

# UC Monthly Safety Spotlight, December/January

## Careless Chris Hangs It Up

By: Kitty

Arms akimbo, fists on hips, Careless Chris surveyed the front of the house. There was an awful lot of frontage that needed to be decorated for the holidays and very few hours before the whole family had to be packed, organized, and on the way to the airport in order to get to the grandparents' house for the Thanksgiving weekend. After some heated debate it had been decided that the best way to handle holiday decorating this year would be to complete the exterior before leaving, which had the dual advantages of being able to install a timer to make the empty place look more occupied in the evenings, and significantly reducing the amount of work to be done immediately after their return trip.

It was all very logical and practical, but looking back at the box of tangled cords and lights that had been dragged out of the garage to lay limply on the driveway did not inspire any great ambition toward creating the most beautiful expression of seasonal spirit. To the contrary, the effect was far more of an overwhelming urge to go back inside, have another sandwich, and spend the rest of the afternoon napping on the couch. That was how one ought to prepare for the coming orgy of feasting, Chris thought rebelliously, rather than this frenzy of starvation and hard work. Did the Steelers practice for the Super Bowl by NOT playing football?

Of course not. Yet here was the task of the hour, or the next four to six hours if experience was any guide: sort and untangle all the light strings, test them for failures, fix or replace the busted ones that had been crammed in the box willy-nilly last year when nobody wanted to deal with the hassle any more, then schlep the ladder all around the flowerbeds and somehow hang all the lights without trampling the landscaping to death. Chris eyeballed the gloomy horizon morosely. It was only just past noon but the sky was a heavy overcast gray and the daylight sure to be long past gone before all the work was finished. It would be cold and dark. "Except for the glitter of twinkling colored lights reflecting off the frost covering my frozen body," Chris muttered, shoulders already slumped in defeat.

At least having acknowledged there was no choice provided a starting point, and from there the progression of tasks was straightforward if not particularly enjoyable. In more time than it took to describe the chore, the strings of lights had been extricated from the box and laid out across the lawn in single strands, then plugged in and carefully checked for dead bulbs. Only three had to be further investigated and eventually one was sacrificed for the bits needed to make the other two functional. Then the old aluminum extension ladder was disinterred from its corner of the garage and deployed despite being too short, even when fully extended, to get closer than four feet from the overhanging eaves on the downhill side of the house.

"Honey, are you on the ladder yet?" Alex called from the doorway. The mixing bowl in one hand counterbalanced by the wad of pajama flannel tucked under the opposite arm spoke to the level of activity indoors, making Chris briefly glad for being delegated the outdoor part of the day's chaos. "Do you need me to hold it again?"

A preliminary push determined the desirability of additional stability. "Yeah, could you? This thing always makes me nervous when I get near the top."

Leaning against it with both hands bracing the rails, Alex appeared glad to have been able to put down the other chores for a moment. Not so much as to keep from asking an obvious question all the same. "Why do we still have this thing, anyway? Didn't you salvage it from a dumpster at work? I think we really ought to have a decent one if you're going to keep using it."

"I looked into it but they're pretty expensive," Chris replied, carefully dragging the first string of lights upward. "We needed the extra hundred bucks for the plane tickets this year. Besides, this still works."

"Yeah, but they must have thrown it away for a reason. What if it's dangerous?"

"It's just a ladder," Chris replied dismissively, hanging the start of the lights on the left where an old hook still clung precariously under the eaves. "What could go wrong?" The next hook was toward the right side of the ladder and a bit stronger. The one after that was over two feet off to the right of the ladder, just barely within reach and loose enough that pulling on it to align the lights could yank it all the way out. Given a choice between having to go up and down so many times, or else lean a little further out than felt completely safe in order to reach the next hook, Chris did what anyone would do when faced with too much work and too little time to do it in. The ladder shifted alarmingly as the center of mass it was supporting shifted from one side to the other and the newly weighted foot sank with alarming suddenness into the damper, softer ground on the other side. "Hey! I thought you were holding it!"

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"I am! Stop leaning over so far!"

"I can't reach it if I don't lean over!"

"You won't be able to reach it after you fall off either! Get back down here and move the ladder instead of leaning over!" Alex's voice was a high-pitched mix of anger and fright with the scared notes definitely taking precedence, which was enough to convince Chris to comply but not sufficient to repress a bit of sotto voce commentary on the way down.

"You sound like that tiresome safety trainer at work. At least she shows us funny cat pictures in between the boring advice and OSHA warnings." Abruptly recalling one with a really cute kitten that was hilariously appropriate to the moment, Chris couldn't repress a grin. With attention divided across a spectrum of competing topics and images from work, the internet, and immediate domestic chores, Chris paid little mind to how the strand of lights curled and twisted down from the hook above as the stiff plastic cord still inclined toward the shape of the knots it had been embalmed in for the last year. Dangling awkwardly, catching at the lower rungs of the ladder, it would have been easy to step on and crush the small bulb, slip on the rounded socket, and fall the last three feet to the ground. Fortunately, that didn't happen.

Instead, Chris noticed the lurking hazard at the last second, altered trajectory, and would have completed the descent safely but for swinging just a little too far out in compensation for the change of stepping distance and then missing the next rung entirely. With one foot sliding neatly down between the last two rungs, all Chris' weight rotated backward pivoting from the entrapped knee, other leg flailing helplessly. If not for Alex happening to be standing in the exact right spot at that moment, able to catch the falling body and act as an involuntary crash cushion, Chris would have hit the ground hard and, worse yet, head-first.

As it was they both ended up flat on their backs, wind knocked out of them, bruised and staring woozily up at the precariously unsettled ladder that was teetering on the verge of collapsing backward on top of them both like the punchline from a long joke about bricklayers. The shooting pain of a seriously wrenched knee was still muffled by shock, or at least that was the explanation Chris used when asked later why the two of them were still weakly trying to catch their breath enough to laugh at the situation by the time the kids came outside to see what was taking so long.

The trip across country was certainly more difficult having to navigate across airport concourse changes on crutches, but at the big meal their old family tradition of going around the table having everyone announce what they were grateful for was correspondingly easier. This time, instead of searching desperately for something suitably profound to profess at the last minute, Chris had an easy answer to the question, "What are you thankful for?"

Eyes meeting affectionately, Chris and Alex spoke in unison, "Soft things to fall down on."