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As last week ended, so did my six-week summer assignment as a middle school English/Language Arts teacher for Horizons Savannah (email me for information about the program, if you're curious). The final day is – every year for me – both welcome and sad.

It's difficult to get up early, day after day, and propel yourself towards the classroom with the energy and enthusiasm that doing the job well requires. It's nearly impossible to maintain a constant level of diligence that leads to thorough and proper preparation – there are days when a teacher feels like phoning it in. It's contrary to my nature to adhere to a schedule that is crafted by someone other than me. And it's demoralizing when the kids in your class ignore you, disrespect you, remind you that they are only there because somebody compelled them to be, and they would rather be anywhere else but with you.

Superficially, I stand out among the staff and student community, and not in a comfortable way. I am the oldest person on campus, one of a conspicuously few men, and often the only white person in the room. From some students' perspectives, especially the ones who are meeting me for the first time, I might as well be from Mars.

Kids can be brutally honest: "Do we have your class this morning?" When I answer in the affirmative, the reaction is deflating: An exaggerated frown and audible groan. There's a dance that happens the first week: They push me to define my limits and measure the range of my countermoves. Whatever I ask them to do, only the extreme outliers warm to. "May I use the bathroom?" is the singular reason a hand is lifted into the air.

I'm generalizing – sorry for that – but in my experience, middle school boys are easier to deal with than girls. Each boy in a group has his "place" based on his attributes, but no single member exerts authoritarian influence over the rest of his mates. Give them a few balls and some open space at regular intervals, don't expect them to push themselves as hard mentally as they do physically, tell them to be quiet when they are acting foolish, and you're fine. At first, they approach you with benign indifference. Eventually, they warm to you – but only so much – like a dish you try that surprises you when you don't immediately spit it out.

Girls...it's more complicated. Invariably, there's a queen bee. A ringleader. The problem: She's almost always the hardest case. It's her job to dislike you, and her responsibility to make sure the other girls do, too. And how does an almost-60-year-old man confront a petulant 12-year-old girl with sufficient force to earn her respect?

This year's queen bee revealed herself immediately, as they do. Like a sorceress, she transformed her mild-man-

nered she-peers into vicious objectors to anything me with the flash of a single sneer. Until one day when I found her during inter-class break tossing a wiffle ball into the air with one hand, holding a bat in her other, swinging to join the two with moderate success. I said nothing as I interrupted and picked the ball from the ground. I walked with it about 10 steps from her, began a cartoonishly exaggerated windup, and delivered a perfect strike in the middle of the imaginary plate where she stood. She swung with maximum vigor. She connected with the ball; it whizzed to her left and my right on a laser-straight line. I ran to get it where it dropped to rest in the grass. I returned to the imaginary pitcher's mound. I wound up again – this time with a motion that suggested I had enjoyed a bunch of good and successful years of baseball a long time ago –and threw the ball towards the queen bee. She swung and missed, then grabbed the ball and tossed it back to me. She didn't speak, nor did I. I threw another pitch, a curve ball to raise the stakes. She hit it close enough to me that I fielded it while it was rolling. I threw another pitch. She took another swing. And so we continued, for no more than 10 minutes, perhaps the most important 10 minutes of the year for me.

The next day, she volunteered to read aloud in class. When she stumbled on a word she didn't know, she looked at me plaintively, without fear or resentment. I didn't give her the answer, but together we sounded it out. She sat with me at breakfast later that week, so the rest of her crew did, too. They gave me a nickname...not a mean one, but one that makes me smile every time I say it to myself imagining one of their distinctive voices inside my head. She never raised her hand to ask to leave for the bathroom during class again.

I'm not a teacher. People ask me what I do, and I don't identify that way. I couldn't persist day-in, day-out, 180 days a year. It's really, really hard. It's sometimes tempting to do less than your absolute best, because you're tired often, and the days seem to last forever, and who will ever really know? You will – the person who the kids think they'd rather be with anybody else. I'm not a teacher...or a pitcher; but, as with much of life, 90 percent of success is just showing up.

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