tiny, floating Coral

This story starts with a tiny coral planula floating through the ocean in a soup of plankton. **It is an animal looking for the perfect place to settle, divide and grow.** Learn about the remarkable life of coral, how it feeds, starts a colony and becomes a part of Australia's Great Barrier Reef – the largest coral reef ecosystem on Earth. **This story ends with a fold-out map.** Are you ready to think big?

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£10.99
ISBN 978-1-9167800-3-3

A CIP catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library.
Printed in China with FSC paper and eco-friendly inks.

START SMALL, THINK BIG

Unfold a world of discovery with this series that takes readers from the small and familiar to new areas of knowledge where you really have to think big.

TINY, FLOATING CORAL

Auld • La Scarlatte

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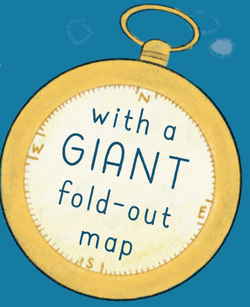
START SMALL, THINK BIG

tiny, floating Coral

by Mary Auld



illustrations by La Scarlatte

Here I am, a tiny floating coral planula. I am a minute animal drifting through the ocean, looking for the perfect place to live and grow.

A planula is the early stage in the life cycle of the tiny animals called polyps that form a coral reef.

Ocean water is full of microscopic life – lots of different plants and animals too small for us to see.

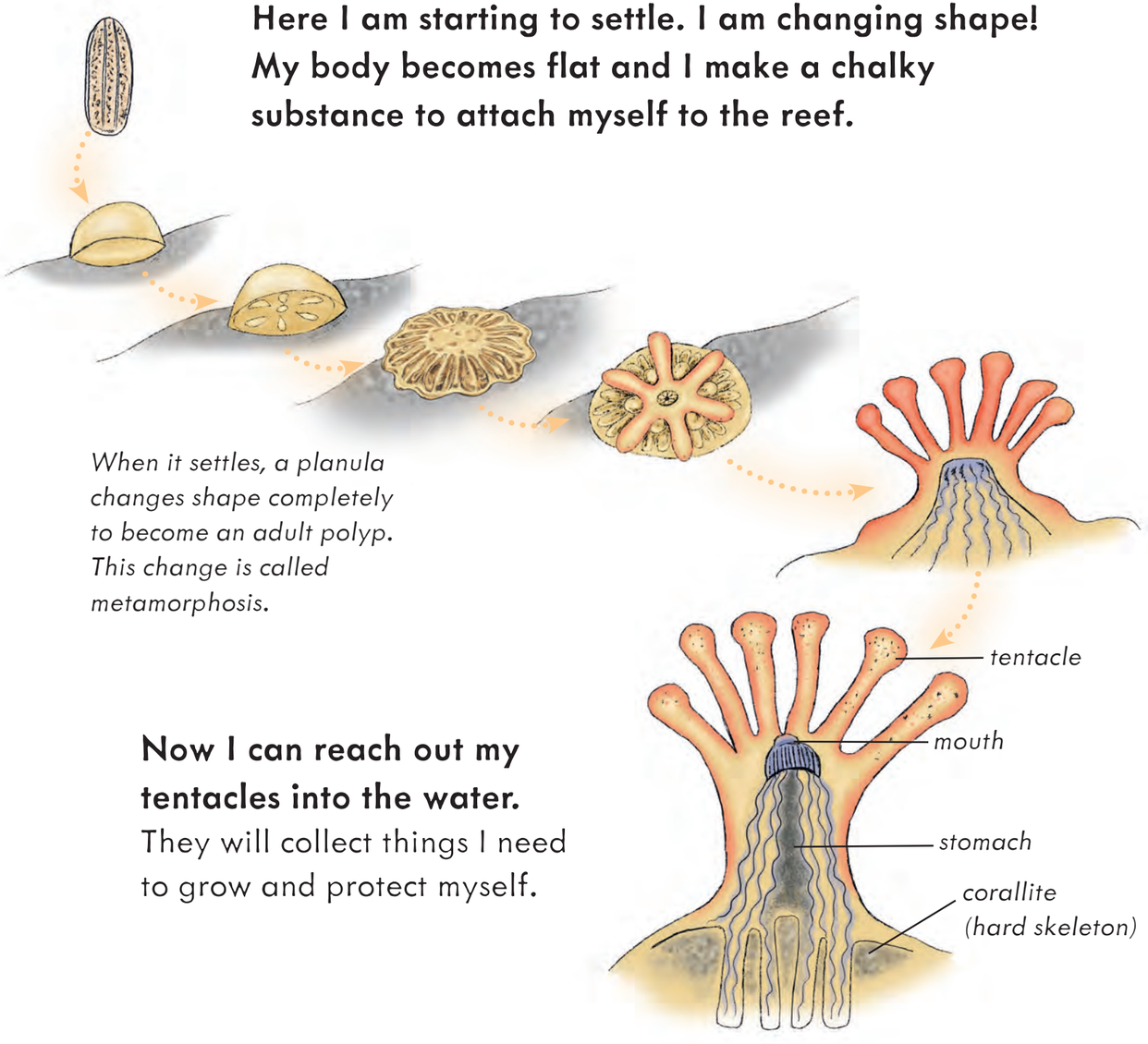
Here is a coral reef. I will settle here, where the sea is warm and calm. Can you find me?

Coral reefs grow in shallow water off the coast, in warm, tropical seas and oceans.

A planula usually settles on healthy coral reefs where there is lots of other life around.

A planula senses a good spot to grow. It uses tiny hairs to move down to a space on the reef.

Here I am starting to settle. I am changing shape! My body becomes flat and I make a chalky substance to attach myself to the reef.



When it settles, a planula changes shape completely to become an adult polyp. This change is called metamorphosis.

Now I can reach out my tentacles into the water.
They will collect things I need to grow and protect myself.

Here I am splitting in two!
I am budding – making a new polyp.
This new polyp will split, too. We do this again and again. We will become a coral colony.

A colony is group of animals that lives and works together.

An adult polyp splits to make a copy of itself.

Each polyp makes a hard skeleton, connected to the previous one. The hard skeletons build an amazing shaped coral colony.

Here is my colony. We are called smooth cauliflower coral. To grow fast, we need food!

Corals need energy to grow. They get some of this energy from microscopic food they catch in the seawater, but they need much more.

smooth cauliflower coral

We have a secret food supply. Tiny life forms called algae live inside us. Algae make food from sunshine and share their food with us.

The coral protects the algae inside its body. In return, the algae give some of their food to the coral.

The algae inside the coral polyps are called zooxanthellae (zoo-zan-thell-ay).