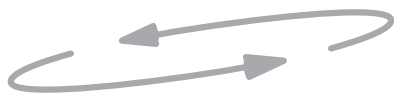


The  
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Project



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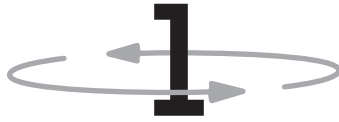
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## Oliver Zahn

### **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 *grand*parents 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 humour 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. 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 centre 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.