

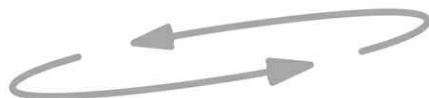
The
SUPERTEACHER
Project



GORDON KORMAN

New York Times bestselling author of *The Unteachables*

The
SUPERTEACHER
Project



Gordon Korman

Balzer + Bray

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Dedication

For my teachers,
who always brought something
surprising and unexpected
to class.



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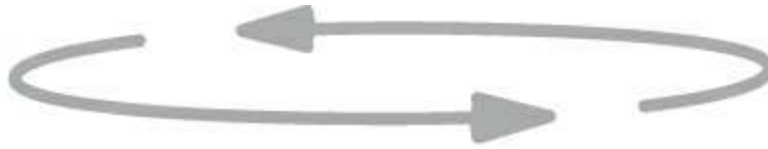
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1

Oliver Zahn

Consider the spitball.

Not the baseball kind. That's something different. I mean the school kind.

I've heard all the arguments: nobody shoots spitballs anymore; they're extinct, like the dinosaurs; these days, nobody does anything without high-speed internet and an eight-terabyte hard drive.

No way.

Spitballs are more than mushy pellets of chewed paper. They're our heritage. Our parents shot spitballs. Our *grandparents* shot spitballs. The minute the ancient Chinese invented paper, I'll bet some smart aleck tore off a corner, wadded it up in his mouth, and chucked it at somebody.

Spitballs are an art form. Over the centuries, millions of kids have made them, shot them, spit them, flicked them, and thrown them without ever knowing they were doing it all wrong.

It goes without saying that spitballs are against the rules. That's the biggest part of their appeal. Rules aren't just made to be broken; they're made to be *wrecked*. And I, Oliver Zahn, happen to be Brightling Middle School's number one rule-wrecker.

My best friend, Nathan Popova, is a rule-wrecker too, but he isn't close to my level. So as I prepare my spitball in homeroom, I do everything slowly and carefully, so Nathan can see all the steps.

For example, I always chew the paper with my *back* teeth because that encourages the action of the tongue, which naturally forms it into a near-perfect sphere. Amateur spitballers think that's enough. We professionals prefer a larger projectile. I always use a two-layered warhead, by forming a

second paper around the first one. Same process, though—back teeth, tongue.

The delivery system is important. Most people use a straw as a blowgun to launch a spitball, but I prefer the empty shell of an old ballpoint pen. It won't bend or get squashed. And it produces higher velocity, greater distance, and better aim. From my pocket, I take out a Bic pen that I've saved since elementary school. Nathan casts me a look of respect. This launcher has a lot of glorious history. Two years ago, I used it to deliver the famous Cadillac spitball, which I dropped in through the sunroof of the superintendent's car as he drove away after fifth-grade graduation.

Choosing the target is important. My eyes first turn to Kevin Krumlich, who's easily the most annoying kid in the seventh grade. He thinks he's a genius, when he's obviously not. Accordingly, he treats the rest of us like we're gerbils. A bright white spitball would look magnificent strategically placed in his curly brown hair.

He's perfect, right? Wrong. You don't pick on someone like that, because everybody else does. Annoying or not, you give the kid a break.

No, your target should be: (a) someone with enough of a sense of humor to laugh it off, (b) someone popular, who can handle a little embarrassment, or (c)—

The new teacher walks to the front of the room. "Good morning, pupils. I'm Mr. Aidact."

Nathan and I exchange a look of pure joy. There's no more perfect spitball target than a new teacher—especially one with a funny name. AIDACT—he types it onto the Smart Board in foot-high letters. And what's up with "pupils"? What is this—1870? Does he commute to school by covered wagon? No one has ever deserved a spitball more.

A buzz of anticipation goes up in the room as I raise the hollow pen to my lips and fire my spitball, the first of the new school year.

My aim is true, like I knew it would be. The soggy white projectile sails through the air, almost in slow motion. I savor every millisecond. It arcs in toward the light brown hair at the back of Mr. Aidact's head.

It happens so fast that I almost miss it. The teacher's left hand flashes out and catches my spitball between the thumb and forefinger. I have the presence of mind to fumble the launcher into my desk. Otherwise, I'm frozen with shock.

Mr. Aidact turns and fixes me with a blue-eyed stare. But he doesn't seem mad. He doesn't seem anything.

Just then this older guy carrying a big briefcase scrambles up to him.

Mr. Aidact shows him the spitball and points a long finger at me. “It came from *that* pupil.”

There it is again—*pupil!* And how did he know it was me? Has he got eyes in the back of his head?

The older guy glares at me. “That’s no way to start the year.”

There are a few chuckles around the room. Someone mumbles, “It’s Oliver’s way.” I think it was Kevin. That’s what I get for sparing him.

I look back and forth between the two adults. “Is he your father?” I ask Mr. Aidact. He looks young enough to be the older guy’s kid. But what kind of teacher brings his dad to his first day on the job?

“This is Mr. Perkins, my student teacher,” Mr. Aidact informs me.

That gets a reaction. Student teachers are normally college kids, maybe twenty-one or twenty-two. This guy Perkins seems more like a boomer.

I’m already the center of attention, which is a place no rule-wrecker ever wants to be. You need to be able to blend into the wallpaper when the spitball hits or the stink bomb goes off or the fire alarm starts wailing. I have to get this class back to normal or I’m going to be “the guy who” all year.

So I say, “Anyway, nobody’s getting educated by standing around talking. Let’s hit the books.”

Mr. Aidact blinks. “There are no books. All the material you need is already preloaded on your iPads.”

Is that supposed to be a joke? If so, then Mr. Aidact really needs comedy lessons, because he stinks at it.

When homeroom is finally over, the hall is buzzing about the new teacher—especially the girls, who seem to think he’s good-looking.

Nathan makes a face. “Don’t be gross. He’s a teacher!”

“We’re just making an observation.” Rosalie Arnette, tallest girl in the seventh grade, rolls her eyes down at him. “He has broad shoulders and perfect skin. And his hair is *ridiculously* thick and shiny. He could be a movie star.”

She had to mention the hair. Just the thought of it makes me picture the shiny white spitball that should have been there, but never got that far.

Ainsley Watanabe reads my mind. “I guess your rule-wrecking career is over, Oliver. Did you catch Mr. Aidact snatching your spitball out of the air? I’ve never seen anyone move that fast!”

“It was a fluke,” I scoff.

“You hope,” Rosalie challenges, looking pleased with herself. “School’s barely even started, and our homeroom teacher has already figured out you’re trouble.”

I shrug. “Who cares about homeroom? Twenty minutes at the start of the day when nobody’s even really awake. Trust me—rule-wrecking is about to have its best year ever!”

That’s not bragging. I mean that—right up until I walk into my first-period algebra class. There he is at the front of the room—Mr. Aidact, right next to his great-grandfather, Perkins, the student teacher.

Nathan can’t believe it either. He pulls his schedule out of his pocket and unfolds the page. There it is, right under Period 2—Math: *R. Aidact*.

I wonder what the R stand for—besides *Ruins Everything*.

Rosalie shoots me an in-your-face grin.

I smile back, but believe me, it hurts. It’s suddenly very urgent that I put a spitball into the new teacher’s *ridiculously* thick and shiny hair.

As soon as I take my seat, I tear off a corner of paper, tuck it into the back of my mouth, and begin to chew. But I’m so tense that I bite down too hard and end up swallowing it.

I choke a little, and Nathan shoots me a concerned look. I ignore him and start on a new piece of paper. Wouldn’t you know it? Dry mouth. Dry mouth is the enemy of all top-flight spitballers. You keep yourself hydrated, even if you have to walk across the Gobi Desert at high noon to find water.

So I duck out into the hall and get a swig from the water fountain. I dart back into class just as the boomer is closing the door.

“Good morning, pupils. I’m Mr. Aidact. Welcome to seventh-grade algebra. . . .”

The whole time the teacher is introducing himself and Mr. Perkins, I’m working on the new spitball, and I can already tell that it’s going to be a masterpiece—tightly packed into a unit, with three layers instead of the usual two.

While Mr. Aidact turns his back to write some equations on the board, I pull the launcher out of my sleeve, hold it to my mouth, and tongue the projectile to the open end.

Before I can even take aim, Mr. Aidact is at my side. He pulls the launcher out of my mouth and I have to swallow the second spitball of the day.

“You won’t be needing this anymore.” He snaps my beautiful pen

launcher in two—with one hand!—and drops the pieces into the wastebasket.

How did he get here? He must have flown, because a split second ago, he was at the whiteboard with his back turned!

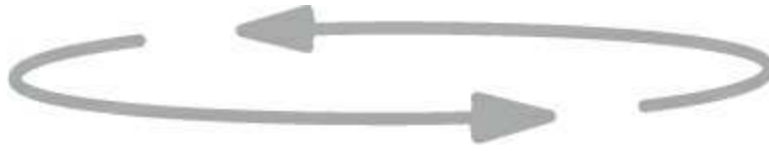
Mr. Perkins speaks up. “That’s the second problem with this particular student. What kind of punishment do you have in mind, Mr. Aidact?”

For just an instant, Mr. Aidact tilts his head slightly, staring off into an empty corner of the room. When he comes back, his bright blue gaze is on me.

“It’s only the first day of school. We’ll start off on the right foot tomorrow.”

My relief at not getting punished is short-lived. My best spitball launcher—broken and thrown away like garbage!

This Aidact guy is starting to get on my nerves.



2

Rosalie Arnette

When your school is full of weirdos, even a visit to the girls' room can be like taking your life into your hands.

I'm at the sink, washing up, when the bathroom door opens, and a male voice hollers, "Fire in the hole!"

A black plastic object sails through the air, bounces twice, and comes to rest in the center of the tiles.

Shocked, I duck under the sink and cram myself against the drainpipe, making my body as small as possible—which isn't so easy, since I'm five foot nine. There I crouch, heart pounding, waiting for the explosion—for the air to fill with smoke or rotten-egg smell, or for ink to spray everywhere, staining the bathroom. And me.

It doesn't happen. Instead, the black object just lies there, looking dangerous. It's about the size of a tape measure with an outer casing that looks like a grill.

The next thing I know, Cassidy Bonner is framed in the doorway, staring at me. "Why are you under the sink?"

Silently, I point to the *thing* in the middle of the floor.

She frowns. "What is it?"

"It might be a smoke bomb." I'm whispering, afraid that sudden noises might set it off. "Or a stink bomb. Or a . . ."

My voice trails off. If it was something like that, we'd know already—the hard way. Suddenly, I'm embarrassed to be caught cowering under the sink by Cassidy, who's in eighth grade. Eighth graders are the top of the food chain around here, especially Cassidy, who's captain of the girls' field

hockey team.

Slowly, like I'm handling nitro, I pick up the metal-and-plastic device and turn it over in my hand. "Search me," I say as much to myself as to Cassidy.

Cassidy's so cool. She just shrugs. "It's a school. Stuff happens. So long as it doesn't have eight legs, I'm good." She disappears into a stall.

By this time, I've convinced myself that—whatever it is—this mysterious object isn't going to explode. I march out of the girls' room, determined to find the jerk who threw it in there.

My eyes rake the hall from north to south. Just as I suspected—Oliver and Nathan sit side by side in front of their lockers, their noses hidden in books. That's a dead giveaway. When was the last time those two ever opened a book?

I shove the object in Oliver's face—he's the ringleader. "What do you have to say about this?"

They don't even try to deny it. Oliver holds in his laughter for about two seconds before it bursts out of him in a loud raspberry. That sets off Nathan, who buries his head in his hands and makes faint snorting noises like a piglet.

"You should see the look on your face!" Oliver manages, gasping for breath.

At least Nathan has the decency to be a little ashamed between guffaws. Well, being the junior partner doesn't earn him any brownie points from me. I'm just as ticked off at him as I am at Oliver. Maybe more, because Nathan should have the brains to behave himself.

"Did you climb up on the toilet seat?" Oliver persists, still laughing. "If you climbed up on the toilet seat, Nathan owes me a bag of chips!"

"You guys are legends in your own minds," I snarl. "Your jokes aren't even funny. What is this thing, anyway?"

"That's the beauty of it!" Oliver crows. "It's nothing—just some piece of junk from the supply closet. But you're freaking out because it could be *anything*."

"Which it *isn't*," I remind him.

"Exactly! The *nothing* becomes *something* because of how you react to it!"

I didn't think anything could make me even madder. I stand corrected. This creep thinks he's some kind of genius and I'm his latest experiment. It's only the second week of school, and I can already picture my entire seventh-grade year turning into a food fight.

I can't let it happen. Seventh grade sets the tone for eighth. Eighth grade paves the way for high school. And high school is the gateway to college and the future.

When I see Mr. Aidact walking down the hall, with his student teacher in tow, I know exactly what to do.

"You're in trouble now," I tell those so-called jokers. "Let's see what Mr. Aidact has to say about this!"

"Wait!" Nathan pleads. "Rosalie—come back!"

Too late. He should have thought about the consequences before signing on to be Oliver's sidekick.

I catch up with the new teacher and show him the mysterious object from the supply closet. "It was Oliver and Nathan," I seethe. "They threw this into the girls' room and yelled 'Fire in the hole!'"

Mr. Aidact takes the object from me and examines it carefully, blinking twice. "This is an external cooling fan for a T-73 computer. It can't catch fire. You weren't in any danger."

"Yeah, but I didn't know that when they threw it," I protest. "I hit the ceiling!"

He casts a long look in the direction of the girls' room. "Why would the ceiling in there be any lower than in the rest of the building?"

Mr. Perkins, the student teacher, speaks up. "What Mr. Aidact means—"

I'm not in the mood to be soothed. "It could have been anything, you know! It could have been a bomb."

"But it wasn't," Mr. Aidact insists.

He says it so reasonably that I'm actually starting to think that *I'm* the one who did something bad. No—I'm the victim here!

"But—they did it on purpose!" I sputter. "They wanted to scare me! Don't you get it? The *nothing* was *something*!"

Oh man, now I sound like Oliver.

Mr. Aidact nods pleasantly. "It *was* something. Just not what you expected it to be."

Like that's not bad enough, Mr. Perkins takes out a small notebook and starts scribbling in it. How come I'm the one getting written up, not Nathan and Oliver?

"I'll take this back to the computer lab," Mr. Aidact assures me. And he and Mr. Perkins disappear into the faculty lounge.

The thing is, I really like Mr. Aidact. He's the only adult in the whole school who doesn't talk down to kids. When he's teaching, it's like we're all at his level.

"I'm with you a hundred P," Kevin Krumlich chimes in from the other side of the lunch table. "Honor roll forever, baby."

"I'm not your baby," I snap. "I'm nobody's baby."

Kevin talks about the honor roll all the time, even though our school doesn't have one. And even if we did, he wouldn't be on it.

"That's easy for you guys to say," Nathan complains. "You understand stuff. I can't keep up with Mr. Aidact. And if I ask him a question, I can't keep up with his answer either."

Three days ago, Nathan and Oliver were fake bombing me in the girls' room, and now here I am sitting with them in the cafeteria. That's what passes for justice at Brightling Middle School.

"If you're having trouble, you should go to extra help," I argue.

"Not going to happen," Oliver puts in. "Extra help is extra school."

"I'll never understand ratios," Nathan says mournfully. "How can ten-to-five be the same as two-to-one? They're totally different numbers!"

"The *numbers* are different, but the *ratio* is the same," I explain.

He makes a face. "Mr. Aidact told me it couldn't be simpler. Yes, it could. Like if I understood it!"

"Why is Mr. Aidact teaching math, anyway?" Ainsley puts in. "He's a social studies teacher. I have him for American History 101."

"Really?" Kevin is surprised. "I have him for English and gym."

"He's in the art department too," adds Laki Heathwood. "And he teaches French on the side."

"Wow." I'm impressed. "I've heard of teachers covering a couple of subjects, but never all of them. He's like a superteacher."

"Seems to me he isn't any kind of teacher if he can't explain ratios," Nathan grumbles. "And don't even get me started on probability. What's up with that?"

"You guys are missing the point," Oliver announces in that superior tone of his. "The real problem with Mr. Aidact is he has no sense of humor. Has anybody seen him crack a smile even once since he got here?"

I can't resist. "Well, obviously, he doesn't smile around *you*. People don't usually feel like smiling when someone has just tried to put a giant spitball through the back of their skull."

“Seriously,” he insists, “if you don’t ever find anything funny, how smart can you be?”

“You mean throwing a computer fan into the girls’ bathroom like it’s a grenade?” I ask savagely.

He doesn’t have the decency to be embarrassed. “Every single minute, the world around us is filled with things to laugh at. You just have to have the brains to notice it.”

“Maybe Mr. Aidact doesn’t consider education one big comedy routine,” I counter.

“Are you kidding? This school is a gold mine for stuff to make fun of. Have you ever read the *Code of Student Behavior*? There’s an actual rule in the handbook that says you’re not allowed to ride a Big Wheel down the hall. You know—those toy bikes for six-year-olds. Like anybody here could even fit on one!”

Kevin snaps his fingers. “I heard about that. Supposedly, it all started back when Brightling was an elementary school. Some kid brought his Big Wheel for show-and-tell and bowled an entire kindergarten class down the stairs. That’s why they made a rule against it.”

“And it made sense—back then,” Oliver concludes. “But this place has been a middle school for how long? Fifty years? And it’s still right there in the handbook.”

“Okay, fine,” I say impatiently. “We’ve got one dumb rule. So what?”

“So every time Principal Candiotti lectures us on where we can’t use our phones or why we shouldn’t run on the stairs or how gum chewing is a big no-no,” he explains earnestly, like he’s making a speech, “I think about that rule and I laugh inside. Because if the rules are so important, why didn’t she bother to take that old one out?”

“I like Principal Candiotti,” I retort. “She went to middle school right here, like us. She was captain of the last Brightling Bobcats field hockey team to win a state championship.”

That trophy still holds a place of honor in our school, on a special pedestal in the main hallway. And, sure, it isn’t football or basketball or one of those other sports people make a big deal out of. But it’s nice to have something to be proud of. “Every time I pass that trophy, it makes me feel good to go to Brightling.”

“Candiotti’s a little nuts about that trophy, though,” Kevin puts in. “I touched it once and got a week’s detentions for ‘finger marks.’”

“Hi, honey!” A singsongy voice rings out across the cafeteria.

Uh-oh. I forgot Mom was going to be at school today. She flits across the lunchroom, a little tilted to one side by the weight of the giant shopping bag looped over her left arm. She takes a seat on the bench beside me and delivers a peck to my check. “Don’t mind me. Don’t let me disturb you and your friends.”

I hate to tell her this, but she’s already disturbed me and my friends. Ever since Mom and Dad split, she’s been throwing herself 110 percent into her role as PTA president. That means she spends more time at school than I do, and maybe even more than the principal.

“Hi, Mom.” I keep my attention laser-focused across the table on the empty space between Ainsley and Nathan. If you meet her eyes, that only encourages her.

“Hi,” she says again, and rustles the paper of the shopping bag.

Now I’m supposed to ask what’s in the bag. I keep my lips clamped shut. I love my mother, but when she stalks me in the cafeteria—which happens almost every day that ends in Y—it drives me around the bend.

“What’s in the bag, Mrs. Arnette?” Oliver pipes up.

Thanks a lot, friend.

She beams. “Great news—the Halloween dance is back on. This is what we’re going to sell to raise the money.”

She reaches in and pulls out what, at first glance, looks like a candy bar. That’s until you read the label: FLAXPLOSION.

Nathan frowns. “Flax?”

“Halloween has a bad rap these days, with all the emphasis on candy and sugar,” my mother explains. “This is healthier.”

“But it tastes like vacuum cleaner fuzz!” I protest. “Nobody’s going to buy these!” And when kids get thrown out of every house in town for trying to sell birdseed bars, they’re going to remember whose mother is the president of the PTA.

“Great idea, Mrs. Arnette,” Oliver exclaims with an infuriating wink in my direction. “Hey, speaking of PTA stuff, what do you think about Rule 24-B in the student handbook?”

Mom looks blank. “Is that the one about nut-free tables in the lunchroom?”

“It’s the one about no Big Wheels,” Nathan supplies.

“Big Wheels.” Mom looks puzzled. “That doesn’t sound like a sensible

rule for a middle school. Tell you what—I'll bring it up at the next PTA meeting." She stands, depositing a second peck on my cheek.

"Don't forget your flax," Kevin puts in helpfully.

"You mean *your* flax," she says cheerfully. "You're the ones who'll be selling the bars."

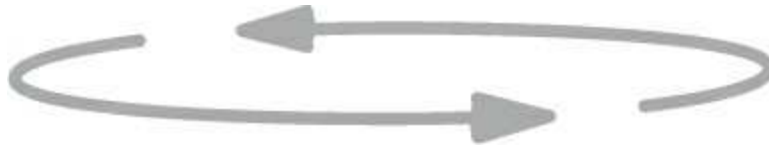
Don't remind me.

"By the way," Mom goes on, "I finally met your homeroom teacher, Mr. Aidact. I tried to shake his hand, but he was holding the door and he wouldn't let go of this gigantic briefcase."

"I think you're talking about Mr. Perkins," I tell her. "He's the student teacher. Mr. Aidact is the younger one."

"Really!" she exclaims in surprise. And then again: "Really!"

The last time I saw that look on my mother's face, it was the day she found out there was an opening for president of the PTA.



3

Nathan Popova

Seems to me our school has the neediest guidance department in the whole state. It's not like the high school, where everybody's lining up to get help with college applications and summer internships and fancy stuff like that. Here in middle school, you go to guidance only to complain about a class. And nobody wants to do that, because if you tick off your teacher, it only makes things worse.

But something has to give with math and me, and that's why I finally go to see Mrs. Rostenkowski.

"Nathan!" she exclaims when I poke my head in the door. "Wonderful to see you! Come in, come in! Have a Jolly Rancher!"

She sits me down in a padded leather chair. Guidance always has the most comfortable chairs in the whole school, barely even sat in. "I can't understand my math teacher," I mumble around my candy. "And when I go to extra help, he explains everything the same way, and I can't understand that either."

"And have you brought this up in homeroom?" Mrs. Rostenkowski asks.

"I can't," I explain. "My homeroom teacher and my math teacher are the same person."

"I understand," she says sympathetically. "I'm happy to bring up the subject with your teacher. Who is . . . ?"

"Mr. Aidact," I supply.

Maybe it's just me, but I swear she goes white as a ghost. "Mr. Aidact," she repeats.

I nod. "The new guy."