

Colony

by Dorothee Lang

"It won't work," I say to Nina while I put today's newspaper and a box of beeswax candles on the counter.

My daughter ignores me, determined to believe the announcement on the shiny magazine cover: "*Magic sea pearls. Grow your own neon starfish.*"

"Believe me, it's a fake," I try again, even though I know that I might as well argue with the sparkly hanging balls that surround the counter: Nina has made her decision already.

The guy behind the counter shrugs. He is dressed in a silly red sales suit, probably a student helping out. Or maybe I am wrong.

"It's your choice," I say to Nina. "If you want to spend your money on cheap magic, that's fine with me."

Nina logs the line as a victory.

Back home, we try to find a fitting vessel for our future neon starfish colony. "Let's start small," I suggest, and pull out one of the jam glasses.

Nina thinks in reef-size.

We settle on the punch bowl.

I rinse the bowl, trying to remember the last time I used it. Then I start to make tea. "Sandwich or yogurt?" I ask.

But Nina is gone already, to hunt for reef stones in the garden.

When she is back, she takes almost an hour to arrange the stones. That's the bit that leaves me puzzled: this sudden patience. And the shapes that form, under her clumsy fingers. She even digs up her old plasticine box and pieces together a palm tree in orange and green. She glues the tree on one of the top stones. "For shade," she explains.

When Nina is finally finished, we add water. And salt. Then it's done: the punch bowl has become a starfish home. We place it on the window sill in the kitchen, right next to the plastic figures that

are supposed to be ninja yaks, but always make me think of lowing cows.

Nina lets the magic pearls plop into the water, one after another.

We gaze into the bowl.

Nothing happens.

Told you so, I think.

“Well,” I say, “maybe it takes some days for the magic pearls to turn to dust and then crystallize into starfish.”

Nina looks at me, her eyes wide with anticipation. The concept of irony is lost on her yet.

That night, I dream of the sea, of swarming fish. Of real reefs, huge and dark and full of hidden gaps. Home to things we don't even know of yet. Things we wouldn't carry home.

When I wake, I am almost sure that starfish will appear in the bowl. Or rather: that they have been there, in the night, while we slept.

“Still nothing,” I say to Nina when she runs into the kitchen that morning. The scene repeats the next day, and the one after that. She starts to grow impatient.

“Maybe the starfish wouldn't like the bowl anyway,” she says.

“Maybe,” I answer.

But every time I gaze at the bowl, I can almost see them there, in the reef. Waiting for the night. For the dreams. For the colony they were, the one they will become again, once.

