

SUGAR CHARLOTTE'S SOLUTION

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Charlotte had a good reason for her sweet tooth. She had hyperinsulinism. The insulin switch in her pancreas was locked in the open position. As a result, the sugar in her blood disintegrated so rapidly that she was not only encouraged to eat sweets, she needed them to survive.

Charlotte's parents were extremely vigilant and proactive. They were up on the latest medical devices, procedures, and pharmaceuticals. During the day, Charlotte was hooked up to an insulin pump that the mother had redesigned to automatically administer a medicine called Octreotide to slow the pancreas. At night she was hooked up to another device that dripped sugar through the gastric port a surgeon had opened to her stomach.

Charlotte tolerated all these meddling devices and procedures graciously. They appeared to turn her into something of a mechanical genius, and the way she helped with them was something that any mature 3-year old could be proud of.

Charlotte's parents were not only practical and innovative, they were highly attuned to the psychological ramifications of Charlotte's 'condition', a word they hated. So they decided early on that her need for sugar was not only nothing to be ashamed of but should be treated in a matter-of-fact manner. After all, everyone in this world has problems and must learn to deal with them. Secrecy and shame are almost invariably counterproductive. Furthermore, informing the neighbors meant that they would be able to help in an emergency. And several neighbors proved to be actively involved. Not only did they keep sweets available and ready for Charlotte whenever she might show up at their doorsteps, they viewed themselves as her guardians. Charlotte came to feel that the world was a loving cornucopia.

Charlotte's most faithful, attentive guardian was her next door neighbor, a man from Costa Rica who had earned the venerable title, El Viejo, even though he was not that old. He kept close watch on Charlotte whenever she played in her yard. It was funny to see his eyes poking above the tall wooden wall that separated the two properties. Sometimes, El Viejo would peer over that wall and invite Charlotte to visit his garden. That was the most fun of all for Charlotte.

When El Viejo tripped the latch in the wall's creaky wooden gate it swung open, and Charlotte entered a Garden of Eden. Over the years, El Viejo had succeeded in

smuggling a wide range of beautiful and exotic Costa Rican plants past California's Department of Food and Agriculture. For those plants that were particularly vulnerable to California's mild coastal chills he had built a small greenhouse. El Viejo would tell Charlotte interesting stories about all his plants. Charlotte's favorite, at least at first, was the small mango tree in the greenhouse. For such a small tree, it was truly prolific and Charlotte was often treated to the sweet mangos, her favorite fruit.

El Viejo's favorite plant was a small, thorny unimposing bullhorn acacia tree standing alone by itself on a small plot of level ground halfway up the hill of his backyard. With obvious pride, El Viejo lovingly pointed out the tree to Charlotte. "Eso es El Cochito. That is my bullhorn tree. Let's go to see it."

El Viejo put a straw in his shirt pocket. He grabbed a step stool in one hand and holding Charlotte's hand in his other hand they climbed up the hill to the tree. El Viejo put the step stool down near but not touching the tree and then climbed it holding Charlotte so that she could see everything close up but safely. Then he looked at Charlotte with a very serious face and addressed her in the gravest of tones, "Charlotte, El Cochito is a very wonderful tree, a very special tree, but it is also a very, very dangerous tree, so you must promise to be very, very careful. You must never touch the tree or even step on the bare ground around it. It won't bother you if you stay off its ground. But if you do touch it you will be very sorry."

El Viejo proceeded to describe and show Charlotte everything about the tree. "First of all, look at all those giant thorns! They are very sharp. But they are the least of your worries because you can see them and they don't move. The thorns are hollow. Sugar ants live in the tree. They dig small holes in the thorns and that is where they live. The sugar ants are what make El Cochito so dangerous."

When Charlotte looked closely she could see tiny ants emerging from a small hole near the tip of one of the thorns. "What are sugar ants?"

"Sugar ants love sugar as much as you do. You can see the ants going to the shiny sugar stations. We call the sugar stations nectaries. Once the ants taste the sugary sap or nectar they don't want any other sugar in the world. We think that the nectar makes them drunk. Then they spend their whole lives guarding the tree to protect it. If any animal or bird or bug comes to eat the leaves the ants will bite them. The bite is very painful. The ants put a little drop of venom in you when they bite and it really hurts. It hurts like an electric shock, much more than a bee sting, and the pain lasts all day. You don't ever want to get bitten by one of those sugar ants."

El Viejo also pointed out the tiny white bulbs at the tips of the leaves. "That is where the ants get their protein. It's like meat or cheese for the ants. So El Cochito gives the ants everything." He showed Charlotte that the ants groomed the ground around El Cochito so that no vines or other trees could threaten it. Charlotte was fascinated, especially by the ants and the nectar.

"But those ants are so tiny. How can they bite you?"

"Don't be fooled, little one. They are tiny but their bite is tremendous and terrible."

Switching the subject, El Viejo said, "Now, it's time to get some nectar for ourselves. But we have to be very careful not to touch the ants. That's why I have the straw." He then stuck the straw into the juiciest nectary. Almost instantly a few ants jumped on the straw. El Viejo shook them off and escaped safely with his prize drops of nectar.

"Before you taste the nectar, remember, Charlotte, stay away from El Cochito. You saw that I had to shake ants off. If I didn't they would have bitten me and when they do, it stings terribly. I am so careful because I don't ever want to get another bite." He then gave Charlotte the straw. When she licked the nectar she was hooked.

From that day the forbidden tree beckoned Charlotte. She worried a bit about El Viejo's warning but ants had walked on her hands and feet so many times she didn't quite believe that they ever could bite anyone. And they certainly would not be mean enough to bite her. So, given the temptation, you can well imagine that it was just a matter of time before she learned her lesson.

It happened after Charlotte discovered how to open the gate. When she did, she came well prepared. She brought her own straw and step stool. Standing on the step stool, she was just tall enough to reach the latch. The gate swung open. Charlotte was in. As she approached El Cochito, she was very careful and very mature. She did everything that El Viejo had done. She put the step stool near the tree but not touching it. She climbed the step stool and stuck the straw in the nectary. The ants were just as fast as before, but Charlotte was not as fast as El Viejo had been in shaking them off. Two ants crawled up the outside of the straw and another two crawled up the inside. In short order she got four bites on her fingers. Wow! Something like electric shocks ran through her whole body. They were so stunningly painful Charlotte gasped silently a few times. Quickly the shock turned to a burning, throbbing feeling on her bitten fingers. Finally, she caught her breath enough to begin crying. And did she bawl!

When El Viejo heard Charlotte screaming he guessed what had happened. He went to his medicine cabinet, ran out into the backyard and raced up to her side. "Where did the ants bite you? I have a salve that will make it feel better." He rubbed the strangely attractive smelling salve on the bites and carried her down the hill. The burning, throbbing feeling began to diminish. Some minutes later the distraught and exhausted girl finally began to calm down.

"What a terrible way to learn your lesson! I guess you won't soon go near El Cochito again." It was clear that those stings had doused all Charlotte's ardor for El Cochito. Despite that El Viejo added, "Charlotte, promise me that you will only go near El Cochito when I am with you." And even with her promise, El Viejo wisely put a lock on the gate.

Time moved on. Charlotte's thoughts wandered in different directions. She still loved El Viejo's garden and would go there occasionally, and after enough time, El Viejo would sometimes take her to the tree to safely steal a few drops of the precious nectar. But her focus was now on preschool and all her new friends. Charlotte's parents had enrolled her in Mariposa Gardens, a Spanish immersion school. Within a year, she was able to understand and speak Spanish quite well. She had an almost secret language with El Viejo, who, to use a Yiddish word, kvelled with pride.

So, Pre-K and Kindergarten passed happily and uneventfully. But First Grade brought a very unwelcome change. A new girl, Betty - big, ungracious, and mean – was welcomed to the school and to Charlotte's class. This outcast took to bullying all of the girls and even some of the smaller boys. She went about it in a sneaky way that showed she was quite experienced. When no one in authority was looking, Betty would trip kids, push them down, sucker punch or even bite them.

Unfortunately for mostly gentle Charlotte, it didn't take Betty too long to focus on her. After all, Charlotte's sugar need was no secret to the other children. They understood the situation and vaguely sympathized, but still, just about all they thought about it was that it wasn't fair that while Charlotte was encouraged to gorge herself with all sorts of sweets they were victims of stingy rationing by health oriented parents and school officials.

So, Betty quickly learned about Charlotte's need and the special contents of her lunchbox. It was Betty who created the nickname Sugar Charlotte, taunting her with it mercilessly in the most sarcastic manner possible for a First Grader. And

Betty used every trick in her nasty book to filch the contents of Charlotte's lunchbox.

When Charlotte's parents learned about Betty, they naturally complained. But the school administrators responded that they were already doing all they could and that Charlotte should stay away from Betty. Easier said than done, of course. Kids can be very sneaky, and this was compounded by the fact that both of Betty's parents were lawyers, and always seemed to be threatening litigation. To add insult to injury, Betty's aggressive mother had wrangled her way onto the School Board, thereby intimidating the gun-shy school officials further.

Betty's presence made Charlotte hate school. Every day, Charlotte's mother faced an inordinate struggle to get Charlotte there. The whole block witnessed the daily morning meltdown scenes between the house and the car. They all learned the source of the trouble and sympathized.

One day after school, El Viejo saw Charlotte in the backyard. He peered over the wall with an unusual twinkle in his eyes and began speaking to Charlotte. "I think I have a way for you to teach that bully a lesson she will never forget."

"Nothing will work. She's much too sneaky and mean and strong."

"Listen to my idea anyway and see if you think it has a chance!" As El Viejo whispered in Charlotte's ear, which was totally unnecessary because no one was within 100 feet of them, Charlotte began to smile and then giggle. And so, they hatched their nefarious plan. It only took a few days to work out the details and rehearse. El Viejo coached Charlotte and Charlotte learned eagerly and well.

"Let's call it S-Day!" El Viejo said with a really wide grin. "But remember, not a word to anyone. This has to be our secret. Promise?" Charlotte promised and meant it.

On the morning of S-Day, Charlotte raced out the front door, her lunchbox in hand. Her mother couldn't believe it. Then, in a vain attempt to dissemble her obvious excitement, Charlotte slowed down and said, "I have to say good morning to El Viejo". That was another curiosity. Charlotte rang his doorbell and he opened up immediately. A moment later Charlotte reemerged and danced her way to the car.

At the school drop off, Charlotte almost sprinted into the schoolyard. She forgot to close the car door and didn't kiss or say good bye to her dumbfounded mother.

That morning Maestra Miranda sensed a change in Charlotte. She was relieved. It had been torture negotiating the thorny diplomatic path that simultaneously protected Charlotte and did nothing that might offend and activate Betty's litigious parents.

Shortly before morning recess, Betty asked to go to the bathroom. She often did. Maestra Miranda thought that the kid had the most active bladder in the world. And, since the bathroom was a short distance down the hall, Miranda agreed.

About two minutes later the most horrible screams emerged first from the girl's bathroom, and then from the hall. All the teachers raced out into the hall. There, writhing on the ground uncontrollably and clearly in agony, with a chocolaty mess covering her hands and mouth, was Betty.

No one knew quite what to do. Immediately, Betty's mother and the EMT's were called. The EMT's showed up first and tried to learn from Betty what happened to her. All she could indicate was that her tongue, lips, and hands hurt terribly. Retracing Betty's steps with Maestra Miranda, one of the EMT's found a chocolate mass on the bathroom sink. She picked it up and put it back in the zip-lock bag it had apparently come from. There were a few tiny ants amidst scraps of chocolate on the floor. The EMT quickly concluded the ants were typical foragers, stepped on them, and returned to the screaming girl.

After Betty's mother showed up, it was determined to take her to the hospital. Then, Betty and her mother were gone for the day, but not without a few words from Betty's mother that the school should expect to hear from this further.

The lab tests at the hospital all came back negative and none of the doctors were able to determine anything. Betty's pain persisted all day and through the night, subsiding slowly. The best guess was that she had been stung by a wasp, but why she should have been stung so many times remained a mystery. And they couldn't find anything wrong with the chocolate mass, which seemed to be only Raisinets that had clumped together in the heat. One of the doctors even taste-tested some after rinsing it and judged it to be not only delicious but virtually addictive.

Betty returned to school two days later with lingering pain. When her mother returned promising trouble, she was informed that her daughter had knowingly and intentionally put another child at risk of life. One more such infraction would mean Betty's automatic expulsion from the school and certainly lead to both civil and criminal charges, which the Board of Education's legal department would support.

At the same time this confrontation was occurring, Charlotte's class was having its art lesson. When Maestra Miranda disappeared into the supply closet for paper and paints, Charlotte seized the moment. She slowly and dramatically turned towards Betty and facing her directly, without a single word, gave her the widest, most spiteful, knowing smile imaginable.

After school that day, several neighbors heard Charlotte and El Viejo laughing raucously in his garden for what seemed to be an incredibly long time. We also have it on good authority that Betty never bothered Charlotte or anyone else again.