

UC Monthly Safety Spotlight, April 2014

Careless Chris Makes a Change

Careless Chris looked up from the mound of carrots she was slicing and stretched her fingers briefly from their tight grip on the knife. At the back door of the kitchen near her prep table, the receiver was putting on his gloves and rolling his shoulders to get ready for another burst of activity bringing in supplies. The Monday deliveries were the largest and she shook her head in silent wonder at the sheer amount of stuff that one person moved every day. It didn't occur to her to marvel at her own accomplishments; preparing huge quantities of food every day was just what she did, not anything special. That she had done so with care and never caused an injury to herself or others was a testament to her dedication that she didn't consciously consider, though her record was certainly a source of pride.

Instead of focusing on the many good habits she had, Chris worried more about the bad ones. Even now, as she did a couple quick stretches for her forearms and hands before returning to her task, she was worried. Her uniform had been feeling tight and her knees bothered her a little if she stood in one place too long or went up a flight of stairs too quickly, and both were signs of something she really didn't want to face.

"It's the bakery truck this time," Anya commented as if reading her mind from across the table where she was cutting oranges. "I hope they have those amazing mint-chocolate chip cookies today, it was supposed to be in the order."

Chris looked down at her work and sighed as she reached for the next handful of carrots. If those cookies had come in, she was doomed. There wasn't much she could do to resist their sweet, chewy, chocolately goodness, no matter how guilty she felt afterward. The holidays had not been kind to her continuing attempt to lose the twenty pounds she had slowly accumulated over the last few years and she was on the point of giving up the effort. Everybody got fatter and slower as they got older, right?

Except for Mario. Chris glanced over quickly at him as he moved box after box off the dock and into the dry storage room. It couldn't be just his backbelt acting like a girdle and keeping him looking trim, he actually moved differently than she knew she could. When he bent his knees to pick up a crate, his back was straight and he had an almost fluid grace as he stood up from a deep crouch that she envied. Years ago, she had moved like that, with the thoughtless easy quickness of youth and health, but she doubted she could even get back up from a crouch that low without hauling herself up by holding on to something. Mario was a year older than her but seemed to feel it a lot less despite how much hard work he did every day. Thinking about how stiff her back already felt at only ten thirty in the morning, she sighed and diverted herself from depressing thoughts of aging with the prospect of having not just one but two of those incredibly delicious cookies at lunch. It was about the time of year when they ordered new uniforms anyway and she would just have to ask them to get her the next larger size next time. Maybe if she tried a different model of shoe, she could find one that helped her knees, too.

When her lunch break rolled around at last, Chris had regained some of her usual cheerfulness. Still wondering about the difference, she paid more attention to what Mario was eating. Instead of the creamy pasta alfredo she had piled on her plate, he had a salad. She felt absurdly proud to see he was choosing to eat the carrots she had spent an hour on that morning, but when she looked at her own plate, there weren't any there. Instead, she had two pieces of the garlic bread Angel had been working on. Even though she knew there was no real butter involved in the oily yellow spread, she had still been unable to resist the sprinkling of browned parmesan that made them smell absolutely delicious. She'd managed to hold herself back to only one of the cookies, but Mario had two of the orange sections Anya had prepped for the dessert bar. Chris had never thought plain oranges were much of a dessert treat and occasionally wondered why they were offered there instead of at the salad bar. Not that she would have eaten them if they were placed there either, she had to admit to herself.

It didn't seem like such small changes could make so much of a difference. Chris considered the problem as she ate, and it kept her distracted enough that she only tuned in to the conversation around her as it was coming to an end.

"Yoga!" Kwaneesha was saying derisively. "I work hard all day and now they want me to spend my lunch hour getting dressed in an outfit I have to pay half a day's wages to buy that makes my butt look huge, and then do silly poses in front of someone half my age who exercises for a living. They claim it's for our own good but I think they're just messing with us." The other women at the table laughed and nodded, agreeing that the image of themselves in spandex trying to touch their toes to their shoulders was ridiculous.

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The idea made Chris smile too, but in the second between visualizing that picture and looking back down at the half-eaten cookie in her hand, something happened. It was a small, obvious realization but at the same time it was as big as transcendent enlightenment. In that moment of time, minty chocolate cookie softening slowly on her fingertips and the busy murmur and clatter of an active dining commons all around her, Chris realized she was at a tipping point in her life. All around her, the temptation to keep doing the same things she always had done before was leading her toward increasingly bad and accelerating consequences, and she could see the future stretching ahead of her. For that one frozen moment her health trajectory was clear and real and very scary, and the visceral fear of being stuck in a mobility scooter for the rest of her life because her knees had finally deteriorated completely left her shaken to the core.

Dazed, she put the cookie down and excused herself from the table. On her way back through the kitchen to her prep area, she saw Mario and asked impulsively, "I hardly ever see you for the whole lunch break. Do you go to the yoga classes?"

He shrugged, a little embarrassed. "No, I just go for a walk." Waving a hand toward the back door, he brightened. "It's beautiful out there, the sun is out – it's like a surprise to get outside and find the air is so clear."

A little shyly, Chris suggested, "Maybe I can go with you some time?"

He smiled happily. "That would be fine!"

It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship, and the impetus that Chris needed. Over the months she made several small changes in her life, none of them too drastic to keep up with, and it added up just as certainly as her bad habits had accumulated their effects up to then. A year sounded like a long time at the beginning but once it was past, she had lost fifteen pounds and felt several years younger instead of older. She often looked fondly at the cookies when they were laid out and while they still tempted her, she remembered that moment of clarity, took a deep breath, and let the sense of wellbeing overwhelm the urge for sugar. Most importantly, she wasn't afraid of the future any longer because she had taken control of her life and had found that she could make a difference in and for herself, even without special spandex pants.