

## Prologue



March 31, 1993

*THE FLAG ABOVE ME* is flying straight out. Starched. How can a cloth flag do that? Fly with no ripples.

The wind tears at the hood of my rain parka. Tries to rip open my shell of protection. Tries to congeal everything in its path. I cannot gaze into the gale without shielding my eyes. Tiny bullets, pellets of ice, bombard me. Moments earlier they were spray from raging surf, now they are piercing shrapnel.

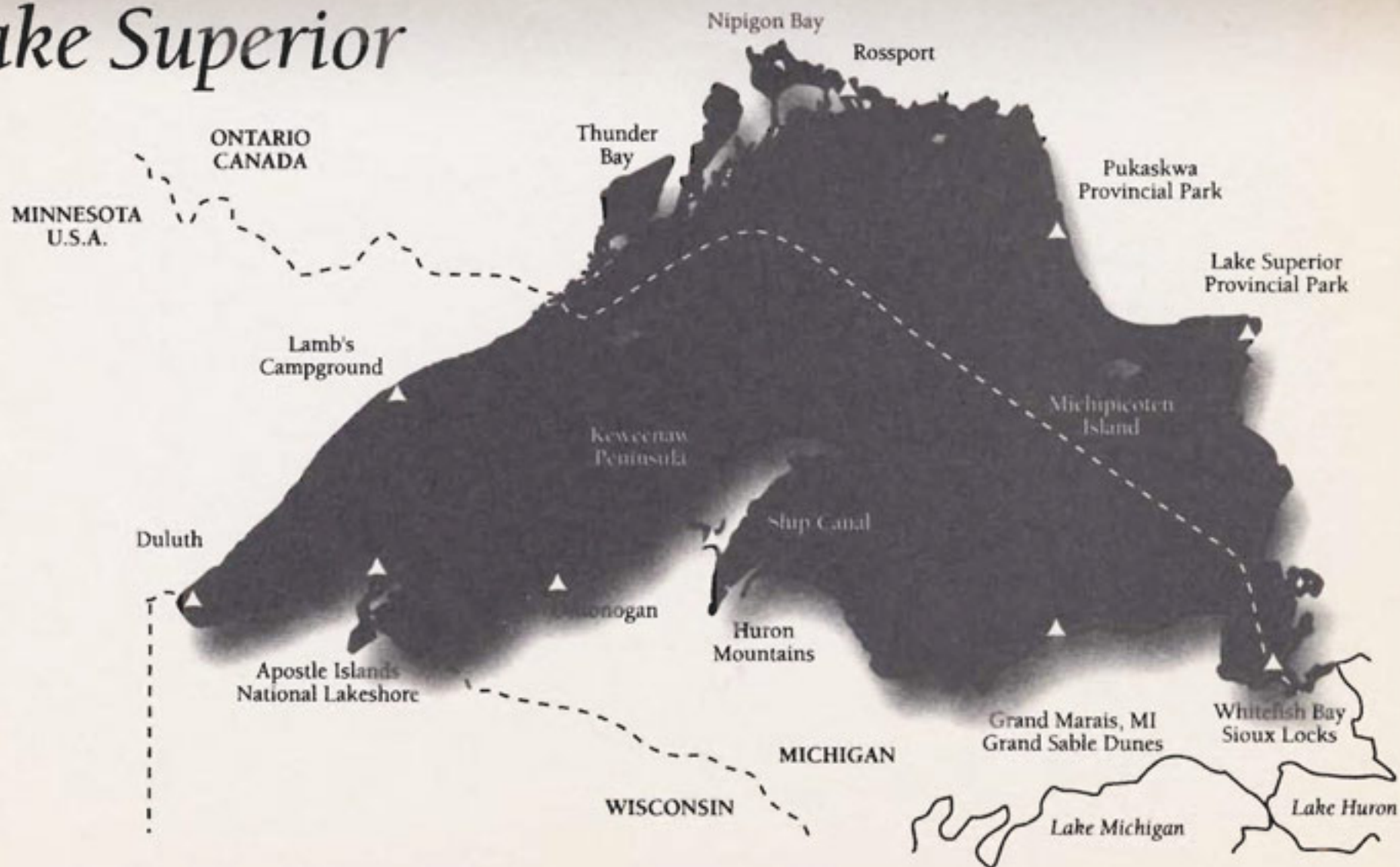
I turn my head to protect my face from the wind, from the vision of the big lake. I gaze down the expanse of sand beach littered with ice from the long winter. The lake's twelve-foot surf pulverizes the ice; it is eager to destroy the last vestiges of frozen bondage.

A gust of wind blows me backward several feet. I remember the summer past. Gusts of wind that tried to knock the paddle from my hands, tried to blow my kayak over. The many times Lake Superior engaged this kind of fury and I was not standing safely on shore.

I drop to both knees, bow my head into my body for protection. In the cocoon of my thoughts I can hear the tiny pellets hitting my jacket, can hear the deep, steady pounding of the surf. *Pik, pik, pik, pik, pik, BOOM. Pik, pik, pik, pik, pik, BOOM.*

This is the symphony of *She-Who-Is-The-Biggest*. The symphony of *She-Who-Changed-My-Life*. I bow before her. Humble. Respectful. Grateful to be alive.

# Lake Superior



- Largest lake in the world by surface area
- Average annual water temperature: 40° Fahrenheit
- Highest recorded waves: over 40 feet
- Greatest depth: 1,333 feet
- Distance around shoreline: 1,826 miles / same as driving distance from Duluth to Miami

*Deep Water  
Passage*

# I

## *First Day*



When we deliberately leave the safety of the shore of our lives,  
we surrender to a mystery beyond our intent.

ON JUNE 14, 1992, the day of my forty-third birthday, one day before I was to leave on my kayaking trip around Lake Superior, I rose with the dawn, slipped on sweatpants, sweater, and windbreaker, and walked to a nearby park in my home city of Duluth.

I passed no other walkers, and the neighborhood dogs, accustomed to my early exercise routines, didn't bother to bark. Down the long block of faculty homes on the hill behind the university campus where my husband taught, I made my way with quiet confidence through familiar scenes of my comfortable life. Lilacs in the neighborhood, late blooming in this latitude, were beginning to fade, and here and there I noticed peonies emerging in people's yards. Friends and family would phone in birthday wishes from warmer climes, but I was used to bundling up, and enjoyed the coolness and changeability of lake-edge weather.

Near the end of the street I entered the park, and a whole parade of chest-high blue and pink lupines saluted me. I love the season of my birthday in the north. It is a time of beauty and fullness for the plants, which must endure so much to claim a space in this harsh land. In the ravines and pathways of Chester Park, it took me twenty minutes to follow the narrow, rocky trail over the creek, up one of the highest hills in Duluth, past the ski jumps, to my special place.



My habitual sitting, or standing, spot is a small outcrop of exposed volcanic rock five feet by six feet — large enough to make myself a sense of place — a rock to stand on. Local guides claim it is some of the oldest exposed bedrock anywhere on the planet, about one billion years old. The claim makes it sound famous. It looks ordinary — a gray-black, pockmarked slab of Canadian shield. It feels extraordinary — steady, calming, reassuring. I call it my listening place.

From this spot I can survey the southwest finger-pointing tip of Lake Superior, much of the city, and the complexities of my personal life. I make the trek to my special place every week of the year. For at least five months that means trudging through snow. But that June day, the rich green knee-high grasses surrounding me waved and pulsed in the wind, and my eyes were drawn upward and outward by the spectacle of blue sea dotted with whitecaps stretching into the horizon before me.

Lake Superior is well named. No other body of water on the continent even approaches the size of this inland sea. The lake is about the same size as the entire state of Maine. To paddle around it is the equivalent of hiking three-quarters of California's Pacific Crest Trail from the California/Oregon border to just north of Los Angeles. Because it is more than a thousand feet deep in some of its trenches, Superior contains more water than the other four Great Lakes combined. Lake Baikal in Russia contains more freshwater by volume, because it's deeper, but in terms of sheer size Lake Superior is the biggest lake on the planet.

The choosing of names is an important, symbolic act. We cannot know what name the earliest human residents chose for the lake. They were a nomadic group, hunting the mastodon on the edge of the receding glacier. Evidence left by the Old Copper Culture of seven thousand years ago on the south shore, even with its more permanent civilization, includes no remnant of written language or way to know the words they spoke for this lake. It was not until the first white explorers arrived in the 1600s and reported that the Ojibway people called the lake Gitchee Gumeé, "Great Lake," that a name was first recorded. One of these explorers, Étienne Brûlé,

added his own name: "Northern Sweetwater Sea." And shortly thereafter the French began referring to it on fur-trading maps as Lac Supérieur.

At 7:30 A.M. the next day I planned to set out in my seventeen-foot sea kayak and paddle around this lake. My paddling partner and close friend, Paul, and I had worked hard these past several weeks, packing and repacking food, gear, and clothing. We had been preparing for five years — paddling the lake in all its conditions and seasons — to gain the skills we needed. For both of us this represented a lifelong dream to do one extended, challenging wilderness trip.

I have always been a seeker of wild places. As a lanky, blond ten-year-old, I rode my blue, single-speed Raleigh to the edge of Austin, Minnesota, to Turtle Creek to catch crayfish and wade in the shallows and climb trees along the banks. As a junior in high school, I was the camp counselor leading nine- and ten-year-olds on canoe trips in northern Minnesota. As a U.S. Forest Service naturalist, I wrote hiking and skiing guides to the northern Utah mountains. With Paul and two other colleagues, I wrote a book about environmental education and taught Sense of Wonder workshops to teachers, parents, and children. All my life, I have sought wild places for adventure, for my livelihood, and for good counsel.

When my son and daughter were tiny and newly adopted from Korea, and I was adjusting to my much-longed-for motherhood, I drove with them into the wilderness to create the foundations of our family life. In the spring of 1985, Brian, Sally, and I wandered through the desert southwest for three months, letting the gentle warmth develop and seal the bonds between us. A few years later, when they became school age, we packed up again and took books and papers to sandy arroyos and shady, moist canyons in search of answers beyond school walls. My deepest adult friendships have always bubbled up from the spring of shared enthusiasm over mountains climbed, sunsets watched, or lakes paddled. The lessons of the wilderness have not always been easy, but they have been profound.



I remember the first time Paul and I sat in a kayak. It was 1987. A camp in Wisconsin. A warm August day. The instructor cautioned us about the boat's tippiness and delicate balance, but my slim, canoe-wise body slid easily into the narrow hold. The small, river kayak, its hull shaped like a horizontal cigar, was like pulling on my favorite pair of pants. Comfortable. Snug. Close to the water. My hands moved back and forth along the shaft of the double-bladed paddle. Smooth, long, and lean, the paddle curved to fit the cup between my curled fingers and palm. I found my arms and shoulders rotating automatically to the dance rhythm of paddling. Forward with the right blade. Pull the paddle while pushing on the right foot peg for leverage. Forward with the left blade. Pull the paddle while pushing on the left foot peg for leverage. I was delighted by how quickly the boat slid across the smooth skin of water.

For me, who had grown up in Minnesota and swum and boated since I was a toddler, this was the watercraft of my dreams. I had always paddled canoes, but a kayak is different from a canoe. You get into a canoe. You wear a kayak. In a kayak you are only a step above swimming. You become a creature with license to explore beyond the realms of ordinary, earthbound existence. A creature capable of moving in inches of water or handling immense seas.

On this gusty June morning, I sat on the hilltop for half an hour, feeling the steady, strong wind and worrying about our proposed morning takeoff. Then I knew it was time to return home and cook Sunday breakfast for my family. I left a small pebble I had collected from the shore of the lake — an offering, a request that I be watched over on my journey by the steady presence that I always seemed to find on this rock. This morning I was deeply aware that my leave-taking from Duluth meant letting go of more than just special people. I was a woman raised within solid, Protestant, midwestern values. They had served me and limited me. I knew, vaguely, that I was approaching the end of some kind of life cycle, and I was hoping the trip would teach me what that was and where I might be going.

My friend Christina and I had recently started combining teaching skills to create circles of self-empowerment for women. We were

excited by what was beginning to happen in these settings, and hesitant about our abilities to "lead" because we felt ourselves in as much upheaval as the women who came into the circles we were teaching.

A week earlier, on the drive back from Wisconsin to drop her off in Minneapolis, Christina had said to me, "Ann, you must be willing to let this voyage change everything — to prepare yourself for the second half of your life."

"I know," I'd answered, "but I don't know what that means. Do you?"

"No. I support you and I'm afraid for you and I'm confident in you. You are just going to have to trust the journey, day by day by day."

I sighed deeply, remembering these words, and turned my face toward home, making my way downhill back into the neighborhood and the comfortable embraces and exchanges of the life I knew. Birth. Day.

Nine-year-old Sally admonished me the minute I walked in to the house. "Mom, why did you get up? Brian and me are serving you breakfast in bed for your birthday."

"Well, how would it be if I just sat right down on the porch and you brought me breakfast in the sunshine?"

She wrinkled up her little Korean nose, put her hands on her tiny waist, and said, "Oh, all right."

Fifteen minutes later twelve-year-old Brian carried the scrambled eggs, toast, and coffee out on a tray. Sally carefully laid out the silverware, napkins, and plate. Both of them joined me on the porch steps. Their father, Dave, having supervised the entire affair, remained inside reading the paper.

"Where were you, Mom?" asked Brian.

"Saying good-bye to my listening place."

"Well, you're not going forever," retorted Sally.

"No, but it is for a long time. I left a present for listening place just like I've left presents for you. I'm thinking a lot this morning about what I'll miss being gone."



The next morning I rose at 5 A.M. and went into my upstairs office. Fierce lake winds were pounding rain against the skylight. I was sure Paul and I would choose to delay our start. Still, it was important to me to begin every day between now and the end of the trip with a ceremony. I put some ground sage in a small pottery bowl, lit a candle, ignited the sage, wafted the smoke around me to clear my heart and mind. Then I prayed for safety and dialed Paul's number.

"Doesn't sound too great, Ann," Paul said. "My weather-band radio says northeast winds of twenty to thirty knots, waves are four to seven feet, and small craft should stay off the lake." We agreed it was not a day to start out, called friends to let them know we weren't launching, and then drove down to look at the lake together.

We stood on the beach, studying the surf. One white-water mountain after another rolled in and smashed itself against the sand, an image repeated again and again. Rows and rows of white mountains as far as our eyes could see. Relentless. Persistent. Loud.

"You know," said Paul, shouting over the roar of the wind. "We could make it out. We've done surf like this before."

"Yeah, but why give our families the message that we're going to take chances? Let's wait a day and see what happens. We've been telling everyone that we are going to be cautious."

A sea kayaker looks at raging water differently from anyone else. Paul and I did not stand there simply mesmerized by rolling surf. We were calculating how many sets of big waves separated the small waves. Looking to see how far out the breaking waves or the surf line actually extended. Measuring our skills against the incoming challenge.

"You're right, Paul. We've been out in worse. But I still want to wait. This is forecasted to continue for a couple of days. We might get out okay and even make it to Stony Point, but we'll be exhausted, and then what about tomorrow? It isn't efficient to go today." He nodded. It was our first summit about the weather. We were neophytes in conference. In the next sixty-five days, every day

that we weren't on solo we would meet many times a day, and always, topic One would be the weather.

My journal entry from 4 P.M. that same day reflected the challenge of waiting when I was so ready to go:

Ah, the disappointment of remaining put when one is ready to leave . . . a lesson I will undoubtedly learn more than once from the lake this summer. It has been a quiet day of getting our broken disposal replaced and taking kids to the show. On the way home from Sister Act at Cinema 8, I drove down to the lake. The kids said, "Mom, where are we going?"

"To the lake. My body wants to be on the lake."

"Oh, Mom!" But they got out of the car with me near the Aerial Lift Bridge, which marks the beginning of Park Point. Watched the surf pounding in against the rock breakwater. Stood next to me, admiring the waves.

Brian said, "Isn't it amazing that something invisible like the wind can make something like these waves?"

I reached over and put my right arm around him, my left arm around Sally. I felt grounded and safe nestled between these shoulder-high pillars. Thought about what it would be like to be apart from them for nine weeks. Thought about how different the summer would be for them.

Yet, even in that moment, the call of the lake was so strong that it erased the tether of doubt and concern I felt. Yes, the summer will be different for them and for Dave, but they will be safe and, I hope, well in their adventure together.

By Tuesday afternoon the marine forecast was calling for a wind shift. I drove down to Paul's with the kids. His children and mine began to play games on the living-room floor. Friends since birth, home-schooled together for kindergarten and first grade, these four children were more like brothers and sisters than friends.

Paul and I sat on stools in the kitchen, drinking coffee. "Well, what do you think, kiddo?" I asked of my curly-haired friend with the impish blue eyes.

"I think we should go. We need a shakedown paddle on big seas." The truth of his statement stirred a queasiness in my stomach. I remained silent for a moment.

"Yeah, you're right. The storm is supposed to end Thursday. Let's go for it." Paul reached over to shake my hand. I matched the strength of his grip.

This time we had shaken on the contract. Five years earlier we had spoken about our desire to paddle around the lake. Last summer after our weeklong sea kayaking trip on the lake's south shore, we had sat down and figured out an itinerary for our circumnavigation of the lake and drafted a letter to friends and family inviting them to join us on shore or to paddle alongside for parts of the trip. First we spoke of intent. Then we wrote the commitment. Now we shook hands. Each sanction of the dream had pushed us further along the river of preparation leading to the lake. Around rocks, over ledges. Now we were prepared to drop over the waterfall onto the surface of the great lake. Irreversible. One never goes back on a handshake, never goes back up a waterfall.