

## Summary and Analysis Chapter 1 - The Alaska Interior

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### Summary

Outside Fairbanks, Alaska, a truck driver stops for a hitchhiker who introduces himself as Alex (though his real name is Christopher Johnson McCandless). The hitchhiker says he is from South Dakota and requests a ride to Denali National Park. He then tells the driver, an electrician named Jim Gallien, that he wants to "walk deep into the bush and 'live off the land for a few months.'"

At first Gallien thinks McCandless is "another delusional visitor to the Alaskan frontier." But during their two-hour drive north, Gallien changes his opinion and comes to regard the young man as intelligent and thoughtful. Gallien recognizes, however, that McCandless lacks the basic necessities for surviving in the Alaskan bush: he has no food except for a 10-pound bag of rice, his hiking boots are not waterproof, and his rifle is too small for the large game he will have to kill in order to survive. Other essentials that McCandless lacks include an ax, snowshoes, and a compass.

McCandless plans on following the Stampede Trail, an often unmarked route in the wilderness north of Mount McKinley. Gallien tries to talk him out of this, but the young man is undeterred, claiming there isn't anything that he can't deal with on his own. On Tuesday, April 28, 1992, "Alex" (McCandless) disappears down the Stampede Trail.

### Analysis

*Into the Wild* begins not with the birth of its main character, or even with the beginning of the journey that the book will trace, but with an important turning point late in Christopher McCandless's trip through the American West: his final encounter with another human before he enters the Alaskan wilderness. The epic poems the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* both start similarly, employing a technique the ancients called beginning *in medias res* – "in the middle of things." Though *Into the Wild* is a nonfiction book (that is, a true story), Jon Krakauer's choice to start it in this fashion encourages the reader to connect Christopher McCandless's journey with that of the fictional character Odysseus (as well as other characters, like Aeneas and the protagonist of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, who resemble Odysseus) – and to consider that McCandless himself may be a kind of hero.

Note that McCandless has chosen to call himself Alex, short for "Alexander Supertramp." The adoption of this alias represents McCandless's rejection of the parents who named him and his parents' values. It also places him within a tradition of American characters who, as part of the process of reinventing themselves, change their names. Think of Jay Gatsby (from F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*), born and raised James Gatz before transforming himself into a glamorous millionaire. McCandless may have chosen "Alexander" to honor Alexander the Great, a conqueror of vast territories previously unknown to him. And although Supertramp is the name of a British rock band from the 1970s, the reference more likely signals McCandless's aspiration to be a super tramp – a great wanderer.

Finally, McCandless may have been aware of a long line of characters from American literature who reject society and its values by "lighting out for the territories" – heading, that is, "into the wild." These include Mark Twain's creation Huckleberry Finn, Ishmael from Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Ernest Hemingway's character Nick Adams, and many others.