

Nthabi's Star
by L. F. S. Alden
created for the real Nthabi in 2002

"Please, may I sleep with the window open?" Nthabi asked her Daddy as he tucked her in.

Daddy put his finger on the tip of her nose and peered closely at her. "Won't you feel cold, little one?" he asked.

"Please, Daddy? The quilt will keep me warm!"

Daddy grinned. "OK, sweetie. You can fall asleep with it open. I'll check to see if you're warm when I come to bed." He kissed her lightly on the forehead and tucked the quilt all snugly around her shoulders. "Good night, Nthabiseng."

The crashing surf sang a lullaby both rhythmic and wild and soon Nthabi fell asleep.

Just at midnight, just at the peak of the tide, at the very moment that the rays of the round moon shone into Nthabi's window and splashed across her face, she awoke. She sat up and thought that she could feel the soft touch of moonlight on her face and arms. What had woken her? She didn't feel cold, she hadn't had a dream. Did she hear something outside?

Pulling her blue and white quilt around her, Nthabi knelt up on her bed and peeked out the window. The tree outside looked all silvery and shimmery in the moonlight and breeze. Everything looked as it normally did - except what was that? A tiny little light darted behind the tree and around a corner.

Just as quickly, a second light zipped across some of the yard to Nthabi's left. Nthabi was feeling curious, wondering who made the little lights. They were too small to be flashlights. Could they be fireflies?

Suddenly, a third tiny light flew right toward Nthabi, up, up, past her window toward the roof, and Nthabi gasped with delight. She had seen what the tiny lights were, and never had she seen anything so lovely!

The small glow had come from a teeny, tiny little person, with wings and a long dolphin tail. Nthabi watched and listened closely.

She heard a sweet, wild voice whispering loudly down from the roof. "I can't find anything here. Are we *sure* this is the right place?"

A little green glowing person flew right up outside of the window to answer. "It said 'where princes danced on waves' - and this is the shore where those Hawaiian princes came to school and showed everyone how to surf! I don't know if that's what the poem means, but if it doesn't, then I'm out of ideas!"

The tiny green man with a dolphin tail looked so serious and silly at the same time that Nthabi laughed right out loud. *That* caught the little man's attention, and he looked right at Nthabi, with the moonlight caught in her hair. She smiled at him, but he yelped, "Ooops!" and backed away.

"Please don't fly away!" she said.

He stopped and watched her.

"I want to be your friend!"

The voice from up above the roof called down. "Whom are you talking to, Liam?"

Nthabi's little green friend looked sheepishly at Nthabi and called up, "I've woken one of the Big People."

That made Nthabi laugh again. "I'm not big, I'm little!" She was pleased to have been mistaken for a big person, though. Sometimes she wanted to be bigger.

"Well, hello, Little," said the little green man. "I'm Shell."

"My *name* isn't Little, I just meant that I'm not big. I'm Nthabi." She reached out through the open window to shake his hand. He solemnly took one of her fingers and flew up and down to shake it.

"Pleased to meet you, Nthabi! We didn't mean to wake you up, but my friends and I are searching for something most 'specially important.'" He turned up again to speak to his friend up on the roof. "Her name's Nthabi and she's very nice."

Nthabi grinned. "I'm a little girl. What are you?"

The other little person flew down beside Shell. She had long raspberry colored hair. "We're sea faeries! I'm Anemone. If you live here, maybe you can help us search."

"Well what are you searching for?" Nthabi asked.

Shell and Anemone looked at each other. "We're not *exactly* sure. We need something to help us take care of a seed. We're supposed to find something from all the way across the world, and we're supposed to be able to find it here in this neighborhood!"

Nthabi thought about that one. The world was certainly a big place. She got tired just walking all the way down the street. She thought about the big ball with a picture of the Earth on it that she played with outdoors. Her Mamma had shown her something with a flashlight about day and night the other day. When it's daytime here in Santa Cruz, it's night time in...

"Hey!" she piped, "I'm from all the way across the world! I was born in Africa!"

"Wow!" said Shell. He looked at Anemone. "Do you think???"

Anemone said that it made a lot of sense, and she started whistling to all the other little sea faeries that were combing the neighborhood.

Shell looked very serious and asked Nthabi, "Would you come with us to help the seed? It's going to sprout tonight, and it has to be taken care of by something - that's you - from the other side of the world. That way it will know that it belongs to the whole world."

Nthabi looked pleased. "I'd love to help." Then she thought a minute. "But I'm not supposed to go out without a grown up from my family. Should we wake my parents?"

"Hmmm," thought Shell. "Parents might not believe in sea faeries. Then we'd disappear. Hang on..." Shell concentrated his face and blinked his eyes hard and...

Suddenly, Nthabi heard a friendly woofing down in the yard. It was Cousin Maya! Maya was running around wagging her tail and looking pretty excited. Shell grinned. "I just sort of made a little magic spell to find the grown up in your family who believes strongest in faeries. Then her own adventurousness followed my spell back here!"

Nthabi nodded and reached for her bath robe. Since Maya was grown up for a dog, they could go together with the sea faeries. "I'll meet you down by the kitchen door!"

Shell laughed. "Why don't you fly?" He held out his tiny hand and waited for her.

Nthabi cautiously reached her hand back out the window. As she carefully leaned on the window sill, she felt her body rising up off the bed! With a huge grin on her face, she glided out the window and Shell led her down into the yard to land gently on her feet. Maya quickly ran up to her and gave her two wet dog kisses. Nthabi knelt down and hugged Maya. "It's good to see you, girl, did you see the faeries?"

Maya looked about her and answered. "Sparkly, flying magicky-magics. Smell like seaweed. Very fun. Go to beach?"

By this time, Anemone had rounded up a dozen of other sea faeries, each one with a dolphin tail and big, fluttery glowing wings. One of them had a big basket over one arm. This one - who was blue - flew over to Nthabi and handed her the basket.

Nthabi peeked inside and found a beautiful white pearl! This one wasn't round like the moon, but longer, a little bit like an egg, and it nestled in a bit of soft sand in the basket.

"This is it," said Shell, "the seed that's going to sprout tonight!"

"What do I do?" asked Nthabi.

Anemone and Shell looked at each other again. "We're not *exactly* sure. The instructions say to go to a place of hope where the sea meets the land. We thought we'd fly along the shore until we found a place of hope, whatever that looks like."

"A place of hope?" echoed Nthabi. "Where the sea meets the land?" She pictured the rugged cliffs nearby. What would someone hope for there? "I know! How about the brick lighthouse on the cliffs? A lighthouse is certainly a place to hope that all the boats and sailors stay safe!"

"Hooray!" shouted all the sea faeries, and together they flew up.

"Help!" yelled Maya, when she started to float up in the air. "Four feet, no ground, still moving!"

Nthabi laughed at how silly Maya looked with a sea faerie holding her tail. "It's OK, Maya, it's OK. We're just going to fly to the lighthouse!"

Maya quieted down, but still did not look pleased. "Four feet, no ground," she muttered, and felt better when she flew close enough that Nthabi scritch'd her ears.

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Nthabi had never been out to the lighthouse at night before. Thick mist was curling up along the cliffs, and the breakers glowed with phosphorescence. She looked close and tried to squint at the sparkling waves. She looked back at Shell and Anemone who had their own glow - green and raspberry. She furrowed her little brow and demanded, "Is it really tiny creatures that make the glowing?"

Anemone laughed a laugh that sounded like a fountain. "Well, we *are* rather small, but it's actually sea faeries surfing!!"

"And falling down a lot," added Shell, "since it's officially cheating to fly while you surf, we sort of tumble down a lot when we get to the breaker part of the wave."

Nthabi nodded. "When I'm big enough to surf, I'll remember not to fly at the same time." Many afternoons, Nthabi and her Mamma had stood at this lighthouse watching the women and men surfing here so gracefully, and she knew she would try to do it one day.

"But what do we do with the seed?" she asked.

“We’re not *exactly* sure,” answered Shell, “but it has something to do with a dance.”

“That’s what the poem says, anyway, “ added Anemone.

“What is this poem?” Nthabi asked.

Shell spoke up. “We found a poem one day when we were treasure hunting.” A faraway look crept into his eye and he recited.

When something’s rough & hurtful,
The Great Blue Oyster doesn’t fight
He smoothes it over with beauty
And makes magic for the night.

Where princes danced upon the waves
Find treasure from across the world.
In hopeful place where sea meets land
She’ll dance to wake the pearl.

The fitting name for the tiny gift
With all that a true name means
Lifts it above the sea-ringed Earth
For wishes, hopes, and dreams.

Nthabi and the other faeries were silent while he recited, listening to the words. Maya was sniffing at some rocks. “I don’t understand all of it,” said Nthabi.

Anemone shrugged. “Neither do we. You should have seen us trying to find the Great Blue Oyster. We thought it was some very big oyster monster far down in the deeps. Turns out that Great Blue is the name of a bay in Australia which is full of oysters. And then we had to learn how

to get the pearl without hurting an oyster. But now we've found you, and *you're* from across the world. So you can dance to wake up the pearl. I think."

"Well," said Nthabi looking around her. "I dance better with music..."

Several of the faeries perked their tiny pointed ears. "Music? We can do *that!*" they said, and quickly gathered up stones and hollow bits of grass and filled tiny shells with sand. In less than one minute, the sea faeries began shaking and tapping their instruments, and the grass-blowers joined in just as wild and sweet as the wind.

Nthabi was caught by the beauty of their song and raised her hands up high to dance. She twirled her body and swirled her arms, she danced slow and fast with the music, she danced when the faeries began to sing. She felt the moonlight begin to dance with her and then Maya joined in, making circles around and around her. Some faeries brought in long ribbons of light to twist through the air.

Finally, the music ended like the cashing of the breakers, and Nthabi fell down on the grass, laughing. Maya gave her more dog kisses then lay there panting, "Round and round, happy feet!"

Suddenly Shell cried out, "Look at the seed!" They all turned and looked and saw that it was growing! Nthabi quickly opened the basket, took the pearl out and held it in her hand. It grew and grew, shining brighter and brighter until it was almost as big as a soccer ball.

"I guess we really woke it up," said Nthabi. "Now what do we do?"

Anemone looked at Shell. "We're not..."

“I know, I know,” laughed Nthabi, “you’re not *exactly* sure. What comes next in the poem?”

Anemone answered. “The fitting name for the tiny gift, with all that a true name means. But how can we tell if the name fits? And what’s a true name?”

Maya spoke up. “Maya Fourfeet Greatheart. That’s me. Says what I am. True name.”

The friends all thought and thought about what a glowing pearl would be named. They almost did not notice the sudden swirl of light far off in Steamer Lane. Closer and closer, like a spray of fireworks, came a splash of water and phosphorescence and magic arcing along a long breaker.

“It’s the Queen! It’s the Queen!” shouted some of the faeries, and they all took up the cry. Shell zipped to Nthabi and grabbed her hair. “It’s Queen Aquarya, come and see!”

Nthabi scrambled up and started to fly with Shell over the rocky cliff, but Maya was scared to fly again.

The Queen was closer still, a tall elven woman with long sea-drenched copper hair filled with sea-stars and kelp. Her pearl-colored wetsuit reflected the cool moonlight and her great wings sparkled every color of the rainbow. She looked up toward the lighthouse and kicked her surfboard. The front tipped up and up! into the air rose her board, soaring through the air to land gracefully near Nthabi and Maya. All the sea faeries hovered around her, making the place quite bright.

She turned to Nthabi and spoke in a gentle voice. “Hello, Nthabiseng Marilyn Helene. Hello, Maya Fourfeet Greatheart.” Nthabi remembered

her grandmothers whom she was named for and all the memories and stories of Africa as well, all just by hearing her name.

Maya was rolling over and resting her paws on Queen Aquarya's knees as the lady knelt on the grass.

"How did you do that?" asked Nthabi. Then she remembered her manners. "Good evening, your Magickness. Are you here to name the seed?"

The Queen's beautiful laugh rang out. "No, Little One, *you* are here to name the seed. And I could do it because your name fits you. It honors your grandmothers and your own life. It honors places all over the world: your birth-land and your home-land and a land you will explore when you are a grown woman. And it is beautiful and sweet, just like you. In my language, it means 'Makes the World Happy'."

Nthabi's mouth opened. "It does?!"

The Queen nodded. "That's you, Little One." She took one of Nthabi's hands in her long, cool one. "Now, what will you name the star?"

"A star!" Nthabi echoed in amazement. "The seed is going to be a star!" She turned and picked up the glowing seed, now almost as big as she was. She held it lightly and whispered. "I think everyone needs a little Happiness. I name you Nthabi."

She released her hands, and the star flew up, up into the night sky where it shone and twinkled brightly for all the world to wish upon, and hope, and dream.