

NIHLA MEETS FATIMA

Nihla smiled at Fatima, the baby, just moments after she was born. Full and bright, Nihla smiled radiantly at the baby girl. Her cool gaze washed over the little island, off the tops of coconut-laden trees, and bounced off the green waters of the lagoon.

The island was so little that it was only a speck in the middle of the big blue ocean, a smudge with nothing around it for hundreds of miles. So teeny that the tiny tots of the island could run around it in a half a day. So tiny that a teeny turtle could swim around it in an hour. Too minute for a map. Too small for the world.



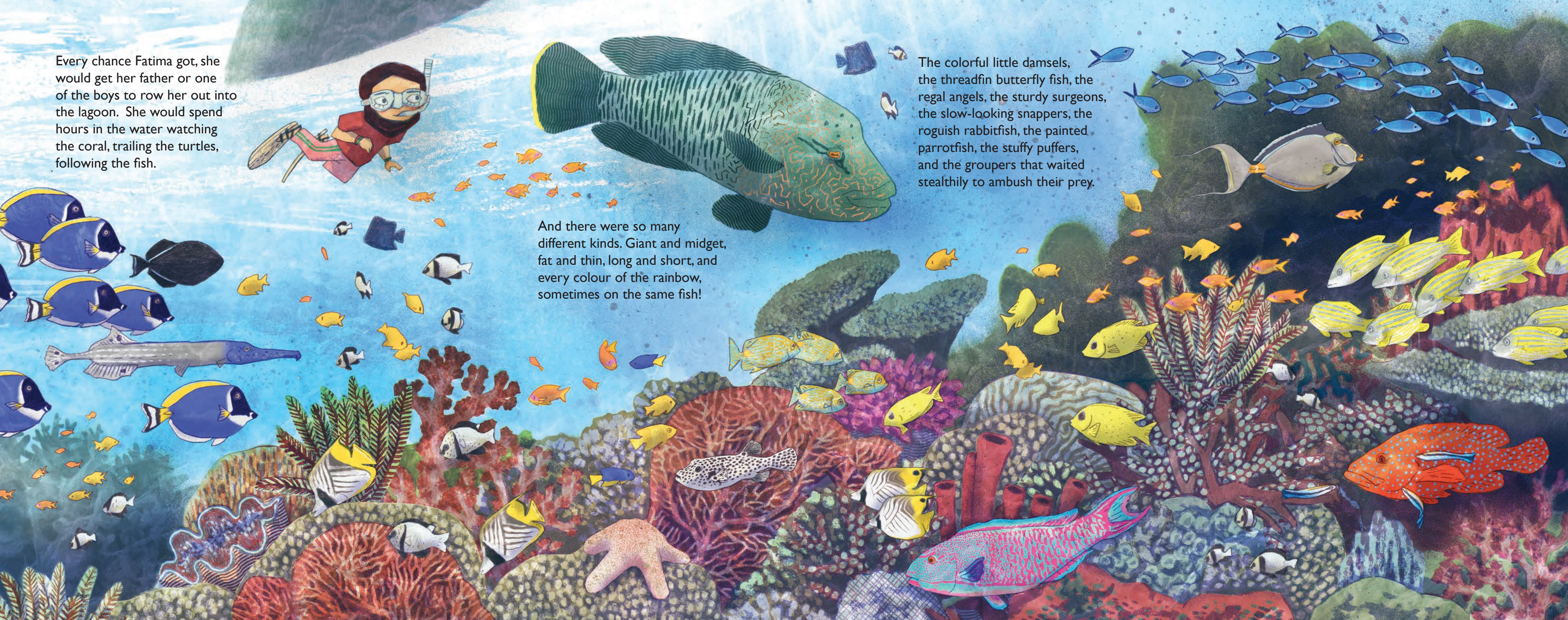
And Fatima grew up there, smelling the salt air all around her, the white sand of the beaches below her cradle, the open ocean to her left, the lazy lagoon to her right.

Every chance Fatima got, she would get her father or one of the boys to row her out into the lagoon. She would spend hours in the water watching the coral, trailing the turtles, following the fish.



And there were so many different kinds. Giant and midget, fat and thin, long and short, and every colour of the rainbow, sometimes on the same fish!

The colorful little damsels, the threadfin butterfly fish, the regal angels, the sturdy surgeons, the slow-looking snappers, the roguish rabbitfish, the painted parrotfish, the stuffy puffers, and the groupers that waited stealthily to ambush their prey.



One day, while Fatima was snorkeling, she saw a big green turtle, a male with its long tail protruding behind it. She had seen it in the lagoon many times. This time, she decided to follow it as it lazily swam on. It was an old turtle, with crud on its carapace, and half a flipper missing. What shark had chewed on this grizzled giant, she wondered.



There had once been hundreds of green turtles in this lagoon but now there were just a few. Her father said that the turtles had eaten all the seagrass here and then gone to other islands to feed there. They are pests, he said, eating all the grass in the lagoon and leaving the fish with nowhere to rest, breed or hide. He said that was why there was so little of the baitfish they used to catch the tuna. But watching the old male drift languidly through the green waters of the lagoon, Fatima could not bring herself to dislike him.



And where had he traveled — thousands of miles across the open ocean? Fatima imagined herself swimming across open seas and meeting wondrous sea creatures along the way.