

## ***Jack Strong Takes a Stand***

**By Tommy Greenwald**

I was about to go to soccer practice when I decided to go on strike.

I didn't mean for it to become this big thing.

I was just feeling kind of tired, that's all.

But the next thing I knew, there were two big television trucks outside my house.

There was a stage on my front lawn, with lights mounted on twenty-foot poles.

There was a television host sitting right next to me. There was an audience gathered in front of the stage, full of people. Half of them thought I was a hero, the other half thought I was a menace to society.

And they were all there because of *me*.

Just because I sat down on a couch.

*Who would've thought?!*

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But first, a little background information.

My name is Jack Strong, but I used to wish it wasn't.

I know, it sounds like a cool name. And it *would* be a cool name, if I

actually *were* strong. But I'm not. Just lifting my ridiculously heavy backpack in the morning is a challenge.

The truth is, I'm kind of weak.

Which the other kids think is hilarious, of course.

I go to Horace Henschell Middle School. It's a typical middle school. The classrooms are way too hot, and the cheeseburgers are way too cold. No one knows who Horace Henschell is, but it's generally assumed that he is both well respected and dead.

I do really well at the school part of school. My grades are excellent, and the teachers like me. I don't make trouble.

The non-school part is a little harder for me. I'm not what you would call a loser or anything, but I'm definitely not at the top of the heap, either. I'm in that huge middle section of kids who mind their own business and try to get through the day without any real drama. Usually it works. I'm not a great athlete, and I don't think the modeling agencies will be calling anytime soon, but some people seem to think I'm pretty funny. Every once in a while I make a joke in class that the other kids laugh at, and that's enough to keep me off the list of dorks and lame-os, at least for the time being.

I have one really good friend, Leo Landis, who I've eaten lunch with every day since second grade, and one really bad enemy, Alex Mutchnik, who's hated me ever since he was caught cheating off my math quiz last year. (I didn't tell on him, but he hates me anyway.) Alex's favorite activities are knocking my backpack off my shoulders and gluing my locker shut.

You know, typical school stuff.

But I definitely don't hate school. There's a lot about it that I like.

For instance, there's Cathy Billows, who's so pretty that it makes my eyebrows hurt. There's Mrs. Bender, my favorite teacher, whose tiny but unmistakable mustache makes me smile every time I see it.

And there's the bus ride home.

The ride home is incredibly important because it's the one time of day I have completely to myself. I always sit in the same seat: third row back, window seat on the left. The seat next to me is usually empty, but I don't mind—it gives me a place to put my backpack. And as the bus slowly rolls away, I gradually begin to

put the school day behind me.

“Have a nice night, Horace,” I say. And then—using my jacket as a pillow—I rest my head against the window, smile, close my eyes, and think about my absolute favorite thing in the world.

The couch.

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To someone who doesn't know any better, our couch is no great shakes. It has one or two rips in it, from when my dog, Maddie, makes herself comfortable a little too aggressively. It has plenty of stains—soda stains, sauce stains, chocolate stains, and several mystery stains. And it might not surprise you to learn that it smells a little, too. My mom always talks about getting rid of it, but I won't let her.

Because to me, that couch represents everything good.

It's where I watch *Dancing with the Chimps*, my favorite TV show. It's where I play *Silver Warriors of Doom II*, the video game that Leo and I would happily play until we are old men, if only our parents would let us. It's where Maddie lies down on my lap, even though she's way too big to be a lap dog.

It's where I daydream about Cathy Billows.

It's where I forget about Alex Mutchnik.

It's where I eat a huge bowl of Super Fun Flakies every day after school.

I could go on and on, but I think you get the picture. The couch is pretty much my favorite place in the world.

The only problem was the outside world kept interrupting.

Because here's the thing: I was probably the most overscheduled kid in the entire universe. Or, at least, I was tied with all the other overscheduled kids. And there

wasn't anything I could do about it.

And then came the week of June 6.