

## FARCICAL MOMENTS

*Things happen. Sometimes they're funny.*

By Lee Burdette Williams

**T**HE TEACHABLE MOMENT—it is one of the grand clichés of our profession: the serendipitous moment when a situation or event coincides with a student's (or our own) openness to learning one of life's valuable lessons. We've built careers out of these moments. They are what carry us through the long days and frustrating times. They are what affirm our choice to work in this profession. They are too serious to write about here.

Instead, I choose to ponder the other moments—the ones that are too weird, or funny, or downright ludicrous to have any didactic value; the ones that serve us only as we sit around the campfire, and that serve to keep us up late at night in a fruitless effort to find meaning in them.

Like a teachable moment, a farcical moment continues to be farcical well after the actual event, and in fact grows in stature and silliness when burnished by the years. As educators, our responsibility is to pass these moments along so that others may laugh at them, too.

**T**AYLOR WAS a dedicated theater student at the small college where I worked, but theater was about the only thing he seemed to be good at. He had a reputation as a bit of a flake, and what happened that fateful autumn night did nothing to dispel that notion.

The performance was over and Taylor was anxious to get out of the auditorium and on to a party. He was, however, covered in heavy makeup, which normally took quite a while to remove. But a shortcut occurred to him. Leaning over a utility sink in the closet off the dressing room, he reached toward the faucet and turned the water on, intending to wash the pancake makeup off under the running water. Instead, in some way that could probably never be replicated, his head became wedged between the sink and the spout—thoroughly, unyieldingly wedged.

His fellow actors couldn't free him. The play's director was called and he tried valiantly to loosen Tay-

lor's head—to no avail. Finally, with no alternative apparent to anyone, the police were called. The first officer to arrive sized up the situation (I would like to have read his report: "Found subject bent over sink. Stuck. Mascara still intact") and called the fire department, which arrived with a hacksaw. They removed the sink from the wall (with Taylor still attached) and then sawed off the spout, freeing Taylor to go to his party as well as down in the history of the college's theater department as perhaps the most hapless student ever.

Somehow the television show *Rescue 911* heard about Taylor and called the college's public information office, asking if they could reenact the incident and film it for use on their show. In an impressive display of restraint for a public information office, the request was denied.

**M**Y PHONE NUMBER was one digit different from the number of the local party store. It was an annoying circumstance, because it meant that we were often awakened by drunks looking for more booze, as well as by hopeful people wondering what that day's winning lottery number was.

One Thursday night, during a week in which we had been strategizing to keep the upcoming big party weekend under control, we were trying quietly to determine party plans for two fraternities that were already facing charges of serving alcohol to their pledges, and for the other chapters.

It was about 8 P.M. I was at home reading when the phone rang.

"Hello," I answered.

"Uh, yeah. Hi. I was wondering if I could, like, order kegs."

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The voice was a young voice. I smiled—one of those devious, Grinch-like smiles that used to strike fear into the hearts of my elementary school teachers. “Sure. What do you need?”

“Um, like, two of Michelob?”

“Sure. When do you need them?”

“Tomorrow? And can you deliver?”

My smile widened. My eyes narrowed. “Where do you want them delivered to?”

“The Days Inn. They’ll have my room number at the desk.”

“No problem. What’s your name and phone number?”

He told me and I assured him the kegs would be there. I hung up and called Campus Safety. “Can you tell me where John N—— lives?”

“Wesley,” I was told. The freshman hall.

The next morning I asked the Greek adviser which fraternity John had pledged. “Sigma ——.” I told him about the phone call and the keg order. His smile matched mine. At 8:30 that morning I awakened John from a sound sleep. “I need to see you in my office right away.”

He arrived looking dazed and still half asleep. I offered him a chair in my office, facing me and the Greek adviser, who admirably managed to maintain a serious demeanor throughout the ensuing interrogation.

“John,” I asked, “do you realize your fraternity is on probation for serving alcohol to minors?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“And that another violation would mean the immediate loss of their charter?”

“I think so.” He began to look around nervously.

“And you would never do something to get your new brothers in trouble, would you? Like maybe get a couple of kegs and host a pledge party at the Days Inn?”

He was silent. “Good. I didn’t think so. John,” I continued, “you’re a freshman. You’re new here. You haven’t had time to learn this. But let me tell you this: there is nothing you can do that I won’t know about. It’s a small school, and a small town. I have friends everywhere. We all do.” I nodded toward the Greek adviser. “Now have yourself a good weekend, and tell your fellow pledges: there is no hiding from us.”

He left without a word. There were no alcohol-related incidents involving John’s fraternity that weekend. In fact, it was a fairly quiet weekend. And I’m pleased to report that John graduated four years later with a spotless record. I’d like to think it had something to do with learning a valuable, if somewhat shady, lesson his freshman year.

**H**OWARD WAS the kind of student we’ve all known. He had this amazing gift of being able to annoy and alienate every person around him within about half an hour—sometimes less on his best days. For reasons I

never understood, he decided to join a group of students on an alternative spring break trip to West Virginia to do community service in a poor Appalachian region. It was my first encounter with him.

He initially endeared himself to me by driving a van full of students fifteen miles over the speed limit in a blinding snowstorm on an Ohio interstate. I was driving another van and could only watch helplessly as he zigged and zagged through the snow plows and other cars until finally pulling over at a rest stop. The students filed out of the van looking like they had just watched *Silence of the Lambs* in the presence of Hannibal Lecter himself. I grabbed the keys from Howard’s hand before he could say a word and, sticking my nose an inch from his, said quietly, “You will not get near a driver’s seat during this trip again.” He didn’t. But that wasn’t the farcical moment. This is.

Our first day there we didn’t have to work, so a staff member where we were staying offered to take us on a hike. About eight of us, including Howard, followed him down a mountain path. After about two hours of hiking, the other group members were prepared to throw Howard over the next cliff we came to, sick of his incessant, self-centered, button-pushing yammering. I listened with almost clinical fascination, asking myself, “What’s it like to be his mother? His roommate? Seated on a bus next to him?” I had never met such an aggravating person. His precision and thoroughness in totally provoking each member of the group was almost admirable.

We came to a place where a large tree had fallen across a stream. Someone suggested it was a good place for a photo. Several hikers climbed atop the log, safely hovering over the riverbank. Howard, however, shimmyed along the log until he was midstream.

“Howard,” I said, with as much enthusiasm as I could muster, “you might not want to go that far. Howard——” Shimmy, shimmy. “Howard.” Shimmy.

With his legs still curled around the trunk, he spun 180 degrees and paused for just a split second before his legs let loose. Plunk. Into the ice-cold stream. The group stood silently watching as he righted himself in the three-foot-deep pool and stood. His big fluffy down coat now looked like a windbreaker. His jeans clung to his legs. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his brown paper lunch sack, soaked through.

In a moment of grace I shall always admire, the group remained silent. Finally, our guide turned and continued, with all of us following. Howard, for once, was quiet, save for the chattering of his teeth. We had another ten miles to go, the guide informed us—news that might have discouraged us just moments before. But we had a renewed strength and purpose, and we picked up our pace.