

THE UNTEACHABLES

GORDON KORMAN

Cover art by David Miles

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For all the teachers who soldier on



One
Kiana Roubini

It's no fun riding to school with Stepmonster—not with Chauncey screaming his lungs out in the back seat.

Don't get me wrong. I'd cry too if I'd just figured out that Stepmonster is my mother. But at seven months old, I don't think he's processed that yet. He just cries. He cries when he's hungry; he cries when he's full; he cries when he's tired; he cries when he wakes up

after a long nap. Basically, any day that ends in a γ , Chauncey cries.

There also seems to be a connection between his volume control and the gas pedal of the SUV. The louder he howls, the faster Stepmonster drives.

“Who’s a happy baby?” she coos over her shoulder into the back seat, where the rear-facing car seat is anchored. “Who’s a happy big boy?”

“Not Chauncey, that’s for sure,” I tell her. “Hey—school zone. You better slow down.”

She speeds up. “Motion is soothing to a baby.”

Maybe so. But as we slalom up the driveway, swerving around parked parents dropping off their kids, and screech to a halt by the entrance, it turns out to be one motion too many. Chauncey throws up his breakfast. Suddenly, there’s cereal on the ceiling and dripping down the windows. That’s another thing about Chauncey. His stomach is a food expander. It goes in a teaspoon and comes out five gallons.

“Get out of the car!” Stepmonster orders frantically.

“You have to come in with me,” I protest. “They won’t let me register without an adult.”

She looks frazzled, and I guess I don’t blame her. That much baby puke must be hard to face. “I’ll run home, change him, and wipe down the car. Wait for

me. Ten minutes—fifteen at the most.”

What can I do? I haul my backpack out of the SUV, and she zooms off around the circular drive. I don’t even have the chance to make my usual Parmesan cheese joke—that’s what it smells like when Chauncey barfs. When I first came from California to stay with Dad and Stepmonster, I thought they ate a lot of Italian food. That was a disappointment—one of many.

So there I am in front of Greenwich Middle School, watching swarms of kids arriving for the first day of classes. A few of them glance in my direction, but not many. New girl; who cares? Actually, the new girl doesn’t much care either. I’m a short-timer—I’m only in Greenwich for a couple of months while Mom is off in Utah shooting a movie. She’s not a star or anything like that, but this could be her big break. After years of paying the bills with bit parts in sitcoms and TV commercials, she finally landed an independent film. Well, no way could I go with her for eight weeks—not that I was invited.

Eventually, a bell rings and the crowd melts into the school. No Stepmonster. I’m officially late, which isn’t the best way to start my career in Greenwich. But short-timers don’t stress over things like that.

Long before it could come back to haunt me on a report card, I'll be ancient history.

I check on my phone. It's been twenty minutes since "ten minutes—fifteen at the most." That's SST—Stepmonster Standard Time. I try calling, but she doesn't pick up. Maybe that means she's on her way and will be here any second.

But a lot of seconds tick by. No barf-encrusted SUV.

With a sigh, I sit myself down on the bench at student drop-off and prop my backpack up on the armrest beside me. Stepmonster—her real name is Louise—isn't all that monstrous when you think about it. She's way less out of touch than Dad, which might be because she's closer to my age than his. She isn't exactly thrilled with the idea of having an eighth grader dropped in her lap right when she's getting the hang of being a new mom. She's trying to be nice to me—she just isn't succeeding. Like when she strands me in front of a strange school when she's supposed to be here to get me registered.

The roar of an engine jolts me back to myself. For a second I think it must be her. But no—a rusty old pickup truck comes sailing up the roadway, going much faster than even Stepmonster would dare. As it reaches the bend in the circular drive, the front tire

climbs the curb, and the pickup is coming right at me. Acting on instinct alone, I hurl myself over the back of the bench and out of the way.

The truck misses the bench by about a centimetre. The side mirror knocks my book bag off the armrest, sending it airborne. The contents—binders, papers, pencil case, gym shorts, sneakers, lunch—are scattered to the four winds, raining down on the pavement.

The pickup screeches to a halt. The driver jumps out and starts rushing after my fluttering stuff. As he runs, papers fly out of his shirt pocket, and he's chasing his own things, not just mine.

I join the hunt, and that's when I get my first look at the guy. He's a kid—like, around my age! “Why are you driving?” I gasp, still in shock from the near miss.

“I have a license,” he replies, like it's the most normal thing in the world.

“No way!” I shoot back. “You're no older than I am!”

“I'm fourteen.” He digs around in his front pocket and pulls out a laminated card. It's got a picture of his stupid face over the name Parker Elias. At the top it says: PROVISIONAL LICENSE.

“Provisional?” I ask.

“I'm allowed to drive for the family business,” he explains.

“Which is what—a funeral parlour? You almost killed me.”

“Our farm,” he replies. “I take produce to the market. Plus, I take my grams to the senior centre. She’s super old and doesn’t drive anymore.”

I’ve never met a farmer before. There aren’t a lot of them in LA. I knew Greenwich was kind of the boonies, but I never expected to be going to school with Old MacDonald.

He hands me my book bag with my stuff crammed in every which way. There’s a gaping hole where the mirror blasted through the vinyl.

“I’m running late,” he stammers. “Sorry about the backpack.” He jumps in the pickup, wheels it into a parking space, and races into the building, studiously avoiding my glare.

Still no sign of Stepmonster on the horizon. I call again. Straight to voice mail.

I decide to tackle the school on my own. Maybe I can get a head start filling out forms or something.

The office is a madhouse. It’s packed with kids who a) lost their schedules, b) don’t understand their schedules, or c) are trying to get their schedules changed. When I tell the harassed secretary that I’m waiting for

my parent and/or guardian so I can register, she just points to a chair and ignores me.

Even though I have nothing against Greenwich Middle School, I decide to hate it. Who can blame me? It's mostly Chauncey's fault, but let's not forget Parker McFarmer and his provisional license.

My phone pings. A text from Stepmonster: *Taking Chauncey to pediatrician. Do your best without me. Will get there ASAP.*

The secretary comes out from behind the counter and stands before me, frowning. "We don't use our phones in school. You'll have to turn that off and leave it in your locker."

"I don't have a locker," I tell her. "I just moved here. I have no idea where I'm supposed to be."

She plucks a paper from the sheaf sticking out of the hole in my backpack. "It's right here on your schedule."

"Schedule?" Where would I get a schedule? I don't even officially go to school here yet.

"You're supposed to be in room 117." She rattles off a complicated series of directions. "Now, off you go."

And off I go. I'm so frazzled that I'm halfway down the main hall before I glance at the paper that's supposed to be a schedule. It's a schedule, all right—just not mine.

At the top, it says: ELIAS, PARKER. GRADE: 8.

This is Parker McFarmer's schedule! It must have gotten mixed up with my papers when we were gathering up all my stuff.

I take three steps back in the direction of the office and freeze. I don't want to face that secretary again. There's no way she's going to register me without Stepmonster. And if there's a backlog at the pediatrician's, I'm going to be sitting in that dumb chair all day. No, thanks.

I weigh my options. It's only a fifteen-minute walk home. But home isn't really home, and I don't want to be there any more than I want to be here. If I went to all the trouble of waking up and getting ready for school, then school is where I might as well be.

My eyes return to Parker's schedule. Room 117. Okay, it's not *my* class, but it's *a* class. And really, who cares? It's not like I'm going to learn anything in the next two months—at least nothing I can't pick up PDQ when I get back to civilization. I'm a pretty good student. And when Stepmonster finally gets here, they can page me and send me to the right place—not that I'll learn anything there either. I've already learned the one lesson Greenwich Middle School has to teach me: fourteen-year-olds shouldn't drive.

That's when I learn lesson number two: this place is a maze. My school in LA is all outdoors—you step out of class and you're in glorious sunshine. You know where you're going next because you can see it across the quad. And the numbers make sense. Here, 109 is next to 111, but the room next to that is labeled STORAGE CLOSET E61-B2. Go figure.

I ask a couple of kids, who actually try to tell me that there's no such room as 117.

"There has to be," I tell the second guy. "I'm in it." I show him the schedule, careful to cover the name with my thumb.

"Wait." His brow furrows. "What's"—he points to the class description—"SCS-8?"

I blink. Instead of a normal schedule, where you go to a different class every period, this says Parker stays in room 117 all day. Not only that, but under SUBJECT, it repeats the code SCS-8 for every hour except LUNCH at 12:08.

"Oh, here it is." I skip to the bottom, where there's a key explaining what the codes mean. "SCS-8—Self-Contained Special Eighth-Grade Class."

He stares at me. "The *Unteachables*?"

"Unteachables?" I echo.

He reddens. "You know, like the Untouchables.

Only—uh”—babbling now—“these kids aren’t un-touchable. They’re—well—unteachable. Bye!” He rushes off down the hall.

And I just know. I could read it in his face, but I didn’t even need that much information. Where would you stick a guy who could annihilate a backpack with a half-ton pickup truck? The Unteachables are the dummy class. We have a couple of groups like that in my middle school in California too. We call them the Disoriented Express, but it’s the same thing. Probably every school has that.

I almost march back to the office to complain when I remember I’ve got nothing to complain about. Nobody put *me* in the Unteachables—just Parker. From what I’ve seen, he’s in the right place.

I picture myself, sitting in the office all day, waiting for Stepmonster to arrive. *If* she arrives. Chauncey’s health scares—which happen roughly every eight minutes—stress her out to the point where she can’t focus on anything else. To quote Dad, “Jeez, Louise.” He really says that—an example of the sense of humour of the non-California branch of my family.

So I go to room 117—turns out, it’s in the far corner of the school, over by the metal shop, the home and careers room, and the custodian’s office. You have to

walk past the gym, and the whole hallway smells like old sweat socks mixed with a faint barbecue scent. It's only temporary, I remind myself. And since my whole time in Greenwich is temporary anyway, it's more like temporary squared.

Besides—dummy class, Disoriented Express, Unteachables—so what? Okay, maybe they're not academic superstars, but they're just kids, no different from anybody else. Even Parker—he's a menace to society behind the wheel of that truck, but besides that he's a normal eighth grader, like the rest of us.

Seriously, how unteachable can these Unteachables be?

I push open the door and walk into room 117.

A plume of smoke is pouring out the single open window. It's coming from the fire roaring in the wastebasket in the centre of the room. A handful of kids are gathered around it, toasting marshmallows skewered on the end of number two pencils. Parker is one of them, his own marshmallow blackened like a charcoal briquette.

An annoyed voice barks, "Hey, shut the door! You want to set off the smoke detector in the hall?"

Oh my God, I'm with the Unteachables.



The first day of school.

I remember the excitement. New students to teach. New minds to fill with knowledge. New futures to shape.

The key word is *remember*. That was thirty years ago. I was so young—not much older than the kids, really. Being a teacher was more than a job. It was a calling, a mission. True, mission: impossible, but I didn't know that back then. I wanted to be Teacher

of the Year. I actually achieved that goal.

That was when the trouble started.

Anyway, I don't get excited by the first day anymore. The things that still get my fifty-five-year-old motor running are the smaller pleasures: the last tick of the clock before the three-thirty bell sounds; waking up in the morning and realizing it's Saturday; the glorious voice of the weather forecaster: *Due to the snowstorm, all schools are closed down . . .*

And the most beautiful word of all: *retirement*. The first day of school means it's only ten months away. My younger self never could have imagined I'd turn into the kind of teacher who'd be crunching numbers, manipulating formulas, and counting the nanoseconds until I can kiss the classroom and everybody in it goodbye. Yet here I am.

I sip from my super-large coffee mug. The other teachers call it the Toilet Bowl when they think I'm not listening. They gripe that I owe extra money to the faculty coffee fund because I drink more than my fair share. Tough. The students are bad enough, but the dunderheads who teach them are even worse. Colleagues—they don't know the meaning of the word. A fat lot of support they ever offered me when it was all going wrong.

“Mr. Kermit.”

Dr. Thaddeus is standing over me in the faculty room, his three-thousand-dollar suit tailored just so. Superintendent. Major dictator. A legend in his own mind.

Christina Vargas, principal, is with him. “Nice to see you, Zachary. How was your summer?”

“Hot,” I tell her, but she keeps on smiling. She’s one of the good ones, which puts me on my guard. Thaddeus uses her to do his dirty work. Something is coming. I can smell it.

“There’s been a change in the schedule,” the superintendent announces. “Christina will fill you in on the details.”

“As you know, Mary Angeletto has left the district,” the principal says. “So we’re moving you into her spot with the Self-Contained Special Eighth-Grade Class.”

I stare at her. “You mean the *Unteachables*?”

Dr. Thaddeus bristles. “We don’t use that term.”

“Every teacher in this building knows what they are,” I fire back. “They’re the kids you’ve given up on. They had their chance in sixth and seventh grade, and now you’re just warehousing them until they can be the high school’s problem.”

“They’re a challenging group,” Christina concedes.

“Which is why we’ve chosen a teacher with a great deal of experience.”

“Of course,” the superintendent goes on pleasantly, “if you don’t feel you’re *up* to the job—”

Light dawns. So *that’s* what this is really about. Thaddeus figured out that I qualify for early retirement after this year. He doesn’t want the school district on the hook supporting me forever. The Kermit men live till ninety-five, minimum. My grandfather, at 106, is still president of the shuffleboard club at Shady Pines. That’s why they’re giving me the Unteachables. They aren’t interested in my experience. They want my resignation.

I look the superintendent right in his snake eyes. “You’re just trying to make me quit before I qualify for early retirement.”

His response is all innocence. “You’re up for retirement already? I think of you as so young. It still seems quite recent—that horrible Terranova incident. The media attention. The public outcry. The scandal.”

Well, there it is. Jake Terranova. Thaddeus is never going to forgive and forget, even though it wasn’t my fault. Or maybe it was. They were my students, after all, and it happened on my watch.

What a hypocrite. Thaddeus wasn’t superintendent

then. He had Christina's job—principal. And did he ever take the credit when a class at his school scored number one in the country on the National Aptitude Test. He squeezed every ounce of glory out of that—interviews, profiles in magazines. When there was traffic in the driveway, you could bet it was because of a TV station mobile unit on its way to interview the high-exalted lord of all principals.

Until the truth came out. A kid named Jake Terranova had gotten hold of the test and charged his classmates ten bucks a pop for a copy of it. That's why they aced it—they were cheating. And when the whole thing blew up, was Thaddeus there to take the heat the way he'd taken the acclaim? Not on your life. The teacher was to blame. That's who I've been ever since. The guy who . . . The teacher whose class gave the entire Greenwich School District a black eye.

Officially, life went on after that. No one revoked my teaching certificate or docked my pay or kicked me out of the union. But everything was different. When I stepped into the faculty room, people stopped talking. Colleagues wouldn't look me in the eye. Administration kept changing my department. One year it was English, then math, French, social studies, even phys. ed.—me with my two left feet.

I went into a blue funk. Okay, that wasn't the school's fault, but it began to affect my personal life. My engagement to Fiona Bertelsman fell apart. That was on me. I was lost in my own misery.

Worst of all, the one thing that was most important to me—teaching—became a bad joke. The students didn't want to learn? Fine. I didn't particularly want to teach them. All I needed to do for my paycheck was show up.

Until next June, when early retirement would carry me away from all of this.

And now Thaddeus thinks he can make me throw that away too, just to avoid a year with the Unteachables. Obviously, the superintendent doesn't have the faintest idea who he's messing with. I would happily go into room 117 with a pack of angry wildcats before I'd give him the satisfaction of forcing me out.

I look from the superintendent to the principal and back to the superintendent again. "I enjoy a good challenge." I pick up the Toilet Bowl and walk out of there, careful to keep the big mug steady. Can't risk spilling coffee all over myself. It would spoil the dramatic exit.

Three decades in this school, and never once have I set foot inside room 117. I know where it is, though,

from the stint in phys. ed. Somebody has to be in the remotest classroom of the entire building, but I decide to be offended by it. It's just another part of the conspiracy to force me out.

Well, it won't work. After all, how bad can these Unteachables really be? Behaviour issues, learning problems, juvenile delinquents? Does Thaddeus honestly think I've never crossed paths with students like that throughout thirty years in the classroom? Bad attitudes? The kid hasn't been born with an attitude that's half as bad as mine at this point. Face it, the Unteachables can only hurt you if you try to teach them. I gave up on teaching anybody anything decades ago. Since then, my relationship with my classes has been one of uncomfortable roommates. We don't much like each other, but everybody knows that if we just hold our noses and keep our mouths shut, we'll eventually get what we want. For me, that means early retirement. For the SCS-8 students, it means being promoted to ninth grade.

That part's a slam dunk, because surely the middle school is dying to get rid of them. What would they have to do to get held back—burn the whole place to the ground?

I walk into my new classroom.

A roaring fire in a wastebasket. Smoke pouring through the open windows. Kids toasting marshmallows on the end of pencils. Pencils catching fire. One pyromaniac-in-training seeing if he can get his eraser to burn. An escapee standing outside in the bushes, gazing in, eyes wide with fear. A boy draped over a desk, fast asleep, oblivious to it all.

Most kids would scramble to look innocent and be sitting up straight with their arms folded in front of them once the teacher puts in an appearance. Not this crew. If I came in with a platoon of ski marine paratroopers, it wouldn't make any more of an impression.

I stroll over to the flaming wastebasket and empty the giant cup of coffee onto the bonfire, which goes out with a sizzle. Silence falls in room 117.

“Good morning,” I announce, surveying the room. “I’m your teacher, Mr. Kermit.”

Only ten months until June.