



'Back to the bus'

Extracts from chapter 16.

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. He seemed to have moved beyond his need to prove 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.

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 (*maigre*). Already his cheeks are sunken (*creuses*). The tendons in his neck stand out like taut cables.

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 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.

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 (*à hauteur de genou*), and he'd simply strolled across (*traverser en marchant*) 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.

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 (*la rivière s'élargissait en petits cours d'eau*). If he'd scouted (*explorer*) carefully, by trial and error he might have found a place where these braids were only chest-deep (*à hauteur de poitrine*). As strong as the current was running, it would have certainly knocked him off his feet, but 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 lived 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 considering 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.

Let's talk....

- **What did Chris decide to do at the beginning of the extract? Why? What has changed from the start? What is different in your opinion?**
- **Can you prove using the text that he really changed his mind ?**
- **What was the hero's decision at the river? Why? Find adjectives to describe the river.**



- **Can you imagine his feelings? Can you describe them? (he must be....)**