



'No return' Extracts from chapter 18.

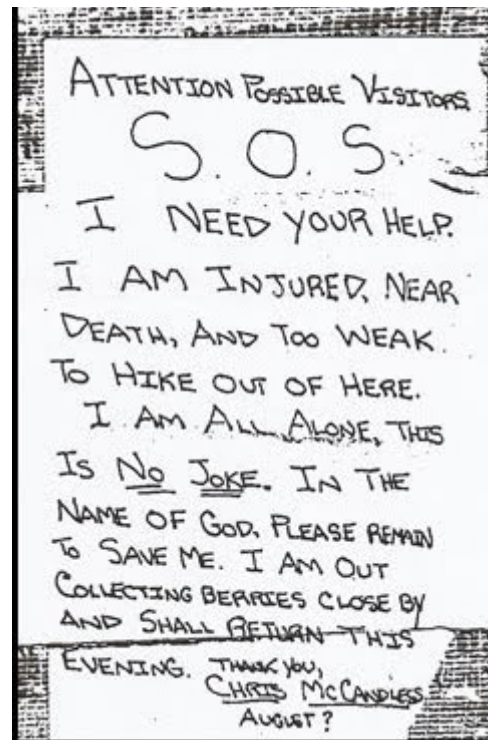
After his attempt to depart the wilderness was stopped by the Teklanika's high flow, McCandless arrived back at the bus on July 8. It's impossible to know what was going through his mind at that point, for his journal betrays nothing. Quite possibly he was unconcerned about his escape routes having been 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.

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 (*to buy*) some seeds (*graines*) 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, McCand-less 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 (*germer*). 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.

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:



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.