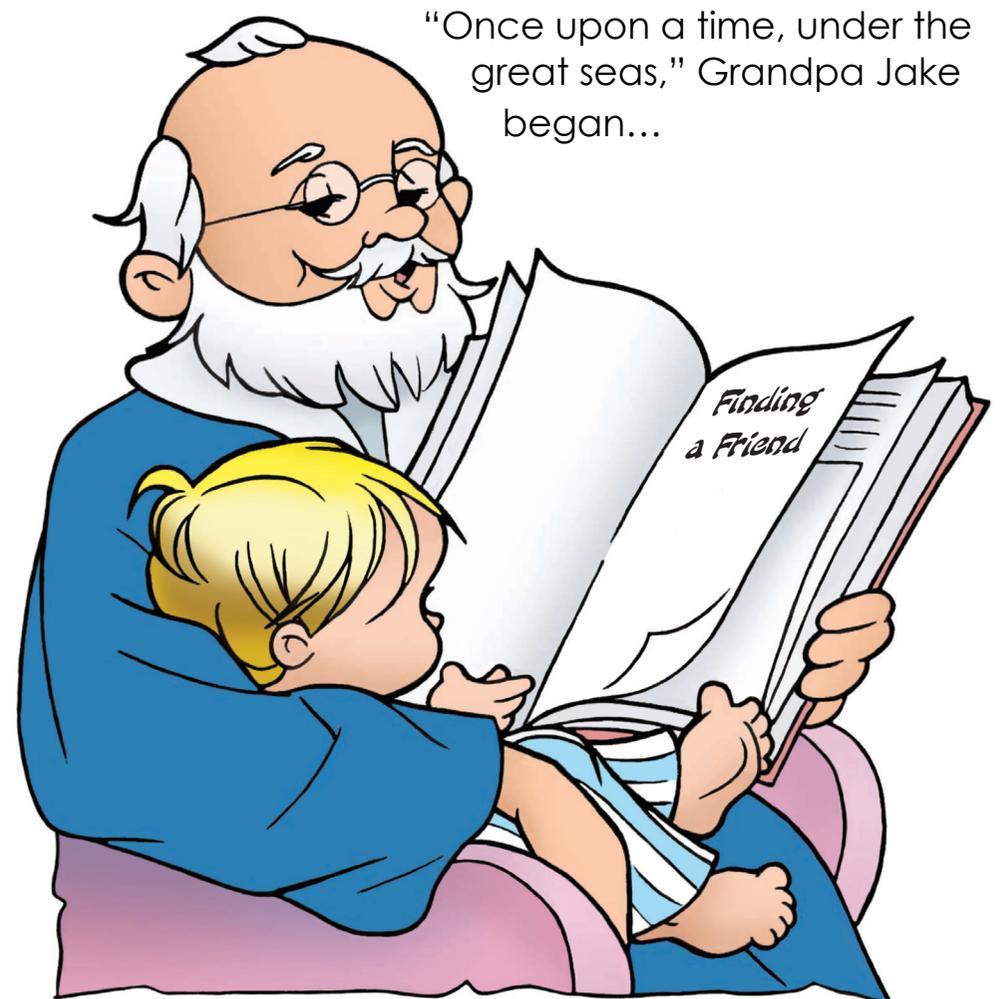




"Grandpa Jake!" Tristan called. "What story will we read tonight?"

The thumping of little feet bounding down the stairs echoed throughout the house. In came Tristan wearing his pajamas, eager for story time with his grandpa. He climbed into his grandpa's lap and wiggled until he was comfortable.



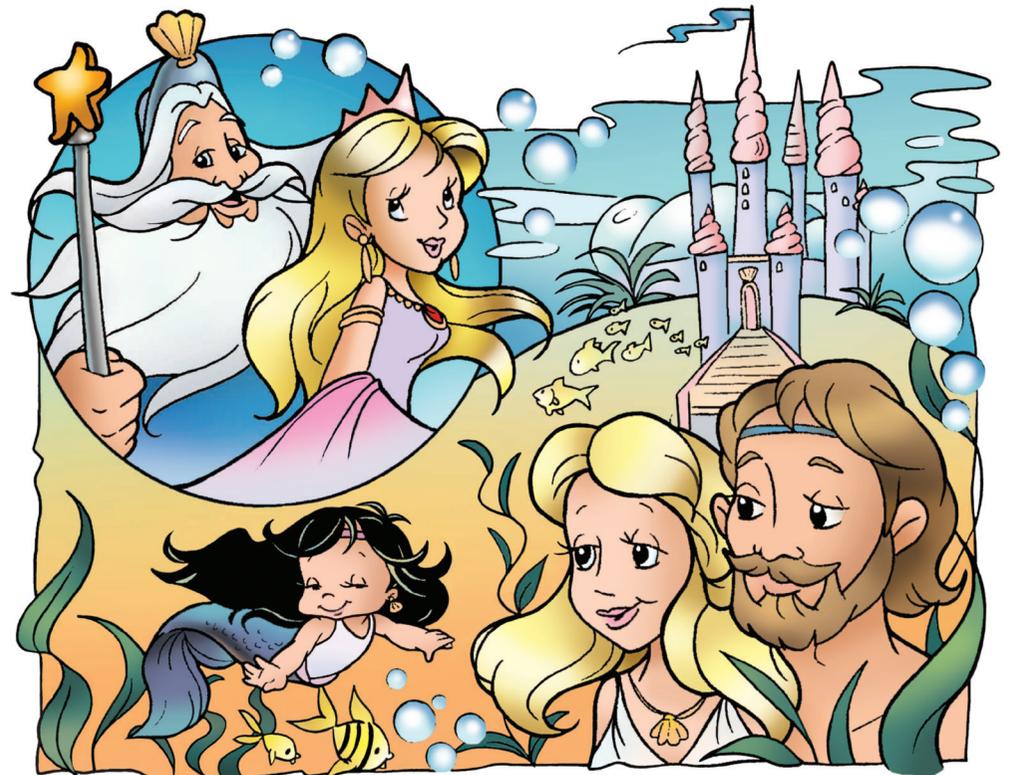
"Once upon a time, under the great seas," Grandpa Jake began...

...there lived a mermaid named Camille. She had long, flowing hair, as black as night, and a sparkly tail of purple scales. In one way Camille was different from other mermaids: She was very small—smaller than every other mermaid.



Camille's mother and father loved her dearly. Together they lived in the underwater Kingdom of Shadda with all the other mermaids and mermen. The Kingdom of Shadda was beautiful; it was ruled by King Orthan and Queen Xaria, who were both kind and wise.

The tower was Camille's favorite place in the castle. Up there, Camille would sit and watch everything that happened down below in the kingdom.





Her best friends were Shallo, a seahorse, and Clip, a crab. They had a special hideout in a nearby reef that no one, except for the three of them, knew of. Their times together were filled with laughter and fun.

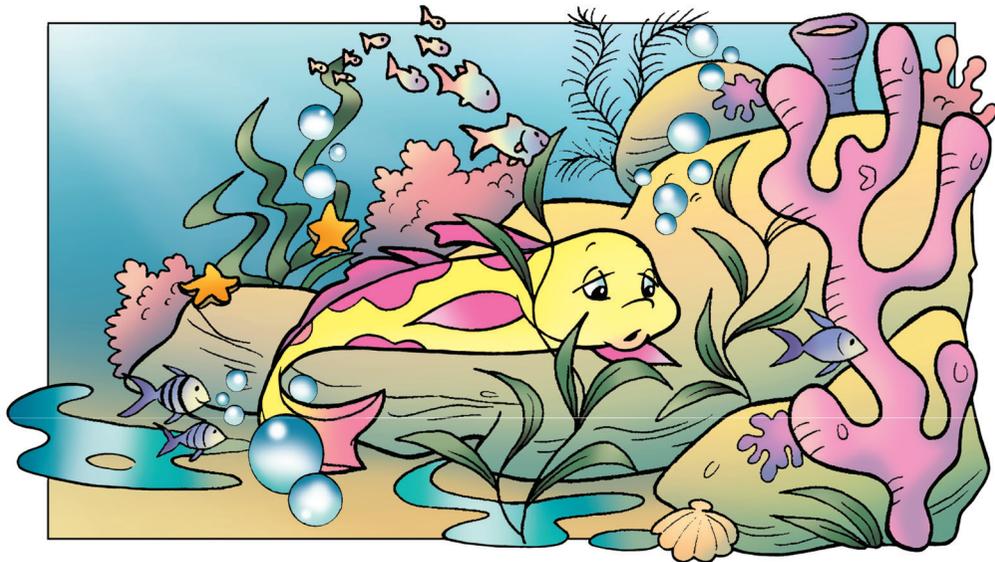
One day Camille was feeling lonely, as Clip and Shallo hadn't been able to visit her. She swam up to the tower and began to sing a little song to cheer herself up. Usually this worked, but today it didn't.

Down below her in the great castle, she could see people preparing for a celebration, stringing decorations and preparing food. Everyone was busy.

*I don't like being so small, Camille thought. I wish I were bigger like all the other mermaids, that way I could help with the party.*

*She began to cry. Nobody likes me except for Shallo and Clip, and because I'm so small I'll never be able to do anything for the king and queen.*





In the distance was a large coral reef, speckled with bright and diverse colors. A variety of fish and sea creatures lived in it, but one fish in particular seemed lost and lonely—a little goby fish named ... Goby!

Goby would often hide in the coral, and you could hardly see him. He hid because he was very shy.

"I wish I had a friend," sighed Goby. "But I don't. I wonder if anyone would want me for a friend. Probably not. Why would anyone want to be friends with a little fish like me?"

Suddenly Goby heard a commotion off in the distance. It was coming from the undersea castle.

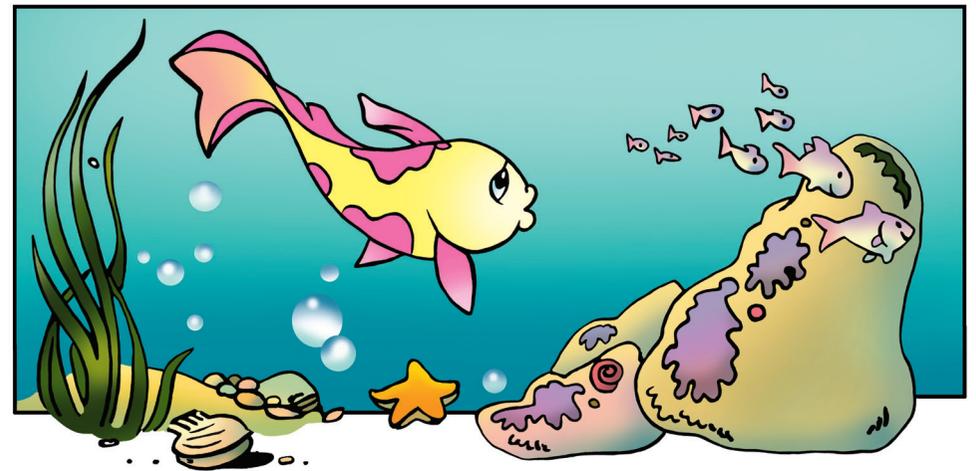
*I wonder what's going on at the castle?* he thought.

Goby quickly emerged from the coral reef, only to bump into Old Budder Blowfish.

"I'm sorry, Old Budder," he stuttered.

"You seem rather impatient to get somewhere. Where are you headed?" asked Old Budder.

"I heard some noise coming from the castle. Do you know what's happening?"



“From what I hear, young Prince Cadis is celebrating his fifth birthday. The whole kingdom is busying itself with the preparations. Are you going to join in the entertainment over at the castle?” Old Budder asked.

“I don’t know that I can.”

“Of course you can! Didn’t you hear? All the fish and sea creatures of the area are invited. That would include you, little Goby.”

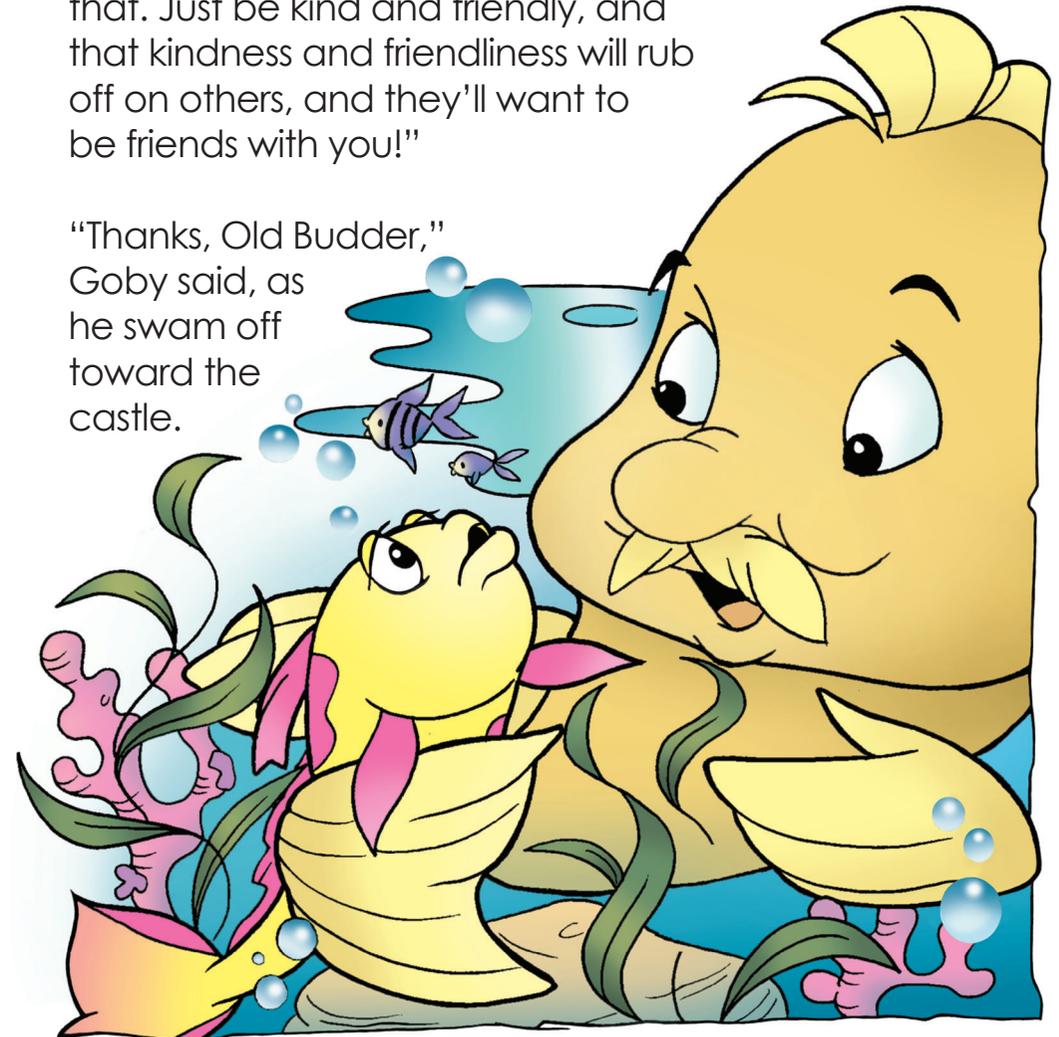


There was a moment's silence, then Old Budder with a chuckle and a wag of his fin said, “Ah, little Goby, if you want friends, they are not going to magically appear! You have to go out of your way to find them!”

“But I don’t know how to make friends,” Goby said.

Old Budder laughed. “Don’t worry about that. Just be kind and friendly, and that kindness and friendliness will rub off on others, and they’ll want to be friends with you!”

“Thanks, Old Budder,” Goby said, as he swam off toward the castle.



On his way to the castle, Goby heard laughter and merriment. He felt very shy and quickly swam up the tower to get away from the crowd. At the top he noticed a little mermaid by herself, crying.

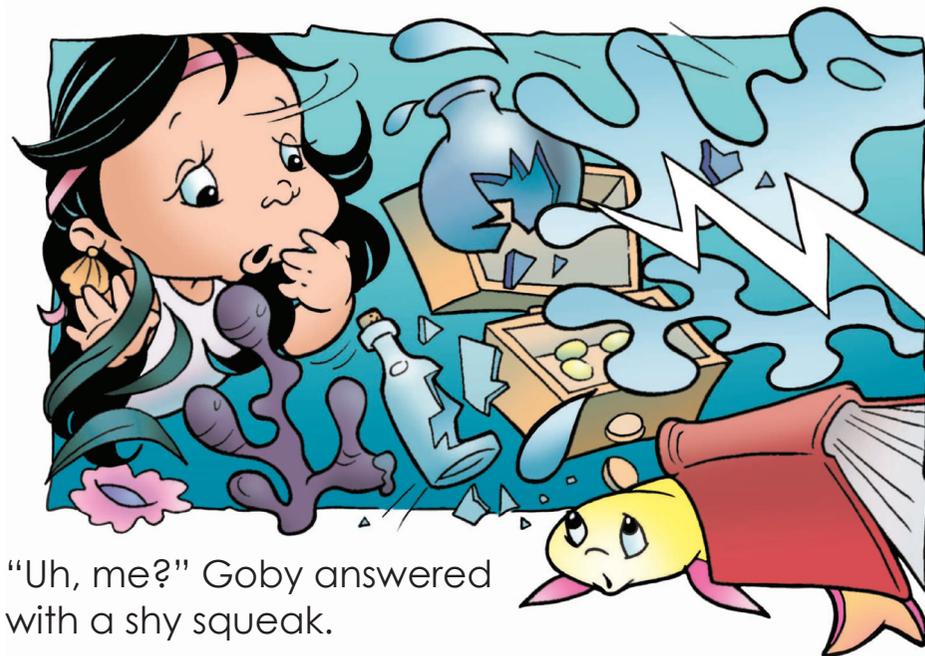
Quickly, Goby decided to leave the tower. *I'm sure she doesn't want to be disturbed right now!* he thought. But in his haste to leave, his tail knocked a shelf. It fell to the ground with a bang.



BANG! CLANG! CLUNK!

Camille turned to see a colorful fish quickly swim past. Curiously, Camille followed him.

"Who are you?" she asked.



"Uh, me?" Goby answered with a shy squeak.

Camille giggled. "Who's 'me'?"

"Goby," he answered.

"Nice to meet you, Goby."

"You too." Goby said. "I'm sorry about the mess."

"Don't worry," Camille said. "I bang into that shelf quite often. We can pick things up together."

Goby felt shy, but he remembered what Old Budder had told him, so he decided to give it a try.

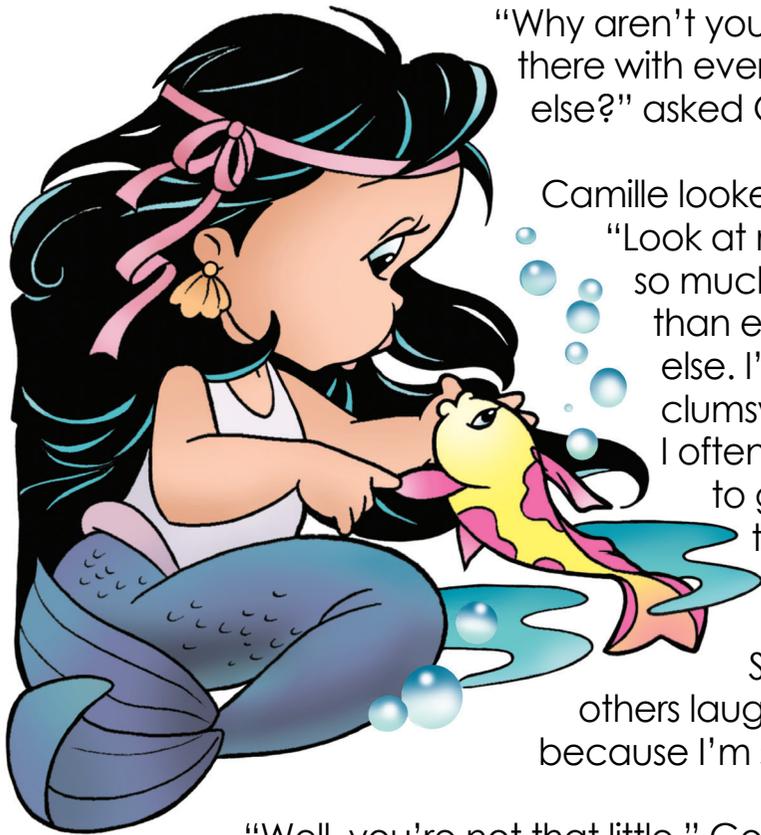
"Do you come up here often?" Goby asked.

"It's my favorite place," she answered. "But this is the first time I've seen you here."

"I haven't been up here in a while."

"It has the best view," Camille said as she looked over the tower railing. "You can see everything that's happening in the castle from up here."

The two watched the commotion below.



"Why aren't you down there with everyone else?" asked Goby.

Camille looked down. "Look at me! I am so much smaller than everyone else. I'm kind of clumsy too, and I often seem to get in the way."

Sometimes others laugh at me because I'm so small."

"Well, you're not that little," Goby said.

"Besides, I'm small, too."

"Camille ... Camille!" two voices echoed in the tower.

"Who's that?" Goby asked.

"Oh, that's Shallo and Clip," Camille said. "Come, Goby, I want you to meet my friends."

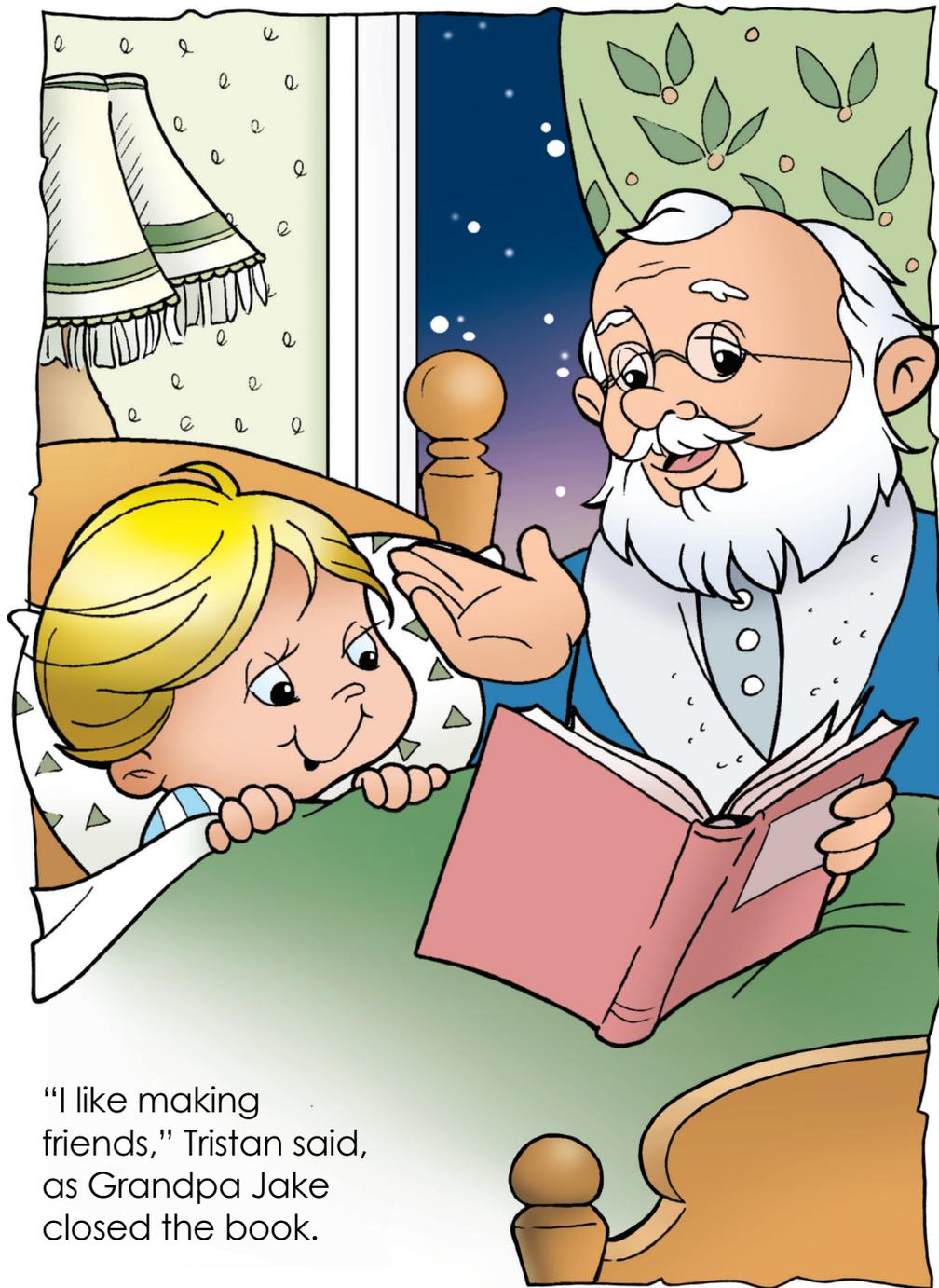
"New company, I see," Clip said.

"This is my new friend, Goby," Camille said with a smile. "Let's go play together around the reef."

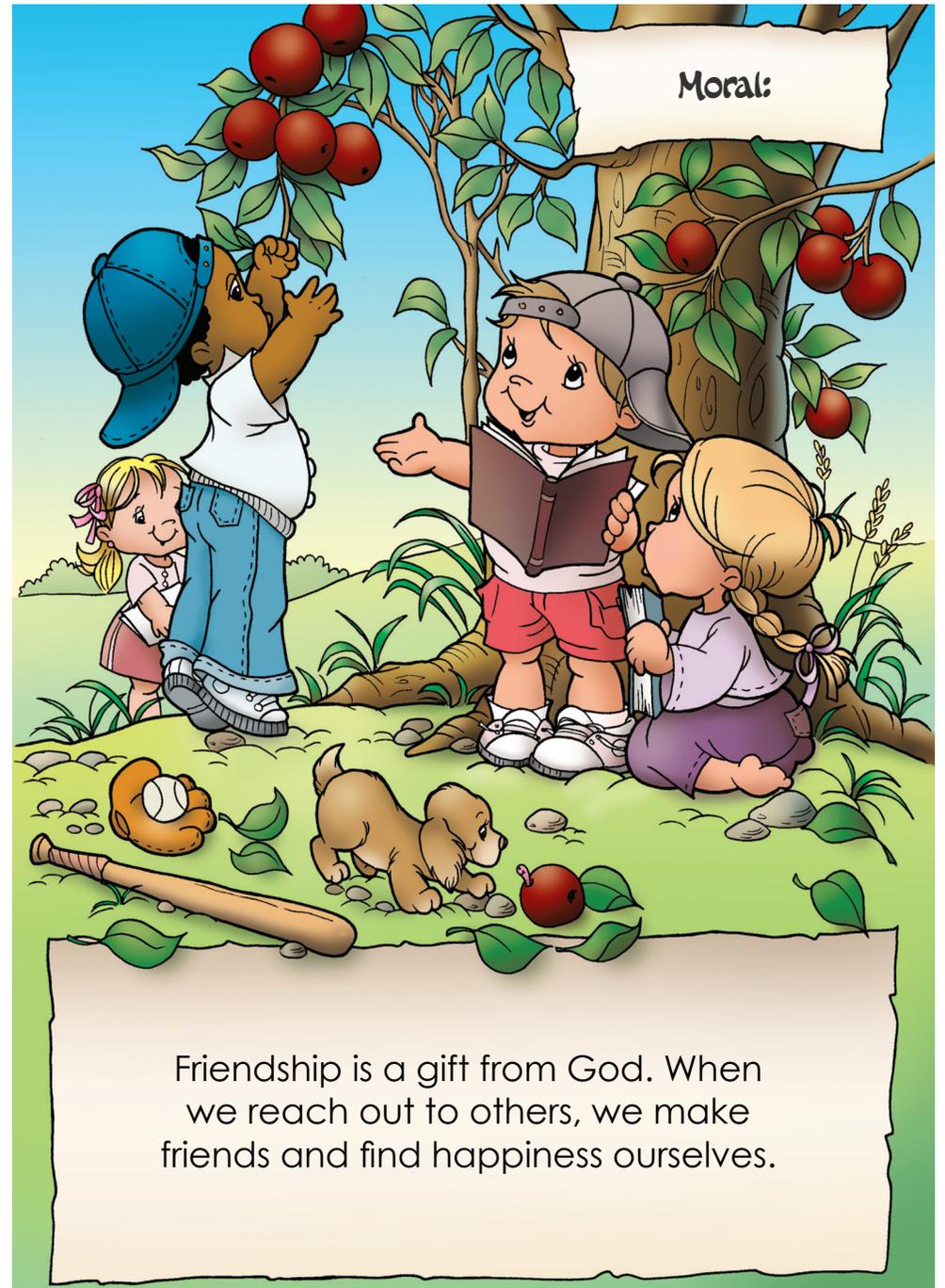
"Sure," Shallo said enthusiastically. "We love making new friends."

Old Budder had been right! Goby didn't feel as sad and lonely as he had before when he took the time to make new friends.





"I like making friends," Tristan said, as Grandpa Jake closed the book.



Moral:

Friendship is a gift from God. When we reach out to others, we make friends and find happiness ourselves.