



Solstice Stories:

Love in the Oaks

and

Winter Solstice...in the Back of the House

by Edward Branley

Love in the Oaks

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"I told you to keep an eye on him, and now he's run off!" The man said harshly to the woman next to him.

"I was trying to frame a shot, to take a picture of you and him in front of that snowman figure over there! I'm his mother, don't accuse me like that!" The woman replied, worry setting into her tone. She glanced around from side to side, looking for the child.

"You stay here, in case he comes back. A four-year old couldn't have gone far. I'll find a cop or someone who works here. And for God's sake, pay attention!" He stormed off.

The concern and anger expressed by the couple were a marked contrast to the Christmas decorations and thousands of lights adorning the Botanical Gardens of City Park New Orleans for the park's annual "Celebration in the Oaks" light display. In spite of the festive mood of the crowd, Renard Alciatore could feel the hostility that this couple clearly felt towards each other. Even now, they were angrier with each other than they were concerned over their missing child. They were right that the child likely had not gone off far, and Celebration in the Oaks was limited to the park's Botanical Gardens, and the children's area, "StoryLand". Kids are creative, though--he'd certainly photographed his share of them--and this kid may be outside that controlled area by now.

"I'd run from these two, if I were him, bickering like that while he's trying to enjoy the Christmas lights," Ren thought.

He was just a few steps away from the mom. She followed her husband's instructions, staying put, for the moment. Ren was still a novice in the use of the psychic Talents that had been awakened in him over the last few months, but he wanted to help. He looked at the mom, without making direct eye contact, worried she would think he was just some public creeper. He held his camera up a bit, took a deep breath, and then closed his eyes, exhaling deeply. A couple more deep breaths and he'd gone into a light trance.

"Holy crap! I didn't set shields!" He thought.

He came up to full consciousness for a moment, then visualized a crimson shield aura of light around his body. When he felt the aura set in place, guarding him from intrusion, he resumed the deep breathing. When everything felt right, he opened his eyes.

The festive atmosphere around him continued, but now Ren picked up mental images as well as what he observed with his five senses.

Ren turned again to look at the mom. The further away her husband went, the less annoyed and angry she was. She filled that gap now with worry, on the verge of panic. Ren exhaled again and sent a wave of calm, reassuring energy to her. He felt her settle a bit, as she started to pace in a circle, looking around in the light crowd of revelers in this section of the park.

"Love..."

Ren's head snapped. He didn't hear that, he sensed it.

So did the mom.

"Tyler?" She called out loud.

That confirmed it to Ren.

"Love Love Love Love"

Ren closed his eyes, focused on the words. When he opened his eyes, he looked at the mom and smiled.

"Did you hear my son, too?" She asked.

"Tyler? Is that your son's name?" Ren asked in reply.

"Yes, Tyler. He's four years old," She explained.

"No, I didn't hear him," Ren said.

The woman was suddenly crestfallen. Heartbroken.

"I didn't hear him, I felt him. Just like you did," Ren sent to her, mind-to-mind.

"How did you...?" She asked, aloud.

"Don't worry about it now, let's go get your boy," Ren sent.

"Go get...you know where he is?" She replied, this time with her mind.

"Yes. Come on!" He extended his hand. She let her camera fall around her neck and took his hand.

"I'm Renard, by the way. Ren to friends," he sent.

"I'm Corinne," the mom thought back to him.

Ren walked her through a row of decorated Christmas trees, navigating them past the food tent and several clumps of people who were chatting and watching their own children run around.

"You're not a bad mom, you know, but the anger is why he ran away. I can feel that in him from here," Ren said, this time out loud.

"Things haven't been...well, things between my husband and I haven't been good for a while now," Corinne replied.

Ren led her out of the Botanical Garden. They crossed the Great Lawn, a large grassy area between the gardens and the buildings around the park's lagoon. When they crossed the street on the other side of the Great Lawn, he led Corinne to the right, towards a large open-air pavillion that had a collonade which wrapped around it.

"He's there, at the Peristyle," Ren said.

Corinne tried to break Ren's grip on her hand and run to the Peristyle, but Ren held her firm for a moment.

"He's safe. Seriously. Feel it!" He instructed Corinne.

"Love Love Love Love"

They both heard Tyler in their minds.

She relaxed, and they walked over.

"The Peristyle has been the site of trysts, declarations of love, proposals, and weddings for over a century. So much love here, it's no big surprise that a kid who felt trapped in a lot of anger was drawn to it," he explained.

Ren felt Corinne's shame. She'd failed her son.

"No, you haven't. All you have to do is build on the love," he said.

He released her hand when they spotted Tyler, sitting on the concrete steps by the water. Corinne slowly approached, and joined her son for a chat.

"Happy Christmas," Ren whispered.

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Winter Solstice...in the Back of the House

by Edward Branley

"One grits bowl, all day, scrambled!" came the instructions from Evan, who was expediting orders.

"One grits bowl, all day, scrambled," replied Corinne, as she reached for two eggs to scramble.

Tuesday mornings aren't all that busy at Wakin' Bakin', a small breakfast joint in New Orleans' Mid City neighborhood, but today was an exception. All seven tables inside were occupied, and the line to order was four-deep.

"Big John with sausage, egg fried!" Evan called the next order. Corinne repeated the order, as she'd been trained. She took the job here just a week earlier, and was starting to settle into the organized chaos of a working kitchen.

Evan grabbed the grits bowl order as she set it on the "out" counter, and brought it to one of the two-top tables where a young man sat, alone. After checking the man didn't need anything else from the back, he turned to pick up the plates from a middle-aged couple sitting at the next table.

"Was everything OK?" Evan asked the couple.

"The food was great. Wish there weren't so many fags eating here, though," the man replied.

"George!" His wife scolded, as she rolled her eyes by way of an apology to Evan.

"Well, I'm glad you enjoyed your breakfast," Evan said, with a smile, as he walked away.

As George and his wife left, Evan let out a huge sigh, from his spot in the kitchen.

"Yeah, that was pretty shitty. Thing is though, the place has been pretty gay for the last couple of days," commented Elise, who was working the front counter.

"I didn't notice. Been too busy," Evan replied.

"Your gaydar sucks, anyway," Elise quipped, with a laugh. "Still, it's as if something's drawing 'teh geh' into the place. This part of Mid City isn't particularly a 'gay' neighborhood. It's like we've got a pride flag out front."

"But you do. Have a pride flag flying, that is." This last comment came from a man in his thirties, his accent betraying his British roots.

"Huh?" Elise looked at him curiously.

"There's an aura of welcome coming from here. A statement that this is a safe space. I'm pretty sure that man who left unhappy sensed it, but did not sort out why he didn't like the atmosphere here. Considering how wonderful the food is, his confusion is not surprising. I'm Samuel, by the way," the man said, extending his hand.

"Elise," she said, taking his hand in a firm grip.

"I'm Evan!" Came a second reply, from the back.

"I've seen you around here, before. So, how do we have an 'aura' here?" She asked.

"Someone's projecting it. It's a wonderful feeling, for anyone, gay or straight," Samuel said, with a smile.

"Really? Who's doing it?"

"Not me! I can't expedite and project at the same time! Hash bowl, all day, over easy!" Evan said.

"Hash bowl, all day, over easy," Corinne replied, her voice barely above a whisper. She was suddenly worried.

"No, Mister Evan, it's not you. It's your cook. She's one of us," Samuel sent, mentally, to both Evan and Corinne.

Corinne dropped the bowl full of hash browns she held. Evan usually didn't look up at kitchen accidents, but this time, his head jerked. Corinne stood there, surrounded by broken porcelain and food, a look of panic on her face.

"I didn't--"

"RELAX! I've known about your Talents since Ren introduced us," Evan sent.

"Really? I didn't know--"

"Don't sweat it. But do get that guy's breakfast to him!" Evan replied in her mind, with a chime of amusement.

Corinne shook her head, took a deep breath, and then plated the order. Evan brought it to the customer. Rather than return immediately to the kitchen, he sat across from Samuel, who had taken the two-top table in the window. Evan offered a fist for a casual bump. Samuel smiled and returned the gesture.

"You must be friends with Renard," Evan said.

"Yes, I am. You might say, I work for Fr. O'Donnell," Samuel replied.

"That man is into everything," Evan said, laughing. "Ironically, I'm as inexperienced with all this as my new cook."

"We can work on that. You know we're setting up shop a couple of blocks away, right?" Samuel asked.

Evan nodded.

"Looking forward to it. More like-minded customers," he replied, smiling.

Samuel chuckled.

"Back to Corinne's 'aura' -- I would love for that feeling to be permanent, not just when she's here," Evan said.

"We can make that happen. Tomorrow is the Solstice, which helps amplify any power we raise. This would be an opportunity to do a bit more than return the power to the Earth in a general sense. We can put it in the walls here," Samuel explained.

"Interesting. What do you need?" Evan asked.

"Well, you'll be closed long before sunset. If you can be back here before then, we can do our ritual. I'm sure Michael wouldn't want to miss this, as well as a few other of our people. Let's be sure to add Corinne, as well. I'll make the arrangements, if you're serious."

"I definitely am! Make it so, as Captain Picard would say!" Evan replied, excited.

"A Trekker, excellent!" Samuel said, extending his arm for another fist bump.

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Evan let Corinne go early, so she could rest up for the evening. The last hour of service was busy without Corinne, but Evan kept up with the orders just fine. When the last diner departed, around 2:15PM, Elise locked the door and the staff began to clean up and prepare for service tomorrow. About an hour later, the place was all set, as everyone but Evan left. He worked on the books for another hour, when a knock on the door heralded Samuel's return.

"I brought a couple of friends to help us out. Evan Ferrante, meet Mary Margaret

FitzRyan," Samuel said.

"Hi," Evan said, shaking hands with Meg.

"Hi, yourself! It's a pleasure to meet you, Evan. I've heard good things about your food," Meg replied

"So have I! I'm Beth Hershey," the grey-haired woman who entered behind Meg said by way of introduction. Beth was about 5'5" tall. Her hair made her look older than her forty-five years.

"And I believe you know this guy," Meg said, with a grin.

"Father Mike, it's good to see you!" Evan said, shaking the priest's hand.

"You too, Evan. It's been a while, but I'm glad the place here is doing well," Michael Aloysius O'Donnell said, looking around the small restaurant.

"The delivery business is really booming. Is Ren joining us tonight?" Evan asked.

"The good Father here says Mister Alciatore is busy with holiday photo shoots, so, alas, no. Which is a shame, because I haven't even met him yet," Meg replied.

"He's a good one," Evan said, nodding.

Another knock at the door. Evan let Corinne in, and she was introduced to the newcomers.

"OK, that will be everyone, then. We can start preparations. Sunset is just after five o'clock, so we're right on track," Samuel said, taking charge of the gathering. While Mike, Meg, and Beth were far more experienced in esoteric Work than Samuel, the leadership of the Assembly of Mainz encouraged younger adepts to take the lead when possible.

Samuel worked with Evan to clear a space in the center of the restaurant to create a sacred space. He left one of the two-top tables in the center, to be used as an altar. When the other tables were pushed to the sides, he then positioned everyone.

"OK, Corinne and Evan, stand here by the altar. Meg, you take the East, I'll stand in the South, Michael, you're in your usual position in the west, and Beth, that leaves--"

"North for the yente. That works. I'm an earthy sort of girl," Beth said, jovially.

The group took their places. Samuel removed several items from his messenger bag, and placed them on the table that would be their altar: black and white candles, a small incense burner, and a gold-handled dagger. He placed a cup of water and a tuft of green pine needles next to the incense burner. He placed a small votive candle behind each of the participants forming the circle. Samuel stepped back to assess the set-up. He lit a stick of incense and placed it in the burner. As the smoke rose to the ceiling, he retreated to the South position and began the ritual.

"We come here, to this place, stepping outside of time, recognizing the Power that binds us, inside and out." Samuel bowed to the altar, then to Meg.

Meg picked up pine needles and the cup of water. She dipped the needles in them, and walked the circle they'd formed, sprinkling water as she moved. After doing this three times, she placed the cup and pine needles on the altar and returned to the East. She bowed to the altar.

Mike bowed from his position in the west and approached the altar. He picked up the dagger. Pointing it to the ground, just behind Meg's position in the east, he traced an arc, from East to South. Gold light extended from the dagger, making the arc visible. The color of the light changed to red when he passed the candle in the South, then to blue when he passed West, then black when he reached North. On the second pass, the projected violet, then green, then orange, then white light. On his third pass, all the colors changed to a soft, white glow. The circle complete, Mike returned to the West and bowed.

"Let us call the Guardians of the Quarters," Samuel instructed, nodding to Meg, who raised her arms above her head:

"I call upon the East Wind! Bring your healing and the power of Air to us, Mighty Raphael! Help us remember the sky and the clean air granted us by the Goddess and her Consort, on this Solstice night!" .

The smoke from the incense appeared to form a spiral and climb to the ceiling. Raphael was among them.

Meg lowered her arms and bowed.

Samuel bowed and raised his hands:

"I call upon the South Wind! Bring your mercy through the power of Wisdom to us, Mighty Michael! Help us kindle the fire of Knowledge, on this Solstice night! Inshallah! "

The flames of all the candles in the room appeared to double in length, then returned to normal. Michael was among them.

Samuel bowed, then nodded to Mike, who raised his hands:

"I call upon the West Wind! Bring your message of love through the Strength of God to us, Mighty Gabriel! Help us grow in the love of one another, on this Solstice night!"

A rush of damp air seemed to swirl around the room. Gabriel was among them. Well, Gabriella was, since Michael preferred to See the Archangel in its female aspect.

Mike lowered his arms and bowed. Samuel then nodded to Beth for the last Call:

"I call upon the North Wind, bringing its damp chill of Winter Earth to us! Mighty Uriel, help us remember the miracle of the oil in the menorah on this Solstice night! "

The scent from the incense turned to that of fresh-turned earth for a moment, then returned to the smoky scent of Frankincense.

Beth bowed to the altar, and Samuel stepped to the altar.

"We stand, shielded by the Elements, from outside forces, that we may proceed with our Work," he said, formally. After one final bow, he relaxed his posture and smiled.

"OK, I hope all the ceremony didn't put you too off all that much," he said, looking at Corinne and Evan. "Once we've formally closed the Circle, things get pretty free-form with this group, the Witch over there in particular."

"Hey, that's not fair. The priest's people have been at this longer in context of the Assembly!" Meg retorted.

"Beer conversation. Let the man proceed," Mike said, with a grin.

Meg huffed, then blew kisses to them both.

The banter put Evan and Corinne a bit more at ease. They both visibly relaxed, mimicking Samuel.

"What we want to accomplish now is up to you two. Evan, you said you liked the aura that Corinne projected from the kitchen?" Samuel asked.

"Yes! It made the place feel like a true 'safe space' for everyone. I feel selfish in a way, though, knowing that being 'safe' will improve business," Evan said, a bit embarrassed.

Samuel turned to Meg for a response.

"That's not a problem, Evan. You'd make money without that aura. Maybe from different people, but you'll still make money. In the case of Celtic Bayou Gifts and Metaphysical Supplies, we deliberately project that 'safe space' feeling. In our case, it's, in a way, part of the security system. We make it distasteful for Bible-thumpers and the like so they don't come in at all," Meg explained.

"That makes sense," Evan replied.

"Then what we need you to do is to visualize the space you want. Don't think of specific people or types of people, think of emotions. Think of love, friendship, camaraderie, 'personal space' when you're grumpy or tired. Those kinds of things," Samuel explained. Corinne and Evan nodded.

While they were thinking, Samuel reached into his messenger bag and withdrew a small witch's cauldron, a tablet of paper, and a pen. He set them all on the altar, inviting Corinne to pick up the pen.

"Now, write down some of the emotions you've been thinking about. Evan, you take over when Corinne's done," Samuel instructed.

While this activity took place at the altar, Beth, Meg, and Mike stood in silence. Their energy was strong, offering Samuel support, but it was clear that this was his activity.

After Corinne made some notes on the tablet, she handed it to Evan. He flipped the page and wrote her own thoughts, not looking at his. After a couple of minutes, she exhaled and set pen and paper down. Samuel picked up the tablet, reviewed what they wrote, and then pulled the written sheets from the tablet, placing them on the altar. He returned the rest of the paper to his messenger bag.

"Now your lists of what you want and make them reality. Evan, Corinne, please take my position in the South, so the energy is balanced." Samuel gestured towards his original position. The pair hesitated at first, but walked to that side of the room, then turned to face the altar.

Samuel took a deep breath and picked up the two sheets of paper, one in each hand. He lit Evan's list from the flame of the white candle, and dropped it in the cauldron. Then he did the same with Corinne's list, using the black candle. Fire shot out up from the cauldron. Samuel stretched out his arms so his hands were above the cauldron, to either side of the fire.

As Samuel exhaled, he drew strands of light from the cauldron. The colors of the rainbow floated in bubbles above the altar. He gathered the bubbles into a small bunch, then motioned with his hands to move them to the room's ceiling. When the bubbles reached the ceiling, Samuel invited all present to raise their arms towards them.

"I call on the the Light, in the form of the Mighty Archangels to accept these petitions, making this room a safe space, inviting for all!" Samuel said, in a strong but inviting tone.

The Archangels accepted his petition! Yellow and violet light extend upward from behind Meg, followed by red and green from behind Corinne and Evan. The blue and orange of the West was next, and black and green light extended from behind Beth.

When the power of the Quarters converged above the altar, the rainbow bubbles all turned white. Samuel turned to Corinne and Evan.

"When I signal, use your hands to 'push' the energy into the ceiling," He instructed, then turned back to the altar.

Taking another deep breath, Samuel was ready.

"I declare this place a safe space and haven. May it benefit many for generations!"

He raised his hands above his head, and the others did the same. He then thrust his hands at the ceiling, followed by the others. The psychic force of the gesture struck the bubbles of light floating above them, pressing them upward. As they made contact with the ceiling, the bubbles appeared to pop, and their energy spread out over the ceiling and down the walls of the restaurant.

"One more thing," Samuel said to Corinne and Evan.

Samuel motioned for the pair to turn and face the wall. The others did the same, in their Quarters. On Samuel's signal, they all extended their arms outward and pressed the light and energy in front of them into the walls. The magical circle appeared to vanish when they pushed.

"The protections are still here. Instead of being a temporary sphere that we would dismantle, the energy is now in the structure. You can feel your desire for safe space now. It worked!" Meg explained to Corinne and Evan.

"Now we formally end our Work," Samuel said. He returned to the South position, and they formally thanked the Archangels for attending their ritual. The welcoming energy of the room remained.

"In the Wiccan tradition, we would complete the grounding process with a simple snack," Meg said.

Evan chuckled.

"I think we might be able to arrange that," he said.

"Blessed Solstice to all!" Mike exclaimed.

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