

Jack Jenk  
Shouts Love

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ISBN: 978-1-7375589-3-4

First edition.

Design by Jennifer Playford at  
[playfordstudio.com](http://playfordstudio.com)

[www.320sycamorestudios.com](http://www.320sycamorestudios.com)



320 Sycamore Studios

For Gordon Bryson,  
football coach and scholar.



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1

## A Different Kind of Smart

Jack Jenk never gave much thought to the world outside New Oslo, Minnesota.

He was too busy coasting through sixth grade, playing linebacker for the New Oslo Lumberjacks junior football team, hanging out with his friends, and tap-tap-tapping on his phone.

In other words, life was pretty great.

So when his teacher, Ms. Bergson, gave her class their homework assignment one ordinary October Monday, Jack wasn't expecting it to send his life cartwheeling off in a whole new direction.

"Your task," said Ms. Bergson, "is to watch the news on television tonight. You're going to see lots of problems, because that's what news is. Pick one of the problems, think of a solution, and write it down."





Jack yawned. “How long does it have to be?”

Ms. Bergson ignored him. “Make a plan. Something a person could do to solve the problem. Something YOU could do. Your plan is due next week.”

Jack raised his hand this time. There were certain class rules Ms. Bergson did not bend.

“Yes, Jack?”

“How long does it have to be?”

“As long as necessary,” she said.

“So I could write, like, one sentence?” asked Jack.

Most of his classmates giggled.

“Maybe you could just tackle something,” hissed Mark Farkle.

Mark Farkle was, like some kids, both smart and cruel. He had an ability to sense people’s weak spots, and poke at them. Mark Farkle didn’t like Jack Jenk because Jack was outsized and sunny and easy in his skin.

Jack didn’t like Mark Farkle because Mark Farkle teased him about being stupid, and because Jack wondered deep down if Mark Farkle might be right.

Ms. Bergson shushed the class. “Yes, Jack. You can write one single sentence—IF that’s all you need to describe your plan.”

“Is there a *maximum* length?” asked Keisha Thompson.

Jack exhaled, loudly, and rolled his eyes. *Showoff*, he thought. He disliked Keisha Thompson almost as much as he disliked Mark Farkle, but for different reasons.

She was smart and nice. She was a good person all around, the kind that makes you uncomfortable if you're someone who likes to glide through a life of least resistance.

Ms. Bergson shook her head and smiled. "As long as necessary," she repeated.

In reality, though, Jack *was* smart. It was just that his *way* of being smart isn't the kind that's usually *called* smart. It was more like he had a natural feeling about how life should flow and where he should be in that flow. It's what made him such a good linebacker. But it wasn't just football. There was a rightness to things he could sense and it bothered him when things got out of flow, got "scratchy," as he called it.

He was also curious about the world. He liked puzzling his way to answers about things. The trouble was, he got distracted.

A lot.

And because he was packaged in a big body for his age, he and his parents and most of the grownups in his life felt that his future pointed toward the football field, toward tackling and toughness.

Jack stared out at the bright October day. For a moment he thought about just getting up and walking outside. But then he wondered where he would go and what he would do.

So he stayed where he was and thought about football.



2

## The News Was a Bummer

Jack almost forgot to watch the news that night. In fact, he missed most of the top story, about a hurricane headed for Miami. No matter. There wasn't much Jack could do about a hurricane.

It didn't take long for him to realize why he never watched the news. The news was a bummer.

An earthquake in Peru. A business scandal that caused hundreds of regular people to lose their jobs. A bunch of immigrant kids being held in jail somewhere in South Texas. Two politicians arguing with each other. A shooting in St. Paul. Even in New Oslo there were problems. Frederickson's Grocery had mistakenly received an entire truckload of Manly Man Beef Stew. There was Mr. Frederickson complaining that the beef stew company wouldn't

take the delivery back. “What am I gonna do with all that stew?” he complained.

Jack laughed. *He* knew. His homework assignment *was* going to be one sentence.

Jack went to his room, took out a piece of paper, and wrote, “Send the stew to Peru.” It even rhymed. He wrote his name at the top and smacked the paper with his palm. “Done!”

Jack thought for a moment about Mark Farkle, who probably hadn’t started his assignment. “Who’s smart now?” Jack asked his room. He thought about Keisha. She would probably spend the rest of her week at the library or hunched in front of her computer. Researching, writing, rewriting while Jack was having maximum fun.

But as Jack swiped through the images and messages on his phone, a scene from the news kept popping into his brain. A boy gripping the bars of his jail cell in South Texas, looking bewildered and hurt. For a moment as he’d watched, Jack had felt like the kid was looking directly at *him* and asking, “Are you going to do anything?”

Jack groaned. He typed “kids jail south texas” into his phone and scrolled through the results page. There. He saw the boy. Jack tapped the picture and read the story.

His name was Emilio Garcia. He was ten years old, same as Jack. There was a war in his country. His



mom and dad had been trying to get him to the United States and out of danger when they were picked up at the border. The family was separated and put in jail.

This was exactly the kind of scratchy situation that drove him crazy.

Jack flung his phone on the bed. He was surprised to see that half an hour had passed. “What can I do about it?” he complained to the ceiling. “That’s right,” he muttered. “Nothing.”

Still, he wasn’t convinced.

Just before he fell asleep, he asked the question again. He spoke it aloud to the night, to his room, to the Great Whatever. “What can I do about it?”

When you ask a question like that just before you fall asleep, the Great Whatever usually answers you in the morning.

In the morning, Jack got his answer.

He didn’t like it.



3

## "Can I Change My Answer?"

So all week he tried to forget about it.

The answer wouldn't go away.

Jack tried to distract himself with his phone.

Which didn't work. The thought kept sneaking back.

He tried to make himself believe that the answer was too complicated for him to understand.

That didn't work either. The answer was simple and clear.

He tried to ignore it.

Nope.

Jack couldn't dodge the answer, hide from it, outrun it, or tackle it into submission.

He told himself the answer didn't make any sense.

This was true and not true. It didn't make sense to his head. But it made some other kind of sense he couldn't describe.

He was distracted Saturday during the football game against Bedford River and had only ten tackles. He was so distracted, in fact, he didn't even care that much that the game ended in a tie. The rest of the weekend skittered by crabwise. The days did not flow.

On Monday, just before Ms. Bergson collected the assignments, Jack grimaced and forced himself to ignore the answer that had been tormenting him all week and handed in the paper that said, "Send the stew to Peru."

Most students had turned in papers that were two or three pages long.

Mark Farkle handed Ms. Bergson a thumb drive. "It's a slide deck," he winked. He shot Jack a smirk.

Keisha Thompson turned in a coil-bound report that was neatly tab-divided and as thick as all the other assignments put together.

Jack made a soft gagging sound. Inside, though, he was in tumult.

The scratchy feeling was overpowering. Ms. Bergson set the assignments in the homework bin on her desk, thanked the class, and was beginning the math lesson when Jack raised his hand, high. "Yes, Jack?"

"Can I change my answer?"





Ms. Bergson raised an eyebrow. "Of course." She handed him his paper.

Jack unfolded it, scratched out what he'd written, and wrote down the two words that had tormented him all week.

He quickly refolded the paper so no one could see and handed it back to Ms. Bergson. His face flushed with embarrassment.

"Thank you, Jack," she said.

Jack shrugged his shoulders. He felt unbelievably stupid the rest of the day. What had he done? If anyone found out what he'd written, he was going to have no friends. He'd probably be kicked off the football team for being soft.

Yet way down deep, he felt good about his answer. He just couldn't explain why.



4

## Mark Farkle Says They're Criminals

“We had twenty-four excellent ideas for solving the Manly Man Beef Stew problem,” Ms. Bergson announced to the class Tuesday. “And two excellent ideas for solving the children-in-jails problem.” She paused to look first at Keisha and then at Jack. “Now for part two of the assignment.” The class groaned. Ms. Bergson palmed the air. “Part two of the assignment is to put your plan into action. You may not succeed. That’s okay. I just want you to try.”

Ms. Bergson handed back the assignments. Jack stuffed his assignment deep in the front pocket of his jeans. *I only have to do it once and then I’m done*, he thought. *Nobody even has to hear me.*

Keisha cornered him at lunch. She looked at him the way you’d look at a pillbug that had wandered onto



your sandwich. “So what’s your plan, Mr. One-Sentence Problem Solver?”

Jack shrugged, “What’s yours?”

“I asked first,” she said, sitting down.

“It’s stupid,” he mumbled. “I should have done the Manly Man problem.”

“Then why didn’t you?” she shot back.

Jack jabbed his plastic fork absently at the mac and cheese on his plate. “I don’t know.”

Keisha relaxed. She placed her binder on the lunch table. “Okay, I’ll tell you my plan if you show me that scrap of paper you call an answer. I have a lot of work to do. Maybe we can help each other.” Jack grunted, which could have been interpreted as agreement, so Keisha continued. “It starts with a letter-writing campaign to Congress.”

Lunch was almost over by the time she finished explaining. “All right,” she said at last. “Show me your note.”

“Yeah, show her your note, Jenk,” hissed Mark Farkle from behind Jack.

Jack froze. Mark Farkle smirked, “You soft-heads picked the wrong problem. Those...” he searched for the word, “illegals... belong in jail. They’re illegal. They’re *criminals*.”

Jack got up without saying anything and pushed past Mark Farkle.

“Hey,” said Keisha, “you owe me.”

Jack looked back at her and shook his head once.  
There was no way he was going to show her that paper.



5

## A Not-Very-Linebackery Thing to Do

When Jack got home from school that afternoon, he went straight to his room and dug the paper out of his pocket. He unfolded it, hoping somehow that it didn't say what he'd written.

It did.

He stared at the two words he'd     ten.

"Shout Love."

*May as well get it over with*, he thought. "I love you, Emilio Garcia!" he yelled into his pillow.

The words felt ridiculous. Jack was a linebacker, for God's sake. And that was not a very linebackery thing to say. *Whatever*, he thought. *This project is DONE.*

Jack spent a happy evening on his phone.

But the Great Whatever wasn't done with him.

When he woke up the next morning the first words out of his mouth were, "Sorry, Great Whatever."

He felt like...

*What* did he feel like?

Scratchy.

Like he was in the middle of a game and there was a play to the opposite side of the field and he had stopped running before the running back was completely tackled.

Even if he knew someone else would make the tackle, Jack *never* stopped running until the whistle blew. It wasn't... it wasn't *excellent*.

Yet he'd stopped running for the tackle with the Emilio project. He needed to go bigger. Get someone to listen.

"Fine," he said aloud. "Do-overs."

When he got home from school Wednesday afternoon, he went straight to his room, cleared his throat and shouted, "I love you, Emilio Garcia!"

Better.

The words didn't taste so mediciney. He decided he could think of Emilio like he was a teammate. It's cool to love a teammate.

He fell asleep wondering what position Emilio would play. He looked small. Maybe a defensive back.

Jack woke up Thursday morning feeling better. He still wasn't ready to show his paper to Keisha,





though he kept it in his front jeans pocket each day. An amulet.

He still wasn't quite right with the Great Whatever, so on Thursday afternoon he stopped in his front yard, took a deep breath, and shouted, "I love you, Emilio Garcia."

*Almost*, he thought.

He strode into his front yard again on Friday afternoon and shouted it three times.

It felt pretty great, actually. Now he was thinking of Emilio like he was a brother. It's cool to love a brother.

The problem was that nobody had heard him.



6

## Jack Adds a Sentence

That weekend, Jack did Jack.

He made fourteen tackles in the game against Haller. Feasted on pizza Saturday night. Messaged friends. Watched TV. Hurried through his homework Sunday evening. But all through everything, his thoughts kept drifting back to Emilio Garcia. What was *he* doing? What was *he* eating? Did *he* have people to talk to?

Jack went to sleep Sunday night wondering what else he could do to be heard.

He groaned when he woke up Monday with the answer.

He didn't like it, so all morning at school he tried to escape from it.

No use.

It was like trying to dodge water when you're swimming. He gave up and took out the paper. Under "Shout Love" he wrote a second sentence.

*Shout Love.*

*Keep Shouting It.*

At lunchtime, Jack Jenk left the school grounds and walked three blocks to New Oslo Town Square. It was a cool fall day and a smattering of townspeople were bustling about their errands. Jack hoped none of them would recognize him.

He stepped up onto the bandstand and shouted three times: "I love you, Emilio Garcia! I love you, Emilio Garcia! I love you, Emilio Garcia!"

Some of the passersby glanced at him curiously. One old man frowned and shook his head. Most people ignored him, thankfully.

Jack sat down on the bandstand steps to eat his turkey sandwich. He felt half-idiotic and half-amazing.

But before, he'd felt *mostly* idiotic and only a *little* amazing. If he kept shouting love, maybe the amazing part would just get bigger and bigger.

He decided to find out.

On Tuesday, Ms. Bergson gave him access to the art room during independent study. That's why later, when Jack arrived at Town Square with his lunch,



he was carrying a poster with a blown-up picture of Emilio Garcia on it.

Jack unrolled the poster and held it over his head. “I love you, Emilio Garcia!” he shouted three times. He rolled the poster up, stuffed it back in his backpack, and sat down to eat his ham sandwich.

He giggled. He felt so giddy and stupid.

This time a handful of people heard him. A few were indifferent. Several scowled, including a woman Jack recognized as Mark Farkle’s mom. One young man in a red-and-black flannel shirt with long black hair flashed Jack a peace sign and a smile.

Word got around.

On Wednesday at lunchtime, a few classmates followed him, including Mark Farkle. Jack felt embarrassed, but he did his three shouts anyway. He didn’t want the scratchy feeling to come back.

His classmates laughed at him. Mark Farkle laughed loudest. Jack didn’t care.

On Thursday, his entire class followed him to Town Square (except Keisha, who was using her lunch time to write letters to senators). A lot of kids from other grades showed up, too. And the crowd of grownups was growing. Jack saw Coach Wahl, his football coach, in the crowd. Coach Wahl looked like he’d just found a hair stuck in his teeth. Jack unrolled the poster and almost lost his nerve. *Emilio’s like a brother*, he told himself.

“I love you, Emilio Garcia!” he shouted. “I love you, Emilio Garcia! I love you, Emilio Garcia!”

When he was done, nearly everyone was laughing or grumbling. “See you online, Jenk,” shouted Mark Farkle, waving his phone.

“They belong in jail!” grumbled one of the grownups. “Jail!”

It was Coach Wahl.

Jack stuffed his poster in his backpack and opened his mouth to say something, but what was he going to say? He didn’t know what he was doing or why he was doing it. He just knew that he *had* to do it. It felt right deep down.

Jack’s eyes found the flannel shirt man. He gave Jack the thumbs-up. It was enough.

Jack took a bite of meatloaf sandwich but he wasn’t very hungry.

That night, as usual, he turned on his phone. “No,” he whispered. “No, no...” He flicked from post to post, from friend to friend, from one story to another.

All he saw were pictures and videos of himself. A big, pale kid holding up a poster and shouting his love for a random scrawny brown kid.

And the comments.

“Idiot.” “Loser.” “Crazy.” And the worst thing you could call a football player, “Soft.”

Coach Wahl showed up that night to talk to Jack’s parents. Certain words floated up to Jack’s room.

“Worried about him... losing his focus... big game this weekend...”

Jack Jenk went to sleep wondering what to do.  
He got the answer in the morning. A single word.  
He knew better than to hide from it.  
He took out the answer paper and wrote it down.

*Shout Love.*

*Keep Shouting It.*

*Together.*





7

## The Plan Goes *Splat!*

When Jack got to Town Square on Friday, it seemed like the whole town was waiting for him.

He walked to his usual spot on the bandstand. He tapped his front pocket—the one with the folded-paper amulet—for luck.

He took out the poster and held it up over his head with both hands so people could see Emilio Garcia's face.

Jack cleared his throat. "So, everyone say it with me today, okay?" He took a deep breath and—*splat!*

Jack felt a gooey splash hit the top of his head. Gelatinous liquid soaked into his hair and dripped down his head.

When an astonishing thing happens, there is a moment of silence between the seeing and the reacting.

In that silence, Jack heard several pairs of footsteps running off the bandstand behind him. He whipped around. Goo flew. He wiped his eyes. Who was it? Jack couldn't tell. They wore masks. But the voice that had hissed, "THAT'S what you do with Manly Man beef stew," had sounded awfully familiar.

Jack turned back to the crowd. The astonishment had registered and now came the reactions. Laughter, mostly. And chattering. And of course, holding phones aloft to take videos.

A chunk of beef slipped off Jack's shoulders and plopped on to the bandstand. Stew juice seeped into his shirt.

Jack glanced skyward, where he figured the Great Whatever was watching. *Enough*, he thought. He rolled up the poster and bent down to stuff it in his pack.

He heard footsteps behind him. He didn't care. What worse thing could happen? The footsteps stopped. A hand touched his shoulder. A voice said in his ear, "We love you, Emilio Garcia."

Keisha.

He stood. She reached for his hand. The second time, they said it together, said it loud. "We love you, Emilio Garcia!" Two other people joined them as well. The flannel shirt guy and Ms. Bergson, who had been barely visible at the back of the crowd.



Keisha grabbed the poster and held it up. When she and Jack shouted, “We love you, Emilio Garcia!” the third time, more than half the crowd joined them.

“See you tomorrow,” shouted Keisha. “Bring a friend!”

Lunchtime was over.

Keisha turned to Jack. “That was your plan?”

Jack shrugged. “Pretty much.” They walked back to school together in silence, trailing the main flow of people. Finally Jack asked her, “Why did you do that?”

“I have too many letters to write,” she said. “I help you, you help me. Deal?”

Jack reached out his hand. A small chunk of potato clung to his wrist. Keisha shook his hand anyway.



8

## Tougher Than Football

Jack showed up at the bandstand Saturday with a backpack full of pens, envelopes, and paper. A lot of grownups were waiting, including Ms. Bergson. She'd made a sign that read, "We <3 U E. G." Jack grinned at her and waved.

"No football today?" asked Ms. Bergson.

Jack shook his head. "I got suspended. Coach Wahl said I'm getting soft and it's hurting the team."

Ms. Bergson put her hand on his shoulder and looked at him without blinking. "Love is tougher than football."

That day the crowd in Town Square gave three enthusiastic shouts for Emilio Garcia. Afterward, every person wrote at least one letter to a member of Congress.

On Sunday, the pastor of the New Oslo Community Church gave a sermon about the power of love, how people could send it out into the world, how the smallest gesture anywhere could blossom everywhere. She urged her congregation to look for ways to become little radio towers, to broadcast love out of themselves with no expectation of reward but because it was a joyful thing to do. After the service, the congregation streamed to Town Square to join the three shouts for Emilio Garcia. Jack noticed that some of the same people who before had laughed at him now joined in. Even Mark Farkle, who had been dragged to the square by his mom.

Jack and Keisha collected a lot of letters that day.

On Monday, love got liftoff.

“We love you, Emilio Garcia!” roared the people of New Oslo, Minnesota. “We love you, Emilio Garcia! We love you, Emilio Garcia!”

Down at the end of Main Street that day, Mr. Arthur Judkins, who owned Judkins Hardware, had stepped outside his store to listen. He heard the voices, nodded once, turned himself southward, and gave three shouts of his own. His voice curled into Sally Gustavson’s cake shop two blocks down. Sally Gustavson came out from behind her counter, stepped outside, and sent the love across a vacant lot over to the Hemings’ property,

where Deb Hemings was tending her garden. Deb Hemings smiled and shouted the love on its way.

The love settled gently on her rooftop and stopped there.

On Tuesday, love went farther.

From the Town Square bandstand to Mr. Judkins to Sally Gustavson to Deb Hemings to John Hemings in his workshed to Harley Adkins out jogging to the Ericson farm to the cluster of New Oslo Knitter Club members waiting for their bus to the man at the Caffeine Nation espresso stop right at the city limits.

Wednesday the love went even farther.

It was as if love, having had a taste of freedom, now wanted to gallop. It traveled from New Oslo Town Square on, from person to business to farm to person.

All the way to Minneapolis.

What started as a spring had become a stream. Letters poured out of Minnesota east toward Congress.

On Thursday, when the love arrived in Minneapolis, the big city was ready. It shouted its love for Emilio Garcia.

And on Friday, love broke through.

“We love you, Emilio Garcia!” shouted Jack Jenk, Keisha Thompson, Ms. Bersgon, and the people of New Oslo, Minnesota. Even Coach Wahl and Mark Farkle.

Love rolled south.





“We love you, Emilio Garcia!” shouted Minneapolis and Des Moines and Topeka and Wichita and all the people and towns between.

Love surged south.

“We love you, Emilio Garcia!” shouted Oklahoma City and Dallas and Austin and San Antonio and all the towns right down to the border.

A mighty river of love poured south.



9

## Voices on the Wind

It was a dry, windy day at the Nuevo Sueno prison. Tumbled newspapers and scraps of trash blew about the dusty exercise yard. Guards barked now and then at the little inmates to keep quiet. Emilio Garcia stood clenching the wire mesh of the north prison fence, staring vacantly at the sky.

That's when he heard it.

A chorus of voices on the wind.

Telling him he was loved.

For the first time in months, he smiled.

Once love has broken through, it becomes unstoppable.

That Saturday, love was an avalanche. It gathered power as it rolled south and by the time it reached

For Nuevo, it crashed like a thunderstorm quenching a thirsty desert.

At the same time, the nation's capital was so flooded in letters for justice and voices of love that the president instantly set all the prisoners free and reunited all the broken-apart families.

A loving nation welcomed them in.

That night, Emilio Garcia and his parents stayed in the home of a Nuevo Sueno prison guard. After dinner, they watched the news and saw Jack Jenk and Keisha Thompson and the people of New Oslo, Minnesota, eating beef stew and holding pictures of him and crying and shouting because he'd been set free.

The TV reporter pointed a microphone at a large, pale boy and asked him if he had anything he wanted to say.

The boy tapped his pocket and said simply, "I love you, Emilio Garcia."

Then the news moved on. A scandal involving the prime minister of Japan. A nationwide strike in Italy. Protests in Afghanistan, where a girl named Ilhan Mohammed had been sent to jail just because she wanted to go to school. A volcano erupting in Indonesia.

Sunday, Emilio Garcia, his parents, and the prison guard walked to Nuevo Sueno Town Square. Emilio carried a poster with a picture of a girl's face.



At noon, the little group faced east, toward Afghanistan, and together shouted three times.

“We love you, Ilhan Mohammed!”

“We love you, Ilhan Mohammed!”

“We love you, Ilhan Mohammed!”

Love was just getting started.

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