

FRED II

Timeless Tenant Tales
Buffalo West Side Stories

A Novel by
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and
James A. Costa

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FRED II Timeless Tenant Tales: Buffalo West Side Stories

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This novel is dedicated to
my daughter, Jennifer; my son, Dennis, Jr.;
my late husband, Dennis;
and to my special Schmidt family.

Introduction

Some of you may remember me from my previous book, *FRED: Buffalo Building of Dreams*. Others should know I am a four-story building over a century old, located on the corner of Niagara Street and Potomac Avenue on Buffalo's West Side.

Although I'm an inanimate object, I've been personified in a manner I can't explain. As you may already know, I'm aware of all that happens within my weathered brick-and-mortar exterior. The windows are my eyes and the walls my ears. Over the years I have acquired most of the emotions humans possess. I can even identify the ethnicity of my tenants, not only by their names and accents, but by the odors of cabbage, garlic and various sauces wafting from their kitchens into my halls. I lack only the power of locomotion and audible speech.

My first book was an historical novel dealing with families newly arrived in our country. They were difficult times for virtually everyone. Jobs were scarce and government assistance almost nonexistent. Those who had families sponsoring them were most fortunate. Many others, however, had to depend upon their own resourcefulness to survive. Those tales were centered primarily on the history and struggle of families occupying my premises shortly before and into the early years of the Twentieth Century.

Now I'd like to relate several stories of families who lived here about the time of the outbreak of WWII in 1941. Over the intervening decades since the end of WWI in 1918, many things changed. Fueled by the passage of the Prohibition amendment in 1919, the 1920s ushered in a decade of crime and corruption, as well as prosperity and technological progress. It ended with the crash of the stock market in 1929, and marked the beginning

of the Great Depression of the 1930s. Only the creation of Social Security and Public Welfare programs helped people through those dark years. The onset of WWII, however, put the Depression behind us and brought a measure of prosperity to most people willing and able to work. As the saying goes, 'Times, they were a changing.'

As I intimated earlier, I've seen and heard thousands of conversations within my skin of bricks. Over those first forty years I have learned that humans are a complex and unpredictable species, and because my tenants come from all walks of life, I've observed the best and worst in them. I've marveled at the generosity and kindness of some, and despaired at the depths of cruelty and wickedness of others. Because of this dichotomy in human nature, I've been glad I wasn't one of them as often as I've wished I were.

I try to stay uninvolved in their petty squabbles and everyday lives, but when I hear something that especially upsets me, I can make myself heard by rattling my plumbing, squeaking my floorboards and popping my internal timbers like old bones. My tenants attribute the sounds to changing temperatures and my old age. Those with more active imaginations swear they're hearing ghosts haunting my passageways.

No one has ever guessed I'm a living being of sorts. I may not have a soul, but in an inexplicable way, I do have a heart. I suppose it happened over time from hearing and seeing so many sad stories. To the casual observer, I may be only a pile of bricks and mortar, wood and glass. But those who think deeply recognize I have character and have stood proudly for well over a century protecting my tenants from the ravages of frigid Buffalo winters and occasional scorching summer days.

In a sense my tenants have become my children. Together we're a family. I've been there for them through the best and

worst of times. Like all families, each has experienced its joys and sorrows, and each has a story to tell. If you would indulge me, I'd like to relate several to you. In most cases, I will let you hear them in their own words, exactly as I heard them. Sometimes I make assumptions based on my experiences over the years and what I hope are intelligent guesses. Occasionally, I may be wrong, but I will always admit it when I am.

I've chosen the years right before and after WWII because of the rapid economic and cultural upheavals taking place in our country during that time. Heaven knows, the glittering Flapper Age of the 1920s and the quiet despair of the Great Depression that followed provided me with enough stories to last a lifetime. However, despite the horrors of war, a new dawn was breaking. Jobs were being created overnight and money started flowing into people's pockets. A sense of optimism and hope pervaded the country. Great changes were underway, but prosperity for most people still lay ahead.

I should mention here that by the time WWII broke out, I had learned a great deal about the English language. At first it was difficult because so many of my tenants were immigrants—most of them from Europe—who spoke broken, if any, English. Not until the 1920s, when Miss Alice Wagman and her widowed sister Agnes moved in together, did I begin to learn proper English. A long-time librarian at the Buffalo Public Library, Alice Wagman was constantly correcting her sister Agnes's speech. She called her sister an embarrassment and took every opportunity to correct her whenever she made a grammatical error. Although Agnes resented this treatment, I profited greatly from it. The first thing I learned was to never say 'ain't.' I also learned the difference between 'who' and 'whom' and 'lie' and 'lay.' I even developed a sizable vocabulary. Miss Wagman hated the word 'maybe.' She said it was a word used by the uneducated, and insisted Agnes say 'perhaps,' instead. I have never forgotten that.

Wander through my passageways with me today, and you will feel the haunting grip of nostalgia, and whiff the scent of past decades metabolized in my wooden floors, doors, and the laths buried behind my plaster walls.

Join me now as I relate the first of my tales.

Chapter 1

You may recall from my earlier book that, in 1938, Anna and Bianca, two of my tenants, moved in at the same time and became close friends. Anna was forty-one, and Bianca, born in 1917, was twenty years her junior. Originally from New London, Connecticut, Anna moved to Potsdam, N.Y., where she worked as a waitress for years before enrolling in college, ultimately graduating with a B.A. degree. Weary of finding only part-time teaching positions there, she decided to move here to Buffalo, New York, where she hoped to land a permanent job and to be near an ailing aunt, who, unfortunately, died shortly after Anna arrived. Anna and Bianca became quite close, eventually forming almost a mother-daughter relationship. Bianca had already fallen in love with Benedict, a young man who lived across the street.

When Bianca and Anna were better acquainted, Anna confided to her that more than twenty years earlier, her husband, Jack, had been killed in WWI a year after they'd been married. Six months later, she said she suffered a miscarriage.

Sitting at Anna's kitchen table, Bianca listened sympathetically. "I'm so sorry, Anna. It must have been terrible."

Anna reached across and covered Bianca's hand with her own. "It was a long time ago, Bianca. Time heals. It doesn't

hurt so much anymore.” She rose to pour another cup of tea. “So, tell me...” she said, cheerfully as she could, “...how are you and your boyfriend, Benedict, getting on. I haven’t seen him in a while.”

Bianca brightened at the mention of his name. “Oh, Benny? He’s been busy working overtime. We’re trying to save as much money as possible before we get married. We’ll need furniture and other things.”

“Have you set a date?”

“Not yet, Anna, but you’ll be the first to know.”

After Bianca left, Anna picked up her cup of tea and padded over a thick, shag carpet into her small living room. I liked the way she decorated it with table lamps, stained-glass shades, a maroon-cushioned couch with colorful throw pillows and a large, print Afghan she often used to cover and warm her legs when she felt a chill in the air. The walls reflected a soft, pink glow around the room, creating a cozy atmosphere.

I watched her sip her tea, then put her head back and close her eyes. She stayed that way a long while before setting her cup aside and getting up. She opened her closet door, took a Thom McAn shoe box from the shelf and sat down again with it on her lap. When she lifted the cover, I could see the box was filled with photographs. She took one out and spoke to it:

“Jack. Jack, can you hear my voice, my darling? It’s been more than twenty years since I heard yours. I told Bianca that being without you doesn’t hurt as much anymore. But it does, my darling. It never stops hurting. It never will. I told Bianca we were married and that you died in the war. It wasn’t true. Nothing I told her was true. They were all lies. I was ashamed of the truth. Please forgive me, Jack.” She kissed his picture.

From my windowed vantage point, I could see a smiling young man with deep dimples framing his mouth. His eyes

looked very much alive and seemed to smile. I noticed Anna's eyes glisten as she kissed his picture again.

"It seems like yesterday, a hundred years ago, since you held me in your arms, comforting me, telling me you still loved me, despite what you found out. You had every right to leave me, but you didn't. I betrayed you and you forgave me." She picked out another picture.

"Remember this one, Jack? You took me ice skating down on Brimmer's Pond shortly after we met. My ankles kept turning in and I had to cling to you to keep from falling. Later you said you brought me there on purpose because you knew it would happen. That was pretty sneaky, Jack. Remember how we both laughed about it afterwards?"

She picked out another picture. "How about this one, Jack? See your arm hugging me and your cheek next to mine? I can still smell your aftershave lotion, Jack, a fresh, clean pine smell. Whenever I sniffed that fragrance, I knew you were near. Oh, Jack, there's so much to remember and so much to regret."

She dropped the picture on her lap and laid her head back again, whispering to herself as she relived moments of her life, but I could hear every word falling from her barely moving lips.

Her brow wrinkled. "I hurt you, Jack, so cruelly, yet you were willing to forgive me. I still suffer the pain I inflicted on you. It never goes away, Jack. Never. I've been to church and prayed to God. I've spoken to Father O'Brien at St. Lucy's church. I remember him asking me, "Ahna..." (He always pronounced my name that way) "...Ahna," he said, "if you truly loved Jack, how could you hurt him so?"

I couldn't answer because of my shame. Father said we're mysterious creatures who often do things to ourselves that we know will hurt us. Yet we persist. He said the ancient Greeks understood personal guilt and personified it as the Furies,

mythological divinities who punish us. He said forgiving ourselves is harder than forgiving our enemies and that Holy Confession may be God's solution to my problem. I did confess, but it didn't help. After all these years I still don't understand it, Jack. I probably never will.

I watched Anna as she lay gazing up to the ceiling. She was silent for a while, then seemed to slowly brighten. She spoke aloud.

"That article in the newspaper last week, I remember now... the psychologist who said some studies show that people who are depressed often find relief in writing down their experiences and feelings. He said many of them find writing poetry to be helpful, and that such activities occasionally lead to a catharsis, a big word meaning a 'sudden release of tension and anxiety.'"

Anna rose and crossed over to her writing desk by the window. It was perfect for me. The strong light streaming in made it possible for me to read every word she began putting on paper.

Dear Diary,

I was 15 years old when I first met Jack Newcomb. He was a senior at our high school, and it flattered me to think that a senior, a handsome football hero, no less, could possibly be interested in a lowly sophomore like me. It was a bright spring day. I was sitting in the bleachers beside the athletic field and remember looking away from our track team up into the blue sky, watching a flock of quacking ducks flying overhead, their flapping wings winking at me as they caught the light.

"Is this yours?"

Startled, I looked to the side and there he was—I'll never forget it—my first ever image of Jack, standing there looking so

muscular in his football uniform, and handsome, with a big smile and deep voice.

“It was on the ground near you,” he said, handing me my compact.

Flustered, I thanked him as I took it. “It must have slipped out of my pocket.”

“It’s OK,” he said, looking into my eyes so intensely I had to turn away. “I just happened to spot it here on my way into the building to clean up and change. We just finished scrimmaging.”

“I know, I was watching for a while,” I lied, trying to sound interested.

He slapped some dust off his uniform. “My name’s Jack, Jack Newcomb. What’s yours?”

“I’m Anna Good.”

“Anna Good. That’s not a bad name. Get it?” He laughed. “Pleased to meetcha, Anna Good,” he said, taking my hand and shaking it vigorously.

“Same here,” I said, pulling my hand out of his tight grip.

He began turning away then stopped. “Say, Anna, do you like milk shakes?”

He caught me off guard. “I s’pose so. Doesn’t everybody?” I mumbled.

“Yeah, dumb question. Well, look, after I’m freshened up I’m stopping for one at Scheck’s drug store. Maybe two or three. I’m pretty thirsty. You want to join me? My treat.”

I hardly knew what to say.

“If the answer’s no, it’s OK.” He started to turn away again.

“No, no, I was just wondering if I have enough time. I told my friend, Molly...” I looked at my watch. “How long before you’re finished?”

“Twenty minutes, tops.”

“All right. Where should I meet you?”

“The front of the building. I’ll be out in a flash,” he said, breaking into a jog.

And that’s how it began. A short time later we started dating regularly. Jack was warm and considerate in every way, what they call a true gentleman. I had been warned to be wary of senior boys, especially those who were ‘fast’ and who ‘ran the school,’ as they say. Jack never tried anything with me, though, not ever. Once, his hand accidentally slipped near my breast. He almost fell over himself, apologizing. Actually, it was all I could do to keep from laughing, seeing his face all red and sweating for almost an hour.

About a month later, right after seeing a Mack Sennett comedy that put us in a good mood, we took a long, slow walk along the street, holding hands, laughing and enjoying each other’s company. Afterwards we stopped at Avery’s candy and soda shop for a Coke and a chocolate milkshake (Jack loved his chocolate milkshakes). When he slurped the last of his down, we wandered over to Brook’s farm and plopped ourselves on one of his haystacks. It was a warm, sunny day and the air smelled fresh and clean. After a few minutes Jack reached into his pocket.

“Anna,” he said, looking straight into my eyes, “will you be my steady?”

At first I was stunned and could hardly speak. When I found my voice, I said, “Yes, Jack, I will.”

Of course, I was thrilled to death as I watched him take my