

CRASH



by Newbery Medalist
Jerry Spinelli

1 MY NAME

My real name is John. John Coogan. But everybody calls me Crash, even my parents.

It started way back when I got my first football helmet for Christmas. I don't really remember this happening, but they say that when my uncle Herm's family came over to see our presents, as they were coming through the front door I got down into a four-point stance, growled, "Hut! Hut! Hut!" and charged ahead with my brand-new helmet. Seems I knocked my cousin Bridget clear back out the doorway and onto her butt into a foot of snow. They say she bawled bloody murder and refused to come into the house, so Uncle Herm finally had to drag his whole family away before they even had a chance to take their coats off.

Like I said, personally I don't remember the whole thing, but looking back at what I do remember about myself, I'd have to say the story is probably true. As far as I can tell, I've always been crashing—into people, into things, you name it, with or without a helmet.

Actually, I lied a minute ago. Not everybody calls me

Crash. There's one person who doesn't. It's just one of a million things that have bugged me for years about this kid.

I can still remember the first time I saw him. The summer before first grade, seven years ago.

THEN

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. *Strolllllll*-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.*

So I jump up from my hole and plant myself right in front of the kid. And what's he do? He gives me this big grin and says, "Good morning. I'm your new neighbor. My name is Penn Webb. What's yours?" And he sticks his hand out to shake.

I ignored his question and his hand. "Penn?" I said. "What kind of name is that?"

"I was named after the Penn Relays," he said.

"Huh?" I said.

"It's a famous track meet. When I was born, my parents let my great-grandfather name me, and that's the name he picked. He won a race at the Penn Relays in the year 1919. Thirty thousand people cheered him on. He lives in North Dakota. I lived in North Dakota too until yesterday. Then I moved here to Pennsylvania with my mother and father. My mother had me when she was forty years old. I was a late baby."

You're gonna be a flat-nosed baby if you don't shut up, I'm thinking. "What does your button say?" I asked him.

He stuck out his scrawny chest. "It says, 'Hi, I'm a Flickertail.' "

"What's a flickertail?"

"A flickertail is a squirrel. There are lots of them in North Dakota. That's why it's called the Flickertail State. What is Pennsylvania called?"

"The Poop State."

He didn't crack a smile, didn't even know it was a joke. He got all frowny and thought about it and nodded and said, "Oh." Then his motormouth took off again. "North Dakota is real flat. Where we lived, anyway. And there's prairies. My dad says when the wind blows over the prairie, it looks wavy, like the ocean. I never saw a real ocean yet, but my dad says we're going to see the Atlantic Ocean soon. My dad's an artist. He makes birds out of glass and ceramics and wood and metal. He can make any kind of bird you can name, but he's the best in the world at prairie chickens."

Everybody knows Crash Coogan, seventh-grade football sensation. He's been mowing down everything in his path since the time he could walk—and Penn Webb, his dweeby, vegetable-eating neighbor, is his favorite target. After all, Webb's not just a nerd, he's a cheerleader too.

Crash and his best buddy, Mike, can't think of anything more hilarious than making Webb's life miserable. But Crash starts to realize that Webb has something he may never gain, no matter how many touchdowns he scores. And when Mike takes a prank too far, maybe even for Crash, the football star has to choose which side he's really on.

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