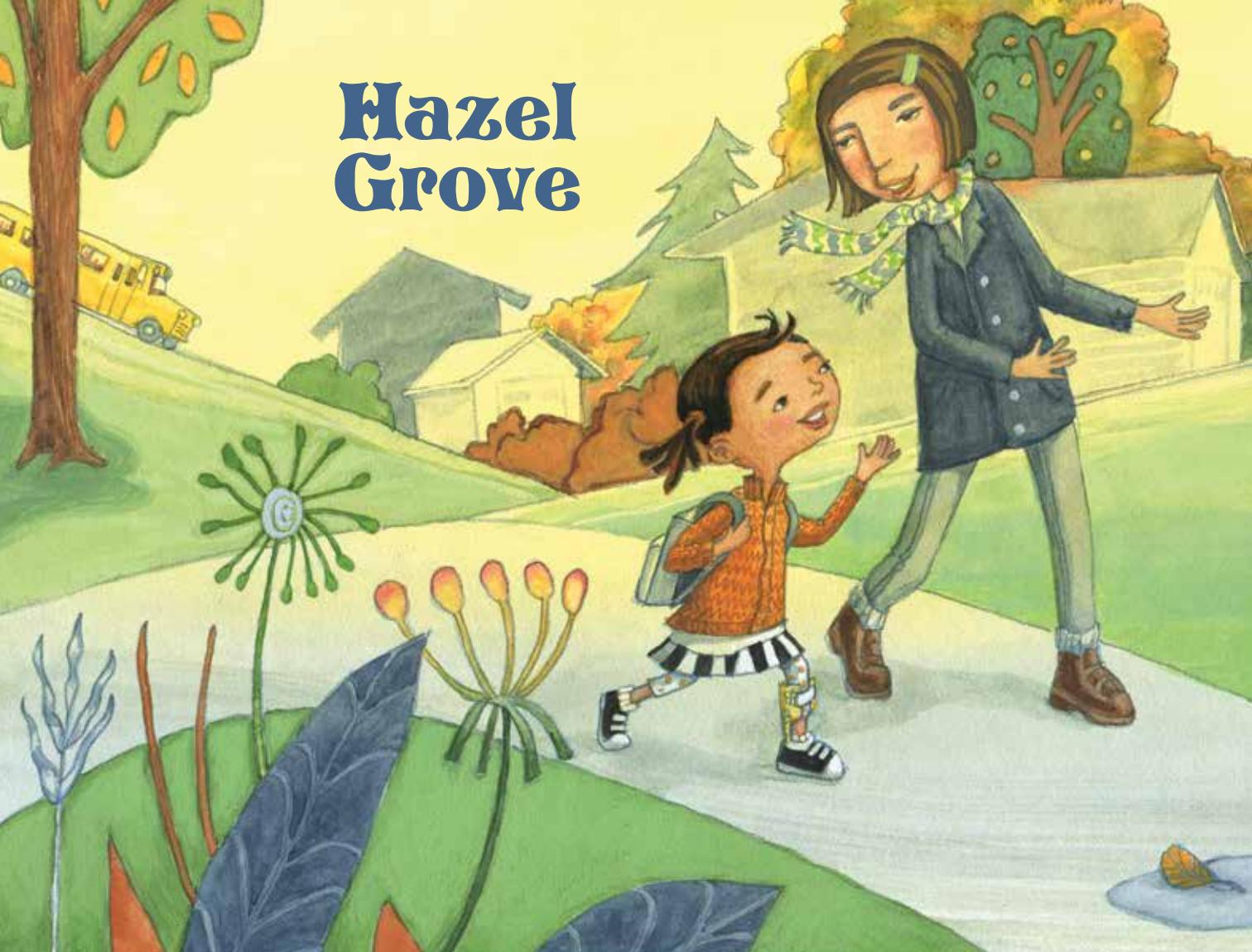


Hazel Grove



Today was Community Service Day at school, and Maya's class was going on a field trip to a senior living center called Hazel Grove. It was also the first day Maya would be wearing her leg brace to school.

Walking to school with her mom, Maya zipped her coat to her chin to fend off the chilly autumn air. She looked down at her shoes. Her left sneaker was a size larger than her right, so the brace could fit inside. Maya felt unsure about wearing the brace to

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school, even though it was decorated with a pretty butterfly pattern she had chosen from a book at the doctor's office. It was supposed to help her walk more smoothly, and it *did* make her feel solid and steady as she picked her way along a muddy patch slicked with soggy leaves. But Maya didn't know how she would explain the brace to other people. She was a little scared when her mom kissed her goodbye at the door to her classroom.



All morning at school, kids kept glancing at the brace, but they didn't say anything. Then the teacher announced that they could sit wherever they wanted while they worked on cards for the people at Hazel Grove.

Maya thought about the hazel bush in her backyard. She started to draw the little green buds that would burst from the branches in spring. Then she drew the flowers that blossomed in her yard at that time of year: crocuses, daffodils, and quince. It felt good to draw. Maya's friend Samir came over and sat by her. When she stood to get another marker from the bin, he noticed the brace. "What's that for?" he asked.

Maya pretended she didn't hear him because she didn't know what to say. Glancing back at him later, she saw that he looked a little sad.

That afternoon, the class got on a bus and headed to Hazel Grove. They brought the cards they had made. When they arrived, Maya noticed that the brace made it easier to walk up the ramp to the doors. She didn't stumble or trip. Still, she felt a little flip-flop in her stomach when a man leaving the building glanced down at her leg.

Maya and her friend Gabriela were paired up with a woman who was 103 years old. It was hard to believe anyone could be so old. The woman was in a wheelchair that had a pretty knitted covering over the back. She wore bright pink lipstick and a necklace of big pink plastic beads. She smelled like coffee.



“I’m Joan,” she said cheerfully. “Glad to meet you.”

Shyly, they handed her the cards they had made. Joan squinted at Gabriela’s card. “You’ve written a poem!” she said to Gabriela. Gabriela blushed. Then Joan turned to Maya’s picture. “The first flowers of spring!” she cried in delight. “You like drawing?” she asked Maya.

“I do,” Maya said.

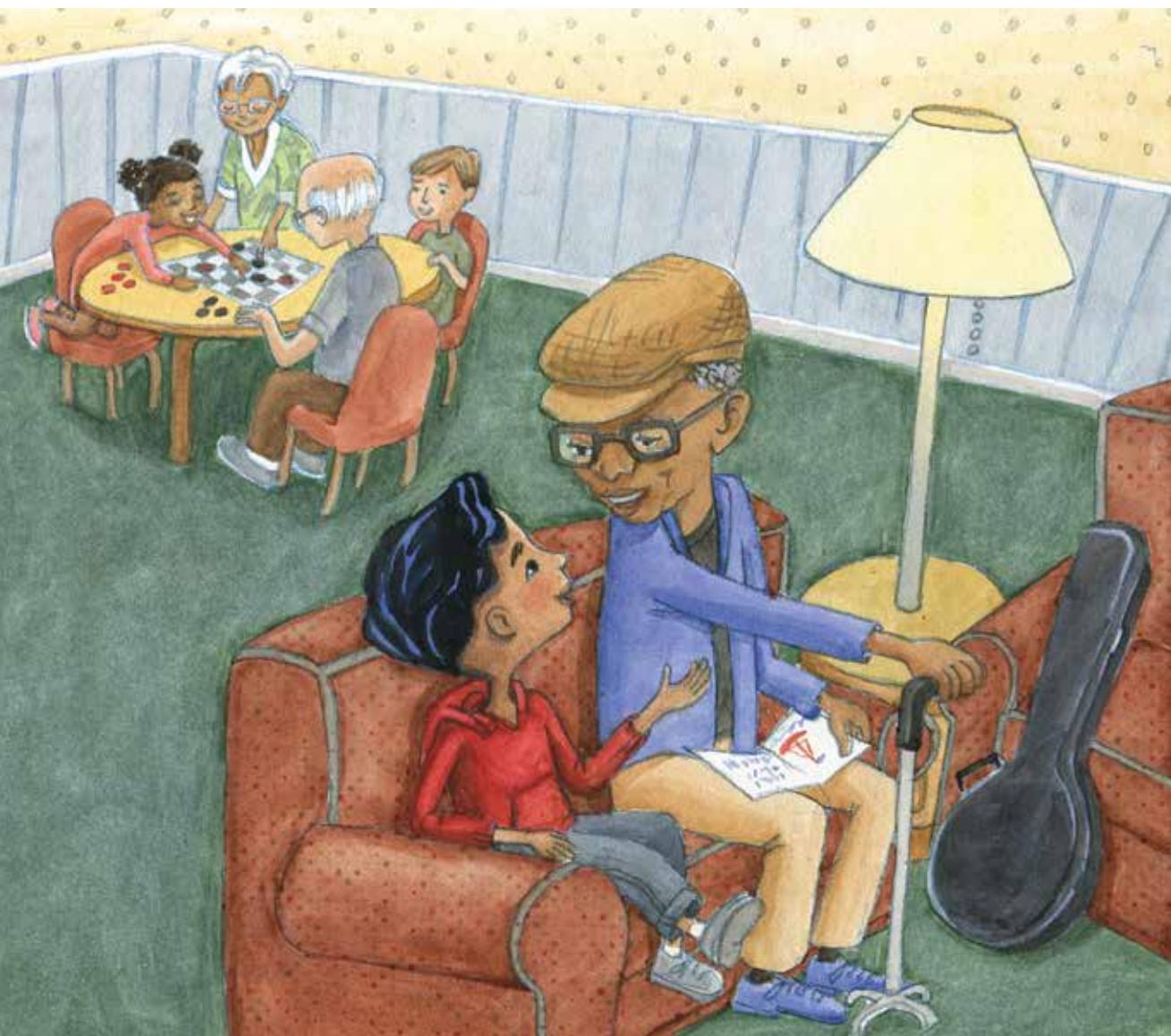


“You better keep it up, then.”

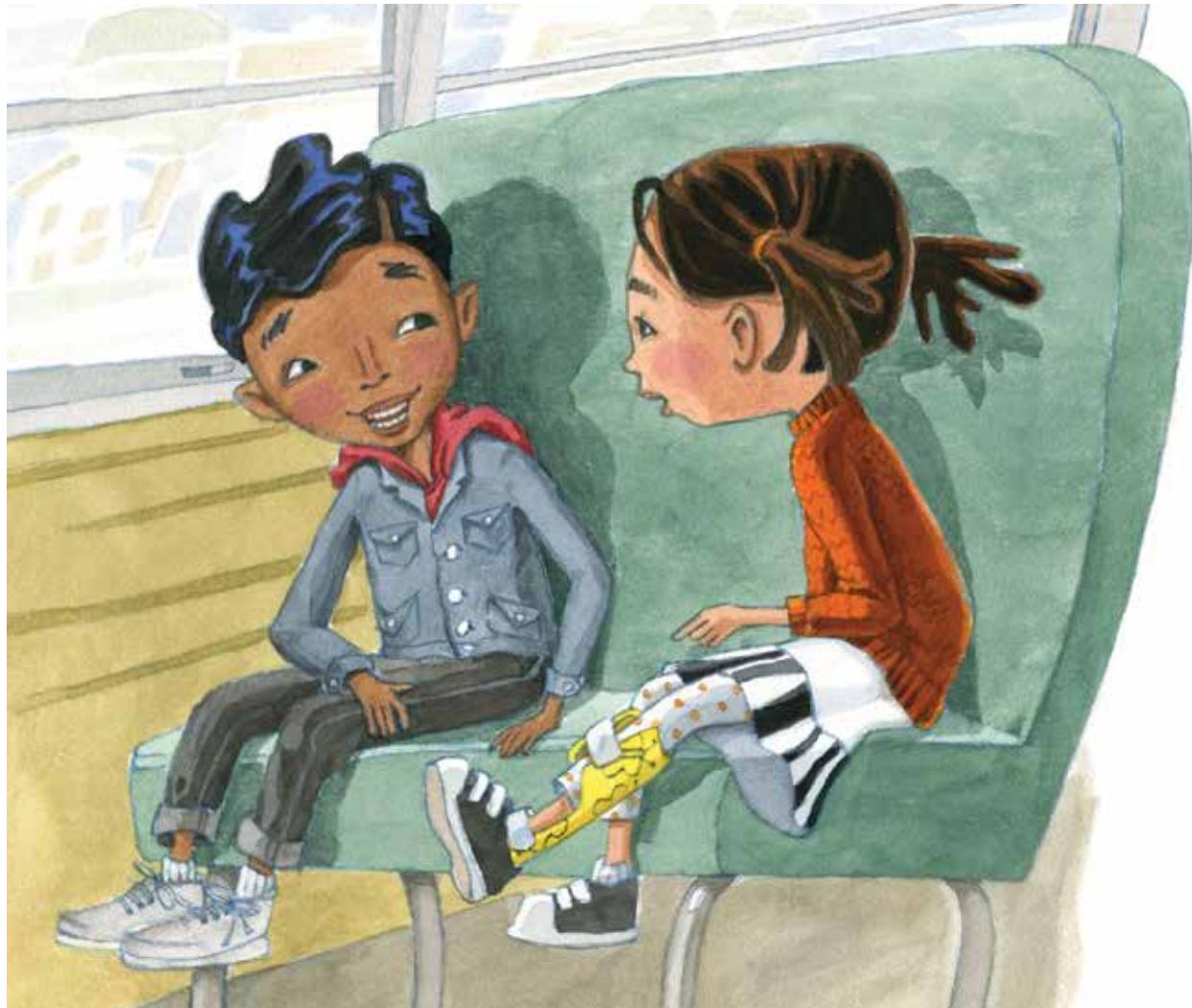
“I will,” said Maya. Then, in a sudden burst of bravery, Maya asked, “What’s it like being in a wheelchair?”

“It helps me get around,” Joan said simply. Then, grinning, she added, “You’d be surprised how fast I can go in this thing!” Right then, she whizzed across the room. Then she turned around and whizzed back.

“You see?”



It was true. Joan was fast in her chair. The girls and Joan talked and talked: about pets and cats and little brothers, about what it was like in the olden days and what it was like now. When it was time to go, Maya gave Joan a big hug.



On the bus ride back to school, Maya sat next to Samir. She told him, “This brace keeps my toe up so I can walk better.”

“Really?” he said. “That’s cool.” Then they talked about the people they had met at Hazel Grove. Maya told Samir about Joan, how nice and funny she was. Samir told Maya about Bob, who had played Samir and Everett a song on the ukulele.

When Maya’s mom met her at the door at the end of the school day, Maya skipped into her arms. “Today was the best!” Maya said. Though it was still cold and windy outside, to Maya it felt like spring. Her mom let her stay and play for a while, and Maya ran all around the playground feeling strong and fast in her new brace. 

