

TUCKER'S HILL

TUCKER STOOD BY the back door and considered the winter sky: ice blue and not a single cloud. His breath made steamy circles on the chilled glass pane.

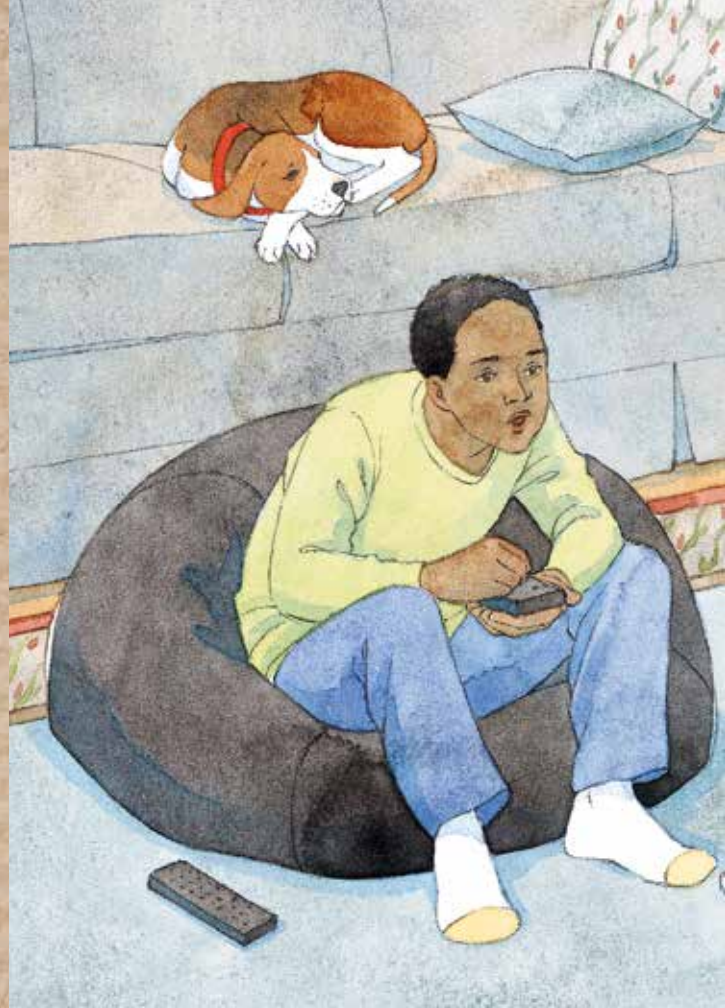
"I don't think today's the day, Tuck." His father walked up beside him and looked outside.

"It has to snow sometime, doesn't it, Dad?" asked Tucker.

"Sure, pal." His father tousled Tucker's hair and strode off toward the basement door.

Tucker looked across the backyard of his family's new home. Just beyond a cluster of prickly pine trees, the flat ground pushed upward into a steep and empty hillside. Dad had promised that the hill would be perfect for sledding—much better than anything the city had to offer.

Sledding. Tucker's brand-new sled rested in the corner of his room, sandwiched between his dresser and train table. It was perfect: bright blue with red and orange flames



racing up its sides. Tucker loved the feel of the cool, smooth plastic and the nubby yellow rope. He was sure it would be superfast. If only it would snow.

Tucker kicked gently at the door, then turned and went back to his bedroom. He opened his car case and started rolling miniature hot rods down the long cardboard carpet tube the movers had left

Spider, are you sure you don't want a hair brush?



'Scuse me, but I'm rocking that tousled—messed up—look.



by Alicia McHugh
Art by Phyllis Pollema-Cahill



behind. *Zip, crash, zip, crash.* The cars landed in a jumbled heap on the wooden floor. After the last one smashed into the pile, Tucker decided to find Paul.

Paul was in his usual spot—plopped in the beanbag chair, controller in hand, working his way through a video game.

“Hi, Paul.” Tucker sat down beside his older brother. No

response. “I said, ‘Hi!’” He tried speaking louder this time.

“Sorry, Tuck. I’m at level ten. Later, OK?” Paul’s eyes remained glued to the screen.

Tucker sighed and got up. “Sure.”

Tucker went down to the basement and found his father surrounded by piles of flattened cardboard boxes.

“Can you play knights with me, Dad?” Tucker asked.

His father looked over the wall of boxes. “I promised your mom I’d get all these boxes broken down and ready for recycling. In a little while, pal.”

Tucker fished a small, yellow convertible from his pants pocket and settled down to watch. When he pulled aside a box to make a ramp, he got an idea.

“Dad, can I have some boxes?” Tucker asked.

“Sure, if you clean up when you’re done,” answered Dad.

“And some duct tape, too?” Tucker continued.

But 'ow is ziss different zann any other hair day?



Hey, ya gotta own yer look.



Look, gang! At least I remembered to clean up the old jitney so we can ride to town in style.





His father smiled, grabbed the duct tape, and tossed it to Tucker. "Have fun."



"Whew." Tucker wiped his mittened hand across his forehead and gulped the frosty air. Despite the cold, he was sweating from carrying a mountain of cardboard into the backyard.

"What are you up to?" Paul called as he walked across the crackly yellow lawn.

"Oh, good. I need help cutting the duct tape." Tucker threw the sticky silver tape roll to his brother.

An hour later, Tucker and Paul stood on top of the hill under the fading January sun.

"Do you think it will work?" Paul asked as he handed Tucker his sled.

Tucker shrugged and looked down the slope. He and Paul had lined the flat brown boxes, one after the other, up the hillside, and taped the undersides together until

We'd better get going.
It's a long ride to Bugtown.

Okey dokey!

All aboard the
New Year's Eve Express!



they had a ramp. It ran from the tiptop of the sledding hill, past the pine trees, and down to the middle of the backyard.

Paul held the sled in place. Tucker carefully climbed on, gripped the steering rope, and moved his feet into position. Paul placed his hands on Tucker's back. Tucker took a deep, frosty breath and waited.

"Ready . . . set . . . blastoff!" Paul called out as he pushed Tucker down the hill.

"Whooooo!" Tucker screamed as the sled raced down the slope, faster and faster. It came to a sudden stop in the crunchy grass. Tucker flew through the air and landed in a giggly heap. He jumped to his feet and raced back up the hill with his sled.

"That was so cool!" Tucker collapsed next to Paul, grinning and breathless. "Your turn!"

Paul grabbed the sled and sped off down the hill, laughing and yelling.

"Hey, Tuck! Great sledding hill. I want a turn!" Dad waved from the

back porch as Paul trudged back up the slope.



When the last of the daylight finally faded away, the cardboard was dirty, crumpled, and ripped from the boys' many trips down it. But Tucker didn't mind. He lay back in his sled and gazed up at the darkening sky. Then he stuck out his tongue to catch the first thick, white flake swirling down from above. And he smiled.



C'mon, Miro, plenty of shroom for you.

Zat pun eez not even zlightly funny, Monsieur.