

Tell 'em What They Wanna Hear

By Jeffrey Kerr

Middle school. An inescapable hurdle on the racetrack of life. Clear it and what lies beyond – high school – beckons as a joyous time of dates and proms and trips to the lake and – best of all – a driver's license. Stumble over that hurdle, though, and grades 9-12 bring only misery and loneliness. For by the 9th grade the cliques have formed and the nerds and jocks, wallflowers and prom queens, mean girls and everyone else, have separated like oil and water. With rare exception, no one on the outside at Wilbarger Middle School in the tiny town of Sweetgum, Texas had ever made the jump to the inner circle of cool at Sweetgum High. Jack Cowherd was one of those exceptions.

Back in 1990, when Jack was twelve, no one could have predicted his meteoric rise. Even Jack, a scrawny, awkward boy with no discernible athletic talent – or talent in any field, for that matter – believed he would forever remain unpopular. He had a few friends, fellow dweebs and nerds like Jack, but they shared his pessimism about the prospect of rising to popular status. None provided Jack with true companionship. None saw Jack as anything special. None provided the type of emotional support that might help Jack navigate the terrors of adolescence.

Then he met Tasha. A transplant from Plano, Tasha was smart, she was self-confident, and she was pretty. Maybe not beauty queen pretty, but pretty like the second female lead in a romantic comedy, the girl whose beauty is hidden by her lack of interest in fashion and makeup, the girl who quickly transforms from ugly duckling to starlet just by seeing the right

hair stylist. In short, she was prettier than any girl that would talk to Jack, so, of course, Jack was terrified of her.

His terror melted, though, within a few days of Tasha's debut at Wilbarger Middle School, when she asked Kali Tincer to move so she could sit behind Jack in math class. In truth, Kali didn't mind moving – she thought Jack was as nerdy as all the other unpopular kids – but she complained loudly at Tasha's request so the mean girl clique in the back of the room wouldn't think she was a pushover. She quickly found a new seat behind Aaron Priestmeyer who, even as a benchwarmer on the basketball team, conveyed much greater status than Jack.

"Hey," Tasha said in a loud stage whisper once she was seated. "What's your name?"

Not used to being spontaneously addressed by pretty girls, Jack ignored her, assuming she was talking to someone else.

"Hey!" Tasha said again, this time tapping his shoulder.

Jack turned around and said, "Hay is for horses."

Tasha laughed. "That's funny."

Although Jack had made that joke a few thousand times so far in his middle school career, not once had anyone told him it was funny. This gave him the confidence to say, "What do you want?"

"What's your name?" Tasha asked.

"Jack."

"Jack what?"

On no, Jack thought, here we go. Jack hated telling people his last name, for it usually elicited laughter. He even got in trouble once with a sixth grade teacher who thought he had

made it up. But, still basking in the glow of being spoken to by a girl, he said, “Cowherd. Jack Cowherd.”

Tasha smiled. “Cowherd. Like cow—”

“I know, I know,” said Jack, interrupting. “Go ahead and say it. Cow turd.”

Tasha said, “I was gonna say ‘like cowboy.’ That’s a cool name.”

“Really?” Jack asked, stunned. “You think it’s cool?”

“I do,” she said. “It’s way better than mine.”

“What’s yours?”

“Tasha Bottom.”

“Oh,” said Jack. “I’ll bet you get teased a lot.”

Tasha rolled her eyes. “That’s for sure. Some people are so immature. Hey, you know what would be funny?”

“What?”

“If we put our names together. You know, like ‘cowbottom.’”

Jack snickered. “Cowbottom. Whoa, you’d *really* get teased with a name like that.”

“I know,” Tasha said. “Why don’t we pretend that’s really our name? We won’t tell anybody else; we can just call each other that.”

“Okay,” said Jack.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Jack Cowbottom.”

“Nice to meet *you*, Tasha Cowbottom.”

And so they became friends. Not romantic friends – Jack was much too shy for that – but friends who teased each other and did their homework together and sat together in the lunchroom. When Jack found out what class Tasha was in right before math, he began meeting her in the hall as she left that class and walking with her to math. When Tasha learned that Jack’s house was only two blocks from hers, she began showing up on weekends for them to play board games or watch a movie together. They became so close that one day Billy Kane pointed at them on the playground and recited in a cracking sing-song voice, “Hey, everybody. Jack and Tasha sitting in a tree. K-I-S-S-I-N-G. First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes Mrs. Spratt in a baby carriage.”

Mrs. Spratt was an elderly assistant principal, who Jack thought must surely have ridden dinosaurs to school as a young girl. As Billy finished his song, Jack’s face turned bright red and he stuck his hands in his pockets, desperately trying to think of a way out of the situation. Just as he was about to break and run, though, Tasha chanted, “I see London. I see France. I see Billy Kane’s underpants.” Then she pointed at Billy’s crotch.

Billy panicked, looking at and feeling his crotch to see if he had left the barn door open.

“Made you look!” said Tasha, laughing.

By now a small crowd had gathered. A boy shouted, “Hey, Billy, what are you doing there? Playing with your tallywhacker?”

“Yeah, Billy,” said another. “Should we get you a hotel room?”

Now it was Billy’s turn to blush. In a futile attempt to salvage his dignity, he harumphed and said, “You guys are perverts,” before stalking off.

As the crowd broke up, Jack turned to Tasha and said, “That was awesome.”

Tasha snorted and said, "Some people really need to grow up."

"Yeah," said Jack. "That's the truth."

"Hey, Jack," said Tasha.

"What?"

"Your zipper's open."

When Jack immediately glanced at his crotch, she punched his arm and said, "Gotcha!"

"Grow up, Tasha Cowbottom," Jack said with a grin.

Tasha returned the smile and said, "You first, Jack Cowbottom."

Jack laughed.

"You know what?" Tasha asked.

"What?"

Jack never forgot the next words out of her mouth. "You're pretty cool," she said.

Mr. Dankworth, principal of Wilbarger Middle School, stopped on the way to his office to admire the sign urging students to run for student council. The thing was huge, a hand-painted monstrosity that loomed over the hallway like a hungry vulture. At one end was the school mascot, Rita Cheetah, grinning and pointing directly at whoever happened to be looking at the sign. Next to here were the words, "The Student Council Wants You!"

"Not bad," Mr. Dankworth said to himself. As he walked away, though, he mumbled, "Rita Cheetah. Good God."

Rita Cheetah had been the inspiration of Mr. Dankworth's nemesis, the infamous Mrs. Spratt of Billy's taunt. She had somehow convinced the PTA to change the official school mascot

from Charlie Cheetah, a muscular, clearly masculine jungle cat with a mouthful of deadly fangs, to the feminine Rita, whose stupid smile Mr. Dankworth thought struck fear into no one. “Has the world gone mad with political correctness?” he had angrily asked at the decisive meeting.

One mother then raised her hand and said, “Treating women equally is not political correctness.” When everyone in the room applauded, Mr. Dankworth knew he had lost.

Ten minutes later, as Mr. Dankworth complained to Miss Beatty, the school secretary, that there was no more creamer for the coffee, Jack and Tasha entered the building. As was his habit, Jack ignored the sign, having decided long ago that elections were just popularity contests in which someone like him had no chance of winning. Tasha, though, pointed at it and said, “Look, Jack.”

“What about it?” Jack asked.

“Student council elections,” Tasha said, as if that explained everything.

“I can read,” Jack said, annoyed. “So?”

“So you should run.”

“Me? No way.”

“Why not?”

“I’d never win.”

Tasha frowned and said, “You don’t know that. I’d vote for you.”

“So I’d get one vote,” Jack said. “Big whoop.”

But Tasha didn’t give up. “I’ll tell you what,” she said. “I’ll be your campaign manager. I’ll convince people to vote for you.”

“How will you do that?” Jack asked.

“You know, posters and things.”

“Forget it.”

Tasha wagged a finger at him. “Don’t act like such a loser. You’re as smart as anyone else in this school and you could do a good job. I’m gonna tell Mr. Dankworth to put you on the ballot.”

It was the word ‘loser’ that changed Jack’s mind. For Tasha, his best and perhaps only true friend, to see him as a loser would be unbearable. He gritted his teeth and said, “All right.”

Tasha’s face brightened. “Great!” she said. “But here’s what I’m thinking. Anybody can be on the student council. I mean, Herbert, that exchange kid from Austria, he got on it and he didn’t even speak English.”

“But you just said I should run.”

“I did. But not for student council.”

“For what, then?” asked Jack.

A smug look spread over Tasha’s face. “Student council *president*,” she said.

A week later, as Jack fidgeted nervously behind the stage of the school auditorium waiting for the assembly to begin, he immensely regretted his entry into the race for student council president. Only one other candidate, Mandy Reynolds, was running. Mandy was everything Jack was not: tall, athletic, a straight A student, and an ace on the piano. Earlier this year she had brought the crowd to its feet at the school talent show with her flawless performance of *Moonlight Sonata*. Then, just as everyone was settling down, she added a jazzy,

unscripted encore of the *Rugrats* theme song, which brought forth an even louder standing ovation. Somebody even threw roses onto the stage.

Now there she was, standing right next to him in a brand new outfit that her big-shot lawyer mother had helped her pick out, smiling smugly at him and saying, "I don't get your campaign slogan. 'Be a bull. Charge ahead with Cowherd?' What does that even mean?"

Jack said, "You know, like a charging bull. Bulls charge ahead."

"Yeah," said Mandy, "but bulls and cows are different. One is a boy and the other's a girl."

Jack looked away and said, "Tasha thought of it."

Jack scanned the front row for Tasha's face. There she was, sitting between Blaine Cook and Evan Pitchman, two football players who were chatting way too amiably with her, Jack thought. One of them said something and they all laughed. Tasha caught Jack staring at her and flashed a thumbs up sign. Irritated and jealous, Jack immediately looked down at his note cards.

He had written the speech with Tasha's help the night before. Then he had practiced it several times before going downstairs to deliver it to his parents. Jack remembered them grinning like monkeys as he spoke, stumbling over words that Tasha had inserted after looking up synonyms in a Thesaurus. "They make you sound more educated," Tasha explained. "People will like that."

When he finished his parents had gushed such effusive praise that Jack feared they were mocking him. "No, honey," his mother said. "We think it's wonderful."

"We do," said his father. "Absolutely fantastic."

"But what does 'perspicacious' mean?" his mother asked.

“And ‘verisimilitude,’” said his father. “That might go over the heads of the voters.”

The next day in school Mr. Dankworth strode to the microphone and said, “All right, everyone, settle down so we can begin.” But he might as well have been talking to a roomful of screeching chimpanzees for all the effect he had. After a few more attempts, he twisted a knob on the sound panel attached to the podium to produce an ear-splitting shriek from the speakers. The rambunctious crowd immediately quieted. Mr. Dankworth smiled and said, “That’s more like it.” He peered at a sheet of paper in front of him. “We have two students running for student council president who will now say a few words. The first is Mandy Reynolds. Mandy? Can you come out here?”

“Good luck,” Mandy whispered to Jack. Amid polite applause and one very loud wolf whistle, she marched confidently to the microphone, cleared her throat, and said, “If I am elected as your president, I will try always to hear your concerns and bring them to the attention of the council.”

Jack groaned at the deathly silence Mandy’s words elicited, for it indicated to him that she had the crowd in the palm of her hand.

“I will serve you with integrity and fairness...and I will never miss any meetings or school events, as I have too much respect for our school and its principal to do that.” As she finished the line, she glanced over at Mr. Dankworth, who rewarded her with a wink. Wrapping up, she said, “So I ask you to vote for me, Mandy Reynolds, to be your next student council president.”

As the crowd applauded and Mandy strode away from the podium, Mr. Dankworth gave her a high five. Jack heard him say, “Excellent speech, young lady.”

As Mandy passed Jack on her way off the stage, he muttered, "Everyone knows your name."

"Excuse me?" she asked.

"I said, everyone knows your name. You didn't have to tell them."

Mandy sniffed. "Well, it never hurts to let them know who you are. That's how they remember you when they vote."

"And now we'll hear from Jack Cowherd," said Mr. Dankworth into the microphone.

Jack fought down the urge to vomit as he stepped tentatively to the podium. He held up the first note card and said, "Hello. My name is Jack—"

"Cowpie!" shouted a pimply kid a few rows back.

Scattered laughter rippled throughout the auditorium. Jack steeled himself and flipped to the next card.

"If I am elected president, I will—"

"Fart!" the heckler shouted.

Again everyone laughed. Mr. Dankworth signaled to a teacher in the front row, who stood and scanned the crowd for the troublemaker. "It was Wyatt Brinkman," a girl called out. The teacher nodded and signaled to Wyatt, who stood and followed her out of the auditorium.

Flustered, Jack said, "No, I will...I will—"

"Get free donuts in the cafeteria!" another heckler shouted.

The crowd laughed.

"That's a good idea," Jack quipped.

The laughter intensified.

“And chocolate milk,” Jack said.

Cheers broke out.

Jack tossed the notes aside. He leaned into the microphone and said, “And pizza in all the classrooms!”

The room exploded in cheers and applause. Students rose from their seats, screaming, pumping their fists, jumping up and down as if the winning touchdown had just been scored.

Jack threw up his arms and shouted, “Are you with me?”

They were indeed. Despite Mr. Dankworth’s valiant efforts the chaos continued and a chant arose, indistinct at first but, as more students joined in, echoing clearly throughout the auditorium. “Jack! Jack! Jack!” Anxious to restore order, Mr. Dankworth grabbed Jack’s shirt and tugged him away from the microphone. Jack marched off the stage a hero, basking in the crowd’s love. “Jack! Jack! Jack!”

At lunch later that day Tasha dropped into her usual seat next to Jack and said, “You can’t really get free donuts and chocolate milk for everybody.”

“Did you hear everybody cheering?” Jack asked.

“Yes, but pizza in all the classrooms? They’ll never do that.”

“I know.”

Tasha pulled out her sandwich and took a bite. “What did Mr. Dankworth say?”

Jack groaned. “He gave me a Saturday detention. But he said I could still run for president.”

“Do you really think you’ll win now after getting in trouble like that?”

Jack thought about it. “Yeah, I do,” he said.

Before his speech in the school auditorium, most students at Wilbarger Middle School didn't know of Jack's existence. They might have recognized his face as the one belonging to the nerdy kid in their language arts class or the kid they targeted first in a dodgeball game, but few were familiar enough with him to greet him by name in the lunchroom. Jack's speech, though, changed all that. Overnight he became a celebrity, "the pizza boy," or the "donut dude," or "that guy that really stuck it to Dankworth." People passing him in the hall now cheerily called out his name and gave him a high five. Girls smiled at him. Kali Tincher even traded her favorite training bra for the seat behind Jack in math class.

Jack reveled in his newfound popularity. Suddenly he had vaulted from the ranks of dweebhood to become one of the cool kids. He began receiving invitations to parties, where he was usually called upon to relate the tale of his speech and subsequent private chat with Mr. Dankworth. In doing so, he discovered he had a knack for quick repartee, which he used to embellish his stories and keep his audience enthralled. Girls began passing him notes in class, many with their phone numbers scrawled in pink with the zeroes written as hearts. One even kissed her note; the sexy lip imprint fueled Jack's fantasies for weeks.

Within two weeks of his speech, Jack had a steady girlfriend, a cute cheerleader named Paula Lunceford. She was followed by Maggie Ramirez, who gave way to Cecelia Stewart, who in turn lost out to Ella LaRoche. Despite these romantic distractions, Jack maintained his friendship with Tasha. Tasha told herself she wasn't and had never really been romantically attracted to Jack, a lie she maintained for the next thirty years.

After the student council presidential election, Jack profusely thanked Tasha for engineering his victory. But deep down he knew it hadn't been Tasha's slogans and posters that carried the day; it was the pizza and chocolate milk. The sixty percent of the student body that voted for him didn't know or care if he would be a good student council president. Those kids voted for him because he made them feel good. Jack couldn't have articulated it at the time, but he had discovered an age-old, unbeatable formula for swaying voters: tell them what they want to hear. It was a lesson he would never forget.