

Nova Scotia

The summer after I fell in love with Zach we decided to vacation together. I was a little apprehensive; he was older and ready to settle down, but I'd had bad luck with men and wanted to take things slow.

We spread maps over his living room floor and tossed out ideas. "How about Nova Scotia?" Zach said finally. "We could take the ferry to Yarmouth and drive to Cape Breton Island. It's supposed to be extraordinarily beautiful."

"Nova Scotia," I said, slowly. Ever since my father died, when I was a child, I'd longed to go to Nova Scotia, the place where he had been born and raised.

"My father was born on Cape Breton," I leaned over the map. "A place called North Sydney."

"Here it is," Zach pointed. "Meagan, let's take a few days there. Wouldn't it be exciting to see where he lived? Terrific. It's settled then." Zach was a great believer in confronting the past. I wasn't so sure.

As Zach and I drove up the eastern coast of Nova Scotia, past small fishing villages, small bays, stretches of flat land with miles between houses, it was as if we were the only people there. The houses were brightly colored in unusual combinations: pink with green trim, purple with red trim, as if people couldn't stand the rain and cloudiness and made vivid protests against the sky. The land was flat, uninteresting, the beaches covered with hard, rounded stones.

My father may have driven on this road, I would find myself thinking. How must it have been for him, growing up in this remote place, so many years earlier? I found myself talking of him as we drove. It was cold and damp, and I'd been letting Zach into

my life inch by guarded inch, and so I told him the difficult part, the part I had promised my mother never to tell. I had never thrown away the shiny brown paper bag that contained the photos and letters. I never looked in the bag again but still kept it buried beneath the socks and tights and underwear in my bureau drawer. Even touching it made me uncomfortable.

"Let's pretend he's only on a trip," my mother begged my sister Julie and me after my father's death. "Please? We'll say he's on a trip home to Canada."

I kept dreaming he hadn't died, that he had left us to seek adventure, or had found himself an entirely new family. I dreamt that years passed and I searched until I found him, but he no longer recognized or wanted me. I had been too young to go to the funeral. I hadn't visited the grave. A little piece of me wondered if perhaps he were still alive.

One day, a few years after my father's death, I came home from school and decided to tidy the living room closet. All was quiet as I sat cross-legged on the floor, my legs, below the blue plaid Catholic school jumper, bare against the cold wood floor. I pulled out an unfamiliar cardboard box and began to sort through it. Near the bottom I found letters addressed "Dear Daddy." At first, thinking they were my own, I felt a wash of pleasure that he kept my notes and cards. There were crudely made toys but, although I often created mine, I didn't remember these. I found packets of photographs and, expecting pictures of my family, was surprised that they were of people I didn't know. There was a large studio photograph of a woman with the word "Beatrice" handwritten across the bottom. She was, I thought with a disloyal qualm, prettier than my mother.

I lifted one of the letters addressed "Dear Daddy" and read through to the signature. My heart began beating rapidly. It was not from me, it was from someone named Fiana. My palms were sweaty as I leafed through another photo packet; it contained pictures of a boy and girl. In one the boy was seated smiling in a wagon, in another the girl leaned against a tree. The light shone on her long black hair and a baseball cap dipped low over her eyes. One photo showed my father with his arm across her shoulders as she sat on a bicycle. Written across the photo were the words: "Fiana's first ride." The bicycle was brand new. My bicycle was a hand-me-down and too small for me. The girl's hair was worn in the long braids my father preferred for me when I was small, and

her handwriting was just like mine.

A daughter? A first daughter?

I vacuumed the bottom of the closet, put everything back neatly, and then waited for my mother to come home. None of it made any sense. It wasn't possible for my father to have had another family. We were the most ordinary, the most Catholic, of families. Why, on the day of my birth my father gave my mother a pair of gold rosary beads: on the back of the cross was inscribed: To Hazel, in thanks for Meagan Anne. It was inconceivable that such a man could commit a mortal sin, a sin worthy of eternal damnation.

As I waited for my mother, everything she had ever said about her courtship with my father ran through my mind. My sister and I always wanted to hear stories about the old days, about our parents' childhoods. Particularly we wanted to hear the love stories, but with my mother we always came away frustrated.

"Meagan, I'm sorry. My memory is so terrible," my mother'd protest.

"Ma *try*. You must remember *something*."

"I've told you everything. I'd been working many years when I met your father at the Canadian Importing Agency. He was so distinguished-looking with his silver hair! All the girls in the office were mad about him."

"What else?"

"What do you mean? Nothing else. We fell in love."

"How long before you were married?"

"Oh, five years or so."

Five years seemed like a long time.

"Tell us about the wedding."

"There's not much to tell. We had a small ceremony and went to Niagara Falls."

There was no framed photograph of my mother in a filmy white gown; instead she had showed us one of her and my father dressed in suits, smiling and holding hands. She had explained that many women in her day didn't wear long gowns and that she always thought tulle and lace were silly. I noted what I thought was a smug, superior tone and concluded that she must have been quite sophisticated.

My father had also seemed special, different from the other fathers in our neighborhood. He never sat out with the other men in their skinny-ribbed T-shirts drinking beer, joking and laughing. He never played in the grass when the other dads joined the kids

for stickball, but instead went off alone to play tennis, immaculate in white. A counterpoint to the fifties Doo Wop music blasting from every radio was the sound of Chopin from the old upright he bought secondhand and repaired and tuned himself. I'd listen to the sounds, imagining his fingers moving fluidly up and down the keys, as I played with my dolls in the dirt underneath the living room window.

My father was the only man in the neighborhood to work in Manhattan, to wear a tie and jacket, to carry a briefcase. His shirts, even the T-shirts he wore to clean the apartment, were always white. Every morning before I watched his tall thin frame disappear up the block, I sat with him as he polished his shoes. He had a little bench and tins of polish and thick brushes and he whistled as he drew the cloth back and forth. Each evening I watched for him at the corner where a small hill was crowned with bushes. I liked to hide in the center of the circle of bushes, liked the feeling of seeing but not being seen, watching with anticipation as people descended from each bus. Would this be the one? This?

"*Bon soir, mon ami, bon soir,*" my father sang to me in French every night as I knelt on the wooden floorboards by the side of my bed. Each night I said the same prayers, in the same order, prayers he made up.

"Go like this with your mouth," he pursed his lips. "Say 'ooh' then 'we. Oui.' "

But my mother asked him to stop. She thought if my sister and I called him Papa, instead of Daddy, the other children would think we were odd.

I felt odd anyhow. My parents raised their eyebrows at the neighbors, and there were children with whom we were not allowed to play. Other children were allowed to hit back, allowed to yell. "Maybe other people's children can look and behave like ruffians," my father said, "but not mine."

"If someone says, 'Hi, Megan, how are you?' You are to reply, 'Fine, thank you, and how are you?' "

My mother beamed every time she was complimented on our politeness. If we visited someone who had candy out in a dish, we were not allowed to help ourselves but had to wait until it was offered.

"Never ask," my father said. "It's rude to put people in the position of having to give when they don't want to."

On Saturdays my father cleaned the apartment, already spotless;

particularly he liked to scrub the bathroom. I watched as he shined the fixtures with silver polish, spreading the cream in pink swirls. "And then," he leaned into the mirror, "I saw an enormous footprint in the snow." His voice hinted at vast snowy landscapes and I shivered, imagining being alone in that white infinity. "The footprints were giant, so large one print was as long as a grown man." He flicked shaving cream into the sink.

"I looked around, terrified," he said. "Maybe the stories were true. Maybe there *was* an abominable snowman!"

The stories all ended at the point where he made a heroic escape or saved the day.

"Mom," my sister Julie asked, "are Daddy's stories true?"

"I don't know," she smiled, "you'll have to ask your father."

But I knew my father never lied. Lying was a sin.

When my mother came home that evening I asked her about the contents of the box. "Oh my God," she said, her coffee cup making a solid whack against the table. Her face whitened and the veins in her hands showed blue through the skin. I wished that I had said nothing.

"Your father wanted to wait until you were older to tell you." She lit a cigarette, fingers trembling. "It was much the way I've always said." She raised and lowered the cigarette without putting it in her mouth, and the ash drifted unnoticed to the tabletop. My mother said she hadn't known when she met him that he had been married, and when he told her, she left the company where they both worked and refused to see him again. She ran away, but he persisted. Finally she agreed to continue seeing him. Eventually he obtained a divorce and they had a civil ceremony. To the Church, of course, a civil marriage is no marriage at all. "I tried, I did!" she cried. "But he hounded me. And I loved him so much!"

"When had he been – married?" The word stuck in my throat. I thought of the picture of the woman with the word "Beatrice" at the bottom, the woman I'd instinctively compared with my mother.

"He married right out of college, up in Nova Scotia. She was very pretty, he became infatuated. They had two children. Later he realized he and his wife had nothing else in common. They separated and he came to New York."

"Are they still there?"

"I suppose. Yes, they're in Canada. They've grown up by now."

I asked my mother no more questions. But the next day I re-

turned secretly to the closet and confiscated some of the letters and photos, just in case.

Sure enough, when I looked a day later, the box was gone.

After passing through the mainland, Zach and I camped on Cape Breton Island, the northernmost section of Nova Scotia, where at last the sun shone. Cape Breton was a rough, rocky place where cliffs rose straight up out of the ocean, creating small pebbly bays. We chilled wine in streams and picnicked on cheese and bread, watching the ocean meet the rocks and explode into air. After it grew dark we drove on, our voices growing quieter, softer, in keeping with the solitude.

Sometimes, especially after we made love, I turned away from Zach in the sleeping bags or went off by myself for a little while. I didn't know why I was feeling so anxious, and tried not to let him feel my distancing.

As Zach and I neared Sydney – a large industrial town, polluted and ugly – I grew increasingly tense. There were only three things I knew for sure about my father's childhood: that his town was called North Sydney, that his house was a block from a harbor, and that the Catholic grammar school he attended was on a hill behind his house. From Sydney we drove through the outskirts of North Sydney, a poor stepchild of Sydney – dirty, dull, half-alive. This was the town where my father lived, perhaps was married in? I hadn't thought what to expect. A quaint little fishing town, with large rambling homes by the misty sea? A tough, working-class town, with rows of high-class houses on a main street, complete with parlors and fringed lampshades? I envisioned my grandmother, whom I had never met, her hair piled up over her slender face, doing needlepoint in a straight-backed chair. But this was a poor town of rickety stores, wharfs, piers, and bridges. Even in Nova Scotia, the poorest province in Canada, the poverty of North Sydney stood out.

"Are you doing OK?" Zach asked.

"Of course." But my skin felt curiously prickly.

"Which way do you want to go?"

"Let's head out. It looks as if we've covered most of the town."

"What are you talking about? Don't you want to find the house?"

"No, we wouldn't be able to anyhow. Let's go."

"But that's crazy. We've come all the way here for this, we should at least find the house."

"We came here for vacation."

"Yeah, right." He glanced at me; I said nothing. I was surprised by my sudden obstinacy.

"Let's try here," Zach said. He pulled over at a church in the middle of town: white, holy, innocent. I hung back.

"Hey," he reached in the window on my side of the car, ran a finger under my chin. "What's going on?"

"Nothing. I don't know."

He pulled the strings of my windbreaker tighter around my face.

"It's important that you do this, Meagan. For you, for us. You understand that, don't you?"

"I don't understand anything." I felt the way I had all those years before, when I'd opened the flaps of the cardboard box, that I should let well enough alone.

"There's nothing you could discover now that'll hurt you as badly."

"How can you possibly know that?"

"Because you're not a little girl any more."

I stepped out of the car, walked up to the rectory, and stabbed the doorbell.

A nun ushered us in. "How can I help you?" she asked.

"We'd like to see records, if you have them, for a Matthew Auclair," I said.

"Her father," Zach added. "Would the church keep records? He was born here, as far as we know, in 1914."

The nun smiled. "I'll see what I can do." She disappeared.

Zach turned to me. "They're only people, you know."

"Oh, no." I shook my head. I'd spent years under the severe eyes of the nuns in parochial school. Nuns could see right through you. Just opening my mouth I felt like a liar.

"I'm sorry," the nun returned. "Earlier records are kept at City Hall, or in Halifax."

"Halifax!" I said. Halifax was days away in the opposite direction. I felt a mixture of disappointment and relief.

"Thank you very much." I turned to go.

"Do you know which of the Catholic grammar schools were built as early as 1920?" Zach persisted.

"That's easy," the nun smiled. "There was only one, St. Joseph's. It's scheduled to be torn down in a couple of weeks. As a matter of fact, there was a commemorative service there recently. Let me see . . ." Her plump hands moved among some papers.

"Yes, here's one of the flyers."

The sheet contained a photograph of a long low building.

"Well," I said, relieved, as we settled back into the car, "this is really something to take home."

"What are you talking about? You're not giving up now, are you?"

"But –"

"Excuse me," Zach was leaning out the window, "can you tell me the way to City Hall?"

"It's her father," he repeated after me as we went from one office to another and I asked for him by name. Clerks asked me questions I couldn't answer. Everyone looked at me too kindly, as if they knew something I didn't. I hung back. I felt, here in my father's home town, unentitled to him, illegitimate.

But City Hall, as well, had no information. All pre-1920s records, we were told, were in Halifax. "Let's just try," Zach said, and so, as a last resort, we drove through an increasingly ramshackle, broken-down area of the town to find the school. The large, crumbling building was on a hill, just as my father had described. I found it difficult to get out of the car. I walked slowly all around the building and then studied each house nearby. One of these, I thought. I remembered my father saying he had skated on the Atlantic Ocean; in a sense maybe that was true: the harbor fed directly into the Atlantic. Dirty gray and black ships were moored close by. I looked at the large rambling houses that might once have been lovely, assuming one must have been my father's, waiting for some flash of certainty, recognition.

Zach called to me. He was up on the hill behind the school. There was a graveyard, and he pointed to a headstone, then left me. There was my name: Meagan Anne Auclair, 1890–1954. My grandmother died the year I was born. I stared and stared, then looked out over the harbor I couldn't name, the school, the tumbling down houses, saw the ships clustered at the shore, gray clouds massed overhead, everything gray, the wind damp and whipping at my face. I could see myself as if from behind, my back stiff, my feet planted apart, hands in jeans pockets, like a lone soldier surveying a battlefield of dead, and for a reason I couldn't understand there were tears on my face.

Zach took my arm. "Let's find the house."

We knocked at the front door of each house along the waterfront. The muscles of my stomach were clenched tight. What if his first wife lived here? How could I say I was his daughter if perhaps here people knew his other children? It was my father who did the

betraying; why did I feel so guilty?

At a house in the center of the block a woman, wearing a blue-flowered housedress, answered the door. She nodded, pointed.

"Oh, yes, they used to live in the green house. He was the youngest boy, but he moved to the States many years ago. His parents died somewhere along the line."

I felt suddenly drained. Only my father's childhood was here. Zach and I walked the few steps to the house the woman indicated. It was a tiny frame house bunched next to its neighbors: narrow, paint-flecked, the most run-down house on the most rundown street in this most run-down part of town. At its best this house couldn't have represented even genteel poverty. I thought of my father's music, his tennis, his chess, and his airs. Where had they been bred?

Zach and I left North Sydney and headed back down the western coast, along the Bay of Fundy. So many questions were still unanswered. The cloud mass that haunted us during the entire vacation did not disperse. The tent was still damp as we spread it out in Zach's living room to dry.

This time, when Zach asked me to move in with him, I agreed. I went back to my apartment in Queens to pack up my things. I filled cardboard box after cardboard box, and then, after hesitating a moment, I emptied the packet of photos, the tiny wooden tomahawk, and the letters from the worn paper bag. I stared at the little girl with the large brown eyes and long thin braids, the baseball cap tilted over her forehead. Maybe my father's arm was across her shoulders, I thought, but it was to me he had given his mother's name. I slipped everything back into the bag, adding the leaflet of my father's school and the snapshots I had taken of my grandmother's grave and my father's house.

When I was finished packing I took out the tiny gold-mesh pouch and removed the rosary. I turned the cross over to read again the inscription: "To Hazel, for Meagan Anne," and sat for awhile with the gold beads in my hands, as if I were saying my prayers.