

LEO AND THE OCTOPUS

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CHRIS
NIXON





For all the Leos of this world, and especially for my very own one – I.M.

For Ollie and Isla – C.N.



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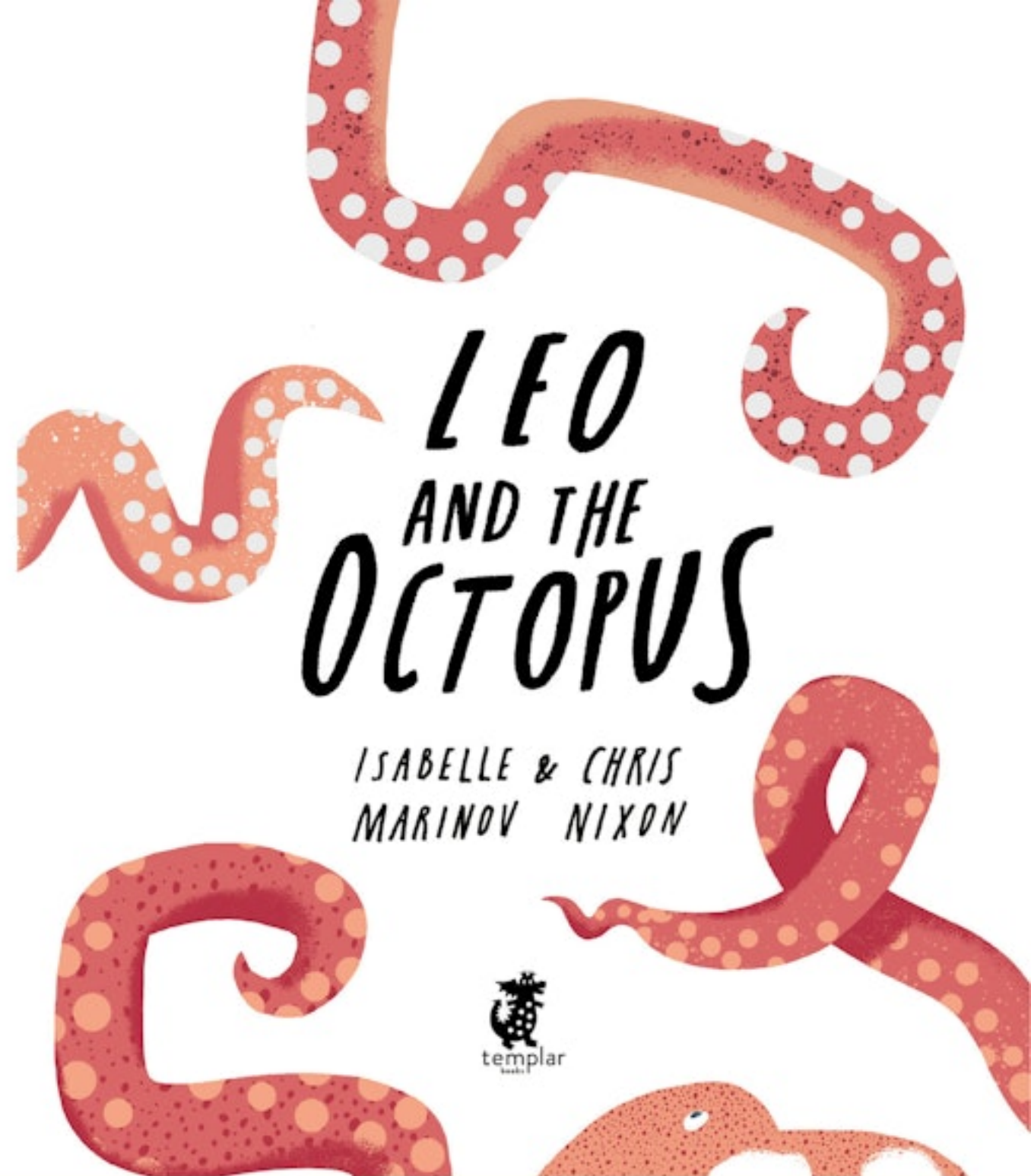


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The world was too bright for Leo. And too loud.
"I must be living on the wrong planet," he thought.
None of the other children understood Leo.
And he didn't understand them.

At home, Leo would hide inside
his cardboard box to read.

Then he could **relax**.




Because life on the **wrong planet** was stressful.

And **tiring**.

And **lonely**.




Until the day Leo met Maya.

A large circular illustration of an octopus in an aquarium tank. The octopus is orange with large white spots and is surrounded by various green and blue plants. The background of the tank is blue with small white dots.

Maya was an octopus.

"She has eight arms, three hearts and a beak like a parrot," said Edgar, the octopus keeper.

An illustration of a man and a child looking at the octopus. The man is wearing a red cap, a grey shirt, and green overalls. The child is wearing a green and white striped shirt, a red backpack, and a yellow cap. They are standing on a light blue path.

"She looks like an **alien**,"
Leo thought. "I *feel* like an alien."
We should get along."



Leo knew everything there was to know about lots of things.
But he didn't know anything about **octopuses** yet.
So he went to the library.

NOTES

OCTOPUSES HAVE BEEN AROUND
FOR ABOUT 300 MILLION YEARS —
LONG BEFORE THE DINOSAURS!
THEIR DISTANT RELATIVES ARE SNAILS.



THEY CAN CAMOUFLAGE
THEMSELVES OR EXPRESS
HOW THEY'RE FEELING BY
CHANGING THEIR COLOUR AND
TEXTURE.

THEY RELEASE
A CLOUD OF BLACK INK
WHEN THEY ARE UNDER
ATTACK TO CONFUSE
THEIR PREDATORS.




OCTOPUSES CAN SOLVE
PUZZLES AND OPEN
CHILD-PROOF JARS.



WITH THEIR SOFT,
BONELESS BODIES,
THEY CAN SQUEEZE
INTO TINY CRACKS.




"Maybe Maya and I could become friends,"
Leo thought as he read. He didn't know much about
friendship, but he was determined to give it a try.

An illustration of two characters standing in a stylized, blue-toned environment with white and green foliage. On the left is a man with a beard, wearing a red cap, a grey long-sleeved shirt, and dark green overalls with a white pocket. He is wearing yellow boots. On the right is a young boy with a yellow beanie, green-rimmed glasses, a green long-sleeved shirt with white horizontal stripes, and a red backpack. He is wearing white shoes. The boy is gesturing with his hands while talking to the man.

The week after, Leo went back to the aquarium to see Maya. He told Edgar the octopus keeper **everything he had learnt** about octopuses.

Edgar was impressed. So impressed that he had an **idea**.
"Would you like to meet Maya?" he asked.
"You can touch her if you like."

A large, vibrant illustration of an octopus tank. A large octopus with orange and red tentacles, each covered in white polka dots, is the central focus. The octopus is surrounded by blue and green stylized plants. In the upper right corner, a young boy with a yellow beanie and green-rimmed glasses is reaching into the tank. He is wearing a green long-sleeved shirt with white horizontal stripes and a red backpack. A white circular line indicates his hand reaching towards the octopus. In the top right corner, a partial illustration of a man with a mustache and a red cap is visible.

Leo was **nervous**. What if Maya didn't like him?

He reached into the tank and stroked Maya's head, just like Edgar showed him.

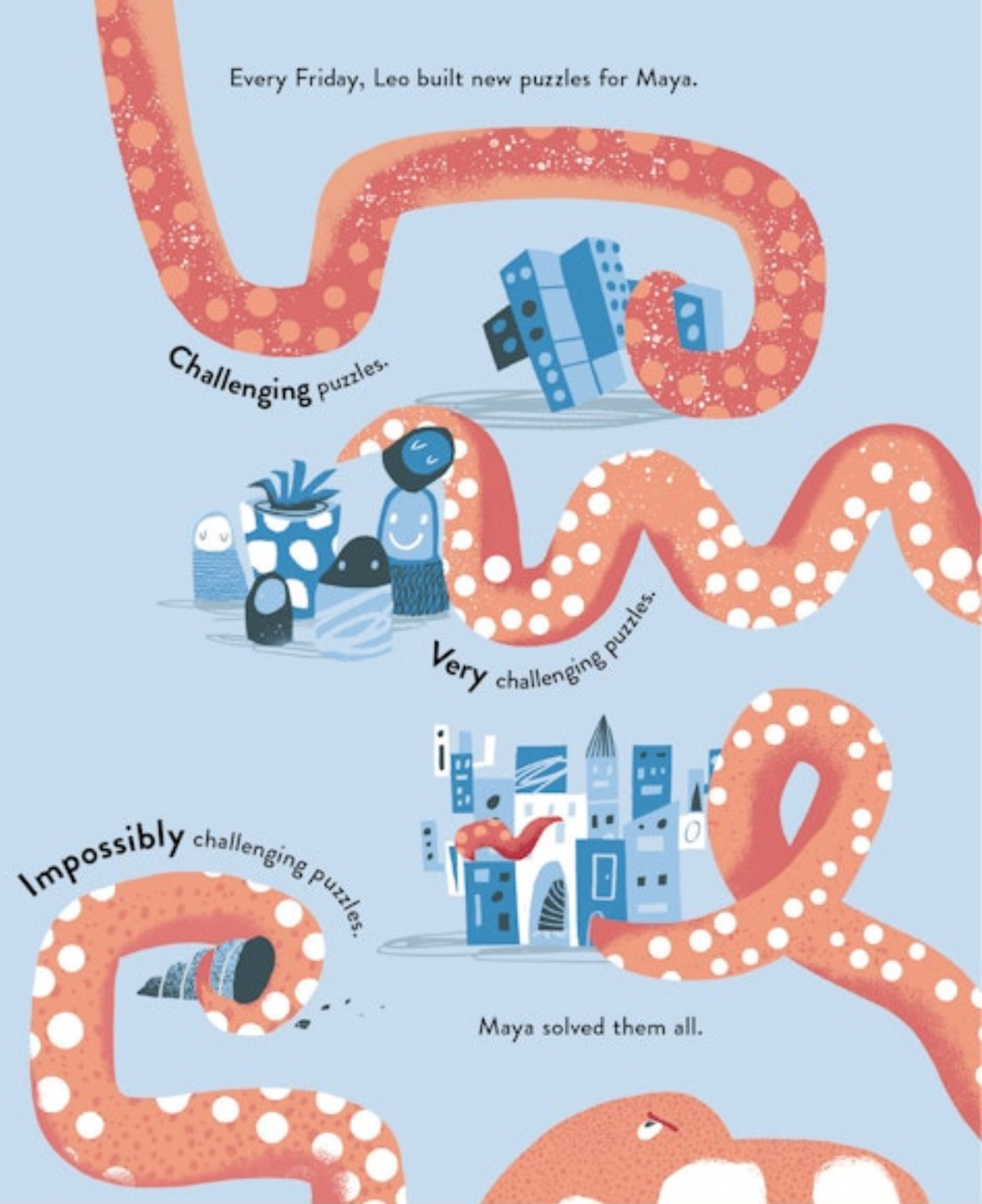


Leo was scared Maya would swim away, but she slowly reached out one arm.
As she touched Leo's hand, her skin started turning white and smooth.

Leo knew this was a **good sign**. It meant that Maya was feeling calm.
If only humans were as easy to understand!



"I think she likes you," said Edgar.
"Why don't you come back and visit every Friday?"
Leo was **excited**. From now on, Friday would be Octopus Day!



Every Friday, Leo built new puzzles for Maya.

Challenging puzzles.

Very challenging puzzles.

Impossibly challenging puzzles.

Maya solved them all.





WHOOSH!

... and hosed her visitors with a jet of cold water.



Leo knew exactly how Maya felt. Sometimes he wished he could squirt water at all the things that annoyed him to make them disappear.



Leo wondered if Maya could use a pair of sunglasses. But they probably wouldn't fit her, so he put up a sign instead.



Everyone had left – except for one small boy.



"Maya has eight arms, three hearts, and a beak like a parrot. Would you like to meet her?" Leo asked. After all, who wouldn't want to meet an **alien**?

The boy said: "Yes."



Maya touched the boy's arm.
Her skin turned smooth and white.
Leo knew this was a **good sign**.

"That means Maya likes you," he explained.



Then Leo told the boy all about
cute octopuses shaped like
umbrellas and **clever octopuses**
pretending to be corals . . .

. . . and about **blanket**
octopuses that look like
superheroes and **argonaut**
octopuses floating in shells . . .

The boy listened closely until Leo
had told him everything he knew.



Then they walked home together.
Leo knew a little bit more about friendship now.
And he knew that this was a **good sign** too.



ISABELLE MARINOV

I've always been fascinated by octopuses, these strange, alien-like creatures.

When I learned that the giant Pacific octopus changes its colour according to its mood, I was mesmerised. How convenient would this be for kids with autism! From my experience with my own son, I've seen that they often struggle to make sense of facial expressions in others. As visual learners, children on the spectrum would most certainly welcome this colour code communication. This simple idea was the seed for LEO AND THE OCTOPUS.

I am grateful to Tony Attwood for reviewing this story. His compassionate and pragmatic book *The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome* is my reference whenever I struggle to understand my son's way of functioning.

PROFESSOR TONY ATTWOOD

This enchanting story describes the world as perceived by an autistic child and an octopus.

In some ways they both seem like aliens, and both share a talent for problem solving. As a child with autism, Leo finds it difficult to determine how someone is feeling by reading their facial expressions and body language. He appreciates how octopuses change colour according to their mood and wishes humans had the same simple colour code.

The story also illustrates another aspect of autism, that is, finding friendship through similar interests. The sensitive descriptions throughout the book of what it is like to have autism are accurate and perceptive on so many levels.

