Crash Coogan

by Jerry Spinelli

April 20

I hardly ate breakfast. I didn’t pay attention in class. I kept thinking of the race-off today, and the Relays Friday.

The four-by-one-hundred-meter relay means four runners each run a hundred meters. Each runner passes the baton to the next runner. The baton looks like a foot-long pipe, but it’s light, it’s made of aluminum.

Since I’m the fastest, I’ll probably run the anchor leg. The anchor gets the baton last. The anchor crosses the finish line. The anchor is your chance

to win. The anchor gets the glory.

All day long I pictured Friday’s race: Huber leads off, he hands the baton to Noles halfway through the first turn, Noles tears down the backstretch, hands to Caruso. I crouch. I look back past my shoulder.

They’re all coming, eight sprinters sprinting. I pick out Caruso. He’s leaning into the final turn, he’s fifteen meters from me . . . ten meters . . . I take off, I drag my left hand behind me, palm open, fingers spread (Hit it!

Hit it! Now!). I feel the baton smack into my left hand, I curl my

fingers around it, I switch it to my right hand and take off down

the chalk-striped brick-colored lane. I’m dead last, ten meters behind everybody. It’s hopeless.

By the time I hit the straightaway I’m passing the next-to-last runner, then the next, and the next. Forty thousand people leap to their feet. Eighty thousand eyes slide from the leader to the kid who’s coming out of nowhere. “Who is he?” they ask, and the answer comes, “It’s Coogan! Crash Coogan of Springfield!” I pass another, and now there are only three ahead of me, but there’s not enough time. “He can’t do it!” they scream, and now there are two ahead of me and the red ribbon across the finish line seems close enough to be a blindfold and they’re hanging from the railing and stomping on the scoreboard and there’s only one ahead of me now and the human hurricane is chasing me around the track, blowing at my back, and I’m on the leader’s shoulder and for an instant the world freezes because we’re dead even–seeing us sideways we look like one–and I remember the coach saying in a close race the one who leans will win, so now with one last gasp I throw my arms back and my chest forward and the red ribbon breaks like a butterfly across my shirt.

I slow down, I stop. I stand on the brick-colored track. I heave the baton into the air high as the pennants wave over the stadium, and the hurricane finally catches me and I close my eyes and let it wash over me: “COOOOOOOOOOOOOOOGAN!”