

# FLOATING TRICKSTERS



THE  
FAERIE  
VILLAGES  
OF  
CENTRAL  
PARK

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*The Faerie Villages of Central Park*

- - - CHAPTER ONE - - -

- New York City -

- 1893 -

The snow fell in a wild fury on the quiet morning of January eleventh. Mary Kate, a twenty-two-year-old Irish nanny, departed with her six-year-old charge, Linda Flavian, and her young terrier for their daily walk through Central Park.

Mary Kate had initiated this ritual in response to Mr. Flavian's irritable moods, which tended to disturb the tranquility of Linda's morning routine. Mary Kate timed their walks so that Linda's breakfast overlapped with her father's only for a few minutes before he rushed off to work. Her goal was to harmonize a house so filled with recrimination it could scarcely be called a home.

As they approached the East Ninetieth Street entrance, Mary Kate stooped down to fasten the open buckle of Linda's rubber boot. An old woman, sitting on a milk crate selling apples under an umbrella, fed the puppy a dog biscuit before whispering in Linda's ear, "Mind your manners now, there be faerie folk in this here park."

The woman, known locally as Apple Annie, smiled and gazed into Linda's eyes in a way that made the young girl feel as if her thoughts were being read. The large falling snowflakes and the spark of awareness in the woman's eyes had a hypnotic effect. "Keep your eyes open and your desires unspoken and you might catch a glimpse of their glen. You're a young enough lass, with plenty of sass. You'll see them, though I can't say when."

"Go away outta that! What do you mean filling the girl's mind with such rubbish," Mary Kate quipped. "Faerie folk indeed!"

"An Irish disbeliever is it? Well, lo and behold. A fiery banshee from the Auld Sod such as yourself should know perfectly well what I'm talking about."

Mary Kate pulled Linda away by the arm and turned to walk away.

"Suit yourself," Apple Annie said, "If you don't believe me, I suggest you go down to the Astor Library and look up the 1691 book *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns & Faeries*. Rubbish, indeed!"

"Even if such creatures do exist, and I'm not saying they do," Mary Kate shot back, "they're in the old country, not in Central Park of all places. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, what is the world coming to?"

"The good people reside wherever they are needed," Annie declared.

Mary Kate led Linda into the park. As she glanced back and noticed the old woman's jaunty salute, she walked squarely into the brass-buttoned chest of a stern looking policeman.

"Watch it, young lady, or I'll be forced to run you in for obstructing justice," he growled, pushing her aside with his stick and wiped the snow from his shoulders.

“What do you suppose, I did it on purpose?” Mary Kate snapped. “Jesus, Mary and Joseph.” She walked around him dragging Linda behind her. The puppy gave the policeman’s foot a slight nip but fortunately the officer was oblivious to the assault.

“Here now, show a bit of respect for the law,” he shouted after them.

“The law indeed,” Mary Kate replied without breaking her stride. “Instrument of governmental harassment is more like it.”

The policeman pushed his hat back and rubbed his head. “Well, I’ll be a pickled egg! She certainly has notions, that one does.”

An old Italian man selling roasted chestnuts smiled. “Young people are always a bit brazen. If only they’d use that fight to stand up to those caviar-eating aristocrats, we’d get somewhere.”

“None of that now, none of that. There’ll be no rabble-rousing on my beat, if you please.” The policeman straightened his uniform and twisted his mustache while thinking, before raising his chin, placing his hands behind his back and continuing on.

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On the top floor of an apartment building on Central Park West, a boy of six gazed through his bedroom window at the thick waves of falling snow.

“Henreeey! Time for school!” His mother’s voice echoed down the long main corridor.

*There shouldn’t be any school when it snows this hard*, Henry thought to himself and, as if his internal declaration was suddenly answered, a Christmas card fell from the mantle and landed near his foot. The corner of the card seemed to point at a gaping hole in his sock, triggering a deep feeling of shame since the boys at school often made fun of his disheveled attire.

He picked up the card. Inside was an illustration of an adolescent faerie sledding down a hill, riding on the shoulder of a child. The image inspired him to action.

Before his fear of rejection had a chance to take hold, Henry found himself running down the hall just as his father, an architect of some renown named Thomas Moore, was gathering his top hat and cane to depart for work.

“Father, wait!” Henry shouted as he slid to a stop in front of him. He eagerly held up the Christmas card. His father studied it, avoiding the round eyes gazing up at him like a willful pup. Finally, he glanced at his watch. His stern expression melted into a smile and nod of approval, filling Henry’s heart with immeasurable joy. Down the hall, Henry’s mother shook her head and smiled before heading back to the kitchen to finish the morning dishes.

Mr. Moore was soon walking at a rapid clip along Central Park West, gripping Henry’s mittened hand and carrying a flexible flyer sled under his arm. Upon entering the park, father and son climbed onto the sled and gently glided down the meandering path that seemed to go on forever. Their idyllic journey unfolded like an elaborate shadow play as they passed cross-country skiers, horseback riding aristocrats, children throwing snowballs, ice skaters singing Christmas carols and an old man feeding pigeons. Yet all the while, time seemed to slow down for Henry and the sights and sounds of the park began to fade into the background.

This phenomenon began to occur when he noticed a young faerie, about an inch tall sitting on his knee and smiling up at him.

“Ariel fairy, one, two, three. Open your eyes, what do you see?” the winged stowaway announced without opening his mouth. “Purple, red, blue, and yellow. This young lad is one odd fellow. Bundle of sticks, moss covered rocks. Free from yesterday with holes in your socks. Take to the sky, gentle and blue, hold the door open for me and for you.”

Henry looked up at his father with a tear of wonderment in his eye, but Mr. Moore was too busy navigating the sled through the park’s intersecting paths to notice. When Henry looked down again he expected the visitor to be gone and was mentally prepared to chalk the apparition up to his imagination. This was not the case. “They call me Undine, you happy little man. Savor the flavors of youth for as long as you can.”

Just then, Mary Kate and Linda approached from the opposite side of the park. Linda was immediately transfixed by the sight of the colorful creature sitting on Henry’s knee. She wanted to tell Mary Kate what she was seeing but the nanny was so lost in thought that she didn’t notice the tugging on her coat.

Suddenly disbelief began to creep into Henry’s mind, causing Undine to lose interest and fly away. The sled soon came to a gradual halt at the bottom of the hill. “Let’s do it again!” Henry exclaimed. But his father gently informed him that he had to prepare for an afternoon meeting. They stood up and started back up the hill.

Undine had a long-standing tradition of pinching roasted chestnuts from the Italian vendor and flying to the top of the Swedish Cottage where he would stretch out on the warm chimney top to enjoy his breakfast. This snowy day was no exception and soon Undine was surrounded by billowing chimney smoke and sagging snow-covered branches, listening to the sleigh bells ringing through the air.

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Five months later, as spring overtook Manhattan, Undine sat atop the chimney, peeling a stolen chestnut. This time he was surrounded by budding trees and blossoming flowers. He tossed pieces of shell to the ground and devoured his contraband in the warmth of the morning sun, forgetting for the moment, that he was late for school. He did not notice that a large piece of shell landed on the head of an old faerie named Zephyr, who was napping in a vacant bird’s nest on a branch below him.

“Any fool can carelessly wait, but a wise faerie is never late,” Zephyr said telepathically before removing the shell from his head. Undine took to the air but paused to glance over at Zephyr with the half-eaten chestnut in his hands. “This may seem like a matter of tit-for-tat, but I don’t imagine you’ll be needing that,” Zephyr said. Undine smiled and tossed the chestnut to him before flying away. As Zephyr nibbled at his prize, an acorn landed with a thud next to him, causing him to place the chestnut shell back on his head as a measure of protection.

Undine darted hither and thither, weaving his way through waving tree branches, over strolling couples and children playing hopscotch and passing a robin and two finches before descending into a secluded cove in Turtle Pond. There he joined his history class which was being held on the sprawling pad of a flowering water lily.

The instructor, a beautiful faerie named Vespera, sat on the flower which grew out of the stem. She glowed with warmth and had a smile that radiated kindness. Sitting in a semi-circle around her were six students reporting on their morning interventions. Undine landed with enough force to rock the lily pad on which the class sat, sending ripples across the pond.

“In he flies with stars in his eyes, and a mischievous grin on his face,” Vespera thought for all to hear. “Sweet Undine, his thoughts are clean, but his landings are an utter disgrace. What justice have you inspired in your charge on this sparkling morning, having suddenly arrived without signal or warning?”

“Some landings are good, and some are bad, but only time will heal a quixotic little lad,” Undine’s thoughts revealed. “I planted a seed in Henry’s heart, which ignited his lonely imagination. He now senses within him, a majestic connection to creativity and his divine illuminations. I am more than a bit proud. After all, it is our task to enchant, for crying out loud.”

“Human idioms, so earthy and authentic, are more playful than lofty jargon that is pompous and cosmetic.”

Undine was Vespera's pet, as everyone knew. He smiled smugly at Yara and Faerydae, two of his female classmates who stuck out their tongues despite being madly in love with him. As Vespera recited a poem, several frogs gathered to listen on neighboring pads while a pair of turtles poked their heads above water to audit the class.

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Inside the stately Flavian mansion on the east side, Linda’s father Edward was seated at the head of the dining room table flanked by Linda and her mother Constance as they finished their breakfast. Her father’s straight backed formal countenance was that of a self-appointed leader, though his wife knew that this was the same performative demeanor adopted by countless members of New York’s elite who were so desperate to appear more European. She suspected that behind the closed doors of brothels and saloons, such men were courser than any street urchin or peddler, though she did her best to hide this awareness from of her thoughts. The task was not a simple matter since her husband loved to reprimand her for every minute inadequacy he detected in her management of their household.

On top of the window frame, observing the family with great interest, was Celestine, a faerie with piercing eyes and an unusually imposing presence for an adolescent. Linda watched as her father’s criticisms caused her mother to grimace, shrink into a defeated posture and quietly begin to weep. The sight brought tears to Linda’s eyes which immediately aroused the ire of Mary Kate who was watching from the main hallway as the butler admitted Linda’s tutor into the foyer and took the man’s hat and coat. Mary Kate gathered her own hat and coat before storming out of the house, shutting the door with more force than she intended.

“Why are people always slamming doors in this house?” Mr. Flavian shouted before going back to the list of complaints he had written in a small leather-bound book. Mrs. Flavian wiped away Linda’s tears before holding her index finger to her lips to quiet her daughter’s whimpering.

The spectacle was too much for Celestine. She retrieved a small prism from a pouch tied to her belt and held it in the beam of sunlight streaming through the window. A small rainbow appeared on the edge of Linda's water glass, catching her attention. She immediately looked over to the window to find its source and caught sight of Celestine who shined the rainbow directly in Linda's eye. By the time Linda finished rubbing her eyes, Celestine was hovering in the sunlight just above Mr. Flavian's head, pantomiming his facial expression with playful theatricality. Linda giggled for a moment, which was enough to cause her father to interrupt his tirade.

Celestine did a loop around the room before flying out of the open window. Linda watched her departure wearing a serene gaze and feeling deeply curious as her father's droning voice faded into the background. The dancing sunlight mixed with shadows of leaves and branches cascading across the room as the sound of cooing pigeons, children playing, and passing carriages all lulled Linda into a calm reverie.

Outside, Celestine generated a gust of wind by flapping her wings, causing the lace curtains to billow into the room. When the curtain gently caressed the top of Mr. Flavian's head, startling him, Linda laughed out loud, fueling the fires of her own budding imagination.

A moment later, her nineteen-year-old sister Penelope quietly entered the room and sat down as inconspicuously as possible. True to form Mr. Flavian had to comment on her "seemingly ritualistic tardiness."

Outside Celestine flew to a towering oak tree and landed on a branch next to her mischievous classmate. Faelan, a confident if lackadaisical air faerie, was lying on the branch with his head resting on the trunk and his arms stretched out behind his head taking a nap.

"I know it's our fate that we are perennially late, but you're not even looking for a chance to mediate." She whispered into his mind.

Faelan yawned before responding. "Like the screech of a hawk and an eagle's sharp claw, your directives leave my nerves jangled and raw."

"If that's how you feel, I'll just travel alone, I have no use for your irritable tone," Celestine said. But Faelan grabbed her wrist before she could fly away.

"I'm sorry sweet lamb, I'm a little bit cranky, I sense trouble from a groundskeeper who is withered and lanky." Faelan led Celestine over the barn and into a courtyard on the other side where they spotted a small whimpering puppy tied to a fence. To their shock and dismay, the sinewy groundskeeper with a grizzled face was preparing to strike the dog with a horsewhip.

"Goodness, that's Linda's young dog, come now Faelan, snap out of your fog."

"We cannot tolerate such volcanic destruction. I have an idea for the perfect disruption," Faelan said as he flew over to a bee hive fixed to the chimney where he consulted with the workers using thoughts and gestures. A battalion of bees soon swarmed the groundskeeper's head while Faelan untied the dog who scampered back to the main house.

Celestine and Faelan flew back to the park with great haste, soaring high above Mary Kate as she boarded a streetcar heading downtown. The headstrong nanny would not have admitted this to anyone, but she was heading to the Astor Library. Despite her five-month delay in verifying Apple Annie's claim on that snowy January day, Mary Kate's curiosity had finally gotten the better of her.

As she gazed through the window at the flowering trees, Mary Kate recalled telling her parents about Apple Annie's old-fashioned beliefs. Her father had merely shrugged and continued reading his paper. But her mother, without interrupting her knitting, simply muttered, "Why of course there are invisible helpers in New York, why wouldn't they be here?" The comment nagged at Mary Kate and helped to undermine her resolve.

Once inside the East Village library, she mustered her courage and asked for the book Annie had mentioned. She was pleasantly surprised by the librarian's reaction. Rather than meeting her with ridicule, the bespectacled woman of modest appearance nodded dispassionately and knew just where to retrieve a copy without needing to look it up in the card catalog.

Mary Kate soon found herself standing over the large open book, which had been placed on an oak wood table. She stood there and stared at the title page for a long time before eventually feeling light-headed: *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns & Faeries, A Study in Folk-Lore & Psychical Research. The Text by Robert Kirk, M.A., Minister of Aberfoyle, A.D. 1691.* She sat down and began reading. Before long, she was entirely engrossed. She had no idea how much time had passed before she was startled by another large book being placed on the table next to her by the librarian.

"This one may interest you as well. It was written in 1493," the Librarian said before walking away holding back a mysterious smile. Mary Kate opened it and read the title page: *A Book on Nymphs, Sylphs, Pygmies, and Salamanders, and on the Other Spirits by Theophrastus von Hohenheim called Paracelsus*

