

# *Anya and the Stars*

(An Advent Fairytale)

by Cindy Baldwin

Once upon a time, when the world was new, there lived a young woman named Anya, whose mother was the sun. When Anya was little, she rode across the sky in her mother's golden chariot, but as Anya grew older she fell in love with the green earth. She loved the tall trees and lush grasses and the sweet, shy animals who lived in them.

During the first summer Anya spent on earth, her mother hovered nearby, watching. It made her happy to see Anya's excitement as the flowers bloomed and the birds sang in the treetops. The days were long and the nights were warm as the sun hardly slept, so busy was she watching her daughter.

But as the year grew older, the sun knew that she needed to begin her journey to the winter lands. She spent less and less time with Anya; and as the days began to grow shorter and colder, the green leaves of the trees turned gold and fell to the ground, and the flowers dried up and scattered their seeds to the wind.

Anya saw that when the darkness swallowed up the afternoons and the icy wind howled around the bare branches, many of the animals she loved found places to sleep away the cold, dark days. The bears lumbered into their mountain caves. The snakes slithered into warm crevices in the earth. The frogs burrowed under warm mud. Ducks and snails, bats and bees all found cozy places to wait for the sun's return.

Without her mother near, Anya grew cold and lonely. Now there was no green grass to run on in her bare feet; there were no sweet strawberries to eat while the juice dripped down her face. Anya wished that she, too, could curl up in a cave, like the bears, to dream away the cold days. But her body was not a bear's, and she was not made for such a sleep; and besides, somebody still needed to care for the world and its inhabitants during the long winter nights.

On one of her mother's all-too-short visits, Anya told the sun how difficult life had grown. "The nights are so long and the days are so cold," she said. "No flowers bloom, and no birds sing. How am I to make it until you return from your winter journey, Mother?"

The sun thought for a moment. She was much older than Anya, and she knew that the short, cold days of winter were an important time of rest while the earth prepared to burst into

springtime bloom. But she loved her daughter very much, and it hurt her bright heart to see Anya so gloomy.

“Tonight, when I have gone, go outside and look up at the sky as it grows dark,” she told her daughter. “I will send you a gift—a light to brighten your darkness. Each week until the year turns and I begin my journey back from the winter lands, I will send you another light. They will burn until the days begin to grow long again, to remind you that even in the dark nights of winter, you are never alone.”

And with that, she kissed Anya’s hair and flew away in her golden chariot, back to the winter lands.

When her mother’s brightness had gone and the sky was black velvet, Anya did as her mother had instructed and went outside to look at the silver stars that twinkled above her. No sooner had she come outside than one star, brighter than the rest, fell from the sky, leaving a trail of silver stardust in its wake. The star streaked down through the bare branches of the trees that ringed Anya’s cottage and landed gently in her outstretched hand. It was warm and bright, lighting the whole forest with a friendly golden glow.

Anya cut branches from a nearby evergreen tree and twisted them into a wreath, green and smelling of spice and wild air. She placed the star carefully into the wreath, where it burned merrily, casting dancing shadows on the walls of Anya’s house.

All that week, the star burned, keeping Anya company and brightening the long, dark nights. After a week had passed Anya went to stand under the stars again, and again, a new star fell into her waiting hands. She set it in the wreath beside the first, and together, they gave twice as much light to her little house.

As the dark weeks passed and the stars in Anya’s wreath continued to burn brightly, others in the forest began to notice. The squirrels, shivering in their nests, crept close enough to see the silvery glimmer of starlight on their bushy tails. The foxes, wearing their thick winter coats, waited nearby, hoping to feel the warmth on their soft paws. The deer, with feet quiet as the snow, peeked in the windows to see the stars shine.

Anya welcomed all of them in.

And people came, too—from other homes in the forest and from the nearby village, all of them hungry for the bright starlight. They brought things to share: the last apples from their cellars, bread fresh and warm from their ovens, grain for the animals, and stories to tell as they gathered together around Anya's stars.

By the third week, Anya wasn't alone when she went into the woods to wait for the third star her mother had promised to send her. When it fell into her cupped hands, the people and animals around her—her friends—cheered. And when she placed the star into the wreath with the others, their light shone brighter than ever.

And so it was that Anya passed the darkest days of winter surrounded by laughter and celebration, friendship and warmth. When the day came for the fourth star to fall, Anya realized that the time had passed so quickly it hardly felt as though it was passing at all. After she'd collected the final star and placed it into her wreath, the light inside Anya's heart was as bright as the light that shone from her four stars.

Even though her mother was far away and the days were short and cold, Anya felt warm.

Soon enough, the year's shortest day had passed, and it was time for the sun to begin her journey back from the winter lands. When the days began to grow longer again and Anya's mother returned to the forest, she found that her daughter wasn't sad and lonely anymore. Instead, Anya's little house was full of warmth and light—the foxes nestled by the fireplace, the squirrels chattered from the rooftops, and Anya's human neighbors visited often, bringing gifts and stories to share.

“Thank you for the gifts of light, Mother,” Anya told the sun. But as the sun's warmth spread over the forest, waking up the sleeping trees and teaching the birds to sing again, the sun held a secret in her heart: that the light that helped Anya through her darkest days wasn't from the stars she gathered to brighten her home, but from the love and friendship she'd found in the world around her.