

*Timeless Tenant Tales*

# FRED II

**Buffalo West Side Stories**

A Novel by  
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and  
James A. Costa

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# Timeless Tenant Tales FRED II: 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 hand gently and slip the ring on my pinky finger. Then he pulled me into his arms and pressed his lips to mine. Breathless, I squeezed him close to me. Slowly, he eased me back, kissing me in a way I had never been kissed. I never wanted to let go. Although no one was around, we spoke in whispers, making promises we meant to keep forever.

We were inseparable after that and went everywhere together, like to the ballpark and the movies. Everyone called me ‘Jack’s girl,’ and I loved hearing it. Some girls, mostly seniors, were jealous. I could tell by their narrow eyes and fake smiles they didn’t like me. Whenever we ran into them, I made the situation worse by snuggling up to Jack’s arm and looking innocent as can be. That made them hate me even more, but I don’t think Jack ever realized the drama taking place before his very eyes.

I don’t know exactly when it happened, but I know it wasn’t sudden. It had to be over a period of months. Jack seemed to change. He was less and less inclined to go places anymore.

“Anna, I’m tired. Why don’t we just sit on the porch swing and relax.”

“Jack, there’s a concert in the town park. Can’t we go there for a while?”

“If you want to go, Anna, go ‘head. I want to take it easy for a bit.”

And such is the way it was, with Jack gradually turning into a stick in the mud. I wanted to do things, like go to the beach or the movies or for a hike in the hills, but he was always too tired, or not interested. All he wanted to do was sit around and talk, mostly about sports. Half the time, though, he didn’t even want to talk about that.

Jack was acting like an old man. Although I was

disappointed, I still loved him. We talked about getting engaged soon. I only hoped he'd get his old spirit back and show some enthusiasm for life. I was beginning to think he wasn't interested in me anymore and wished we would break up, but didn't have the heart to do it himself. He was still his sweet self and always treated me with respect.

I finally figured out that Jack wasn't really the outgoing type I thought he was. When I brought it up to him, he admitted I was right. His cheerfulness in front of others was all an act. He said he was comfortable only with me, not with other people. Of course, I was flattered to hear it; nevertheless, I wasn't happy. I wanted us to go places, to be with other couples, do things and have fun together. But Jack didn't want any part of that. We went on that way for quite a while, with me entreating him, and him going along with me occasionally, but always reluctantly. Frankly, Jack was becoming boring. Very boring. And I was becoming restless. Very restless.

I had recently turned seventeen and, as if things weren't bad enough, our lives took a turn for the worse. I was just sitting down for lunch one afternoon when his mother called:

"Anna? Anna, I have some bad news," she said, her voice cracking.

"Not too serious," I said, hoping she'd say it wasn't.

"Jack's in the hospital? I'm here with him now."

Alarmed, afraid to hear what was coming, I asked, "Why? What happened?"

"He broke his neck."

"Oh, my God!"

"Don't panic, Anna. The doctors said he'll be immobilized for several weeks, possibly a couple of months, but the good news is that they don't think he'll be permanently paralyzed."

“Where is he, Mrs. Newcomb. Where are you now?”

“I’m at the Emergency Hospital.”

Jack’s mother said Jack had gone to a local gymnasium called the Turnverein for his daily workout. Afterwards he went for a swim in the pool, as he usually did, only this time when trying a new dive, he hit his head on the bottom.

Feeling sick to my stomach, I rushed to the hospital as quickly as I could and took the elevator up to Jack’s floor. Mrs. Newcomb was sitting in a chair next to his bed with her handkerchief pressed to her nose. She started to cry openly when she saw me coming into the room.

“How is he?” I asked, stepping in close to his bed.

She shook her head.

Jack looked pathetic, with his sad eyes gazing up to me. I reached down and touched his hand.

“Your mother told me what happened, Jack. You had a freak accident, that’s all, but the good news is you’re going to come out of this a new man. It’ll take a little while, Jack, but that’s OK. We just have to be patient.”

The gentle way he squeezed my hand and smiled at me broke my heart. I felt guilty for the thoughts I’d been having about him. I didn’t like myself very much at that moment.

After the first two days Jack’s mother no longer came by herself in the morning because her knee pain made walking difficult. Instead, she waited until Jack’s brother, Norman, came home from work to bring her later in the afternoon.

Several days passed, with both of us professing our love and discussing plans for our engagement and future marriage. Our conversations lifted our spirits and made the time pass more quickly.

About a week later I was sitting in the waiting room while the nurse gave Jack his morning sponge bath, when a young, handsome guy about my age came in, slipped out of his jacket and sat across from me. He crossed his legs and opened a magazine he picked from the end table. Neither of us said anything at first. I pretended to be interested in the watercolor paintings on the wall, while surreptitiously taking in his polished leather shoes, tan gabardine pants and white, open-collared shirt. He browsed through the magazine, looking casually interested in the pages he was turning slowly one after the other.

After a few minutes he set his magazine aside, flashed a bright smile and said, ‘Pretty monotonous, having to sit around waiting like this, isn’t it?’

Naturally I agreed.

One comment followed another and after a few minutes of exchanging small talk, we introduced ourselves. Before we parted he told me his brother had been stricken with a heart attack and might not make it. I said I was sorry to hear it; then I briefly told him about Jack’s accident. A wan smile crossed his face as he listened and nodded in sympathy to my words.

The next day and for several days thereafter, we met in the waiting room, and before I fully realized it, we were becoming ever friendlier, even sharing information and thoughts we ordinarily reserve only for family and close friends. He dazzled me with his quick smile and contagious laugh.

I can’t honestly say how we got around to it, but before long we were having coffee and sometimes, while Jack napped, we had lunch together in the hospital cafeteria. I found him so attractive with his cleft chin and charming manner that it scared me, but not so much that I stopped seeing him. He made me feel beautiful, the way his eyes wandered over my hair, my face. He

exuded a sense of excitement that was sorely missing in my life with Jack. I soon found myself thinking about him more than I wanted to when he wasn't around. I couldn't help feeling drawn closer to him every time we met, until one day as we were about to leave the waiting room, he pulled me into his arms and kissed me. It was sudden and shocking. Afterwards, of course, I felt terribly guilty, but at that moment, I didn't let it stop me. I couldn't have resisted if I wanted to. My lips clung to his as he held me in his hungry embrace.

"Anna," he said, "I want to see you, I have to see you, to see more of you, more and more of you."

I made a weak attempt to break away. "Please. This isn't right."

He pulled me tighter. "It is right, Anna. I can't help what I feel, what we both feel. Don't deny it."

All I could do was picture Jack right down the hall laid up in his hospital bed, helpless. "No, don't you see? I'm committed. I can't do this to Jack."

"Anna, this is life. Sometimes people get hurt. But is it fair to us to deny what we're feeling? Is it fair to Jack if you stay with him, knowing your feelings are stronger for somebody else?"

I looked into his blue eyes. "Can't you see how this will hurt him if I leave him?"

"It doesn't have to be right away, Anna. Besides, you can't let sympathy stand in the way of our happiness. It isn't fair to you, and it isn't fair to him."

And there it began, the many meetings and secret trysts that eventually led to my pregnancy and abandonment by the boy who deceived my foolish heart. I told Bianca that Jack and I had been married, that he had been killed in the war, but those were

all lies. I also told her I had a miscarriage. Well, that wasn't exactly a lie. Rather than disgrace my family with an out-of-wedlock child, I helped the miscarriage along by mixing and ingesting aspirin and several different drugs. By then Jack had been discharged from the hospital and was working to get his body back to normal, or as normal as possible.

I might have left it there, I suppose, if not for my conscience beginning to haunt me, even in my dreams, until one day I couldn't stand it anymore and was forced to confess to Jack what happened, the whole sordid story, from beginning to end, about how lonely I felt, how I had been charmed by someone who said he loved me, pretended to understand my feelings and wanted to comfort me, how I was enamored of him, attracted to him, dazzled by him with his wit and the magnetism that enveloped him like electricity.

My words pierced Jack's heart like daggers. I'll never forget his reaction when I revealed all this to him. The blood drained from his face and he literally turned white. Initially, I thought he'd pass out; then I thought he might explode and hit me or even kill me. But he did neither. In fact, he sagged in his chair and squeezed his face in his cupped hands. He remained that way a long while, gulping his breaths. When he finally looked up, his eyes were puffy and damp.

"I can forgive you, Anna," he said softly. "I know you'd never intentionally hurt me; you're much too good for that. You didn't have to tell me this. Besides, who am I to judge? I'm not perfect, either."

I burst into tears hearing his words, so soothing, so understanding. I felt more horrible than I did before I confessed. I didn't deserve such kindness, especially not after such a terrible betrayal.

Jack rose and pulled me toward him. "We can start fresh,

Anna. We can forget the past.”

I cried in his arms, then leaned back to see his comforting smile. “All right, Jack,” I said. “If you mean it. If you really can—”

“I can, Anna, and I will.”

But I knew, even in that moment of forgiveness with a chance to start again, I could never do it. How long would it take before my betrayal began eating at him and the accusations start. Besides, my sin was too great for me to forgive myself. I had betrayed Jack and destroyed a life within my womb. Not having the courage to face him, or perhaps fearing that I would give in and live a life of guilt and regret, I left Jack a note, telling him I was leaving New London forever and begged him not to try finding me. I apologized as sincerely as possible and wished him all the happiness he deserved. I believed that by going away, I could leave my painful past behind.

Several years later, I heard through a cousin that Jack married a pretty widow with two children. Apparently, he found happiness after all, and for that I’m thankful to God. I realize now how much I loved Jack and will always love him. I was young, foolish and gullible. I learned my lesson, but too late for us to ever find happiness together.

So here I am today, dear diary, a spinster schoolteacher who has chosen to live out her life in a perpetual self-imposed penance. In so doing, I’ve found a measure of peace, but I’m still haunted by regrets. I admit to being depressed whenever I think about my past and all that has transpired. However, I’ve found happiness in teaching children and helping others less fortunate than I whenever I can. It’s partial atonement for what I’ve done, and it will have to do. Whether writing my story here will make a difference in my attitude and feelings toward myself, only time will tell.

As for the boy who blinded me with words and attention, I've heard several stories over the years about him, not all of them bad. Jeffrey, his brother, passed away in the hospital shortly before Jack was released, and Brad inherited the grocery store they ran together. Several years later, rumors reached me, saying Brad was involved in a scandal over a girl everyone called Crazy Annie. They say he drove her insane, but who really knows if such gossip is true. I also heard that, since then, he's become successful, even philanthropic. I guess even a Romeo like Bradley Beit can be converted and saved from himself.

The school year's over and I have the whole summer to myself. I'll be taking a bus trip to visit the Grand Canyon in Arizona. It's not only something I've always longed to see, but I need to get away for a while to restore my spirits and energy. With a little luck I'll meet someone interesting along the way. Life is full of unexpected twists, turns and surprises. Maybe a pleasant one will be waiting for me.

## Chapter 2

*One of the saddest stories I ever heard took place in the early 1940's. It involves the Rosellini family, and the misfortune that struck them about five years after they moved into my building. Vito Rosellini was a wiry little man with a high, thin voice and a thick black mustache which he proudly kept neatly trimmed. His wife, Josephina, a heavy-breasted woman with shiny black hair, always made sure her Vito had a hot meal when he returned home from work at the Hecker's flour mill on Seneca Street.*

*When Vito walked in the door after work, looking very much like a ghost with his lined face and clothes powdered with white flour, the first thing he said was, 'How much longer to we eat?' And Josephina would say, 'When it is ready it will be ready, but first you go wash up.' She never failed to say it with a broad smile on her round face and a twinkle in her large, brown eyes. It was obvious to me that Josephina loved her husband very much, especially the way she catered to him. But she never said she loved him out loud. Neither did he say it to her, though it was obvious he did in the way he treated her and looked at her with adoring eyes. In fact, the word 'love' never fell from anyone's lips in that home. It didn't need to be spoken aloud*

*because it always showed in their faces, words and actions.*

*I liked the way Vito's eyes brightened when he saw his steaming plate of pasta fazool on the table. It was his favorite. He'd sit down, lift his wine glass in a silent salute and take a drink. Josephina sat at the opposite end of the table and on each side sat their two children, Dorothy, fifteen years old, and her ten-year-old brother, Anthony, nicknamed Sonny. They would carry on small talk.*

*Sonny usually said something to rile them up. For instance, one day he said:*

*"Did anybody get killed or a leg cut off at the factory today, Papa?"*

*"Shut uppa you mouth," Josephina hollered. "Thisa no place to talk about such things."*

*"That'sa OK, Josephina," Vito said, making a circular motion with his hand. "He'sa just a boy. That'sa way boys talk."*

*"Maybe so, but not a my table. Now say you're sorry."*

*Sonny dropped his head, with his mop of black hair drooping over his eyes. "I'm sorry, Mama."*

*"That's a better. Now mangia. Eat."*

*After eating, Vito would sit in his old leather chair they brought with them when they moved in. It was so old that the leather was cracked like dry skin and torn in a few places, but it was comfortable. Then Vito would pick up his newspaper and read as best he could, while Josephina and Dorothy cleaned up the kitchen and washed the dishes. Afterwards, Josephina would come up behind Vito and massage his neck. He would moan his satisfaction. He never thanked her, but she knew he appreciated it. Soon after, he would fall asleep. And then Josephina would put her fingers to her lips and squint a warning for her children to keep quiet.*

*On Sundays the family would dress up in their best clothes and go to Holy Cross church. If they went straight home after Mass they always talked about what they had seen and heard. Sometimes, if the weather was good, they would walk together in Front Park. As often as not, Vito would dig into his pocket and say, 'Anybody want ice a cream?' They laughed because, of course, Sonny, jumping up and down, was always the first to shout out his 'yes yes yes!'*

*Up to the time Dorothy was almost twelve years old, she used to sit on Vito's lap and he would read the comics to her. The 'Katzenjammer Kids' strip was her favorite. She liked the comforting smell of his chair and her father's pipe tobacco that clung to his clothes. But more than that, she felt safe and secure in his arms, especially after she fell on the sidewalk a year earlier while playing hopscotch. The fall wasn't bad, but Dorothy's face landed on a piece of broken glass and cut her face, leaving a red scar more than an inch long. When she talked to people, Dorothy always propped her cheek against her hand, as if she was listening intently, but she was really hiding the scar.*

"I'm ugly, Papa."

"What kind of talk you talk? Who say you ugly?"

Tears wet her cheeks. "Other kids. They make fun of me. They call me scar face."

"Scar face! They have eyes but like the bat, they cannot see. You pay no attention to them, my bambina. You are beautiful girl." Then he would hug her tight against his chest.

*And so their lives went on, a peaceful, loving family, despite living near the poverty line. It went on that way until one fateful day when a knock came on their door. When Josephina answered, a man stood there, floppy cap in hand and hangdog face. It was Marco, one of Vito's best friends who also worked*

*at the mill. His rheumy eyes couldn't meet hers. He didn't have to say anything; the news he had was obvious. He barely spoke a few words before Josephina dropped to the floor, wailing hysterically. Neighbors rushed in and lifted her onto the couch, comforting her as best they could, fanning her with newspapers and trying to force her to drink black coffee. Fortunately, the children were in school, but when they arrived home that afternoon, they found a house full of people. Then, they too were soon crying and hugging their mother for comfort, while Josephina kept repeating, 'Goombye, Papa, goombye Papa.'*

*Two days later Vito's body was laid out in the parlor, with chairs provided by the Lombardo Funeral Home surrounding the casket and filling up the room. Josephina never knew Vito had so many friends. For three days mourners came, bringing food and offering condolences and help if she needed it. Dressed all in black, with a rosary wrapped around her hands, Josephina told anyone who would listen how Vito had taken a younger worker's place on a dangerous machine that crushed him.*

*'They killa my husband,' she repeated over and over. 'They killa my Vito.'*

*I heard the church was crowded after the funeral and many people shed tears for Vito and the family, now deprived of its breadwinner. Some wondered how they could endure, not least of all, Josephina herself. Each sleepless night she worried herself thinking about how she and the children would survive. Sonny understood their plight and said he would get a shoeshine box and bring home some money.*

*Aware of her plight, Father Dominick of Holy Angels church made it his business to see her. He was an ascetic man with a bald crown and benign smile that lent him a saintly St. Joseph look. Beloved by all who knew him, he had visited me many times over the years, primarily to give last rites to several of my*

*dying tenants and comfort to their families.*

*Josephina gratefully welcomed him into her apartment and clasped his hands as he prayed more than an hour with her for her and her children and the soul of her late husband, Vito, whom he assured her was now peacefully and happily in heaven with Jesus Christ. Consoled, Josephina thanked him profusely as she led him out and promised to attend Mass on Sunday, regardless of her weakened condition.*

*Not long after the funeral, two men came to her door. They were dressed in shiny, blue gabardine suits, white shirts and dark bow ties. The taller one with a pocked face and square jaw led the way inside. Both men carried dark, leather briefcases at their sides. They told her they had business regarding Vito to discuss with her. Frightened by their imposing presence and the intimidating briefcases they swung and brandished like weapons, Josephina politely invited them in.*

*Sitting on each side of her at the kitchen table, the tall one opened his briefcase and drew out a sheaf of papers, but it was the other man, a flabby-faced man with thick, black eyebrows who spoke.*

“Mrs. Rosellini,” he said, handing her his business card, “we are Attorneys Livingston and Sanborn, here to extend our deepest sympathy on behalf of the Hecker’s Corporation. We’re also here as representatives to specifically discuss our company’s terms for settlement of the unfortunate accident which claimed your husband’s life. Are you open to a discussion now?”

Nervous and unsure of herself, Josephina bowed her head uncertainly. “I think yes, OK.”

“Good, very good. Now,” he said, taking the papers from Sanborn and speaking sternly, “we have a proposal for you to consider. However, I should warn you in advance, Mrs.

Rosellini, that if you should refuse our terms and choose to reject our offer— which we believe to be more than fair— we will be forced to take up this matter in court. That could be a costly and messy business, something I don't think either of us want."

"No," Josephina said, shaking her head vigorously, "no, no court."

*She remembered, and I remembered, too, what Vito used to say about the law: 'Josephina, the law is not for us. We are not the Irish or the English. Those people, the bigga shots, they run the government, the city, everything. To them, we are just the donkeys who digga the mud in the ditches, and who sweat in the filthy coal mines. For us, there is no justice.'*

*While Livingston was arranging his papers and drawing out his fountain pen, I watched Josephina tighten her shoulders and stiffen in her chair.*

"Mr. Lawyer, I—"

"Livingston."

"Yes, Mr. Livingston. My husband's friends, they say the machine whicha killa my husband was a broke. Lots of times they say they complain to the boss, but the boss say itsa not broke, so go to work or get fired. So I don' think itsa my husband's fault he die."

A mirthless grin passed over Livingston's face. "Of course they would say that, Mrs. Rosellini. Workers always try to blame their problems on the company. And maybe they were just trying to make you feel better by blaming the machine." He sorted through the papers. "Mrs. Rosellini, Hecker's maintains that your husband, Vito Rosellini, failed to operate the machine in question in a safe and prescribed manner. Furthermore, our records indicate the machine was inspected two days earlier and found to be in perfect working condition. Our legal team has

concluded that Vito Rosellini's death was the result of his own negligence." He looked at her sharply. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"I'm a sorry, but maybe, like somebody told me, maybe I should get a lawyer who knows—"

Livingston stood up abruptly, scraping his chair back, and began slapping the papers into his briefcase. "If that is your wish, Mrs. Rosellini, I withdraw our offer to—"

Shocked by his sudden action, Josephina panicked. "No, no, it'sa all right. I'm a listen to what you say. It'sa all right."

"A wise decision, Mrs. Rosellini, a wise decision, indeed," he said, slowly sitting again. He removed the cap from his fountain pen. "As I was about to say— without admitting liability and in the interest of good will as well as to clear our books of this matter— the Hecker's Corporation has decided to offer you the sum of one thousand, eight hundred dollars. Do you find this offer acceptable?"

Josephina hesitated.

"I assure you, Mrs. Rosellini, this is more than a fair offer. In view of the facts, it is quite generous."

"OK." She nodded. "Yes, OK. I sign."

"Fine." He shuffled the papers and straightened a couple of long forms before her. "Now," he said, handing over his pen, "if you'll just sign by the X on each page, we are prepared to issue you a check here and now for said amount."

*Josephina realized it was more money than she and Vito ever had at one time, but she also realized that it wouldn't last forever. Nevertheless, she felt she had no choice. Tears welled in her eyes and her hand trembled as she took the pen and signed the papers.*

He blotted the ink. “Very good, Mrs. Rosellini. I think that about wraps up our business here,” he said, signing the check and sliding it over to her. He rose from his chair and handed the papers to Sanborn, who placed them in his briefcase. “We wish you well,” Livingston said as the two men shuffled out of the apartment and down the hall to the stairs.

*Before they left the building, I heard the tall one snicker.*

“Well, that’s another feather in our cap, Bernie. A few more of those and we should get a raise. A well deserved one, I might add. Too bad we don’t get a commission on the money we save the company. Let’s bring it up at the next corporate meeting.”

Livingston laughed. “She was easy. Did you see the panic in her eyes when I mentioned we could take her to court? And the way her hand shook when she signed the release? Scared to death.... Yeah, she was an easy mark.”

Sanborn nodded. “But not as easy as the Martinez case. That one took the cake. You got that old lady to sign the release on her husband’s coffin lid.”

*I heard them chuckling together as they left my building.*

*The next morning Josephina guarded the check with her life as she hurried to the bank to deposit it. She knew the check was crucial to her existence. What neither she nor I could foresee was the trouble that lay ahead for her.*