

# Chapter 4: Into the...Desert?

Paul Shephard's *Man in the Landscape* speaks of traveling into the desert like a spiritual pilgrimage, which is exactly what Chris thinks he's doing...

Hey, didn't Steinbeck write something like this?

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# The Mysterious Datsun

- Two months after fleeing from Atlanta, GA, Chris ends up in the Mojave Desert.
- Rangers find the McCandless car under a tarp, filled with goodies, its battery drained.
  - Once jump-started, the car runs great and serves authorities for years, having never been claimed.
- Most likely, you ask yourself this: *Why would Chris abandon his beloved Datsun?!*

# Quickly Solved

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- JK doesn't drag this mystery on—very quickly we come to learn that Chris, unfamiliar with the area, parked in a flood zone.
- Sure enough, a flash flood hits. Chris only has time to save his tent.
  - However, it was really Chris's impatience that doomed the car. He didn't wait until it was dry to try starting it, and wore out the battery.

# Newfound Freedom

- All sorts of legalities prevent Chris from contacting authorities, so he abandons his car and most of his possession, going so far as to burn his remaining cash.
  - “He saw the flash flood as an opportunity to shed unnecessary baggage” (29)
- McCandless buries his Winchester rifle for later recovery, then sets out on foot to hike around Lake Mead.
  - He later writes in his journal that this is a mistake.

# Close Call...

- **As Steinbeck explained to us earlier, the Mojave is not a place to be wandering around.**
  - **Journal Entry: “tremendous mistake...In extreme July temperatures becomes delirious” (29).**
- **Suffering heat stroke, McCandless manages to hitch a ride with some boaters on Lake Mead, who take him to a marina on the west side of the lake.**



# On the Road

- **Enthralled by the landscapes of places like Lake Tahoe, the Sierra Nevada, and the Pacific Crest Trail, Chris does exactly what he wants to do: he communes with nature.**
- **Oops...While hitchhiking, he accepts a job offer in northern California.**
  - **When his new employer (Crazy Ernie) refuses to pay him, he steals a bicycle and rides away.**



# More Kindness of Strangers

- **McCandless is befriended by a couple of fellow drifters.**
  - Jan Burres and her boyfriend, Bob, feed the hungry young man, who calls himself Alex.
- **Burres has a son Alex's age from whom she is estranged.**
  - Alex is proud that he's been surviving on edible plants, which he identifies from a book.
- **However, Burres is concerned when she hears he burned his money.**
  - Alex leaves them but stays in touch by sending postcards from time to time.

# Legal Problems

- **Walt and Billie McCandless receive a ticket issued to their son for hitchhiking near Eureka, California, dated August 10.**
- **His choice to change his address was so deliberate and conscious, it seems unlikely he would have given out his parents' address by mistake.**
  - **JK suggests McCandless wants them to know where he is, and that he is all right.**
  - **His desire for freedom from his family may be conflicting with an unconscious desire to work out his family issues.**



# Peter Kalitka, PI

- **Walt and Billie hire a private investigator, named Peter Kalitka.**
- **McCandless is long gone from California before Kalitka begins his search, however.**
- **Kalitka is unable to turn up any information until December, when Chris's tax records reveal that he donated his college fund to OXFAM.**
  - **Walt and Billie flip out.**
  - **At this point in the journey, Chris is with Wayne Westerberg.**

# Into the...Water?

- **After Westerberg is jailed in September, Chris again seeks the warmer climate of the West.**
- **He hitchhikes to Needles, California, then walks through the desert to Topock, Arizona.**
- **Here, he purchases a secondhand aluminum canoe and decides to paddle down the Colorado River to the Gulf of California, which is across the border in Mexico.**

# Postcard to Wayne

S. P. Bridge over Colorado River at Yuma, Ariz.

- **By the end of November, he has reached Yuma, Arizona. He mails a lengthy postcard to Wayne, thanking him again for his hospitality.**
- **Alex also complains that tramping is too easy with the money he earned working for Westerberg. He prefers the challenge of foraging for his food.**



# Crazy Canoe Trip

- On Dec. 2, Alex crosses the Mexican border. There, his canoe trip becomes difficult because the river peters out into marshland containing many dead-ends.
- McCandless's diary for this period, in which he refers to himself in the third person as Alex, tells of his persistent belief that there is a river route to the Gulf of California, although the evidence strongly suggests otherwise.
- Alex carries his canoe overland to the Wellteco Canal after two local canal officials suggest it *may* connect with the Gulf of California. It dead-ends,

# Ocean Fun

- **McCandless spends a month camped out by the sea on a great desert of shifting sand dunes.**
- **On January 11, 1991, he writes about the fateful events of the day in his journal.**
  - **A storm sweeps his canoe out to sea.**
  - **He finds himself helpless against the storm.**
  - **Screaming in frustration, Alex smashes his oar against the canoe.**
  - **Realizing he will die if he loses the other oar, Alex forces himself to calm down.**

# Why This Trip Is So Important

- This incident convinces him to abandon his canoe and head back north.
- He has survived on rice and food caught from the sea for some two months.
- Here, the author clarifies that this survival experience becomes a critical factor in Alex's later belief that he can survive in the Alaskan wilderness on nothing but rice, and what he can forage or kill from the land.



# Back in the USA

- **After some smooth-talking with the authorities, Chris reenters America and travels the Southwest.**
- **In Los Angeles, he rejoins society to obtain an ID and a job, but his journal entry states that he “... feels extremely uncomfortable in society now and must return to road immediately” (37).**

# A Changed Man

- Camping in the Grand Canyon with a young German couple, Alex writes this:
  - “Can this be the same Alex that set out in July, 1990? Malnutrition and the road have taken their toll on his body. Over 25 pounds lost. But his spirit is soaring.”
- Then it’s off to Vegas to live “on the streets with bums, tramps, and winos for several weeks... God it’s great to be alive!” (37).



# Tonight's Reading

- **Chapter Five**
  - (much shorter than four)
  - **Annotation Targets:**
    - **Chris Characterization**
    - **Chris's Effect On Others**