

Catalogue 001
Submitted to publishers 2019
4965 words
17 pages

Baker - 1

Sand Diamonds

By Linda Frazee Baker

Genre: Fiction
Word count: 4965

Every year during spring break until the year I turned eleven, we would leave Grandma Schneider's tiny, overstuffed house in Queens where we lived to visit my father's mother—"the other grandmother" as we all called her—in Atlantic City.

Keep in mind that this was not yet Atlantic City of the casinos. Except for the week of the Miss America pageant in September, Atlantic City was just another Jersey shore town and in early spring, a Jersey shore town out of season. Under a weak sun, wave after wave slammed down on the sand, leaving behind a white, opalescent froth that quickly vanished in the undertow. Huge tumbleweeds roamed the vast expanse of beach as if looking for something that could not be found, bearing with them their dank, seaweedy smells. My father and mother and I would walk along the boardwalk until we found an open concession where my father could play skeet, a game like bowling only easier and with bigger prizes. One year, he won a large doll in a pale green taffeta dress I named Hazel after that year's hurricane; another year, he won a tiny vial of amber-colored scent for my mother that, to my great puzzlement, made her cry. After skeet, we would look through one of the silver oval binocular machines that, along with empty benches, were often the boardwalk's only other inhabitants. Noses pressed against cold metal, we would strain to see a tanker or, better yet, an ocean liner like the new Queen Elizabeth, far out at sea. For all the apprehensions this trip would bring me, for all the cold and desolation of the scene I would not say I disliked going to see the other grandmother. For it was an adventure, and what child—especially an only child---does not crave adventure?

We would have left to go on that last visit, as always, shortly before dawn. The sparrows nesting in the vines on the side of the house would still have been silent. Grandma Schneider herself had not yet stirred, and we didn't wake her to say good-bye. I was glad: I did not like to see her in the half-light of dawn shuffling along the hallway in her flannel robe, her mouth a single thin line pressed over the toothless gums.

Never cheerful at such an hour, my father went outside to check the oil in the engine, leaving my mother to finish the packing and deal with me. She perched on the edge of the bed next to the big rattan suitcase Grandma and Grandpa Schneider had bought for their honeymoon in 1911, which was now filled to the brim. Slowly my mother counted out dollar bills from a manila envelope marked "Miscellaneous" kept in a metal box along with the others marked "Food," "Clothes," "Life Insurance," "Car Insurance," "Cigarettes," and "Rent," which we paid to Grandma Schneider every Friday.

"Let's see," said my mother under her breath. "Toll for the Lincoln Tunnel, toll for the Jersey Turnpike, gas, anything else?"

The metal box disappeared into a drawer with a clatter and the money into her wallet. Swiftly my mother outlined her lips with Revlon *Fire Engine Red*, closed, and blotted the excess with a tissue. She curled her eyelashes upwards with Maybelline mascara, then fashioned her black hair into a single roll around the back of her neck.

Suddenly she grabbed me and ran a comb through the Buster Brown haircut I hated so much. Bangs fell in my eyes as I wriggled this way and that.

"Did you take your Dramamine?"

"I hate Dramamine. It tastes like rotten bananas."

"You'll throw up before we get to the Tunnel if you don't take it."

“I took it last time and I threw up anyway.”

Undeterred, my mother unscrewed the top from the little bottle. I could smell the fumes even before she poured the yellow liquid out onto the spoon.

Just then my father walked in, seeming even taller and thinner than usual in the half-light. He was wearing his blue-and-white checked sweater that exactly matched his pale blue eyes.

I gave him my best pleading look.

“Are you sure Vanessa really needs to take the Dramamine, Evelyn?” he said. “Maybe she’ll be OK without it.”

"Gee, thanks a lot, Joey," my mother said. "You're a big help."

He turned his back to me and forced the antique suitcase shut.

“Papa?” I said.

But already he was gone.

And then I was in the back seat of our dark green, tank-like 1952 Chevy, clutching a plastic carrier with its thermos of lemonade and three ham sandwiches on Vienna rolls. As the engine sputtered on, the sparrows woke up with angry cries. Twin headlights carved out a yellow path for us down the long, narrow driveway. As the scent of gasoline reached me, I could feel the carsickness coming on.

Three hours later, after several stops on the shoulder of the Garden State Parkway for me to be sick, we pulled up in front of the other grandmother’s house. In a gesture of uncharacteristic vulgarity, my father leaned on the horn. No one appeared. Not the other grandmother or her daughter Mabel—my father’s half-sister—or any of Mabel’s three children. Not even Queenie, the aging German shepherd. The only sound was that of the green-and-white

striped awnings flapping above wraparound porch.

The door was open. My father set the suitcase down in the foyer and we stood silent, transfixed. Slanting beams from the bright afternoon sun revealed the palpable dust. A wide staircase of unpolished wood led up to another floor. Straight ahead, a darkened corridor led into the kitchen. To the right was a small dining room with a fake crystal chandelier.

“Hallo!” my father cried. “Anybody home?”

He seemed calm as always, but I thought I sensed disappointment.

I ran through the house and out into the back yard where I found my cousins Ellie and Nellie--so much older than me they now counted as grown-ups--at opposite ends of a twirling rope. Boo, her face almost as flushed as the long red hair flying behind her, bobbed in the center. They all wore jumpers with blouses that did not look as if they had ever seen the business end of an iron. Nellie's long hair flowed free; Ellie and Boo had flyaway braids. Boo was the youngest at thirteen, but still huge to me.

"One, two, buckle my shoe," shouted Ellie and Nellie in time with the rope. "Three, four, shut the door."

"Hey look—here's our cousin Little Miss Goody Two-Shoes," said Boo. "Come on, you're next."

With a fearful expertise, Boo hopped neatly out. The rope kept on swinging.

I froze. I had jumped rope at home, but never one that fast.

“Where'd you get that hair-do?” said Ellie. “Just look at that—*bangs!*”

As if to demonstrate once and for all her superiority to the idiot cousin from New York, Boo jumped back in and then out, quick as *that*.

“Your turn,” she said.

"Could you stop it for a minute and let me stand in the middle and then start again? That's how I always do it at home."

Which wasn't true, but I would have said anything just then to avoid the humiliation of being lassoed and thrown.

Boo pushed me closer to the rope, and I leaned back with all the force I had. Just then my father came out of the house, haggard from the drive.

"Uncle Joey, Uncle Joey," they cried, rushing him like a gaggle of cheerleaders.

"Hey, hey," my father murmured, clearly pleased. "So how are all my favorite girls?"

He seemed pleased as they knocked him over, and they all fell onto the grass. A frantic barking announced the arrival of Queenie, who circled the mass of confused bodies but wasn't able to break in.

The screen door to the house slammed, I turned to see my mother, stiff as one of Grandma Schneider's pressed linen handkerchiefs with crocheted edging at the top of the stairs. A damp line of sweat ran down the front of her dress.

"Good afternoon, Eleanor, Nell, Barbara. Goodness, how you've grown."

Putting an arm around my shoulder, she pointed me firmly towards the house.

"Come, Vanessa, we need to wash our hands after the long trip,"

I followed her into the dim galley kitchen where unwashed plates and empty aluminum cans were scattered everywhere. Counters were dulled with ingrained dirt. I thought, with unexpected longing, of how in Grandma Schneider's house wood was polished every Friday with a lemon-scented cream; tile floors washed with a horsehair brush and a soapy bucket of Spic-n-Span.

My mother stopped at the end of the hallway, I thought to go upstairs, but no.

The other grandmother was waiting for us on the chaise lounge in the living room, which had frayed armrests without antimacassars. She had settled herself regally among the throw pillows and seemed tall even sitting down, tall like my father and his half-sister and his nieces, much taller than me or my mother or Grandma Schneider. The other grandmother was thinner and much more withered than roly-poly Grandma Schneider who insisted we eat every speck of the gargantuan meals she liked to cook. The other grandmother's cheeks were sunken in, and her white hair had tinges of yellow. A single strand of pearls encircling her neck was yellow too.

"Well, well, Evelyn, how was the drive?"

My mother didn't move. She was wearing her white rayon dress with the black polka dots that usually made her look especially pretty. But next to the other grandmother, she merely looked small.

Dinner consisted of Dinty Moore's warmed-over beef stew and white bread smeared with something that looked like butter but wasn't. To my surprise, the children prepared the meal. The other grandmother's brother, a tall, emaciated old man in an undershirt and suspenders whom everyone addressed as "Unc" slurped his stew loudly with no visible sign of embarrassment. An occasional muted whine and faint doggy smell under the old dining room table announced the presence of Queenie. Nobody mentioned my father's absent sister Mabel—the mother of Ellie, Nellie, and Boo.

"Well, well, Evelyn," the other grandmother said to my mother with a trace of—was it sarcasm? "How nice of you to come all this way. Mabel is out somewhere or other, but she should be back soon. Joseph, do my eyes deceive me or is that a new car outside?"

My father looked abashed.

“It’s got a V-6 engine though,” he added, like someone making the best of a bad thing.

Was it better than the car he had driven her to Florida in, the other grandmother asked.

Whatever had happened to that car anyway?

They discussed this for a long time while I wondered how my father had been able to afford a car in the 1930s. I wondered, too, and this was a new thought—how he could afford a car now, when every week he complained about how little he made as my mother apportioned his salary into the little manila envelopes. And what was his job anyway? All I knew was that every day he got dressed in a blue pin-stripe suit more expensive than all my clothes put together and took the Flushing 7 train into the city.

“And how is your work, now Joseph?” said the other grandmother. “Are you still at that place you dislike so much?”

“Yes, yes, it’s fine,” said my father, staring down at his plate.

The other grandmother gave a tiny, delicate shrug.

"As you can see, we are much the same here."

Then the other grandmother and my father talked about people whose names were new to me. Aunt Daisy and Uncle Theodore, Cousin Van de Gaard, Cousin Fauntleroy. Who were these people? Were they dead? As he talked my father’s eyes shone bright over his blue-and-white checkered sweater. He seemed very different than at home, where he listened silently as my mother and Grandma Schneider recounted the events of the day that had already been recounted several times already—a practice that always seemed to me less communication than a desire for noise.

Ellie, Nellie, and Boo were deliriously happy. They sat next to and across from my father, taking advantage of every lull in the adult conversation to put in a word. Ellie was a junior

in high school, and Nellie a freshman. Both were taking the same commercial course my mother and father had taken. They hoped to become secretaries. Boo was in ninth grade, three years ahead of me. My father said that maybe Boo would become a rocket scientist and beat the Russians, who had just launched Sputnik. Everyone laughed at that except my mother.

A wind had come up, rattling the windows and making the gauze curtains sway back and forth. There was a four or five-second pause between each *boom* from the ocean two blocks away. I began to time the pauses in hopes of hypnotizing myself until dinner would be over. The grownups were talking in low voices now about things I didn't understand and felt sure they wouldn't want to explain later.

Something about *bonds*. A *crash* (car crash?). A *railroad fault*.

After dinner my mother and I went up to our room while my father stayed below with the other grandmother. My mother undressed down to her white lace slip and began to brush out her hair in front of the vanity mirror.

"Out!" my mother muttered to herself as she dragged the brush mercilessly over her scalp. At first I thought she meant her hairpins, which were falling in all directions, but no, she meant the absent Mabel.

"Out where, that's what I want to know. What kind of woman is out all day and all night, with three kids to take care of? What does she think, money grows on trees?"

My mother bent down and picked the hairpins up from where they had fallen on the floor. I could hear muffled voices below, the other grandmother's high and calm, my father's vaguely defiant with an embarrassment underneath.

"Do I really have to fold the toilet paper?" I asked.

My mother's brush stopped in mid-air.

"*What?*"

"Ellie and Nellie told me I had to fold the toilet paper. They asked me to show them how I tore off the toilet paper. So I showed them, and they said it was wasteful to take so much and crumple it up like that, and I should just take a little bit and fold it over. They said the other grandmother was angry last year because we used so much. I said I didn't want to fold the toilet paper, but they said they always did it that way and what difference did it make since I'd wash my hands afterwards."

My mother turned back to the mirror and began rubbing Pond's cold cream into her cheeks. Little by little they turned as red as rouge.

"You just do like always. Lie down and go to sleep now. It's late."

Much later I woke in the darkened room to the sound of voices.

"It's just to tide them over for a little while, honey. It won't be forever."

"For God's sake, Joey. That's what she said last year."

I heard the sound of a pillow being punched, someone turning over to find a different position.

"If you won't think of me, you should at least think of Vanessa."

"I *am* thinking of Vanessa. An only child needs cousins."

My mother made a noise.

"What about me? Do you think I want to live in that little house with my mother for the rest of my life?"

Breakfast reprised dinner, with Unc slurping Corn Flakes instead of beef stew. The

hollows under the other grandmother's eyes were deeper. I tried to get the cousins to talk about the Miss America contest, which they had watched on the boardwalk, but they were only interested in talking about boys. They all seemed to know rather a lot about boys.

After breakfast my mother and father went down to the boardwalk, ostensibly to walk the dog, and I followed. The sky was filled with white, fluffy clouds, and a strong wind blew a rain of salt water at our eyes. A few other people were also out, bundled up in winter coats. Below the boardwalk, the beach was a mass of damp, coagulated sand. It was hard to imagine that this dismal landscape had been the sight of the Miss America pageant some months earlier: forty-eight floats, each slowly bearing a nubile young women in a bathing suit toward a future of momentary fame, fortune, and the kind of diamond engagement ring my mother scornfully called “a rock.”

Taking Queenie off the leash, my father disappeared into the only open concession in sight. A few minutes later he emerged smiling with a ball for the dog and a stick of cotton candy for me.

“I don’t know why you want to spoil Vanessa like that,” said my mother. “It’s much too early in the day to be eating that stuff.”

They kept walking past the deserted buildings, the binocular machines, and the empty benches while I struggled to eat the gooey mass without getting it on my face.

A wave crashed on the sand, drowning out my father.

“I’m sorry but I don’t get it,” said my mother. “So what if she's lost her job? Can't she find another one? She’s not the first person to lose a job.”

My father turned around and threw the ball at me. As usual—to his disappointment—I failed to catch it. Queenie scurried past, panting heavily, and I scrambled after the next ball.

"Hey, kid," said my father, forcing a smile. "Why don't you get yourself some crackerjacks?"

"Where?" I said. "Everything's closed except that one place we passed already. Can't we look through the binoculars? There might be a ship out there somewhere."

My mother reached under her chin and re-tied the scarf she had put over her head as protection against the wind. For some reason this upset me. Usually she scorned to wear, as she called them, "babushkas."

"For heaven's sake, Joey," said my mother, clearly exasperated. "It's been years since what's-his-name left them. Can't she find another man?"

"She does," said my father softly. "All the time."

In the afternoon the cousins dragged me out on the porch where a boy named Freddy was waiting. He was tall like them, with slick-backed dark hair and acne. They all sat in a circle giggling. In its center an empty milk bottle lay on its side. Ellie and Freddy kept looking at each other when they thought nobody else was looking. Boo shook her head back and forth; bits of hair escaped from her braid.

"Wanna play spin the bottle?" said Nellie.

"Sure," I said, wondering with dread what "spin the bottle" was.

"Look, we'll show you," Ellie said, not exactly kindly.

She reached over and gave the milk bottle a twirl.

As it slowed, they all fell silent, and the only noise was the background counterpoint of the sea.

"I get to kiss Freddy, I get to kiss Freddy," Ellie shouted in triumph.

They all giggled again except the boy, who twisted his lips in a semblance of a smile.

Ellie pecked him on the lips. Everyone applauded except me.

Now I had held hands with Tommy Dinkelmaier every day in the schoolyard before class. On the way home he and Peter Hustevic would fight over who got to carry my books. I was eleven then. The mere thought of kissing a boy gave me a funny feeling.

Boo pushed me out into the circle, and only a fear of what they would say about me after I left kept me from running away.

"Come *on*," Nellie said. "Spin it, spin it."

Fingers trembling, I seized the bottle by the neck and spun it hard, hoping it would break. Instead it slowed to a chant of "*Fred-dy, Fred-dy*" and stopped in front of the grinning boy as if on cue.

With what I hoped was a dignity equal to that the other grandmother, I drew myself up to my full 4 feet 6 ½ inches and sucked in my breath. Then I waited, hoping there would be an earthquake or a railroad fault. Instead, to my disgust, I began to cry.

Boo put both hands out and moved closer.

"Scaredy-cat," she shrieked.

"Papa!" I cried, and ran into the house.

In the galley kitchen, Unc was eating a bowl of soup while standing up. He wore the same suspenders as the night before but had now added an ancient topcoat to his look. The other grandmother stood in front of the sink, stacking dishes in slow motion.

She sniffed, then wiped her hands on her dress as if it had been an apron. It was a different dress from the night before but the same strand of yellowed pearls adorned her withered neck.

I backed into a cabinet, and then she saw me.

"Why, it's Joseph's little girl," she said vaguely, swaying back and forth. She reached down and ran her fingers through my Buster Brown bangs. She had a nice touch, more gentle and easy than my mother's or Grandma Schneider's, but I was frightened nonetheless.

"Just like Joseph's hair when he was little," she said. "He had the same hair that Charles did. Fine, thick hair."

She held me then against her knees with both hands and murmured something--a name, maybe. Her eyes, blue like my father's but even paler, glistened in the dim light.

But she was merely strange to me, filled with the smells and tremors of the very old.

Upstairs, my mother was pulling the rattan suitcase up onto the bed. Sweaters, underwear, make-up--all were being hurled inside without even a semblance of order.

"Godammit," said my mother, biting her lip. "It all went in before."

I froze at the lintel. A curl escaped the hairpins and fell along my mother's neck. Her lipstick was on crooked. I would not have said then that I liked my mother, but I found all this deeply unsettling.

"They had their turn," my mother muttered. "They had their claws into him long enough. So what if we have a car? Don't we have a right to have a car when he works so hard? And so what if the car is five years old? Would she be happier if it was a *new* car? Jesus Christ, you'd think she would be used to it by now. It's been over twenty years since the railroads defaulted."

The wind whistled through a crack in the closed window. *Boom*, said the ocean. *Boom*. *Boom*. *Boom*.

Turning, my mother sat down on the bed and saw me for the first time.

"Don't just stand there gawking, Vanessa," she snapped. "Help me."

But I didn't.

"OK," said my mother. "Go find your father and tell him we're leaving. No--tell him *I'm* leaving. He can come if he wants to."

I stood in the lintel, still frozen. This was pure bravado since she couldn't drive.

One summer's evening some years later we were walking down 82nd Street under the Main Street Flushing el. We had gone to Grandma Schneider's as usual for Sunday dinner and were walking back to our new apartment five blocks away, well within Grandma Schneider's limit of not farther than a mile away.

Ahead of us, a woman was buying a *Daily News* from a sidewalk vendor. Suddenly my father was hugging her. She threw her head back, laughing, and hugged him back. It was Mabel. She had come out to the neighborhood to visit a friend, she said.

She was living in an apartment house in Manhattan for single women and working as a receptionist, she said. Her short, wavy hair was fake blonde, and her nail polish--a cheap hot pink--was chipped. Still, there was something nice about her, something gentle and still unwounded underneath the shrewdness, and she seemed genuinely glad to see my father. She didn't look at all like the only picture I had ever seen: a solemn-faced little girl in a white dress with eyelet ruffles, a huge bow atop her long, dark hair. In the picture, she is holding the hand of a woman in a nurse's cap--their nanny. This would have been before the railroad bond default and my grandfather's death that followed shortly after. The nurse holds a fat, wide-eyed baby in a long dress who can only be my father.

My father and Mabel exchanged addresses and telephone numbers, writing with a ballpoint pen on the back of a torn envelope. The girls were all married now, she said. Ellie and

Nellie had one child each; Boo was pregnant.

My mother murmured something polite and cold, extending her hand as if to display her perfectly polished nails, or the tiny new diamond that had recently replaced the even tinier diamond my father had given her so long ago.

Mabel went pale.

Mumbling something about what a fine young lady I'd turned into, she hugged my father and climbed the steps up to the elevated subway.

This was the last, and first, time I ever saw my father's sister Mabel.

He was on the beach, throwing a piece of driftwood for Queenie to retrieve. With a short bark, she headed out into the morning mist, tail wagging happily behind. I shouted as I ran up, but the wind was so strong he didn't hear me until I was almost upon him.

"Why, here's my little Miss America," he said, smiling with his pale blue eyes.

To my delight, he picked me up and twirled around.

"Mommy says we have to leave. She says she's leaving and you can come if you want."

His mouth fell open, but he did not seem surprised.

"Is that what Mommy says? Well, then I guess we have to leave."

Slowly he set me down on the wet sand and I sat there, staring at the cold silver-colored sea; the bubbly waves. A tumbleweed brushed by.

"Do we have to leave right now? You haven't played skeet."

He sat down on the beach just where it began to slope up to the boardwalk, and I crawled into his lap, basking in his attention. For a moment we listened to the waves--fierce and

predictable and grand--while behind us, the benches stood guard. Then he stirred.

"Maybe we can find a place with crackerjacks on our way back," said my father.

"Maybe," I said, although we both knew it was too early.

"Do I have to take my Dramamine before we go?"

"Well, honey--" he said, throwing the stick higher for one last time.

"It didn't do any good on the way down."

"Did you take it?" he said. "I thought you didn't."

I shook my head, untruthfully.

He hesitated.

"Please. Please, Papa."

I looked up at him in a way I had seen my mother do.

"We'll see," he said.

My heart sank. I knew what that meant.

Queenie came back, and he grabbed the stick from between her teeth. Shaking her mangy fur she yawned and sat down in front of us, ears up and tail wagging. A wind came then, mingling the doggy smell with the spray.

"Poor old thing," said my father. "Why, she must be almost fourteen now, Queenie."

"Is that why she pants so hard?"

He nodded as he looked out to sea.

"I got her for them after Ellie was born."

That was an odd thought for me, that he had loved them before I was even born, loved them still.

He reached out and patted the dog, then withdrew into his own thoughts where I could

not follow. There was a ship on the horizon, too far out to tell what kind without binoculars, but I didn't ask him to take me to the binoculars just then.

And I think it was in that moment that the thought first took shape within me, vague as a cloud, that it was I who would have to make everything right. That I would have to succeed where my father had failed. To do something wonderful that would insure me forever against the humiliations of faulted railroad bonds and folded toilet paper.

How I would do this shifted in my mind like sand diamonds in the wind. I would be Miss America or a rocket scientist. I would polish more furniture and tat more lace than Grandma Schneider. I would work in an office like my father but at something much more lucrative. I would marry a doctor, or a lawyer, or a Rockefeller, in any case someone who would give me a "rock." These notions, all of which were to cause me so much grief later on, appeared then as dreams more wonderful than cotton candy, or crackerjack prizes, or big, red-lipped, taffeta-dressed dolls.

"Well, kid," said my father, patting me on the back. "Shall we go back now?"

It seemed to me he was putting on a brave front, and I didn't know whether to show that I recognized this, or pretend I didn't.

He threw the stick, this time with the wind, and we were off, Queenie first, and my father after, going so slowly at first I could almost keep up.

But it was a long way, and cold now, and after a while we each began to run as best we could, all three of us, along the hard, damp sand.