

UC Monthly Safety Spotlight, August 2013

Careless Chris Drops a Bomb

By: Kitty

The mid-afternoon doldrums had struck, and lab manager Careless Chris jerked his head back up, trying very hard to look alert and attentive despite the lack of interesting activities taking place at the moment. Barely minutes later, he felt that warm, fuzzy, lethargic stupor stealing back over his brain and his eyes began drooping closed again. Fridays were the worst, he thought vaguely. A whole week of early mornings, long work days, and not quite enough sleep seemed to pile on all at once to make getting through those last three hours nearly impossible without a nap.

A loud bang startled him fully awake, heart pounding violently in his chest for a couple beats as he stared around for what had exploded. Ascertaining the source of the noise to be a book that had been slapped onto the counter next to him, he relaxed slightly. His balance on the stool fully re-established once again, he gasped, "That is not funny."

"You didn't see your face just now or you wouldn't say that," Anita, the senior grad student who had dropped the book, replied smugly. "It was totally hilarious."

"Ha, ha," Chris sullenly agreed. He'd done the same thing himself to undergrads with wandering attention and he had to admit that it was, in fact, satisfyingly amusing. When you weren't the one startled out of a semi-somnolent state, anyway. "Anything worthwhile to tell me, now that you have my full attention?"

"Yes, actually. We're out of chloroform and we still have a lot of extractions to do before the end of the day. Can you go borrow about a quarter liter from the Hofstetter lab? I already called and they have enough to spare." She gave him a pitying look. "You could swing by the coffee cart while you're out, I don't think you'll make it to 5 otherwise."

Chris brightened at the thought of fresh coffee, then glanced at the clock. It was a quarter to two and the cart on the ground floor would close early because it was Friday, making this his last real opportunity for the day. Better yet, at the very end of the week the staff sometimes discounted any remaining pastries for regular customers so there was a chance of a cheap chocolate chip cookie along with the necessary caffeine. "I'm on it," he announced decisively, choosing to ignore Anita's sly, knowing grin.

Heading to the lab door, he stuffed his safety glasses in the pocket of his coat, then pulled it off and headed down the hall. After waiting for the elevator and riding two flights down to the second floor where the Hofstetter lab was located, in less than five minutes he was sliding back into his lab coat and putting on the safety glasses so he could enter the lab. Getting so used to the procedure that he could do it without thought had taken some practice, but now it was such second nature that Chris and most all of the lab personnel would forget their lab coats as soon as they would skip putting pants on in the morning.

Once into the lab core area he looked around, but there were only a few people present, diligently concentrating on their work and barely noticing his presence. Rather than disturb them, he headed for the cabinet and pulled out a half-full bottle of chloroform. It was more than he needed, so he carried it toward the nearest hood to pour off the amount Anita had asked for, but the hood was already so full of stuff there wasn't really room to get the large stock container, a beaker, and a borrowed empty bottle in there to make the transfer. A quick glance around told him the other hoods were just as full, and he stood indecisively for a moment considering his options. He hadn't had time to start feeling awkward yet when the lab manager for that space came out of his shared office. "Hey, Geoff, good to see you."

"Yo, Chris," Geoff greeted him in return, "Anita told me you guys needed some reagent, did you find it?"

"Yes, but I forgot to bring a smaller bottle to put it in." He hefted the large brown glass bottle with its sloshing contents. "Do you need this or can I just take the whole thing and bring back the leftover next week when our order comes in?"

"Nah, we're good, there's another full one in the other cabinet so go ahead. Easier than transferring it, anyway."

He grinned weakly, hoping the conversation would be a short one. In the back of his head he could practically hear the clock ticking on that cookie waiting for him. "Thanks, we'll owe you a favor."

Geoff snorted and waved him toward the door. "You'll owe us half a bottle of chloroform. Have a good weekend."

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Taking the dismissal with uncommon good grace, Chris moved with alacrity. Setting the bottle carefully between his feet when he reached the door, he did the safety glasses and lab coat dance, then picked the bottle back up and headed out into the hallway before remembering he hadn't grabbed a carrier for it. This time the indecision was much shorter-lived; he couldn't leave the bottle in the hallway, it would be slightly embarrassing and time consuming to go back into the lab and try to find a carrier, he was already right by the stairwell, it was two flights up to his own lab or two downward to the cart, and that mental cookie timer was ticking down to the last few seconds. No contest at all, really.

Consciously being careful to keep a very good grip on the bottle, Chris headed down to the coffee cart and was delighted to find only one other person ahead of him at the counter. Peering hopefully into the pastry case, he saw there wasn't much left to choose from. They had one plain croissant, a slightly tired-looking pesto bagel, and a desiccated bran muffin. The dismay he felt surprised even himself and to cover his disappointment, he peered into the lower display cooler, trying to develop a sudden interest in yoghurt instead. It didn't work. He absently tucked the bottle under his arm like a football and concentrated on not thinking about chocolate.

"Hi, Tracy," Chris said dispiritedly when he got to the register. "I was really hoping for a chocolate chip cookie today, but I'll take a double shot instead."

"Poor thing," Tracy replied, looking not at all sympathetic as she passed the order to her coworker on the espresso machine and rang up the sale. "Happy Friday, that'll be three seventy-eight."

Chris reached for his wallet but pulling out the cash meant tucking his lab coat and the bottle further into the crook of his elbow and it was too awkward to juggle them successfully. The bottle slipped off the coat and dropped to the terrazzo floor, shattering on impact. The plastic coating held most of the glass pieces in place but the threaded top broke away and the chloroform glugged slowly out the busted-off neck and formed a puddle that crept underneath the cooler and along the front of the coffee cart.

Chris dropped his lab coat over the puddle quickly, righted the bottle with its remaining contents, then grabbed a handful of napkins from the pile on the counter and shoved them along the edges of the cart's baseboard. He tried to wedge his coat under the display refrigerator to soak up anything that had made it that far, but he couldn't tell if he had it all.

"What the heck is that stuff, and should I be dialing 911?" Tracy demanded from overhead. She was leaning all the way over the counter looking down, and wrinkled her nose at the smell. "Phew! That had better not be toxic or I'm filing workers comp on this exposure!"

"You might want to try to avoid breathing it," Chris said, leaning his own head back away from the mess but still pushing the coat around to absorb as much as possible off the floor. "And can you call Anita for me and tell her to bring our solvent spill kit down here? You're about out of napkins. Extension 4681."

"Uh huh," Tracy agreed with evident insincerity, and Chris could tell from overhearing the subsequent conversation that she had dialed campus dispatch instead. Her second call was to EHS, and Chris groaned to himself. If experience was any guide, the building would be evacuated shortly, he would be the subject of a number of intensive interviews, and it wouldn't be long before he was the example story in somebody's newsletter.

What he didn't anticipate was how long all his friends and coworkers would end up standing around outside watching the firemen check everywhere and wondering when they could get in to collect their stuff and go home. He also hadn't thought about the way the floor tiles would pop up when the chloroform went down through the joints and dissolved their mastic, causing the coffee cart to be shut down for a week to do repairs. For a month afterward he was never quite sure if the lingering stink-eye he got from his lab-mates was because of the evacuation, the lost work, the doubled training and inspections from EHS, or the caffeine shortage.

<http://en.wikinews.org/wiki/>

[Chloroform spill forces evacuation of building at Canisius College in Buffalo, New York](#)