaps McCandless’s closest friend at Woodson. “I can remember standing at the finish line, watching him run, knowing how badly he wanted to do well and how disappointed he’d be if he did worse than he expected. After a bad race or even a bad time trial during practice, he could be really hard on himself. And he wouldn’t want to talk about it. If I tried to console him, he’d act annoyed and brush me off (*me repousser*). He internalized the disappointment. I liked him a lot. He was a really good guy.”

McCandless took life’s inequities (*inégalités*) to heart. During his senior year at Woodson, he became obsessed with racial oppression in South Africa. He spoke seriously to his friends about smuggling weapons (*faire de la contrebande d’armes*) into that country and joining the struggle to end apartheid. “We’d get into arguments about it once in a while,” recalls Hathaway.

“Chris didn’t understand how people could possibly be allowed to go hungry, especially in this country,” says Billie. “He would rave about that kind of thing for hours.” On one occasion Chris picked up a homeless man from the streets of B.C., brought him home to leafy, affluent Annandale, and secretly set the guy up in the Airstream trailer (*caravane*) his parents parked beside the garage. Walt and Billie never knew they were hosting a vagrant (*vagabond*).

McCandless’s personality was puzzling (*déconcertant*) in its complexity. He was intensely private but could be convivial and gregarious in the extreme.

Let's talk...

- **Imagine a title for each paragraph and write it in the caption above the paragraph.**
- **Among the list of adjectives , choose those which best represent Chris. Explain your choice.**



- In your opinion, what do we learn about Chris which is important for the rest of his adventure?