

A black and white illustration of a young boy with curly hair, wearing a hoodie and pants, running. A dog is running alongside him. The background features several thick, parallel diagonal lines that create a sense of speed and motion.

***AT THE SPEED OF
GUS***

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*To my son Ed, who is overdue for a dedication,
and who has had to put up with someone like
Gus for his whole life.*

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CHAPTER 2

The closet door is open. My eyes go there before I can stop them. Inside the closet is a squeegee bucket with a mop in it. And some shelves. And, peeking out from behind some rags, a little dog.

Oh no.

It's a small black mutt, mostly poodle, with curly hair and a chipped front tooth that shows when he pants. I notice him out of the corner of my eye.

Oh no. Oh no.

He slides out of the storage closet, comes over, and stops in front of me.

My dog.

I've had the dog for a while. I don't know his name. I can't remember the first time he showed up, but he's been part of my life for years now. Actually, *I've had him* is wrong. He's had me.

Oh no.

I wish Magnolia — and isn't that a great name for a custodian? — had kept her storage closet shut.

If she had, then I wouldn't have seen the dog.
I walk as fast as I can down the second floor hall.
Noise comes from the classrooms I pass.

Stop talking right this—

No, you may not—

That's strike two. One more and—

How many times do I have to—

Normal teacher talk. Any school, anywhere on the continent. I think about all the kids being yelled at right now. A class full — a school full, a stadium full — of kids feeling bad about themselves. *Lele*. All that heaviness. All that shame. I could laugh or roll my eyes. But I don't. I feel terrible. I'm about to cry.

A girl walks toward me, frowning left and right. She's got a problem. Little kid — grade one or so. So a little kid problem. Is she lost? I take a chance.

"Girls' bathroom is down there," I say, pointing.

Her face lightens. Yup, that's what she was worried about.

She hurries off, then stops, turns, checks me out.

"I know you," she says. "I heard you on the announcements."

"That's right."

"You said my name. You wished me a happy birthday. Thank you!"

She skips down the hall, turning into the bathroom. I guess she's Stephanie Muller. Six years old today.

I smile after her and keep going.

Hey, my dog is gone. How about that?

Ackley stands up by the blackboard in his white golf shirt and blue sweatpants and muscles.

"Constantine," he barks.

He calls boys by their last names. He calls girls *Miss*. Is that sexist? Old-fashioned? Silly? All of the above? Maybe. But Ackley's okay.

"Constantine! What kept you?"

"Nothing kept me, sir. See — I'm right here!"

I throw my arms wide. The whole class snickers. Even Maria Bellini, the goodest of goody-good girls, with hairband and braces and gold stars and hands clasped together — even Maria smiles. It's a good joke.

Mr. Ackley brings the ruler down on his desk with a *swack*. Arminder the Nervous — that's how I think of him, like Alexander the Great or Ivan the Terrible — who sits right in front of the teacher's desk, performs a sitting high jump.

"Constantine!" says Ackley.

“Thank you very much, sir.”

Another snicker. He smiles along with the class.
Like I say, he’s okay.

“Sit down, Constantine.”

“Yes, sir. Oh, and sorry, sir.”

“What are you sorry for?”

“Nothing. But Mrs. Gorby told me to apologize
to you.”

He gives a harsh bark of laughter.