

Guardian

He was young, barely handsome. She was very pretty, hardly twenty. Through the falling snow they strolled to where I waited in 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. Oh, please," she pleaded, her face lighting up with a smile."

But he said his funds were meager, 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 fellow beside me and nodded toward the young couple. He shook his head in disagreement. I stepped on his foot and leaned heavily. He 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. The charm in part stems from the covering of the city's many visual sins. Then too, the mantle of pure white helps to hush the incessant noise of a million automobiles.

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 kind 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, all 1400 pounds of me, swishing my tail and leaving hoof prints on your Oriental carpet.

It was indeed a wonderful evening to be out and about in the city, but perhaps not a great night for a carriage ride through the center of the Park. Each driver coming up from behind insisted on passing, swishing his car in the snow and sliding around us, often getting hardly beyond the carriage before an oncoming car zoomed down on us like a bobsled. Cabbies tooted and swore and seemed to aim at us as I strained to pull the carriage behind me off to the side each time a vehicle careened our way.

New York City drivers should stay at home when the snow falls, but instead foul weather brought them out that night. As conditions worsened, so did their driving skills, common sense and demeanor. They were like crazed battalions of novice soldiers turning more inept as they continued to lose the battle.

I began to feel sorry for myself and wished I'd let my lazy devil of a partner talk me out of this last trip of the evening. He and I are from two separate worlds, as different as night and day. We were paired for that reason, so that we might better understand humanity.

We crossed the park and delivered the young couple safely to the Tavern. I'm sure they quickly ran out of money. But that's not my concern. I'll come across the two 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. Not all of us have the youth and beauty of an Adonis or Psyche. We take the physical form we're given. I'm sometimes sorry I wasn't made to fly. The view up there is wonderful, surely a lot better than down here between the traces of my harness. If I were an eagle, you would see my wings spread in grandeur, rather than watch my backside clomping along ahead of you.

Ah, but wishes are for the young. So are magical evenings and snowy walks in the park. Age brings wisdom to expose our conceit of self-reliance, and with it the dawning awareness that a carriage of benevolence has brought us through the storm.

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