

One September Equinox I Danced Under the Harvest Moon

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It was such a strange thing, I thought, to admit you had fallen in love when love had such a bad mark in your book. The act of acknowledging the emotions intermittently nipping at the odd corners of your heart for some time, making you feel either nervously funny or funnily nervous – or both – made you feel like crying.

I felt like crying. Only I was not sure whether the tears were brought about by condensed happiness or sadness. I knew why I felt sadness, the familiar taste of it somewhat tainted my mouth in a subtle way like smelling cinnamon in a heap of sugar. After countless of times watching my brother invariably broke his heart each time he fell “in love,” his sorrow and dreams had been carved into my being.

My brother did not only wear his heart on his sleeve, he handed it to people without a second thought. He was the same even when he’s hurting – always patient, caring, understanding, and giving, to the point of being stupid. His heart always returned, crumpled and stained with heavy footmarks. This happened so often that I was sadly accustomed to the soothing monotone of his sobs, our visions both blurred by fat tears as I watched his figure curled against the wall on his side of the room.

He never said a bad thing about his heartbreakers and he never talked about his pain. But his sorrow crept into my bones nonetheless, like cold air entering a forbidden room. I always tried to talk him out of those toxic relationships but the problem was: he’s a bona fide hopeless romantic. He never lost hope in his rosy quest of finding “true love” and proving (I guess to himself, more than anyone else) that everyone was entitled to this ultimate meaning of a person’s life no matter who or what he was. But the truth as I saw it was him getting hurt and used by people he loved.

I honestly didn’t think I could handle seeing my brother in such a broken state again, not anymore. In fact, I vowed never to allow it since his last break up. I would stop all of his budding relationships until I was convinced that *that* person wouldn't trash his heart. I swore to myself I would do everything to make him happy, even if it meant I wouldn’t get to fall in love myself because truthfully, I didn’t think I’d ever believe in love until I saw my brother happy in a relationship.

And yet there I was conceding to myself that I had fallen in love with Marius. How fickle of me. How fickle of this heart. I felt like I betrayed my brother and myself. I was afraid that this would end up with my heart being trampled upon mercilessly. I had known him for roughly two months only and now this heart already snitched on me. But then, I reckoned, isn’t time relative? Isn’t there an objective length of time before actually calling what you feel as love?

Oh, my brother told me there's none! But I was wondering if he's wrong. And maybe this was why I felt happiness: that there could be the possibility of love – if not for my brother, then perhaps, for me? Oh, how I betrayed myself, I did not even know if Marius was on the same page as I did!

I first met Marius on the 25th birthday of my brother as I was pacing tentatively around the aisles of a perfume store. I wanted to buy a gift but choosing one scent in a sea of hundreds proved to be overwhelmingly bewildering! I wanted to ask for assistance from the staff but I was just too shy to do so. However, after what felt like eons, my face must have betrayed my frustration because there was suddenly a hand pointing to a spruce-colored bottle on the bottom shelf in front of me. I let my eyes wander from the pointing finger to a pair of stark-night black, intelligent eyes. Those were eyes that could drown you breathless if you were not careful. I caught myself staring and the owner of those eyes smiled, betraying an upper left crooked incisor.

I consciously jerked my head back to the bottle and took a perfumed paper in front of it. I sniffed and was engulfed in a slightly musky aroma – woody in not too strong way with a faint trace of sweet jasmine. Well, if my brother were a fragrance, he would smell like this.

“I just recently loved that.”

I was startled by his voice even though it sounded so kind. I turned to him again. Politely this time. I managed a smile, “This is for my brother. Today's his birthday!”

He's got high arrogant cheekbones and a clean-shaven face with two thick eyebrows arching over his daunting eyes. One rose a little higher and I thought I saw a shadow of laughter passed through his smile, “Well, I wish him a happy birthday!” He began to walk away and I didn't know what gave me the confidence of calling out to him that June morning but I just felt that it was really important for me to know his name.

“Marius.” He answered briefly after my almost reckless question.

He nodded when I said thank you and was completely out of the store in seconds. That was the end of it. Or at least what I thought was the end of it.

I saw him again at the school canteen three days after my brother's birthday. He was not wearing our school's uniform. Whatever he wore anyway, he looked dashing. I would have talked to him. But my shyness got a hold of me. I turned around, dismissing the idea of having lunch at my usual corner. Instead, I briefly wandered around the campus and decided to eat at one of the school's gazebo, fronting the botanical garden. I didn't have many friends and often kept to myself, even eating lunch alone every day. I think that's why I liked having lunch at the canteen, it didn't feel so lonely, watching people come and go.

Sitting unaccompanied at the gazebo for a long time, the quietness became overwhelming and I started to feel sad. I felt like a box slowly being opened by the shifting shades of the garden and the smell of the flowers, the light breeze, and the silence. My emotions started unfolding,

escaping out of me. A tear rolled down my cheek. I quickly wiped it with my elbow when I noticed someone enter the gazebo. He sat on the bench opposite me.

“Is it okay to share space?”

I began to search my bag for tissues, “Yeah, of course.” I was about to stand up when he spoke again.

“Aren’t you the girl from the perfume store? I never got your name.”

I raised my head, finally looking at him now and staring at his face.

I brushed away some stray hair from my face with my fingers. “Hi. Aya,” I said offering my hand. We were silent the whole time, just our spoons and forks making accidental sounds. And then the silence didn’t make me so lonely anymore.

“Do you eat here often?” He asked after we both finished our lunch.

“No. First time outside the canteen.”

He nodded his head, looking like he was supposed to say something but thought better of it and smiled instead. I looked sideways to the garden. A few minutes passed before he spoke again.

“In weakness and in strength, change can be amazing.”

Now it’s my turn to smile. “‘Honest by The Neighbourhood?’”

He shrugged his elbows in reply. “Is it true?”

“What is?”

“That change can be amazing?” He was looking sideways now, looking wistful.

The question struck me as something so personal. Too heavy a dessert after lunch. I contemplated for an answer, contemplating too long, in fact, that the 1:30 pm bell started ringing, and the footpaths suddenly crowded with students. Marius stood and collected his bag, and then he looked at me. “I’ll go now. Take care.”

All I managed was a nod. Can change be amazing?

That night, I was tossing and turning in my bed, thinking about his question. I felt uncomfortable as if there was some part of me that was sharpened into a disturbing focus. I must have annoyed my brother from my restlessness that he sat up from his bed across me.

“Just what it is, Aya?” There was a trace of irritation in his voice.

I sat up too, facing him. “Kuya, can change be amazing?”

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a second, shaking his head. “I don’t know why you are asking me that at this ungodly hour. But yes Aya, change can be amazing. It offers you fresh perspective. New experiences give you lessons and memories. Whether you like them or not, memories have something that will make you feel that you really lived. Of course, what are we Aya, but people made of memories? Change. Yes, the world is never constant, and we are only adapting to its patterns. Resisting is futile. So, change can really be amazing!”

He talked with a pitch higher than usual and there’s dreaminess in his voice. Pitch and dreaminess, it was a strange combination. It must be hectic at their office and I knew how much he hated it when someone disturbed his sleep.

“Did I answer your question? Go to sleep now.” His voice went back to its usual gentleness.

I was already tucking the sheets in and nodded to no one in particular. I turned to my brother and smiled, apologizing and thanking him. He looked straight into my eyes, “Do you have a problem?”

This time I laughed so suddenly that he began to laugh too, and we had been laughing for a minute without any idea why. “Believe me, kuya, you’ll be the first one to know if I do.”

And with that, he went back to bed. His answer offered some sort of satisfaction and allowed me to sleep. Just why that question was so troubling to me, I didn’t know. Maybe I felt that some big change was coming my way.

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A week passed and we saw each other again, both with our lunches on hand. I didn’t know what it was in me that always hoped for his presence during the days he hadn’t come to the gazebo. Every day since we met, I had been staring at the garden, then at my wristwatch, sometimes at my lunch waiting to be touched, waiting for his kind voice and probing eyes. He’s practically a stranger, but I felt some kind of a connection between us, and I felt the need to know what it was that linked us.

I had been hopeful during that week and during the whole hour of waiting every day, the silence felt like choking me. The garden mocking my desperate need for someone I did not even know what I wanted for. I ended eating just half of my lunch every 12:55, feeling more dreadful each day. I had lost hope Friday that week, but I still went on Monday, with just a little hope. So little that when I arrived near the gazebo and saw him sitting there, I found myself half-running and almost squeaking when I greeted him, flashing my smile, “Hi, Marius!”

Thankfully, he smiled back, “Hi, Aya! It’s nice to see you here.”

Suddenly I found myself breathing after a week of being strangled by the silence, the gazebo filled with an abundance of air. The garden’s flowers brighter, the butterflies more cheerful.

Almost every day after that, we found ourselves in front of one another for an hour, satisfying a deeper hunger. I learned he was studying for his Master's degree in our school, that's why he's not wearing the uniform. I felt like I had known him all along, deeply, although I didn't really know much about the details of his life. During the last eight weeks that I talked to him, I shared and learned so much about me. Both of us offering a piece of ourselves in our conversations. We talked about culture, books, films, social issues, politics, trivia, and whatnots.

Suddenly, 12 to 1 pm became my favorite time of the week. Time really was relative I concluded, an hour became as fast as millisecond when we're together – his eyes captivating me, drawing me away from the remaining 23 monotonous hours of the day. Our acquaintance had an advantageous effect on my boring life too – I started eating so much more than I normally did and I felt myself gaining weight. I also pushed myself harder during classes, thinking that if I finished my assignments and studied in between classes instead of studying during lunchtime, I would have less guilt on not studying at noon as I used to. It became a habit now, and I thought I might even make it to the Dean's List if this continued. I just hoped that I'd have the same effect on him too. Maybe, minus the excessive beating of the heart and the difficulty of breathing which were becoming uncomfortable as the days passed.

I consulted my brother about “excessive beating of the heart” and “breathing” one Friday night. We were having our monthly Friday movie night, watching “Flipped” when I remembered how I felt about Marius. I was wondering if I actually flipped, just like Julie Baker the first time she met Jace.

“Is it true what they say about falling in love? How the heart beats uncontrollably fast and how you're looking forward to meeting that person?” I asked, conscious not to sound too pushy.

He stared at me maliciously and laughed. “Why are you asking that? Come on now, Aya, are you in love?”

I felt my face flushed and took a handful of popcorn in defense. “I was just wondering, with all these films like Flipped, if it is really true. You have fallen in love *a lot* of times, so have you actually experienced those?”

He laughed again, obviously entertained by the topic. “Well yes, they're true, in my experience at least. The butterflies in your stomach, your heart racing, always thinking about the person, always wanting to be with him or her, all those clichés. They're real. And it feels so good to feel that, although somewhat scary.”

“Scary because of your heartbreaks?”

“Because of my heartbreaks.”

“They don't deserve you, kuya.” I said, mustering all sincerity in my voice.

This time, he's the one to reach for a handful of popcorn. "I don't think they deserve me too."

"But, when you feel those things, all those clichés, does it instantly mean you're in love with that person?"

"Hhmm. Not necessarily, sometimes it's just infatuation. How can you not know this when you're already in college?" He was placing extra emphasis on not.

I just shrugged my elbows and reached for more popcorn. "Maybe I'm just a late bloomer, I don't know... So this infatuation, true love thing - how do you differentiate them?"

"I'm not sure Aya. I think you just sort of feel it. I'm sure you can just google that if you're really that interested." He said, his eyes teasing me.

I rolled my eyes at him in response. "Come on, kuya, this is sincere. The next time you fall in love again, at least, I'll be able to say whether it's love or just infatuation. I might save your heart from another dent. See, for example, can you call it love when you've only met a person for less than two months?"

He got silent for a minute, and then shrugged his elbows. "Sure. Time's relative, anyway."

And that's when I decided that what I felt for Marius was love. *Might* be love. I was not really sure until I'd see him again.

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It was such a strange thing to admit you had fallen in love, when love had such a bad mark in your book. I was staring at him talk about the stars and the heavenly bodies, and everything around the gazebo became intense, more pronounced than ever. The air increased pressure. The garden so much more colorful it hurt my eyes; the gazebo smaller. My hands were sweating for 30 minutes now. And I was trying my best not to stare too long into his eyes, I might not come back.

So, is this me falling in love? Could it be that romantic love is true and possible? Would I be the proof that love will also come to my brother? Or will I end up like him? My heart returned, trampled? I wish not.

"Aya? Aya!"

"Y-yes?"

Marius had been talking, I only caught strings of words, about stars and sun and light trajectory.

He laughed. "What's with you today? Are you okay?"

Well, I just realized that I'm in love with you today. "Yes, yes of course! I just remembered something about some assignment."

"Is it important? Do you want to go now?" he asked, sounding worried.

"No, it's really insignificant! Sorry, what were you talking about again?"

He nodded, still looking a little worried. "I said did you know that we only experience an equal length of day and night twice a year?"

"It's my first time hearing about that." I must be blushing and I felt stupid. Now I began being so conscious of what Marius might think of me. The truth was that I thought we always had an equal length of day and night every day, but I kept my mouth shut. "When does that happen?"

"There are two equinoxes every year, in September and March. It is when the sun shines directly on the equator and the length of day and night is nearly equal. The September equinox occurs the moment the Sun crosses the celestial equator, which is the imaginary line in the sky above the Earth's Equator, from north to south. This happens either on September 22, 23, or 24 every year." He answered, leaning his head forward across the table. I linked my fingers together on my lap, feeling fidgety.

"How do you know all that?" I asked.

He sat upright. "Oh, my physics teacher introduced us to celestial alignments that one time in class. Really fascinating."

"It is fascinating!" I gaped at him, looking ever more stupid. "I mean it's so cool to know about it."

"There's more! The Harvest Moon rises every September equinox. It is when the moonrise comes soon after sunset. This results in an abundance of bright moonlight early in the evening. It is bigger, brighter, and more orange than the other kind of full moons! And--"

"Why is it called *harvest moon*?"

"In the days before tractor lights, the lamp of the Harvest Moon helped farmers gather their crops, despite the decreasing daylight hours. As the sun's light faded in the west, the moon would soon rise in the east to illuminate the fields throughout the night."

"Wow. It seems very useful!" How my heart beat so fast when our eyes met. My mind covered in a cloud of haze. I couldn't think straight.

"It is!" he answered animatedly. "And I remember all this because there's a book I read about a legend pertaining to September equinox. It is said that the moment the Harvest Moon rises, when you dance under it, sincerely wishing for something, it will grant your wish. But there is a little catch though. You should dance in a field of crops!" His eyes glimmering while he talked.

Should I tell him about my feelings now? But I don't want to spoil the mood, him being so excited while talking about celestial alignments. He and my brother would seriously, seriously get along. They are both astrophiles. I told him so.

"Well, I would like to meet him someday!"

"Oh, you would love each other! He's busy with his work now, though. Maybe one day soon. Anyway, it's late August now, when will this year's September equinox be?"

"On September 22."

"Are you going to dance?" I asked, absent-mindedly.

He laughed. "Is that a serious question?"

I didn't know how to answer that, so I just laughed back, almost thinking out loud: *If I'm going to dance in the middle of a rice field under the harvest moon on a September equinox, I wonder what my heart's desire would be.*

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The days went on smoothly. The twentieth day of September came. I was still very in love with Marius. Still hoping I could finally unburden my heart. I was afraid it was still too early and I might freak him out. And I was afraid of the aftermath. I thought about how my brother would react if he'd know about Marius and how I felt about him. Maybe he'd get too protective of me and would argue that pursuing this would only leave my heart broken. Honestly, I would follow any advice from him, even if it means not having lunch with Marius – ever.

I was supposed to ask him for advice yesterday but before I was able to, we had a fight. My brother was dating someone again, six months after he broke up with his last partner. I accidentally read his message when he left his phone on his bedside table and I caught a glimpse of "Do you want to eat out tonight?" I thought it was just his friend at work but when I read the sender's name, it was labelled "Mahal." I freaked out and confronted him, my nerves raging, my eyes blurred with tears.

"Kuya, who is this? Six months since the last time you were so broken, so broken you could not go to work because you cried yourself to a 49 degree fever! Do you not remember? You promised you'd just focus on loving yourself this year, on achieving a milestone in your career and giving yourself time to heal!" I slumped into the couch, my brother slumped beside me.

He held my hand. "Aya, this person is different. I'm sorry I've broken my promise, but I don't want to let this go. I can't let this go. This might be my last chance."

I pulled my hand away from his and looked at him with so much pain in my heart. "How many times have you said that, Kuya? Do you care about yourself? Do you not know how hard it was for me and for mama and for papa to have seen you suffering because of love? Are you aware I'm afraid of falling in love because of you? Because of your relationships?"

"Aya."

It was the last word I heard from him as I sauntered back into our room to collect my things. I decided to sleep in my parents' room. I was so angry with my brother. I was hurt and angry. I felt betrayed.

But staring at Marius, I felt the same amount of pain. Only that I felt it was I who had betrayed my brother. Maybe I became so enveloped with Marius' presence and his dark, sparkling eyes and smart mouth, and kind voice, and probing questions, and celestial-alignment-stories that I lost sight of my brother's tendency to fall in love every three months and of my goal to keep him from doing so. Maybe it's my entire fault that my brother had irreversible dents in his heart in this lifetime. Maybe even beyond, forever. Maybe--

"Aya?" Marius' voice reached me and abruptly put a stop on my racing thoughts. It sounded so kind, how could you not fall in love with this?

"Yes?"

"Do you have a problem?"

I smiled at him, tears rolling down my cheeks. "Would you come with me to dance under the harvest moon tomorrow? It's tomorrow, right?"

"What's the matter?" He handed me his handkerchief. Who brought handkerchiefs these days? I took it shamelessly, anyway. "Of course, I would go with you if you want to."

"It's just about my brother. I don't really want to talk about it," to this he nodded, "but would you really, really do it?"

He laughed but apologized right away for doing so, which made me laugh.

"Sure, I mean, you look so sad right now, it's honestly frightening." Another round of laughter from us both.

How could he make me laugh when my heart feels like lead today?

"And I don't have appointments tomorrow evening. But, are you sure?"

I nodded, "Very sure. I just want to wish for something really important."

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The rice field glimmered in green, brown, and yellow hues as the sun painted the sky in shades of reds and violets. The silhouettes of the mountains traced intricately against the vastness of the field, the grains swaying languidly with the lazy September breeze. I could smell the scent of the earth, it was intensely familiar – like remembering a mother, long forgotten. We were on Marius'

pickup, waiting for the Harvest Moon's desire-granting magnificence. I hugged my knees, feeling a little nervous. There was this idea that kept gnawing at the corner of my mind.

"Cold?" he asked, looking at the sun. Surely, the sun kissing the field goodbye was so much more beautiful than I was.

I shook my head. We were quietly soaking up the mystery unfolding in front of us.

I stood up and jumped out of the truck the moment the sun was swallowed by the earth. The moon was now rising. It was so bright around us I got goose bumps all over my body. How beautiful and heavy. Perhaps all things beautiful and worth a place in the heart were essentially heavy.

"Do we dance now?" Marius on my side, breaking the silence of twilight with his kind voice. I forgot about the dancing!

"You know, do we really have to dance?" I said, feeling a little funny now.

"Of course, it's a ritual!"

"But... how do we do it?"

He laughed, I laughed too. I loved how I was laughing when I was with him. We're both serious people and we were laughing. He was really like my brother.

He shrugged his elbows. "I don't know. I have no idea how to dance! Maybe, we'll just close our eyes and do awkward arm-flipping and kick around?"

"Are we going to close our eyes because of embarrassment?" I asked, just prolonging my time to ready myself. This wish was really important to me.

"Yes," he admitted, "we'll feel our emotion more and the moon will hear it better. I guess?"

Laughter.

"Is music allowed?" I asked. I downloaded Neil Young's "Harvest Moon" just in case.

"I don't think it will be detrimental." He answered, smiling.

I ran back to the car and grabbed my phone. "Are you ready to dance?" I asked, my heart bursting, Neil Young at the ready

"Better be," he answered. "The harvest moon has been on the sky for twenty minutes now."

Somewhat, I can feel his nervousness and excitement.

"Do we dance together?" he asked, shyly.

I felt my cheeks take the color of the moon and immediately shook my head. “I think we can concentrate more if we just dance separately?”

He nodded.

I took a deep breath and clicked the play button. I closed my eyes. A man’s deep, soothing voice started singing, in chorus with the crickets and night birds in the background.

*Come a little bit closer
Hear what I have to say
Just like children sleepin'
We could dream this night away.*

I started moving, raising my arms and stretching my legs. I felt awkward but dancing under the moon after the recent light show was so overwhelming, what I did didn’t matter.

*But there's a full moon risin'
Let's go dancin' in the light
We know where the music's playin'
Let's go out and feel the night.*

If I hadn’t known Marius, I would not have been dancing here, right now. I wouldn’t have had this surge of new emotions. Change can really be amazing, Marius! This is beautifully amazing Marius.

*Because I'm still in love with you
I want to see you dance again
Because I'm still in love with you
On this harvest moon.*

I didn’t want to be in love with Marius but this heart was weak. It did what it wanted. I was afraid.

*When we were strangers
I watched you from afar
When we were lovers
I loved you with all my heart.*

I must remember why I was there, why I decided to dance under the Harvest Moon. This one wish. I whispered inside my heart: *Oh, Harvest Moon, please never let anyone hurt my brother’s heart ever again. Please give him someone like Marius to love.*

*But now it's gettin' late
And the moon is climbin' high
I want to celebrate
See it shinin' in your eye.*

I hoped the moon hear my heart’s desire.

*Because I'm still in love with you
I want to see you dance again
Because I'm still in love with you
On this harvest moon.*

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I opened my eyes and looked at Marius. I thought I saw something glimmered on his cheeks. I stepped closer and hugged him. "Thank you for this, Marius."

He was startled and lost his balance but quickly recovered himself. He hugged me back, patted my back. Maybe this is getting too awkward for him? I stepped back, wiping my tears with the back of my hands.

"Should we go now?" he asked. I nodded.

We rode back to the city quietly. All along I was contemplating if it was the right time to tell how I felt about him. I looked out my window. The moon was on fire, the stars glimmering feverishly around us.

I think I should tell him now. "Marius?"

"Yeah?" He turned to me.

"Thank you again for tonight."

That killer smile again.

When I got home, I made it a point to apologize to my brother.

We had a deep talk about many things, things that mattered to us both. He talked about the "love of his life," the person he thought was gone forever but came back. They had been in a relationship. Five months now and counting. What could I do other than support him? I loved my brother very much.

Two days later, we were assigned in one of our minor subjects to interview the manager of our favorite restaurant. I promptly wrote a letter, requesting an interview with the manager of my and kuya's favourite restaurant. The interview went as planned. I was surprisingly fluent and smooth during the interview. The manager must have been impressed, he gave me complimentary dinner.

I thought I saw my brother out of the corner of my eye. As there weren't too many tables, it was easy to see who ate at what corner. I turned to look at the corner awash in the soft glow of conch light. He was there in our cozy nook, coincidentally dining with a friend. The friend looked painfully familiar. I was on the verge of tears. I pinched the thenar part of my hand in an attempt to stop it from happening. Thankfully, I managed to plaster a forced smile on my face as I approached the table.

“What a wonderful surprise!” I squeaked, hating myself for being too obvious.

My brother looked startled but immediately introduced me to his date. “Aya, this is Marius, the one I was telling you about. Marius, this is Aya, the best sister in the world.”

"Wow!" Marius exclaimed. "I never thought you're that Aya! This is mind-blowing!"

“It really is.” I said, affirming how mind-blowing the situation was.

My brother looked bewildered. He looked from me to Marius and to me again. They held hands. “You know each other?”

Marius nodded, looking at my brother then looking at me. "Aya is a really good friend of mine!"

I looked around as if looking for something – maybe a time-traveling device to bring me back to the past. “There must be something here Kuya, I’m having my allergies.” My voice was shaking. “I need to go to the bathroom.”

But before I turned to go I reached for their hands, squeezed them, maybe a little too tight. “I am really happy that you are together. You deserve each other.” I forced myself to look into their eyes. We must be a sight to behold!

I made a quick run to the comfort room as thoughts raced in my head. Maybe this is why they call this the comfort room, for people crying in public places. Of course what I feel for Marius is just infatuation, nothing more. How funny. What am I but a great friend to him. Of course, he is not interested in me, how could I have not known? Fickle, fickle, heart how you betray me!

I never thought the Harvest Moon would be that fast and that literal.

Maybe I would be dancing under it again on next year’s equinox, and this time convey my wish a little more clearly.