

Excerpts from **CRASH**

by Jerry Spinelli

It was a sunny summer day. I was in the front yard digging a hole with my little red shovel. I heard something like whistling. I looked up. It was whistling. It was coming from a funny-looking dorky little runt walking up the sidewalk. Only he wasn't just walking regular. He was walking like he owned the place, both hands in his pockets, sort of swaying lah-dee-dah with each step. *Strolllll*-ing. Strolling and gawking at the houses and whistling a happy little dorky tune like some Sneezy or Snoozy or whatever their names are.

And he wore a button, a big one. It covered about half his chest. Which wasn't that hard since his chest was so scrawny.

So here he comes strolling, whistling, gawking, buttoning, dorking up the sidewalk, onto my sidewalk, my property, and all of a sudden I knew what I had to do, like there was a big announcement coming down from the sky: Don't let him pass.

The stands were empty. A school bus moved in the distance beyond the football goalpost. Under the crossbar and between the uprights, like in a framed picture, stood three people.

For once, Webb's parents didn't look so old, not compared to the man standing between them. He was shorter than them, and real skinny, like the prairie winds were eroding him away. But he was standing straight and by himself—no cane, no walker, just two legs. Ninety-three years old. Maybe it was the Missouri River mud.

The thought came to me: they would have liked each other, Scooter and Henry Wilhide Webb III. Two storytellers. Both from the great flat open spaces, one a prairie of grass, one of water. Both came to watch when no one else was there.

Why exactly was he here? Did he know about me? Did he know his great grandson could not win the race-off, and so would not run in the Penn Relays?

I wondered if Webb felt safe in his great grandfather's bed.

The cinder track crunched under my feet. There were five of us in the race: me, Webb, two other seventh graders, and a sixth grader. The coach put us in lanes. Me and Webb were side by side.

Again, he hadn't said a word to me all day. We milled around behind the starting blocks, nervous, shaking out our arms and legs, everything as quiet as if the coach had already said, "Ready."

The other team members—jumpers, throwers, distance runners—had all stopped their practicing to watch. A single hawk, its wingtips spread like black fingers, kited over the school, and suddenly I saw something: a gift. A gift for a great grandfather from North Dakota, maybe for all great grandfathers. But the thing was, only one person could give the gift, and it wasn't the great grandson, not on his fastest day alive. It was me.

I hated it being me. I tried not to see, but everywhere I looked, there it was.

The gift.

"Let's go, boys," said the coach.

A voice closer to me said, "Good luck."

It was Webb, sticking out his dorky hand, smiling that old dorky smile of his. No button. I shook his hand, and it occurred to me that because he was always eating my dust, the dumb fishcake had never won a real race and probably didn't know how. And now there wasn't time.

"Don't forget to lean," I told him. His face went blank. The coach called, "Ready."

I got down, feet in the blocks, right knee on the track, thumbs and forefingers on the chalk, eyes straight down—and right then, for the first time in my life, I didn't know if I wanted to win.

"Set."

Knee up, rear up, eyes up.

The coach says the most important thing here is to focus your mind. You are a coiled steel spring, ready to dart out at the sound of the gun. So what comes into my head? Ollie the one-armed octopus. He didn't disappear till the gun went off.

I was behind—not only Webb, but everybody. No problem. Within ten strides I picked up three of them. That left Webb. He was farther ahead of me than usual, but that was because of my rotten start.

At the halfway mark, where I usually passed him, he was still ahead, and I still didn't know if I wanted to win. I gassed it. The gap closed. I could hear him puffing, like a second set of footsteps. Cinder flecks from his feet pecked at my shins. I was still behind. The finish line was closing. I kicked in the afterburners. Ten meters from the white string we were shoulder to shoulder, breath to breath, grandson to great grandson, and it felt new, it felt good, not being behind, not being ahead, but being even, and just like that, a half breath from the white string, I knew. There was no time to turn to him. I just barked it out: "Lean!" He leaned, he threw his chest out, he broke the string. He won.