

**SLUM GODDESS**  
**A Novel**  
**By Anne Timmins**

*Slum Goddess from the lower East Side*  
*Slum Goddess won't you please be my bride*  
*Slum Goddess from the lower East Side*  
*I'm going to make her my bride*

THE FUGS, 1965

**Chapter 4 Thrown Away Things**

On my way home, I notice a fashionably dressed young woman with flowing red hair and beige linen pumps kicking at an old detached door fronting a pile of discarded furniture next to a brownstone on East Fourth Street near Avenue B.

Her shoes are the exact pair I purchased yesterday, in a moment of weakness at Peck and Peck. I gape at my prized shoes, beige linen spectators trimmed in cordovan leather getting grubbier by the minute as the woman kicks at worn door seemingly put out as trash.

My own pair, cradled in crisp tissue at the top of my closet are yet unworn. Ideal for luncheon at the Palm Court or for that interview for a better job since a good appearance was expected, were my rationalizations as I wrote out the check for the shoes. This morning however, noting my meager balance, I resolved to return them, but allowed myself a few extra days to enjoy the illusion of ownership.

The woman continues pummeling the door with my treasured shoes. She finally pushes it aside with her hands to reveal a small side table with turned mahogany legs in front of an ornately carved breakfront. She notices me watching.

\_\_Hi. Are you interested in any of this? she asks.

I shake my head.

\_\_No, thanks, I say. I love your shoes, though.

She looks at them as if she's forgotten what she's wearing.

\_\_Oh, look at me, she says. Well, it just goes with the territory.

Designer shoes worn as casual accessories. Quaint. Someone with a closetful of the best, no doubt. I envy the woman's throwaway chic and the attitude that clothes are expendable.

With the toe of her shoe, she shoves aside some pieces of wood and moves a broken medicine cabinet. There's an oval gilded mirror leaning against the side of the breakfront. She shuffles through the rubble to get a closer look.

\_\_Well, I declare the scavenger woman says out loud. I think I just died and went to heaven.

She inspects the mirror's carved frame, cooing in admiration. Long fingers sport lacquered nails in a bright crimson gently stroke the edges.

\_\_What fools, she says. Beveled edges too. Who'd throw away this beauty?

She lifts the mirror over to a green Volkswagon van parked next to the curb. Against it stands another mirror, square, with a thick mahogany frame.

\_\_Like any of this?

A plaintive mewling comes from inside the van.

She taps the side of the van.

\_\_Hush yourself, now. You'll be just fine.

\_\_Guess the fellow wants out, I say.

\_\_He's a tattered stray I found this morning. Needs neutering. I was on my way to the vet when I passed this goldmine.

She waves at the furniture stacked on the sidewalk.

\_\_Had to stop. People gutting brownstones have no appreciation of what they're throwing out.

\_\_You just help yourself? I ask, wondering if she was breaking the law.

\_\_Straight to the Fresh Kill dump if I didn't rescue these darlings. Have to make room in the van for that breakfront and table over there. My pal, Ralph wanted a table. You need anything?

Since my move to New York, I resolved to remain unencumbered by anything domestic. I needed to be free and clear if things didn't work out.

The mirror exudes an unsavory decadence and the breakfront with its carved faces, claw feet and brass fixtures appears too foreboding. My taste runs to the plain and simple.

\_\_No, I say. Afraid not.

\_\_Come on honey, an opportunity like this knocks only once.

I shake my head. It's time for me to go, but for some reason, I can't leave.

The woman steps closer.

\_\_Suit yourself, she says. But that breakfront's just beggin' for a place in your parlor.

\_\_I don't think so, I say.

The thought of used furniture makes me uneasy covered in someone else's grime, angst, maybe sorrow. No thanks. I watch as she wipes a hand on her green mini skirt, and extends it.

\_\_Lurilla Belle Harrison from Magee, Mississippi. Journeywoman printer extraordinaire, graveyard shift 11 PM to 7 AM which leaves days free for hunting men, good restaurants and street treasures, in that order.

Her hand is strong and warm. I give it a shake. Her energy is mesmerizing, like my mother's in a way. Tireless and bold.

\_\_I'm Molly Mana.

\_\_You live around here? Lurilla asks. Her eyes are emerald green and direct. Friendly and kind. I like her instantly.

\_\_Over on 11<sup>th</sup> and Avenue C. Moved in about a month ago. I'm originally from Paia.

\_\_Maui! Her green eyes sparkle. Been there. What a magical island. You're in dirty ol' New York for fame or fortune or all of the above?

\_\_Shoes, I say. Like yours.

She laughs.

\_\_So you like these?

I nod.

\_\_A little.

\_\_Lordy, lord, she says stepping out of her pumps and slapping them vigorously together. Dust and wood chips fly everywhere.

\_\_I'm a disgrace, aren't I?

\_\_Old shoes? I ask, trying to sound nonchalant.

\_\_Heavens no, scoffs Lurilla. Picked these up yesterday, for \$2 at Sutton Place Charities, East Side. Brand new. Tags still in them. Someone must have hated them. I love them.

I gasp.

\_\_You're pulling my leg?

\_\_Girl, I'm serious. You don't buy retail do you?

\_\_No, no, of course not, I blurt. I don't want to appear infantile.

But Lurilla Belle reads faces.

\_\_Oh, honey chile, you're out of your bird! Such a waste.

\_\_Well, I didn't know you could find things...nice things...

\_\_You're not looking in the right places, honey. Everything I wear was on another body, including these shoes. I am dressed here for under \$5. Not bad, eh?

Lurilla smooths down her olive leather mini skirt and tucks in the silky beige blouse.

She looks put together. Attractive, sculpted face, and slim frame, an inch or so shorter than my five eight. Dimpled cheeks and generous lips on an oval face; shapely legs peek out of a skirt that looks designer made; sharp green eyes that don't miss a thing. The nose is what spoils the picture, too bad. Romanesque, but interesting.

\_\_Give me a hand with this breakfront? she asks. And without a beat adds, And yes, it's real and I'm keeping it just like it is, 'cause it's who I am.

I'm embarrassed. Great, that she's fine with her nose. Who am I to say? Me, who has begrudged the years of critical analysis courtesy of a mother who insisted I forever pull up my short one, pinch my nose together for more height. Use a clothespin when sleeping, as if that would help? And legs, she said like a stork that never passed her muster. Shall I continue? A lips too full. Those orangutan lips, she called them. Jungle lips. Jonathan doubled over in hysterics when I told him. Lucious, he called them and that was that. Another lifetime.

\_\_Molly? Will you help with that end of the breakfront?

I see my face in the mirror of the breakfront. I'm not bad looking, I like my lips, although my hair could use a trim. And as for my nose...

\_\_Molly? You a model?

\_\_What? That assumption shakes me out of myself. No, I say. No way.

\_\_You're staring at yourself. Something wrong?

\_\_No. No. I was... admiring...the furniture. The mirror is etched around the sides.

\_\_No, honey chile. You were examining your nose! Honey, it's beautiful. You're beautiful. Whatever you were thinkin's not good. Puts a frown on your face.

Keep doing that and the wrinkles will settle in there for good. Now, as my dear Mama used to say, take that frown and turn it upside down. Hear?

I laugh. Her attitude's practical. I like her. She rubs her hands together in anticipation of something good. I wonder if she intends to gather all up all of this furniture and fill her van completely?

\_\_I could use some help if you're up to it?

I'd help her, she seemed like a decent sort. Why not? What else did I have to do after a boring day at my day job in the PR office. Maybe I should go home and work on the new song I started. There's the audition at the Bitter End in two weeks. Maybe Jonathan might call tonight.

\_\_Sure, Lurilla. I'll help. What do you need?

She takes a metal toolbox from the van. With screwdrivers, we take apart the breakfront and table, lifting them into her van after in the sections bit by bit. I comment on her foresight regarding all the tools she has for prying apart parts. Who would have thought furniture came apart this way?

\_\_And who would've thought it's all free? I say.

\_\_With all the renovations, everyone's going modern, Lurilla sighs wiping her brow. My place'll stay original with all the furniture there. I'm on East 7<sup>th</sup>. You should see the near stuff that was already there.

She throws the screwdrivers into the steel box and deposits it in back of the van. A large orange tom cat hisses as I look through the grating of his carrier. I step back at the vigor of his rage.

\_\_We'll get you all fixed up, kittie cat, Lurilla says closing the back double doors.

\_\_Poor cat, I say.

\_\_He'll be as good as new, better even when he's fixed. Can I drop you anywhere?

I had taken the long way home, walking across town from the West 4th train station to get some perogis from the Ukranian restaurant on Avenue B. I got side tracked by Lurilla and her shoes. Time to get home. Go to the bodega across the street for a half dozen eggs and canned spam, watch the Dick Van Dyke Show and The Twilight Zone. And wait for a phone call from him.

\_\_Don't want to take you out of your way, I say.

I was hoping Jonathan would call. No word in months and his last letter posted from Taiwan said he had a special number for overseas calls.

\_\_Well, I'll give you a lift, I'm going your way to the vet, Lurilla says.

We drive north on Avenue B with the windows open. It's a calm September evening, perfect time of day with a beautiful orange and mauve sky, the sun still lingering, a slight chill in the air portending autumn and perhaps the unexpected.

\_\_Do me a favor? Lurilla says. I have to take kittie cat to Sixteenth Street. Would you mind sitting in the van while I drop him off. I can't stomach more parking tickets.

\_\_Well, I say. I have to get back. I...I'm expecting a call.

\_\_Oh. Lurilla is disappointed. You are? What time?

\_\_Tonight. Later.

Jonathan wouldn't call anyway. Maybe never. Who was I kidding? Should I sit around in hopes?

\_\_Okay. Do you mind?

\_\_If it's not too long?

\_\_I'll be quick, Lurilla says making a sharp turn west.

We pull up in front of red brick building near Sixth Avenue. "*The Cats, Etc., Veterinary Group*" reads the sign. There's a black stone cat sitting in the window. A few people wait at the entrance with dogs on leads.

\_\_Guess I need you to circle the block. There's a queue. No parking or standing til 8 PM. Sorry. You drive? Lurilla says squinting at the sign.

\_\_Can do, I say. But, will you be long?

\_\_Might be an hour or more. Listen, if you have do some errands or something, come back for me? Van's all yours.

She's a trusting soul. I could drive off never to be seen again. But what would I do with the furniture?

She keeps the engine running, hops out and opens the back of the van.

\_\_Baby's gonna get some brand new clothes, I hear her sing to the cat. The shrieking and scratching escalates inside the box as Lurilla, barely holding on, disappears into the vet's office.

\_\_See you later!

I pull the van out into the street. It's good being behind the wheel again.

The streets are thick with yellow cabs, people running, hailing, dashing off to liaisons, dinner dates, good times in taverns after a day's work. Something I wish I were doing.

Through a side street, I glimpse an enormous blood orange sun melting into the horizon. What I really want to do is drive to the river and view in the whole spectacle.

Lurilla say errands. Would she mind if I absconded to the Upper West Side to see Jonathan's best friend Peter, whom I haven't seen since I moved down to the Lower East Side. A surprise visit might be worth it since he probably in a funk since I left after staying at his place until I found my apartment. I have a feeling I brushed him off rudely. I'd like him as a friend.

I put the VW in gear instead of circling the block near the vet and head for the West Side Highway to Riverside Drive. Peter's working on a new book and is bound to be home. A quick visit.

I'll see if he'd like a little distraction.

## Chapter Six: The Love Connection

*I almost wish I hadn't gone down that rabbit-hole...  
and yet...and yet...it's rather curious, you know,  
this sort of life! I do wonder what can have happened to me!*

ALICE IN WONDERLAND  
Lewis Carroll

Lurilla drops off a copy of the *Village Voice* at my apartment door with a scribbled note and an ad circled in red:

“Call them. Your destiny awaits. L.”

She decided I need some excitement in my life and let go of Jonathan who is on his East West Center study tour in China and who of late has severed all communication. I agree, it is time for me to act.

It's Saturday morning, and I make some coffee as I study the ad:

*Village Voice, September 14, 1965:*  
**THE LOVE CONNECTION**

*Exclusive Computer Dating Service. New York City's newest idea matches you with the date of your dreams. 54 St. Marks Place. By appointment only. Ask for Keitha. JU 78400*

I wonder if this is legitimate. It sounds more like a brothel. I'm beginning to get annoyed at the way Lurilla tries to organize my personal life. She never takes no for an answer. However, I have to admit I'm curious about this computer matching service she raves about. I thought computers were exclusively used by large corporations not dating services.

I dial the number.

\_\_ Good morning! The Love Connection. Keitha speaking.

The voice is chipper, crisp, yet dulcet. A little bit English. Too irritating for my taste. I need to hang up. It's some scam. I feel instantly cheap and manipulated. I'm perfectly capable of finding a man on my own.

The officious voice beckons.

\_\_ Hello? The Love Connection. May I help you?

\_\_ Umm...I..., I say, not knowing what to do. Should I hang up?

\_\_ Keitha Brighton here.

\_\_ Sorry. This is a mistake on my part. I'll call you later, I say.

\_\_I understand your hesitation. But you've taken the first step. Trust your future with us. Thank you.

\_\_Well... I stare at the phone's round dial. The black numbers loom large. I curse myself for having dialed the correct numbers, I wish I could have misdialed. Too bad for me.

\_\_Today's your lucky day, she goes on. We have a special rate for new subscribers. How did you hear about us?

I notice the zero on the dial has the longest way to go. The number with the shortest distance is the one.

\_\_The Village Voice, I reply dumbly.

\_\_Our old work horse. Do you know how much happiness we've brought our clients through that very paper?

\_\_Dunno...

\_\_Well, my dear, happiness could be yours. Make an appointment and you'll be on your way.

The number six has an in-between distance on the dial. If I had my druthers, I'd be a six. Six is in the middle of the dial unlike the quick #1 which would be Lurilla. Always in a rush to get somewhere, to make a call, to get a date. She's the ultimate hurry up, number one. Like Keitha who is quickly trying to sign me up. Damn it.

Keitha is cheerful.

\_\_We have a choice of appointments for your convenience, she says with enthused efficiency. This morning is free, and we have a few spots this afternoon. Monday looks fabulous, and Tuesday, you have your pick. Next Saturday is open and we're here 'til nine. It's our monthly open house night. What's your pleasure?

\_\_I need to think about this, I mumble.

Actually, on second thought, a zero is better. Nothing like taking my time getting round that dial. Yes, let me be a zero. Take it slow.

I'm twisting the phone cord a little too tightly around my fingers, and they're turning red then blue and getting numb. I slowly pry my fingers out of the cord. It's sticky from honey. Yesterday, I was in the kitchen fixing tea. The phone rang for the first time in days, and I desperately ran to get it, spoon in hand, honey dripping down my arm. I thought it was Jonathan calling from Shanghai, I longed

to hear his voice after all these months. His letters had stopped. But the call turned out to be a wrong number, a sleezy young guy who tried to get my name. I slammed the phone down and all I got in the process honey oozed everywhere. I threw the spoon in the sink, nixed the tea and went straight to my guitar burying myself in an indulgent song about love and pain and betrayal. It made me feel worse.

\_\_Your name, my dear? Keitha's voice is suddenly maternal, warm. You sound like you're ready for a change, she says.

If Keitha's a one, and I'm a zero, I'm going to take my time.

\_\_Look, I don't know if this Love Connection is right for me.

\_\_You sound sad, Keitha says.

I tell her I am not. Why should she care how I feel?

\_\_I know, you probably said to yourself, you would never hold the hand of another man again, but believe me, it is possible.

I say nothing. How can she tell what I'm feeling over the phone?

\_\_The sooner you take charge, the better you'll feel.

I offer no reply. I could hang up now, and stop this, but I've already spent time on this. Maybe I should follow through. Take charge.

\_\_My name's...Jane, I lie. I don't want her hunting me down if I pull out.

\_\_Lane? Keitha sounds confused. Maybe she's not listening.

\_\_Jane. I say slowly, then add a last name South. Going south, comes to mind.

\_\_That's lovely, Keitha oozes. My favorite name. Jane's my mother's name. Ironically, North. Jane North. Isn't this serendipitous? Now. This afternoon, there's a 2 PM spot with your name written all over it.

I shake my head, but hear myself saying that it's fine.

Maybe, if this Jane finds happiness as a one, I, might tag along and get lucky.

\_\_Jane! Well done, my dear. I need your phone number for now, and when I meet you later, we'll take your particulars.

That's if I show up, I'm thinking.

\_\_Okay, I say.

I give her Lurilla's number.

\_\_Ring the bell, #1 and someone will come down to collect you, Keitha says.

Number One, how appropriate.

\_\_Looking forward to meeting you Miss South, and thank you ever so much for calling The Love Connection. Good bye for now.

Even Keitha's disconnecting our call is crisp and efficient . Miss One. How did she get to be a know it all One?

This computer match idea is ludicrous. I'm blowing the whole thing off.

\* \* \* \*

54 St. Mark's Place is an elegant brownstone with a heavy carved wooden door and a shiny brass knocker in the shape of a hand. On the sunny side of the street, the afternoon sun highlights the strawberry colored geraniums in stone pots on either side of the front door. I climb the stone steps to the landing and ring the brass bell marked #1. After a few moments, I hear crisp footfalls on the floor within. There's the unclicking of several locks. The door open and an attractive woman in a navy suit and cream colored silk blouse with a gold circle pin on her lapel.

\_\_Jane South? she smiles.

\_\_Yes, I say feeling my face blush with guilt.

\_\_Keitha Brighton.

She holds out her hand. Her grip is firm and dry.

\_\_Do come in, my dear. Follow me. We're on the second floor, up the stairs. The accent is English, skin porcelain. Her chestnut hair is fashionably cut, shoulder length and shiny.

\_\_I like your hair, I say. I'm tempted to cut mine.

\_\_Kenneth, at Bergdorf's, she offers.

I apologize for being nosy. But I like the way her hair falls easily like a shiny swathe of silk.

\_\_Not at all, Keitha says. I prefer to get all the chit chat done and over with, straight away. Oh, and the suit, chemise and shoes? Harrod's, London, I've had them for yonks... some designer from Leed's, now extinct, I'm afraid. The lipstick? Cherries in the Snow, your Revlon of course.

\_\_It's my mother's, I say.

\_\_Now, we can focus on you. This way, to our sorting room. Originally the parlor floor.

Keitha leads me into a bright sun filled space.

It's a large with floor to ceiling windows and wood paneling all around. You can see the trees out back. I am impressed.

\_\_Original leaded glass windows. Floor, tiger oak. Gordon and I were thrilled to find this building. For a song, I might add. Nothing like this within our means in Maida Vale, where I grew up."

\_\_Greetings, wee hen.

The gruff voice comes from a man dressed in a red tartan kilt. I notice his rather short stature, with stumpy legs spread out, sitting sprawled on the floor in the middle of the room surrounded by stacks and stacks of index cards, blue and white. The hilt of a small dagger peers out of the top of his calf length, thick white socks. His head is normal sized, with a full red beard and mop of red curls. His eyes are an intense sea green. Arms are muscular and appear to be full sized as he shuffles the cards around, selecting the blue ones and putting them in a pile.

\_\_Pleased to meet your acquaintance. I'm a little fellow with a big heart and intellect, he says.

\_\_This is Gordon Menzies, says Keitha. My husband.

He gives Keitha a sly wink, and Keitha smiles, lovingly.

\_\_Nice to meet you, I say, wondering how they manage.

She stares at me. Apparently my thoughts are blatantly written all over me face. It's none of my business. I should control myself. I focus on the mountain of cards surrounding Gordon.

\_\_Jane's our newest client, darling. Come along, we'll get you signed up. My desk is here. Have a seat.

She hands me a sheaf of papers. I scan them and sign. Perhaps I should be more diligent as to what I put my name to, but I want this to be over. I notice her desk. It looks familiar.

\_\_Nice desk, I say. Love the carved feet.

\_\_A Queen Anne, Keitha says proudly. A friend found it on the street.

\_\_A friend?

\_\_She's a treasure. You must see the mirrors she's found for me, and a magnificent breakfront with original brass fittings and etched mirrors.

\_\_Your friend, I say. Wouldn't be Lurilla, would she?

\_\_Good god! Keitha gasps, her hand on her breast. Do you know her?

\_\_Well, yes. And that magnificent breakfront of yours? I helped load your very thing in her VW van the other day!

\_\_Oh my heavens! You know Lurilla?!

\_\_That's why I'm here. It's all her doing. She raves about your computer dating service. I was curious.

\_\_Well, Jane. She's right to rave. We changed her life, Keitha smiles. And we will do the same for you.

\_\_Your computer system is second to none she says.

\_\_It is, Keitha says proudly.

\_\_Where is it? I thought only IBM had computers, those main frame things? They take up a lot of room don't they? You have one upstairs?

Keitha nods toward the center of the room.

Gordon has risen now. No more that three and half feet in height, he whirls around the center of the room amidst the mountain of index cards, his kilt ballooning out like a ballerina's tutu as he sends the cards spinning, kicks at them with his large feet encased in leather slippers, tied in a zig zag pattern of red cord up his calves. Cards fly in all directions. After they settle, he dashes around the room picking up the blue cards putting them in one pile, then the white cards in another. Taking one card from each pile, he stuffs the pair in a plain white envelope, marks it and files the envelopes in a narrow box next to dozens of other wooden boxes, arranged in a neat row horizontally on a long shelf looking all like the card catalogue at the library.

\_\_Our computer, Keitha says proudly. Gordon Menzies. His matches are tops. Better than any main frame on the market, IBM or otherwise. His rate of success is 99.8%. You'll be pleased.

I laugh. Dawn of the computer age with the human element still intact?

\_\_Okay, I hear myself saying. But, make sure none of those cards are Michael Rosen's. His window's too close to mine for comfort.

\_\_Oh, says Keitha. I thought he'd be a great match for one our most discerning clients. Discretion prevents me from revealing her name.

I hate the pretense of it all. Keitha's in particular.

\_\_Her name is Lurilla and I told you she's a friend. She didn't like him.

Keitha keeps her composure, but I see that I've upset her and then some. What is the woman thinking? That her matches are infallible?

\_\_Okay, let me explain. She didn't throw him away, I say. She sent him to me and set up a blind date for breakfast or brunch or it turned out lunch. No spark, but he's an ex naval officer with a penchant for decoupage his bureau and assorted boxes. He'll make some arts and crafts woman very happy.

\_\_I'll have to have a word with her, says Keitha. She shouldn't be handing out our matches like free tickets to a show. It's against our policy. Our matches are exclusive. Like yours. She hands me my pile of index cards.

\_\_Good luck. I've enclosed a copy of our contract you signed. Read it over. If these don't work out, you have more coming.

I take the cards and without looking, and slip them into my bag.

\_\_Nice meeting you, Keitha says extending me hand.

\_\_Like wise, I say. I want to tell her the cards will be in the rubbish bin as soon as I leave. This is a total scam, and I will not perpetuate it.

\_\_Those matches are perfect for you, Keitha says pointing to my bag.

The randomness of it all is ludicrous. Could Gordon's kicking those cards around on the floor find me my ideal mate?

I step out into the bright sunshine and pause at the top landing of the brownstone as I search my bag for my love connection matches.

The first card on top: Art Marlow, 28; 6', 180 lbs; dark brown hair, blue eyes; restaurateur and sculptor; surfer; loves music, books. Looking for my love connection.

Second card: Mark Dagostino, 25; 5'11", 170; musician and playwright; black hair, green eyes; loves his Harley, the Dom and moonlit nights in Vermont.

So instead of tossing the cards into the nearest dumpster, I put them back in my bag.

Maybe it's time to stop eating alone.

