

## STAR TO HEAVEN

by Barbara Haworth-Attard

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“You take care of Daniel, Anna! You watch out for him,” the woman cried from the back of the wagon. “We’ll meet in heaven!”

Past the giant oak, round the road’s bend, and the slave traders and Mama were gone.

“I’m sorry, Anna.” Old Amos touched her shoulder, then limped slowly up the lane to the big house.

Anna stood in the dusty heat, the splintered echoes of cracking whips, harsh shouts, and jangling iron chains settling about her. A small hand tugged her arm.

“Where they takin’ Mama?”

“I don’t know,” Anna answered shortly. Their master was better than some, but she’d heard stories of whippings that set her bones to shaking. It couldn’t bear thinking Mama might go to a master like that.

“Why did Mama say she’d meet us in heaven? Only angels in heaven,” Daniel said.

Anna looked down at him. “She said that? Mama said that?” she asked fiercely.

Daniel nodded. Her mind being so numb, Anna hadn’t even heard.

“We goin’ to heaven, Anna?” Daniel asked.

“Hush, no more talk ’bout heaven.” Anna hurried Daniel to the back of the big house.

“You fetch me some water. I need to heat the mistress a bath.” She gave him a shove in the direction of the well.

Later that night Anna lay on a pile of straw in the corner of their cabin. It felt strange not having Mama warm beside her. First her daddy had been taken, now her mama. She rolled over on her side to face Daniel. She had seen the traders look hard at him. It was a good thing he was small for his age. He looked younger than five years grown. But he was next; she could feel it in her bones. We’re not even people to

them, Anna thought. We're just things to be bought and sold, like that flower jar on the mistress's mantel.

Heaven. Anna turned the word over in her mind. Heaven was the fieldworkers' secret name for Canada. Mama wanted her to go to Canada.

"It's a land of milk and honey," her mama would whisper close to Anna's ear late at night. "Amos told me you just follow the North Star, and it leads you all the way. There a black person can walk right alongside a white person. There's readin' and writin' and payin' work in Canada. There's freedom."

Tears rolled down Anna's cheeks. Daniel was not going to be a bought-and-sold thing. They were going to heaven.

It would be best to leave on a Saturday night, Anna decided. Saturday night Master rode his horse to town, and Mistress lay in bed reading. Anna began hiding chunks of bread and cheese under her dress as she worked in the kitchen. Each night she wrapped the food she'd taken in a kerchief and stuffed it under her straw mattress. Then she'd lay stiff with fear. She told Daniel nothing.

On Saturday night Anna sat watching Daniel sleep. As soon as it was full dark, they would leave. Suddenly, someone swept aside the cloth over the cabin door. Anna jumped up, heart pounding, sure Master had found out about the missing bread.

"Anna?" Amos's voice came low. "Got somethin' for you." He pushed a cold, square box into her hands. Anna stepped into a patch of moonlight and saw she held a small tin with a fitted lid. She opened it, and inside were five matches and two pieces of paper.

"The box will keep the matches dry if you get rained on," Amos whispered. She lifted out the pieces of paper.

"It's dollars," Amos said. Anna hated to take the old man's dollar bills, but she knew she'd need them.

"Remember, follow the star," said Amos. "It's bright and stays fixed in place." He pointed out the cabin's tiny window into the north sky where a silver light hung low. "First there's the swamp. You'll need most the night to get through. Then there's mountains. I don't know what's after that," he whispered. He silently melted into the night.

Anna woke Daniel, holding her hand over his mouth to keep him quiet. She gestured for him to get up.

“Where we goin’?” Daniel asked sleepily.

“To heaven,” Anna whispered.

She had never been so tired. Black mud seeped between her toes and sucked at her ankles until every step was agony. First she had tried to avoid the stumps and roots, but she soon gave that up. She’d rather stumble and fall a few times than move slow. She wanted to be as far away from the house as she could come morning. Frequently she would look up through the branches and check the star, changing her course if needed.

Ghostly, twisted shapes loomed about her, and Anna realized the dark was lightening to gray. They should have been out of the swamp by now; leastways that’s what Amos had said. They would have to stay put for the day. She would only travel in circles without the North Star to guide her.

Anna found a large tree that had fallen, the roots forming a small opening. She cleared out dead leaves and animal droppings and pushed Daniel in before her. Lastly she pulled a branch in front of the opening. Instantly they were asleep.

“Anna! Anna!” Daniel was shaking her leg. She sat up, bewildered.

“Dogs, Anna! I hear dogs!” Daniel’s breath came in short gasps. Anna grabbed her bundle.

“Run Daniel! Go through all the water you can find. Dogs can’t get our smell from water!”

They ran, splashing through small streams, slipping on mud and falling over stumps. A field opened before them, and they crashed through the rows of standing corn. Anna’s side was aching so bad she felt split in two.

“Rest a moment,” she panted.

They flopped on the ground and waited for their breathing to steady. Then they could listen. Nothing, no dogs, no voices, just the wind whistling through the high cornstalks.

“We’ll be safe here awhile,” Anna said softly to Daniel.

She untied the kerchief and scraped green mold from a crust of bread. She broke the bread in two and handed half to Daniel.

“I’m thirsty, Anna.” Daniel was close to tears.

“I’ll get us a drink first thing it’s dark,” Anna promised. “Lie down by me now, and I’ll tell you a story. It’ll take your mind off bein’ thirsty.” She pulled the small boy beside her.

“You know that bright star over us last night?” Anna began. “Well, it shines over heaven. Heaven is a country called Canada. We’re gonna follow that star a long time. Probably take us ’til Christmas.”

“Mama says the Jesus baby was born under a star,” Daniel told her. “She say kings followed a shinin’ star right to the baby. You figger it was this star?”

“Might just be,” Anna told him. “It’s a pretty good star to follow, brighter than the others. And there’s somethin’ special waitin’ for you at the end.”

Daniel’s eyes widened. “What?”

“You’ll see when we get to Canada.” Anna hugged him. “Now you get some sleep. And Daniel,” she smiled, “you’re the bravest boy I know.”

When Anna judged it dark enough, they walked through the rows of corn. They traveled through field after field, until finally they reached a dirt road. She looked up and down it carefully.

“This road follows the star. Might be it goes all the way to Canada. We’ll walk by the side, rather than on the road itself,” Anna said. “We gotta be mighty careful, Daniel. They’re lookin’ for us.”

Anna lost track of time as they followed the road by night, hiding in the fields by day. It was in the dark hours before one dawn that Anna stopped walking. Shivers prickled her neck and crawled down her spine. Then she heard horses being ridden hard down the road. There was no need to tell Daniel. He was already running through the corn. Anna ran, too, until she caught Daniel’s arm.

“Stop! We’re makin’ too much noise. Get down!” she whispered harshly.

“I’m sure I saw somethin’ run into this field.” The voice sounded on her right. Someone was parting the corn and walking toward them. They tried to still their ragged breathing.

“Probably a ’coon or rabbit. Those people are right smart, like foxes. They’re not gonna walk right down the road just waitin’ for us to find ’em. I suspect they headed ’cross the fields and come out near the railroad tracks.”

Anna guessed the second man to be still on the road.

“Could be you’re right,” the first man muttered, turning back. It was a long time before Anna and Daniel moved, then they ran from the road.

They woke next evening stiff and wet. A drizzling rain seeped from a steel gray sky. There was no star to be seen, and Anna stood terrified, unsure which way to go. She had come to depend on that star. It guided her, gave her strength, and comforted her.

She squeezed her eyes shut, then began to walk.

“How do you know we’re goin’ the right way?” Daniel asked.

“I guess I got that star fixed in my heart,” Anna said. “It feels right to go this way. Keep walkin’. When it’s light, we’ll see where we got to.”

Rain and fog held the night late into morning.

“Anna, we’re walkin’ up.”

Anna turned and looked back at Daniel. He was standing below her. She had just been putting one tired foot before the other, not noticing that the land was rising. She looked ahead and saw the trail going up and up, disappearing into the clouds.

“We’re at heaven,” Daniel said joyfully.

“No, we’re at the mountains. Amos told me about them,” Anna said.

Thinking about going up that path made Anna’s throat squeeze so tight, she couldn’t breathe. She didn’t know how long it would take to cross the mountains, maybe forever. Two nights past, she had slipped into a shed and taken four eggs, leaving one of her dollars under an old hen. Two eggs, three ears of corn, and a rotten squash were all she had wrapped in her kerchief. The only thing they could do was go on.

“No one will come lookin’ for us in this rain, Daniel. We’ll just have a small rest, then keep climbin’.”

They traveled day and night, Anna deciding the heavy mist would hide them well enough. The sharp rocks sliced open their feet, and rain dripped on them from overhanging branches until they shivered from the cold. One night Daniel stopped, pointing up to the sky.

“There’s the star back, Anna. You followed it just right.”

Anna stood with her head back. Through the breaking cloud she caught a glimpse of the star. It was a wonder how she had followed it with her heart.

“I don’t feel so good, Anna.” Daniel was sitting on the ground.

She felt his forehead. Her hand came away hot and sweaty. She had been too scared to light a fire and dry out their clothes. Now Daniel had chills and fever.

“Stay here. I’m goin’ a little ahead and find you a place to rest.” Anna walked quickly. The trail sloped down, so traveling was easier. She found a small cave off the main path, and when she’d made sure nothing was holed up inside, she went back to get Daniel.

Anna covered her brother with boughs and leaves, then gathered bushes and branches for a fire. Daniel needed to be warm, and she didn’t care if slave hunters were about. Taking one of her matches from the tin, Anna scratched it on a rock, but the wind blew out the tiny flame. She took a piece of brown grass into the cave’s shelter and lit a second match. She held it to the dry grass, which burst into yellow heat. Quickly she thrust it into the brush piled in front of the cave. Then she emptied the tin box and filled it from a nearby stream. After heating the box in the flames, she made Daniel drink the hot water. All night Anna carted dead boughs to feed the fire while Daniel thrashed about and talked wildly.

“You’re gonna be fine, Daniel,” Anna told him. “We’re gonna follow that star to Canada and be there by Christmastime. There’s somethin’ special waitin’ for you there.” She held his thin body.

The morning sun was touching the tops of the pines. Anna was filling the tin box with water when she heard talking and a man’s laugh. She silently waded through the stream, crouched behind a wide tree trunk, and peered out. A small wooden house stood before her in a clearing. She could hear chopping sounds and voices from behind it. Anna thought hard. She and Daniel needed food. They couldn’t live on heated water.

She ran back to the cave and took her remaining dollar. Maybe the people at the house wouldn’t know her to be a runaway slave. They wouldn’t think runaway slaves would have dollars, she told herself.

She timidly rounded the side of the house and stopped. A white man and a black boy were chopping wood. Anna's eyes bulged. She'd never seen a white man work when there was a black boy to do it for him.

"Where'd you come from?" The black boy stopped swinging his ax.

The white man turned to face her, and Anna began to run. This was a master just like her master.

"Wait." The boy ran after her and grabbed her arm.

"Don't be scared." Anna tried to pull away. "Mr. Hendelman, he don't own me. I'm free. He pays me for workin'."

"I just wanted to buy some food." She held out the dollar bill.

"Are you a runaway? Are there more than just yourself?" the white man asked.

Anna dropped her eyes instantly.

"Mr. Hendelman is a Quaker," the boy said. "Quakers don't believe in slavery. We been helpin' folks get away from slave hunters."

Anna slowly raised her head, and for the first time in her life, she looked a white person fully in the face. The gray eyes meeting hers were kind. The boy nodded at her and smiled. Anna looked at the neat house in the clearing, the blue sky above, and the rounded green mountains. She looked again into the white man's eyes.

"My brother is up in a cave over there." She pointed behind her. "He's real sick. I'm scared he's gonna die."

"You're that brother and sister from South Carolina, aren't you?" the boy asked. "I saw reward signs posted up in Covington."

Anna nodded.

"You come all this way to Virginia on your own." He looked at her, shaking his head. "My name is Sam Johnston."

Anna felt a warm happiness flow through her.

"I'm Anna," she told him.

The wind was cold, carrying the lake smell to Anna and Daniel as they stood at the boat's railing, watching the snow-covered shore draw closer. Sam was with them. He had safely shepherded them from hiding place to hiding place, until finally they'd

reached northern Ohio and boarded the boat that would take them across Lake Erie to Canada. The ship's captain came up beside them.

"Unusual to be able to sail in December. Lake's not even froze proper yet, but cold's coming." He pointed at the chunks of ice floating past. "I'll just make it back to Ohio, then have to dock there 'til spring."

The cold didn't bother Anna. She was warm in her new clothes. The shoes felt strange, probably because she wasn't used to wearing such things.

"It's Christmas Day," Sam said.

Anna turned to Daniel. "See that land? That's heaven, Daniel. We made it. The star brought us all this way."

"But what's waitin' special for me there?" he asked.

Anna smiled down at the small boy.

"Freedom."