

This is a preview of *Journey to Michipicoten*, a novel by Patricia Kay Lucas.  
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***Fort Atkinson, Southern Wisconsin***  
**1992**

My new house is filled with the art of Frances Anne Hopkins. I have made the rooms, halls, and all the odd corners glow with her favorite colors: russet, distant blue, deep gold, and green. In the kitchen, a voyageur camp wakes to mist and dawn on a Lake Superior beach. In the living room, a *canot de maître* shoots a rapids, descending precipitously over my couch. When I open my eyes in the morning, the first thing I see is Frances Anne, her husband Edward, and eight glorious, paddle-wielding men in a canoe. They are gliding past a waterfall that spills down a wall of rock. She is holding a white water lily—her favorite flower—as one of the paddlers bends to pick another. I have maybe a dozen of these pictures in my house. Prints, of course. The originals, wrought in oil, watercolor, pencil, and ink, over a hundred years ago, are secured in museums and private collections. There are some in England and the U.S., but mostly they're in Canada—*O Canada!* She spent just twelve years there, but how she loved its rivers, its lakes, and the forests—the vast *bois fort* of the north. The wilderness: she loved it with her artist's eye and left its images to tease me.

To think that a woman of the nineteenth century, a woman of means and style, would cast aside her comforts and all that was familiar and easy to camp for weeks at a time in the Canadian wilderness. To tramp portage trails in little black shoes and billowing, bush-snagging skirts. The white lace! She went several times, at least twice on canoe trips long enough to stamp her will and imagination forever. She went as the privileged wife of Edward Hopkins, Chief Factor of the Montreal Department of the Hudson's Bay Company. It was the twilight of the H. B. Co., back in the 1860s when Frances Anne went canoeing. The old firm had scrounged and squandered who knows how much natural wealth for centuries, but it was all coming to an end. Frances Anne painted the last days of the voyageur's world.

She was a woman and an artist, and somehow she cut her way out of Victorian England to leave us these pictures. Unbearably, there were many that were simply lost. I have fantasized about finding them, even just one, in an attic in a tenement on a dingy, ancient London street. Or a flea market in a New England town. What would I do? I'd be wracked with guilt and end up giving it to Canada. No, I'd give it to Hampstead village in London, her last refuge, where she ended her days painting through the nightmare of the Great War.

Sometimes I walk from picture to picture studying them so intently I'm surprised to see my own face in an intervening mirror—a tall woman with short straight hair, middle-aged, wide staring eyes. My hair is dark and cut pixie-style, just as it's been for twenty-five years. Can you believe that?

I am supposed to be packing for the dream trip to Pukaskwa, but I'm distracted by the spectacle of voyageurs gamely repairing the skin of their birch bark canoe in the flickering, orange light of a torch. I've been pacing from picture to picture, my little route, wasting time as

usual. What am I trying to see? Clues? Just for once, I wish I could hold everything together long enough to make an informed opinion, one confident decision about the direction of my life, my own route. Surely, if I collected all the threads and spread them out on the table and closed off the drafts, surely I could make some sense of, as my Grandma would say, “this dreadful *mélange*.” Because, you know, much as I love them, clues aren’t enough.

Over the desk in my bedroom, there is a print of a watercolor, *Portrait of a Young Boy*. His features are delicate, sweet, but he is turning away. Frances Anne lost two of her sons, one in 1864 and one in 1869. I have two sons, healthy and grown-up now, and I am strangled at the thought of her grief. Each of her Lake Superior canoe trips followed in the wake of a death. You have to hand it to the Victorians, though; they didn’t stint on what they thought would heal. A bracing holiday in the wilderness? Yes, let’s try that. But how infinitely more tragic that second trip must have been, and just how good a healer is wilderness? I suppose it could either kill you or cure you, but it is likely an open-ended question if there ever was one.

In July of 1869, Edward and Frances Anne took a steamer from Lake Huron to the Company’s old stronghold on Lake Superior, Fort William, near present-day Thunder Bay. From there, they rode in the canoe with the voyageurs, first along the north shore of Lake Superior, then past Sault Sainte Marie, and all the way back on the old trade routes—the rivers and lakes of the back-country—to Montreal. Just a couple months later, they left for England, for good. It was on the 1869 canoe trip that a Canadian-Ojibway *métis* of their crew told the tale of another Frances, a girl who made a similar journey in an earlier time, the last years of the seventeenth century, when the northwest wilderness was a landscape of endless possibility.

I know about this because my great-grandmother heard it from Frances Anne Hopkins herself. This story has been passed down through my female relations from Great-Grandma Marjorie to Grandma Beth, then to my mother Janet, and finally to me, Frances.