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## Constant as the Northern Star

by Nick Barrett

The last time I saw Rachel she was standing in a moonlit garden under the northern star, smiling with guileless, innocent pleasure to see me, her only slightly older, by six years, third cousin. I remember little else like the weather, phase of the moon or anything, but I probably remembered that particular astronomical detail because she has been the only constant in my life for so long.

When I next visited the house, three years later, pathetically hoping to see her standing in the same spot in the mid afternoon, the garden was deserted except for a red book, which lay sunning itself upon the gravel path. I was pleased to see the book, recognising it straight away. Rachel wouldn't be far away I thought, I was told by her mother in a letter long ago that she practically slept with that book. How I envied those red covers.

I picked it up, looking for the handwritten dedication from me. Yes, this was the one, a book of Shelley's poems, who I knew she had been studying in school and had fallen in love with. Full of messages for lovers, I believed.

I had given her the book on her 18th birthday, a suitable present from a cousin, I was assured by a lady in the village bookshop. Three years then since it struck me like a thunderbolt in that moonlit garden that I was in love with Rachel.

Every day since then that image of her standing there would come to mind. My heart and stomach would tumble together in some emotional duet that I wished I could stop, but kept playing over and over again regardless.

I bitterly regretted ever signing up for the career defining, surveyor's position on a large dam project in Kenya that had kept me away for so long. I begrudged every day I was being kept from an opportunity to tell Rachel how I felt and to ask her to marry me.

Letters had kept us in touch but I didn't have the words for what I had to say. I hoped just the sight of her would be enough to unleash some eloquence, but I was sure she felt the same way and would know what I meant whatever words I used.

I walked down the path that led to the river at the bottom of the garden and then I saw her coming towards me, her hair dappled by sun shining through the trees and arranged in a new, I supposed more fashionable, way, surprisingly wearing a scarlet dress, fitting tighter than in my dreams, and her figure perhaps just a touch fuller around the hips and breasts which suited her immensely I thought; but still the same Rachel. She looked right at me but her expression didn't change at first - I realised with shock that she hadn't recognised me straight away.

Then suddenly she did and the familiar smile broke out across that beautiful face as she shouted "Richard!" and ran towards me, throwing her arms around my neck and giving me the embrace I had dreamed of, that kept me awake so many nights. "Look at you," she exclaimed, "you've got so much bigger, and all grown up. It's brilliant you made it back for my birthday! You must meet darling Johnnie."

A slim youth, Rachel's own age I estimated, stepped round from behind her and confidently offered me his hand to shake. "Delighted to meet you," he said, "heard so much about you."

"Look what Jonnie's given me for my birthday," she said, thrusting a book I hadn't noticed she was holding towards me. "We met at a poetry group in London and got talking because he noticed some silly old book of Shelley poems I happened to be carrying. Now he's gone and got me a first edition, isn't he perfectly romantic?"

The red book cast aside on the gravel had delivered its message: I had lost her and I damned Shelley and all the poets.