Chemistry Lessons

It was 1954, my junior year at McCullough High. I was a reasonably good student in most courses but a dud in science. So I dreaded my required chemistry class in spite of reported opportunities for creative mayhem with Bunsen burners, glass beakers, and other mysterious paraphernalia reputed to exist in chem lab that roused a vague interest. However, before being allowed to penetrate the labrosanctum, students had to memorize the periodic table of elements, which I gathered had something to do with astrology, and to endure a couple of weeks of mind-numbing indoctrination lectures delivered in a semi-foreign language by the intimidating Dr. Reese.

My Chem lecture class was scheduled at 1:15, just after lunch break. No school cafeterias in those primitive days, so some brought sack lunches—“some” being the guys. Girls carried metal lunch boxes, often customized with colorful designs and exhibited with prissy pride in one hand, books clutched to the chest in the other. No backpacks in those less convenient times.

I didn’t feel carrying a sack lunch was at all cool, so I usually stashed mine in my ’46 Dodge panel truck (hand painted an ultra-cool battleship gray by me) which I drove to school regularly even though it was hopelessly permeated with the putrud smell of decaying grass hauled off from my after-school lawn mowing jobs. Having transportation enabled me to lunch six or seven blocks away at Fitzgerald’s Soda Emporium, where my friend Jerry worked the noon shift and could fix quart-sized cherry Cokes, to which I was addicted. On this particular day I was especially thirsty and ordered two, downed them quickly and hurried back to class. I didn’t dare be late for Reece’s class, so there was no time to relieve my bloated bladder.

Uncharacteristically, Reece started class by passing out equipment we were going to use in the lab: a glass jar with a white plastic lid which had a hole in the middle, a piece of glass tubing about a foot long, and a rubber stopper with a hole just large enough to squeeze the tubing through. I was examining the jar, wondering if it would hold enough internally processed cherry coke to enable me to survive the rest of class. I estimated it might hold a pint. Would that do? Could I conceal the jar between my legs under the desk with books piled around to muffle the sound and avoid attracting the attention of the pretty girl occupying the seat on my left? The alternative of asking to be excused was not at all cool and would probably elicit humiliating comments from Reece before I could get out the door.

Unfortunately, while pre-occupied with these calculations, I had been toying with the plastic lid and had unthinkingly inserted the third finger of my right hand into the hole in the center of the lid, accidentally creating the digital configuration known to all as “The Finger.”

Now, Reece was instructing us to secure the lid on the jar and install the rubber stopper. This would necessitate first removing my finger from the hole in the lid, which I was already trying to do. Wait—the edge of the lid was very rough and sharp. Ouch and damn. It seemed my finger, which had slipped in so easily, had grown larger while in the hole. How could that be? Was it the result of too much carbonated Coke? Whatever, I couldn’t get it out. I tugged and twisted the lid gently at first, but no luck. I tried harder, but the greater effort endangered my already over-stressed bladder. Now Reece was instructing us to insert the glass tube into the rubber stopper and, when finished, hold up the assembled contraption so he could see it was done properly. The Freudian implications of this process did not escape my male classmates, among whom an undertone of whispered commentary and obscene gesturing was circulating. I tried tipping the lid at every possible angle to get it over my knuckle, but the effort was too painful. I panicked. The lid’s edge was scraping away the skin around the knuckle. Everyone else had finished and was holding up their jar. My increasingly frantic struggles caught Reece’s attention. “Bertram--what’s going on back there? (Realizing “Bertram” was uncool, I had renamed myself “Buzz” upon entering high school but I was Bertram on his class roll). Where’s your jar?” Instinctively, I held up my still securely lidded finger, now bleeding quite noticeably. Too late it came to me, amid a rapidly increasing volume of both male and female laughter, how this looked to Reece and the other students—“The Finger,” plain as day.

Reece was not amused. “Get up here.” That meant I would have to uncross my tightly entwined legs and probably precipitate a serious bladder malfunction. But to remain seated in defiance was unthinkable. “Dammit, Bertram. What have you done?” It occurred to me that it was all too apparent what I had done and that my obvious discomfort was definitely not cool. ”Sorry, sir. I didn’t mean to.” AlI I could think of to say. This elicited an even louder outburst of laughter, suggesting that at least I should lower my offending hand from in front of Reece’s face.

At this point, my memory fails. It is unclear to me now how I was able to avoid an untimely cherry Coke release, get the lid removed, and end up in the school nurse’s office with my offending finger bandaged. However, that there were important life-lessons to be learned from this experience did not escape me: ever since, I have been wary of jar lids with holes in them and, though sometimes tempted, have never again ordered two quart-sized cherry Cokes for lunch, or any other occasion for that matter. Oh well, I probably wouldn’t have chosen a career in chemistry anyway.