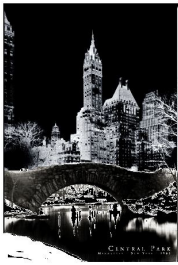


Guardian

He was young, barely handsome. She was very pretty, hardly twenty. They walked up to where I waited at the Horse and Carriage Parking zone at 59th Street on the edge of New York's Central Park. I might have guessed their path would cross mine.



He did all the talking. She listened, sometimes raptly. At other times, her gaze wandered off to anything of interest, but her attention always returned to him, eyes watching him with humor, and surely with love. The girl's look said she had decided on him, for better or worse. It's a look I always recognize and sometimes lament.

"Oh, it's a beautiful snowfall," she said.
"Let's go to Tavern On The Green," he replied.
"Take me in the Hansom Cab," she pleaded, her face lighting up with a smile."

But his funds were small, and would barely cover two drinks at the Tavern. A taxi, too, was out of the question. The young man persuaded the girl to walk, and suggested a route that would take them north and then across the park on the east-west road at 65th Street. It was now beginning to snow heavily again. Four inches were already down, making the streets a mess.

I nudged the man beside me and nodded toward the young couple. He shook his head in disagreement. I put my hoof on his foot and leaned heavily. The man quickly relented and offered the couple a free ride in our carriage along the route they had chosen, "since we're going home that way, anyway."

I truly hoped they would ride with us. Walking on the road through Central Park in a blinding snow storm is something only an idiot would attempt, or a barely handsome young man. I suppose I shouldn't be so harsh. In truth, I often do it myself. And after all, as the young woman said, it was a lovely snowfall. It's impossible to describe the beauty of falling snow in New York City, but the charm in part stems from the covering of the city's many visual sins. Then too, the mantel of pure white helps to hush the incessant noise of a million automobiles.

New York City drivers ought to stay at home when the snow falls, but instead foul weather seems to bring them out. As conditions worsen, so do their driving skills, common sense and demeanor. They're like crazed generals turning more inept as they continue to lose the battle.

I was relieved when the couple accepted our offer and climbed up into the carriage. Had they been native New Yorkers, they might have refused us with suspicion. And maybe with reason, since my partner, free on a sort of parole from a place you seldom hear about anymore, is not the most angelic looking individual. The top hat doesn't improve him, and barely hides his horns. Myself, you wouldn't take notice of me, unless I was standing in your living room, swishing my tail.

It was indeed a wonderful evening for being out and about in the city, but perhaps not a great night for a carriage ride through the center of the Park. Every car coming up behind us insisted on passing, swishing in the snow and slipping around, often hardly getting beyond the carriage before an oncoming car zoomed down on us like a bobsled. Cabbies tooted and swore at us and seemingly aimed at us as we tried to get a bit to the side each time a vehicle came sliding our way.

We got the young couple safely to the Tavern. Where, I'm sure, they quickly ran out of money. But that's not my concern. I'll come across them again. Keeping lovers safe while helping out a little is why we're here. You could say we're old softies, especially for the younger lovebirds.

You may call us whatever you like ... heralds, guardians, cupids. We take the physical form we're given. I'm sometimes sorry I wasn't made an eagle. The view would be better than I have from the harness down here. And you'd see my wings spread in grandeur, rather than my backside clomping along ahead of you.

But wishes are for the young, as much as walks in the snow and the conceit of self-reliance. Only age brings wisdom, and the awareness that a carriage of benevolence often bears us through the storm. Now if I could just get this devil of a partner to put on my feedbag and brush me down, I'd be perfectly comfortable for the night.

David Griffin

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