

Goodbye Cheeky

By Robert A. Chubon

I am in a rather reflective mood as I write this. Attending funerals does that to me. This funeral was for Cheeky Henkle, who lived up the street. It's not like he was a close friend. We knew him mostly because every summer he would stop by once or twice and offer us a watermelon he brought home from the farmers' market. He did this for all the neighbors, and some even referred to him as the "watermelon guy" instead of Cheeky. If you accepted one of his watermelons, you never later refused. They were always at the peak of perfection, reminding you of the one time you got lucky at the supermarket several years ago. Cheeky knew watermelons. Under the circumstances, going to the funeral service was a neighborly thing to do.

When people die, you sometimes learn new things about them. Most of us in the neighborhood never knew Cheeky's real name was Charles until we saw it in the obituaries. They had him listed as Charles "Cheeky" Henkle. We probably would not have known he died if the paper had not put it that way. If they had just put Charles Henkle, we would have skipped over it. Too many people are dying these days to read the obituaries of those you do not know. The paper knows about these things.

To some, Cheeky might seem a strange name. Most of us never gave it a second thought. We have a lot of younger folks around here with purposely misspelled and mispronounced names, as well as some with foreign names

you can neither spell nor pronounce. Heck, “Cheeky” did not seem unusual at all. However, that is one reason I am glad I went to the funeral. There is a story about how he got that name.

There were several folks who spoke about Cheeky during the eulogy, and we got a real good picture of who he was. Usually people tell about the saint in the coffin when everybody knows he was basically an uncaught felon. I am convinced that in Cheeky’s case, there probably weren’t any negatives.

Cheeky’s brother began the eulogy with recollections from their childhood, one of which made him who he was. Cheeky’s parents took him to a petting zoo to celebrate his eighth birthday. At one point, they went over to a fenced area where a small crowd had gathered. Several kids were feeding some llamas standing there. Always curious, Cheeky pushed his way to the fence, climbed a few strands, and found himself looking one of the llamas right in the eyes. Without warning the llama spit right in Cheeky’s face. Of course, the people roared and Cheeky was humiliated to the point of tears. Suddenly, he let out with a loud hock, and a large projectile flew from his mouth. It hit the llama in the head with such force that it shattered like shrapnel, hitting the others as well. The llamas scattered and that was the end of Cheeky’s birthday celebration. It was a day he would never forget.

Cheeky’s wife Flora was next to speak. Flora was a kindly lady. She talked about their time together, including the rough start their marriage got off

to. It centered on his tobacco chewing. He had told her about it when they were dating, but never chewed when they were together. He said it was just something he picked up from watching too much baseball. At that time, it didn't seem like a big deal to her. After they got married, however, the real Cheeky "came out," which is not an unusual event for marriages. He started chewing at home, using coffee cans for spittoons. Flora was totally grossed out. She let her feelings be known, and insisted he stop. He made several attempts, most of which lasted only a few hours. He insisted it was something he just had to do. After withholding his breakfast grits did not get him to stop, Flora threatened to move out. She said he probably needed to see a psychiatrist, and just to spite her, he said he gladly would.

As the time approached, Cheeky had a lot of reservations. He did manage to get to the office, and actually relaxed when he saw the photo of the psychiatrist on the wall. He was standing in a fishing boat holding out a string of stripers. If he was a fisherman, he had to have some good qualities, and to see that he kept his fish made him someone to be admired. Cheeky felt that "catch and release" was just a snob thing. After they shared some stories about good times on the lake, the psychiatrist got down to business. He jotted down a few notes while Cheeky described the problem. It did not take long for Cheeky to get to the, "that's all" point. He asked the psychiatrist for his opinion, but only got a "to be continued next session." He left pretty

perturbed, but relaxed a bit as he drove up the driveway. He was consoled by the fact that Flora would have to stay off his back for a while. Cheeky continued to go for a couple of sessions, which he didn't mind because they always swapped some good stories. However, it was starting to hurt his pocketbook pretty bad and he was running out of tales to tell.

On the very afternoon Cheeky planned to say adios, there was a sudden turn of events. The psychiatrist told how he had landed a near trophy bass, and as he looked to see where the hook was set, the bass flipped its tail and hit him right in the face. His two buddies laughed to the point they almost tipped the boat over. That reminded Cheeky of his llama experience, which he just had to tell. He laughed as he recalled the events, and ended with a play-by-play description of his return fire. At the beginning the psychiatrist chuckled along with him, but when Cheeky told the end part, he suddenly stopped and faced a window. After a few moments he turned back toward Cheeky, with excitement in his eyes. One of those, "aha" moments psychiatrists are prone to getting. "We are ready to do business," he told Cheeky.

Cheeky took his time driving home after the long session so he could digest what he heard. The psychiatrist offered that the llama episode was so traumatic, it affected his personality. His spitting was a defense mechanism that was superglued in his psyche. It was symbolic of his capacity to ward off

danger and was the cornerstone of his self-esteem. Cheeky had no basis from which to disagree. The bad news was that the psychiatrist said it would be almost impossible to change the spitting behavior, and maybe even undesirable. He might come unglued. Rather, the psychiatrist suggested there might be an alternative. Maybe Cheeky could find something less unpleasant to Flora that he could spit instead of chewing tobacco.

He discussed the session with Flora, who was not about to second guess the psychiatrist. After all, seeing him was her idea. At first, the idea of any spitting didn't sit too well with her. However, when she opened the refrigerator to start on supper, she had her own "aha" moment. Right there in front of her was a sliced watermelon with its black seeds glistening on the pink flesh. They negotiated, and Cheeky agreed that when he felt the need to spit, he would get some watermelon, which he enjoyed, and go out on the deck or someplace to eat and spit the seeds to his heart's content. Flora told us that it put their marriage back on track and it ran past the 50 year station.

As Cheeky's life was uncovered during the eulogy, how he got that name came out. It was from the seed spitting. When he made the switch to spitting watermelon seeds, he was faced with the need to keep a supply on hand. That started him making Saturday morning trips to the farmers' market. What he discovered was that the watermelon farmers were fellow seed spitters. When business was slow, they would get together and have contests

to see who could spit the farthest, with a little wagering on the side. They actually scratched out a spitting range on the cement floor of the watermelon shed behind the row of trucks loaded with their melons.

One of the farmers at the service gave a detailed account of Cheeky's visits to the market. The competition was right up Cheeky's alley, and he became a hustler, so to speak. Whenever he saw a seed spitting contest going on, he would innocently stop to watch. Without fail, some friendly soul in the group would invite him to give it a try, thinking they could take advantage of this inexperienced bystander. Cheeky would take a piece of the watermelon providing the ammunition, put a seed in his mouth, and then sort of let it dribble off his lip. After the laughter died down, he would spit a few more, with each shot going a little farther until he was hitting the mid-point in the range. When he seemingly reached his limit, someone would challenge him to a competitive spit off. Normally, competitors had a best out of three contest. Cheeky would start off with two mediocre tries, bringing groans from the farmers. In his final turn, his cheeks would well up as if he was a trumpet player getting ready for a long crescendo, and the seed would come flying out, often landing beyond the range end-mark. It was the farmers who started calling him Cheeky, and that is how he came to have watermelons for the neighborhood. Rather than take the 5 spot from the gullible farmer, he would just pick out a few melons, most of which he gave to the neighbors.

Flora and Cheeky found out that watermelon seed spitting has an inherent limitation. That first year when September came along and the watermelon supply was rapidly dwindling, they realized they would soon be in trouble. However, they were rescued at the last moment. By accident, the medical minutia segment of a TV morning show was on, and Cheeky was watching out of the corner of his eye while tucking in his shirt. A dietician came on touting the health benefits of sunflower seeds. There was a way to get by until watermelon time the following May.

His son, Skipper, told that every year, after the fall frosts came, his dad would sit down in front of the TV on chilly weekend afternoons watching a football or basketball game, spitting sunflower seeds into the nearby burning fireplace. He enjoyed watching the flames spring up a moment or two after a seed hit. Most of all, he enjoyed imitating the field goal kickers and basketball shooters by aiming at knot holes in the logs or the spaces between them. It was said that he had a repeater shot in which he spit out several seeds in rapid succession, with most hitting the same spot. People sometimes described it as a machine gun firing. Skipper said Cheeky took issue with that, claiming that it was an aerobic exercise he did during workouts. As you can see, he had a great sense of humor. However, the IRS was not a bit amused when he wrote "professional patooatist" on the occupation line of his

1040. Sometimes I think people's sense of humor is going the way of honesty.

As you might realize, seed spitting played a role in Cheeky's life to the very end. His dear sister, who was one of those with him when he took his final breath, told the last chapter. It would have been too painful for Flora to do that. Several months ago, after one of his spitting sessions, Cheeky started having a sharp pain in his chest. He did not say anything. He was pushing 70, and when you are that age, it is perfectly natural for pains to come and go. But after a couple days, it began to wear on him and Flora noticed. After considerable prodding, he owned up to the problem. At first, she assumed he had a heart attack, but he persuaded her that it was not since this had been going on for sometime and he had not dropped dead. Besides, he was also coughing a bit as if he were coming down with a cold. Then Flora remembered he had been complaining about some off-sized roasted pumpkin seeds someone had given him. He was having a terrible time manipulating them into the right position in his mouth. A couple times he even choked. Her new theory was that he had aspirated a seed, and it was still down in his lung. Finally, when Cheeky was flushed with pain, it convinced him to allow Flora to take him to the emergency room.

When the youngish resident beckoned Cheeky into an examining room, Flora accompanied him. When he finished giving his account of the events,

Flora filled in the missing part, that is, her aspiration theory, and insisted they get a good chest x-ray. Although embarrassed, Cheeky was too uncomfortable to object.

When the diagnostics were all done, Cheeky was taken back to the examination room, where Flora had remained. After a nail-biting wait, the resident returned carrying a large x-ray. He first thanked them for their patience, and then thanked Flora for her reminder about a chest x-ray. With a sullen face, he held the x-ray up to the ceiling light, and with the other hand pointed to an area. "There are a couple of spots," he began. Flora looked up, almost smiling, waiting for him to explain how they would get the seeds out. "The radiologist thinks it is cancer. We need to get right on this."

Sadly, it was lung cancer, pretty well advanced. Cheeky was a fighter, and underwent four arduous months of chemo and radiation therapies. When the physicians gave them the bad news that they were losing this battle, both he and Flora were crushed. The physician offered that they could remove his lung, and that might extend his time a bit, but there was no guarantee that Cheeky would even survive the surgery. They went home shattered. After a day or two, they did collect themselves enough to have a heart-to-heart talk. As Cheeky put it, "what good is time if you can't even spit a seed?" Flora understood, and she devoted herself to comforting him.

Some of us may have gone to the service because it was a neighborly thing, but when we left, we felt like we lost a true friend. Maybe we did say goodbye to Cheeky today, but you got to believe that he never will be forgotten as long as there are watermelons around.