CHAPTER SIX

ANZA-BORREGO

No man ever followed his genius till it misled him. Though the result were bodily weakness, yet perhaps no one can say that the consequences were to be regretted, for these were a life in conformity to higher principles. If the day and the night are such that you greet them with joy, and life emits a fragrance like flowers and sweet-scented herbs, is more elastic, more starry, more immortal,—that is your success. All nature is your congratulation, and you have cause momentarily to bless yourself. The greatest gains and values are farthest from being appreciated. We easily come to doubt if they exist. We soon forget them. They are the highest reality. . . . The true harvest of my daily life is somewhat as intangible and indescribable as the tints of morning or evening. It is a little star-dust caught, a segment of the rainbow which I have clutched.

henry david thoreau,

viladon, or life in the woods

passage highlighted in one of the books found

with chris mccandless's remains

On January 4, 1993, this writer received an unusual letter, penned in a shaky, anachronistic script that suggested an elderly author. "To Whom It May Concern," the letter began.

I would like to get a copy of the magazine that carried the story of the young man (Alex McCandless) dying in Alaska. I would like to write the one that investigated the incident. I drove him from Salton City Calif. . . . in March 1992 . . . to Grand Junction Co. . . . I left Alex there to hitch-hike to S.D. He said he would keep in touch. The last I heard from him was a letter the first week in April, 1992. On our trip we took pictures, me with the camcorder + Alex with his camera.

If you have a copy of that magazine please send me the cost of that magazine... .
I understand he was hurt. If so I would like to know how he was injured, for he always carried enough rice in his backpack + he had arctic clothes + plenty of money.

sincerely, ronald A. FRANZ

Please do not make these facts available to anybody till I know more about his death for he was not just the common wayfarer. Please believe me.

The magazine that Franz requested was the January 1993 issue of *Outside*, which featured a cover story about the death of Chris McCandless. His letter had been addressed to the offices of *Outside* in Chicago; because I had written the McCandless piece, it was forwarded to me.

McCandless made an indelible impression on a number of people during the course of his *hegira*, most of whom spent only a few days in his company, a week or two at most. Nobody, however, was affected more powerfully by his or her brief contact with the boy than Ronald Franz, who was eighty years old when their paths intersected in January 1992.

After McCandless bid farewell to Jan Burres at the Salton City Post Office, he hiked into the desert and set up camp in a brake of creosote at the edge of Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. Hard to the east is the Salton Sea, a placid ocean in miniature, its surface more than two hundred feet below sea level, created in 1905 by a monumental engineering snafu: Not long after a canal was dug from the Colorado River to irrigate rich farmland in the Imperial Valley, the river breached its banks during a series of major floods, carved a new channel, and began to gush unabated into the Imperial Valley Canal. For more than two years the canal inadvertently diverted virtually all of the river’s prodigious flow into the Salton sink. Water surged across the once-dry floor of the sink, inundating farms and settlements, eventually drowning four hundred square miles of desert and giving birth to a landlocked ocean.

Only fifty miles from the limousines and exclusive tennis clubs and lush green fairways of Palm Springs, the west shore of the Salton Sea had once been the site of intense real estate speculation. Lavish resorts were planned, grand subdivisions platted. But little of the promised development ever came to pass. These days most of the lots remain vacant and are gradually being reclaimed by the desert. Tumbleweeds scuttle down Salton City's broad, desolate boulevards. Sun-bleached FOR SALE signs line the curbs, and paint peels from uninhabited buildings. A placard in the window of the Salton Sea Realty and Development Company declares CLOSED/CERRADO. Only the rattle of the wind interrupts the spectral quiet.

Away from the lakeshore the land rises gently and then abruptly to form the desiccated, phantasmal badlands of Anza-Borrego. The *bajada* beneath the badlands is open country cut by steep-walled arroyos. Here, on a low, sun-scorched rise dotted with
chollas and indigobushes and twelve-foot ocotillo stems, McCandless slept on the sand under a tarp hung from a creosote branch.

When he needed provisions, he would hitch or walk the four miles into town, where he bought rice and filled his plastic water jug at the market-liquor store-post office, a beige stucco building that serves as the cultural nexus of greater Salton City. One Thursday in mid-January, McCandless was hitching back out to the bajada after filling his jug when an old man, name of Ron Franz, stopped to give him a ride.

"Where's your camp?" Franz inquired.

"Out past Oh-My-God Hot Springs," McCandless replied.

"I've lived in these parts six years now, and I've never heard of any place goes by that name. Show me how to get there."

They drove for a few minutes down the Borrego-Salton Seaway, and then McCandless told him to turn left into the desert, where a rough 4-x-4 track twisted down a narrow wash. After a mile or so they arrived at a bizarre encampment, where some two hundred people had gathered to spend the winter living out of their vehicles. The community was beyond the fringe, a vision of post-apocalypse America. There were families sheltered in cheap tent trailers, aging hippies in Day-Glo vans, Charles Manson look-alikes sleeping in rusted-out Studebakers that hadn't turned over since Eisenhower was in the White House. A substantial number of those present were walking around buck naked. At the center of the camp, water from a geothermal well had been piped into a pair of shallow, steaming pools lined with rocks and shaded by palm trees: Oh-My-God Hot Springs.

McCandless, however, wasn't living right at the springs; he was camped by himself another half mile out on the bajada. Franz drove Alex the rest of the way, chatted with him there for a while, and then returned to town, where he lived alone, rent free, in return for managing a ramshackle apartment building.

Franz, a devout Christian, had spent most of his adult life in the army, stationed in Shanghai and Okinawa. On New Year's Eve 1957, while he was overseas, his wife and only child were killed by a drunk driver in an automobile accident. Franz's son had been due to graduate from medical school the following June. Franz started hitting the whiskey, hard.

Six months later he managed to pull himself together and quit drinking, cold turkey, but he never really got over the loss. To salve his loneliness in the years after the accident, he started unofficially "adopting" indigent Okinawan boys and girls, eventually taking fourteen of them under his wing, paying for the oldest to attend medical school in Philadelphia and another to study medicine in Japan.

When Franz met McCandless, his long-dormant paternal impulses were kindled anew. He couldn't get the young man out of his mind. The boy had said his name was Alex—he'd declined to give a surname—and that he came from West Virginia. He was
polite, friendly, well-groomed.

"He seemed extremely intelligent," Franz states in an exotic brogue that sounds like a blend of Scottish, Pennsylvanian Dutch, and Carolina drawl. "I thought he was too nice a kid to be living by that hot springs with those nudists and drunks and dope smokers." After attending church that Sunday, Franz decided to talk to Alex "about how he was living. Somebody needed to convince him to get an education and a job and make something of his life."

When he returned to McCandless's camp and launched into the self-improvement pitch, though, McCandless cut him off abruptly. "Look, Mr. Franz," he declared, "you don't need to worry about me. I have a college education. I'm not destitute. I'm living like this by choice." And then, despite his initial prickliness, the young man warmed to the old-timer, and the two engaged in a long conversation. Before the day was out, they had driven into Palm Springs in Franz's truck, had a meal at a nice restaurant, and taken a ride on the tramway to the top of San Jacinto Peak, at the bottom of which McCandless stopped to unearth a Mexican scrape and some other possessions he'd buried for safekeeping a year earlier.

Over the next few weeks McCandless and Franz spent a lot of time together. The younger man would regularly hitch into Salton City to do his laundry and barbecue steaks at Franz's apartment. He confided that he was biding his time until spring, when he intended to go to Alaska and embark on an "ultimate adventure." He also turned the tables and started lecturing the grandfatherly figure about the shortcomings of his sedentary existence, urging the eighty-year-old to sell most of his belongings, move out of the apartment, and live on the road. Franz took these harangues in stride and in fact delighted in the boy's company.

An accomplished leatherworker, Franz taught Alex the secrets of his craft; for his first project McCandless produced a tooled leather belt, on which he created an artful pictorial record of his wanderings. ALEX is inscribed at the belt's left end; then the initials C.J.M. (for Christopher Johnson McCandless) frame a skull and crossbones. Across the strip of cowhide one sees a rendering of a two-lane blacktop, a NO U-TURN sign, a thunderstorm producing a flash flood that engulfs a car, a hitchhiker's thumb, an eagle, the Sierra Nevada, salmon cavorting in the Pacific Ocean, the Pacific Coast Highway from Oregon to Washington, the Rocky Mountains, Montana wheat fields, a South Dakota rattlesnake, Westerberg's house in Carthage, the Colorado River, a gale in the Gulf of California, a canoe beached beside a tent, Las Vegas, the initials T.C.D., Morro Bay, Astoria, and at the buckle end, finally, the letter N (presumably representing north). Executed with remarkable skill and creativity, this belt is as astonishing as any artifact Chris McCandless left behind.

Franz grew increasingly fond of McCandless. "God, he was a smart kid," the old man rasps in a barely audible voice. He directs his gaze at a patch of sand between his feet as he makes this declaration; then he stops talking. Bending stiffly from the waist, he wipes some imaginary dirt from his pant leg. His ancient joints crack loudly in the awkward silence.
More than a minute passes before Franz speaks again; squinting at the sky, he begins to reminisce further about the time he spent in the youngsters company. Not infrequently during their visits, Franz recalls, McCandless's face would darken with anger and he'd fulminate about his parents or politicians or the endemic idiocy of mainstream American life. Worried about alienating the boy, Franz said little during such outbursts and let him rant.

One day in early February, McCandless announced that he was splitting for San Diego to earn more money for his Alaska trip.

"You don't need to go to San Diego," Franz protested. "I'll give you money if you need some."

"No. You don't get it. I'm going to San Diego. And I'm leaving on Monday"

"OK. I'll drive you there."

"Don't be ridiculous," McCandless scoffed.

"I need to go anyway," Franz lied, "to pick up some leather supplies."

McCandless relented. He struck his camp, stored most of his belongings in Franz's apartment—the boy didn't want to schlepp his sleeping bag or backpack around the city—and then rode with the old man across the mountains to the coast. It was raining when Franz dropped McCandless at the San Diego waterfront. "It was a very hard thing for me to do," Franz says. "I was sad to be leaving him."

On February 19, McCandless called Franz, collect, to wish him a happy eighty-first birthday; McCandless remembered the date because his own birthday had been seven days earlier: He had turned twenty-four on February 12. During this phone call he also confessed to Franz that he was having trouble finding work.

On February 28, he mailed a postcard to Jan Burres. "Hello!" it reads,

Have been living on streets of San Diego for the past week. First day I got here it rained like hell. The missions here suck and I'm getting preached to death. Not much happening in terms of jobs so I'm heading north tomorrow.

I've decided to head for Alaska no later than May 1st, but I've got to raise a little cash to outfit myself. May go back and work for a friend I have in South Dakota if he can use me. Don't know where I'm headed now but I'll write when I get there. Hope all's well with you.TAKE CARE, ALEX

On March 5, McCandless sent another card to Burres and a card to Franz as well. The missive to Burres says,

ABC Amber LIT Converter http://www.processtext.com/abclit.html
Greetings from Seattle! I'm a hobo now! That's right, I'm riding the rails now. What fun, I wish I had jumped trains earlier. The rails have some drawbacks, however. First is that one becomes absolutely filthy. Second is that one must tangle with these crazy bulls. I was sitting in a hotshot in L.A. when a bull found me with his flashlight about 10 P.M. "Get outta there before I KILL ya!" screamed the bull. I got out and saw he had drawn his revolver. He interrogated me at gunpoint, then growled, "If I ever see you around this train again I'll kill ya! Hit the road!" What a lunatic! I got the last laugh when I caught the same train 5 minutes later and rode it all the way to Oakland. I'll be in touch,

alex

A week later Franz's phone rang. "It was the operator," he says, "asking if I would accept a collect call from someone named Alex. When I heard his voice, it was like sunshine after a month of rain."

"Will you come pick me up?" McCandless asked.

"Yes. Where in Seattle are you?"

"Ron," McCandless laughed, "I'm not in Seattle. I'm in California, just up the road from you, in Coachella." Unable to find work in the rainy Northwest, McCandless had hopped a series of freight trains back to the desert. In Colton, California, he was discovered by another bull and thrown in jail. Upon his release he had hitchhiked to Coachella, just southeast of Palm Springs, and called Franz. As soon as he hung up the phone, Franz rushed off to pick McCandless up.

"We went to a Sizzler, where I filled him up with steak and lobster," Franz recalls, "and then we drove back to Salton City."

McCandless said that he would be staying only a day, just long enough to wash his clothes and load his backpack. He'd heard from Wayne Westerberg that a job was waiting for him at the grain elevator in Carthage, and he was eager to get there. The date was March 11, a Wednesday. Franz offered to take McCandless to Grand Junction, Colorado, which was the farthest he could drive without missing an appointment in Salton City the following Monday. To Franz's surprise and great relief, McCandless accepted the offer without argument.

Before departing, Franz gave McCandless a machete, an arctic parka, a collapsible fishing pole, and some other gear for his Alaska undertaking. Thursday at daybreak they drove out of Salton City in Franz's truck. In Bullhead City they stopped to close out McCandless's bank account and to visit Charlie's trailer, where McCandless had stashed some books and other belongings, including the journal-photo album from his canoe trip down the Colorado. McCandless then insisted on buying Franz lunch at the Golden Nugget Casino, across the river in Laughlin. Recognizing McCandless, a waitress at the
Nugget gushed, "Alex! Alex! You're back!"

Franz had purchased a video camera before the trip, and he paused now and then along the way to record the sights. Although McCandless usually ducked away whenever Franz pointed the lens in his direction, some brief footage exists of him standing impatiently in the snow above Bryce Canyon. "Ok, let's go," he protests to the camcorder after a few moments. "There's a lot more ahead, Ron." Wearing jeans and a wool sweater, McCandless looks tan, strong, healthy.

Franz reports that it was a pleasant, if hurried trip. "Sometimes we'd drive for hours without saying a word," he recalls. "Even when he was sleeping, I was happy just knowing he was there." At one point Franz dared to make a special request of McCandless. "My mother was an only child," he explains. "So was my father. And I was their only child. Now that my own boy's dead, I'm the end of the line. When I'm gone, my family will be finished, gone forever. So I asked Alex if I could adopt him, if he would be my grandson."

McCandless, uncomfortable with the request, dodged the question: "We'll talk about it when I get back from Alaska, Ron."

On March 14, Franz left McCandless on the shoulder of Interstate 70 outside Grand Junction and returned to southern California. McCandless was thrilled to be on his way north, and he was relieved as well—relieved that he had again evaded the impending threat of human intimacy, of friendship, and all the messy emotional baggage that comes with it. He had fled the claustrophobic confines of his family. He'd successfully kept Jan Burres and Wayne Westerberg at arm's length, flitting out of their lives before anything was expected of him. And now he'd slipped painlessly out of Ron Franz's life as well.

Painlessly, that is, from McCandless's perspective—although not from the old man's. One can only speculate about why Franz became so attached to McCandless so quickly, but the affection he felt was genuine, intense, and unalloyed. Franz had been living a solitary existence for many years. He had no family and few friends. A disciplined, self-reliant man, he got along remarkably well despite his age and solitude. When McCandless came into his world, however, the boy undermined the old man's meticulously constructed defenses. Franz relished being with McCandless, but their burgeoning friendship also reminded him how lonely he'd been. The boy unmasked the gaping void in Franz's life even as he helped fill it. When McCandless departed as suddenly as he'd arrived, Franz found himself deeply and unexpectedly hurt.

In early April a long letter arrived in Franz's post-office box bearing a South Dakota postmark. "Hello Ron," it says,

Alex here. I have been working up here in Carthage South Dakota for nearly two weeks now. I arrived up here three days after we parted in Grand Junction, Colorado. I hope that you made it back to Salton City without too many problems. I enjoy working here and things are going well. The weather is not very bad and many days are
surprisingly mild. Some of the farmers are even already going out into their fields. It must be getting rather hot down there in Southern California by now. I wonder if you ever got a chance to get out and see how many people showed up for the March 20 Rainbow gathering there at the hot springs. It sounds like it might have been a lot of fun, but I don't think you really understand these kind of people very well.

I will not be here in South Dakota very much longer. My friend, Wayne, wants me to stay working at the grain elevator through May and then go combining with him the entire summer, but I have my soul set entirely on my Alaskan Odyssey and hope to be on my way no later than April 15. That means I will be leaving here before very long, so I need you to send any more mail I may have received to the return address listed below.

Ron, I really enjoy all the help you have given me and the times that we spent together. I hope that you will not be too depressed by our parting. It may be a very long time before we see each other again. But providing that I get through this Alaskan Deal in one piece you will be hearing from me again in the future. I'd like to repeat the advice I gave you before, in that I think you really should make a radical change in your lifestyle and begin to boldly do things which you may previously never have thought of doing, or been too hesitant to attempt. So many people live within unhappy circumstances and yet will not take the initiative to change their situation because they are conditioned to a life of security, conformity, and conservatism, all of which may appear to give one peace of mind, but in reality nothing is more damaging to the adventurous spirit within a man than a secure future. The very basic core of a man's living spirit is his passion for adventure. The joy of life comes from our encounters with new experiences, and hence there is no greater joy than to have an endlessly changing horizon, for each day to have a new and different sun. If you want to get more out of life, Ron, you must lose your inclination for monotonous security and adopt a helter-skelter style of life that will at first appear to you to be crazy. But once you become accustomed to such a life you will see its full meaning and its incredible beauty. And so, Ron, in short, get out of Salton City and hit the Road. I guarantee you will be very glad you did. But I fear that you will ignore my advice. You think that I am stubborn, but you are even more stubborn than me. You had a wonderful chance on your drive back to see one of the greatest sights on earth, the Grand Canyon, something every American should see at least once in his life. But for some reason incomprehensible to me you wanted nothing but to bolt for home as quickly as possible, right back to the same situation which you see day after day after day. I fear you will follow this same inclination in the future and thus fail to discover all the wonderful things that God has placed around us to discover. Don't settle down and sit in one place. Move around, be nomadic, make each day a new horizon. You are still going to live a long time, Ron, and it would be a shame if you did not take the opportunity to revolutionize your life and move into an entirely new realm of experience.

You are wrong if you think Joy emanates only or principally from human relationships. God has placed it all around us. It is in everything and anything we might experience. We just have to have the courage to turn against our habitual lifestyle and engage in unconventional living.
My point is that you do not need me or anyone else around to bring this new kind of light in your life. It is simply waiting out there for you to grasp it, and all you have to do is reach for it. The only person you are fighting is yourself and your stubbornness to engage in new circumstances.

Ron, I really hope that as soon as you can you will get out of Salton City, put a little camper on the back of your pickup, and start seeing some of the great work that God has done here in the American West. You will see things and meet people and there is much to learn from them. And you must do it economy style, no motels, do your own cooking, as a general rule spend as little as possible and you will enjoy it much more immensely. I hope that the next time I see you, you will be a new man with a vast array of new adventures and experiences behind you. Don't hesitate or allow yourself to make excuses. Just get out and do it. Just get out and do it. You will be very, very glad that you did.

take care ron, alex

Please write back to:
Alex McCandless
Madison, SD 57042

Astoundingly, the eighty-one-year-old man took the brash twenty-four-year-old vagabonds advice to heart. Franz placed his furniture and most of his other possessions in a storage locker, bought a CMC Duravan, and outfitted it with bunks and camping gear. Then he moved out of his apartment and set up camp on the bajada.

Franz occupied McCandless's old campsite, just past the hot springs. He arranged some rocks to create a parking area for the van, transplanted prickly pears and indigobushes for "landscaping." And then he sat out in the desert, day after day after day, awaiting his young friend's return.

Ronald Franz (this is not his real name; at his request I have given him a pseudonym) looks remarkably sturdy for a man in his ninth decade who has survived two heart attacks. Nearly six feet tall, with thick arms and a barrel chest, he stands erect, his shoulders unbowed. His ears are large beyond the proportions of his other features, as are his gnarled, meaty hands. When I walk into his camp in the desert and introduce myself, he is wearing old jeans and an immaculate white T-shirt, a decorative tooled-leather belt of his own creation, white socks, scuffed black loafers. His age is betrayed only by the creases across his brow and a proud, deeply pitted nose, over which a purple filigree of veins unfolds like a finely wrought tattoo. A little more than a year after McCandless's death he regards the world through wary blue eyes.
To dispel Franz's suspicion, I hand him an assortment of photographs I'd taken on a trip to Alaska the previous summer, during which I'd retraced McCandless's terminal journey on the Stampede Trail. The first several images in the stack are landscapes—shots of the surrounding bush, the overgrown trail, distant mountains, the Sushana River. Franz studies them in silence, occasionally nodding when I explain what they depict; he seems grateful to see them.

When he comes to the pictures of the bus in which the boy died, however, he stiffens abruptly. Several of these images show McCandless's belongings inside the derelict vehicle; as soon as Franz realizes what he's seeing, his eyes mist over, he thrusts the photos back at me without examining the rest, and the old man walks away to compose himself as I mumble a lame apology.

Franz no longer lives at McCandless's campsite. A flash flood washed the makeshift road away, so he moved twenty miles out, toward the Borrego badlands, where he camps beside an isolated stand of cottonwoods. Oh-My-God Hot Springs is gone now, too, bulldozed and plugged with concrete by order of the Imperial Valley Health Commission. County officials say they eliminated the springs out of concern that bathers might become gravely ill from virulent microbes thought to flourish in the thermal pools.

"That sure could of been true," says the clerk at the Salton City store, "but most people think they bulldozed 'em 'cause the springs was starting to attract too many hippies and drifters and scum like that. Good riddance, you ask me."

For more than eight months after he said good-bye to McCandless, Franz remained at his campsite, scanning the road for the approach of a young man with a large pack, waiting patiently for Alex to return. During the last week of 1992, the day after Christmas, he picked up two hitchhikers on his way back from a trip into Salton City to check his mail. "One fella was from Mississippi, I think; the other was a Native American," Franz remembers. "On the way out to the hot springs, I started telling them about my friend Alex, and the adventure he'd set out to have in Alaska."

Suddenly, the Indian youth interrupted: "Was his name Alex McCandless?"

"Yes, that's right. So you've met him, then—"

"I hate to tell you this, mister, but your friend is dead. Froze to death up on the tundra. Just read about it in Outdoor magazine."

In shock, Franz interrogated the hitchhiker at length. The details rang true; his story added up. Something had gone horribly wrong. McCandless would never be coming back.

"When Alex left for Alaska," Franz remembers, "I prayed. I asked God to keep his finger on the shoulder of that one; I told him that boy was special. But he let Alex die. So on December 26, when I learned what happened, I renounced the Lord. I withdrew my church membership and became an atheist. I decided I couldn't believe in a God who would let something that terrible happen to a boy like Alex."
"After I dropped off the hitchhikers," Franz continues, "I turned my van around, drove back to the store, and bought a bottle of whiskey. And then I went out into the desert and drank it. I wasn't used to drinking, so it made me sick. Hoped it'd kill me, but it didn't. Just made me real, real sick."