

Charlie Cliché's Off'-Told Tales

# Charlie's Rocky Mountain High School



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Royal Fireworks Press  
Unionville, New York



Also by David Kenneth Mull,  
published by Royal Fireworks Press:

*The Death of Old Man Hanson*

*His Date for the Dance was his Science Project*

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Royal Fireworks Press  
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ISBN: 978-0-89824-394-9

Printed and bound in the United States of America on acid-free, recycled paper using vegetable-based inks and environmentally friendly cover coatings by the Royal Fireworks Printing Co. of Unionville, New York.



## Foreword

The first seven pages of this book constitute a short story in themselves. The story introduces our hero, Elmo Burfoot II (a.k.a. Charlie Cliché). After you read these opening pages, I hope you will understand why Charlie is so different from other kids, yet very much the same. You also will understand why his stories are so unique and, at the same time, quite familiar.

For those of you readers who are already fans of Charlie and his stories and are anxious to learn of his latest adventure, feel free to skip the introduction and get caught up in the newest yarn he is spinning for us.

Enjoy,

*David Kenneth Mull*





## Introduction

### Charlie's My Name — Storytelling's My Game

My real name is Elmo Reginald Burfoot II. When I tell most people that, they give me this mournful look of pity, like I have some kind of horrible disfigurement. I knew early in life that I wanted another name. Oh, it's not that I couldn't make it through life with my given title. After all, my dad has the same name, and he turned out to be a cool guy. My dad is an army officer and the husband of a talented artist who is (even if she is my mom) quite a classy gal. It's just that I have a unique situation in which I don't need the hassle of a handle like Elmo Reginald Burfoot II.

You see, I am what is casually termed a “transient.” Because of my father's work, my little family of three has to relocate all the time. There have been many years where I have had to attend three or more schools. I think you can understand that having a name like mine is similar to going to a new school wearing a “kick me” sign on my back. I do have another option, of course. Since I represent the second generation with the same name, I could always go by the name of “Junior.” Yeah...right! As luck would have it, I was saved from having to go through life using my real name by my second-grade teacher.

Her name was Mrs. Roach (talk about a bummer of a name), and she was my third teacher that year. She was one of those teachers who did the “Show-and-Tell” routine, and she liked to bestow that honor on the new students as soon as possible so they “fit in.” It was just my fourth day at that school when I had to go through the ordeal of bringing something from home and exhibiting it in front of the whole class.



I don't have the greatest memory in the world, but I remember that exhibition and the speech accompanying it word for word. After my performance that day, I had a new name—a name that I could live with, a name that set me free. First of all, let me reproduce my speech for you, and then I will explain the name.

When I made my way to the front of the class that day, all I saw was a sea of foreign, hostile faces. As usual, when my stupid name was announced, I had to leave the relative safety of my desk and make my long journey to the front of the room amid the chorus of derisive laughter.

I chose to show to the class that day my collection of rocks. I had decided when I was just a little shaver that wherever my family might live, there would always be rocks. Rocks became to me something substantial, something I could count on, so I started collecting them.

You can imagine, I think, that the second-grade class did not share my enthusiasm for stones. I gave my little speech to faces in a variety of unconscious stares. Before my talk was over, several hollow thuds could be heard from heads hitting desktops, as my classmates fell asleep. No, the speech was not a huge success with my peers. But the outcome was wonderful. Here is my speech:

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls. I'm Elmo, and you're not. I'm here today to let you know that I have rocks in my head—and in this bag. Please try to control your enthusiasm as I exhibit these stones and clue you in on their story.

“First, here is a stone that is solid as a rock. In fact, it is a piece of the rock. It is from the Rock of Gibraltar. I got it when my dad was stationed in England.

“Next,” I said as I stuck my face and one arm in the grocery sack and clicked around in the pile of rocks, “is



the mother of all rocks. It is a piece of flint shaped into an arrowhead. I got this in Ohio at the Flint Hills State Park.” The response from the crowd was underwhelming.

“My next stone,” I informed the group, “is not to be taken lightly. It is a real hot item. It is a piece of pumice from the Sunset Crater Park in Arizona.

“My last rock,” I informed the comatose crowd, “is the icing on the cake, the cream of the crop, the top of the heap. It is a chunk of fossilized dinosaur dung from Siberia in the former Soviet Union.”

A few glazed eyes shimmered halfway to life at the mention of dinosaur and dung but dulled quickly again at the sight of the pedestrian hunk I held in my outstretched hand. I stuffed the rocks into the bag and without fanfare headed back to my seat. My retreat was halted, however, by a comment from the teacher.

Mrs. Roach spoke in a hoarse, bored voice when I finished. What she said, I realize now, was meant to be cleverly sarcastic. But like most attempts at humor by teachers, it fell on deaf ears—all except for mine. What Mrs. Roach said was, “Thank you, Charlie Cliché!”

The comment stopped me dead in my tracks. “What did you say?” I asked the teacher.

A shocked look spread on her face. She must have thought that she had insulted me or something. I’m sure visions of irate parents storming her room flooded her mind.

“I...I just meant your speech was filled with familiar sayings.”

“Huh?” was my highly intellectual reply.

“You used many clichés in your speech. You know, over-used expressions; that’s why I called you ‘Charlie Cliché.’ No offence intended.”



A very awkward moment passed while Mrs. Roach and I stared at each other. The tension must not have been too intense for the rest of the class, however, because all the rest of the kids in the room remained in their catatonic states. Finally I spoke.

“I love that name!”

“Huh?” was Mrs. Roach’s intelligent reply.

“Charlie Cliché,” I replied. “It’s boss, it’s bad, it’s cool, it’s great, it’s out-a-sight, it’s awesome. In fact, it’s my new name.”

Mrs. Roach stared at me for a few minutes. Her expression was hard to read, but it seemed to be one of relief, combined with reluctant empathy. Finally she said, “You may sit down now, Elmo.”

“Charlie!” I reminded her.

“Oh yes, you may sit down now, Charlie.” And she actually smiled.

From that day on, I have been Charlie Cliché. Even my parents call me Charlie now. It just goes to prove that old saying, “A rose, by any other name, smells as sweet.”



I’m sure you are wondering what all this has to do with one of the most unusual and awesome people I have ever met, but believe it or not, that amazing story will soon be presented in all its glory. But every good story needs some background.

Most of you readers probably fall into the fortunate category of those who spend their whole lives in one or two school systems. You all probably always went to school with the same kids and had comfortable, reliable friends.

I, on the other hand, changed schools several times a year. I had no permanent friends. I learned early that I had



to find some gimmick, some way to establish myself quickly in the new school environment. Even as early as the third grade, I watched the other new kids at school to see how they presented themselves.

First I noticed the tough kids—the girls and boys who made it their task to find the meanest, baddest kid in the school and challenge him or her to a duel of fists. The outcome of the fight seemed to be irrelevant. The new kid might get his brains beaten out. The challenge alone did the job. The new kid always emerged with a loyal following. He or she ended up with a place in the system. I also discovered early that the “tough guy” approach was not for me. I had no desire either to beat up someone or to be beaten up.

The next most common method of establishing a place in the school pecking order was from those who, like the tough kids, took an offensive stance. The second type, though, was the razor-tongued folks. These kids could slice a person to shreds with the use of words and an attitude. They were kids of every shape and size who met the world head-on with a snarl. The words these combatants used need not be intelligent. A simple “Oh yeah!” or “Your mama” with the appropriate glare and flip of the head was usually enough to send a peer or school official into an apoplectic mode.

I considered this approach for awhile but decided against it. These folks generally do establish a place for themselves, but at what cost! After these nasty actors prove themselves, nobody messes with them, but nobody really likes them either. The place that these students find for themselves is a lonely one, populated only by the other nasties.

Withdrawing is another defensive method that transients use to avoid trouble in a new school. The place found with this method is also a lonely one but generally safe. These are not simply the shy kids. These are the new students who learn to hide. They strive to become invisible. They don't



want recognition of any kind. I could never be successful at this hiding business. I like to talk too much, and I like being noticed. I just don't like being messed with.

Some new students adopt a more socially correct approach to finding their place in a new environment. There are three types of these more positive approaches. The first type is the kids who attack their new school with friendliness. A "Hi" with a huge smile and a constant sunny ambience are the weapons used in the battle to fit in. Sometimes this works, sometimes not. It all seems to depend on the mood of the new school toward the arrival of the transient and on the commitment of the new student to continue wearing the friendly mask, forever.

The second positive approach is to be continuously funny, to come into the new school in the role of the "class clown." Again, this takes a lot of commitment. To fit into this role, the transient has to be willing to play the comedian every second. He or she also must be willing to face the possible resentment of the reigning class clown, and those people can make for some tough adversity. And of course the transient must be willing to face getting into trouble all the time with school authorities who frown on the disturbing influence of constant clowning.

The third tactic for fitting in to a new school is the toughest one: trying to impress the students and teachers with one's intelligence. This seldom works because it is nearly impossible to demonstrate intelligence in a short period of time. The new student usually turns everybody off by being too showy—keeping his or her hand up in class all the time, constantly using needlessly large words, and trying to be an expert on every topic.

I have tried all of these tactics, but none of them worked for me. I had to develop my own method of fitting in. And



I did find one that works just fine for me. I exhumed an old art form and perfected it. I became a storyteller.

I have lived in so many places and I've met so many people that I have had the privilege to witness some mighty fascinating things. I guess I also must be a pretty good observer of human nature; plus, I must spin a yarn pretty darn well, because for the last dozen or so schools I have attended, I have been able to fit in quickly. Usually within the first day of my arrival to a new school, I find an opportunity to tweak the interest of several students by planting the seeds of curiosity for one of the several stories I have found popular. Often it starts at lunch or in gym where a small audience is already assembled. It usually begins when I am asked a question about where I came from, and I am able to make reference to some funny or exciting anecdote. I never tell all the story at once; I just give tantalizing tidbits until word gets around and I have a large group hungry for more of the story. One of my favorite stories is one in which I get to be a football player and a ladies' man. It is also the tale of one of the toughest decisions that I have ever had to make. I am not really the main character in the story, however. That title goes to an English teacher you just won't believe.





# Chapter 1

## Look, Ma, I'm a Quarterback

This was one of the rarest of school years for me. I was actually going to be going to classes and not be a total stranger to everyone. Dad received his new assignment the first week in June, and the Pentagon gave him some time off before he had to start. Mom and Dad and I first talked about using the time to take a long trip—maybe out west or even to a foreign country, but then the three of us started thinking about it and came to the conclusion that for people like us who travel all the time, the best kind of vacation might be to find a home and stay put for a while.

We moved into the Denver area on the 10th of June. We found a little house close to the high school that I would be attending, and I made it my goal to get to know some kids in the neighborhood. The first couple of days were busy unpacking and getting our house ready, but on the third day after our arrival, I went for a hike to explore the area. When I walked by the small city park beside the high school, there were a bunch of guys playing some sand-lot football. I sat on a concrete bench and watched for a while.

There were about a dozen guys of various sizes and athletic abilities. Two of the guys seemed like real jocks. One was a huge guy with no neck. The other boys seemed to like him, even though he spoke gruffly and bossed everyone around. He was called by a variety of nicknames: “Gorilla,” “Kong,” “Ape Man,” etc. But I gathered that his first name was Carl. The other athlete was a tall, slender, Black teen who ran faster by far than anyone on the field. In the short time I watched, he intercepted four passes and ran three



back for touchdowns. When he was on offense, he was the quarterback. The other boys called him "Tone" and "Tony."

The boys were playing that strange and universal brand of sand-lot touch football where someone hikes the ball to the quarterback, and everyone except the passer becomes eligible receiver and dashes helter-skelter down the field, with all of the defenders except one dashing after them. The one lone defense man stays back to get the quarterback, but he has to count loudly and slowly to ten before he can rush in and "sack" the passer by tapping him below the waist with two hands.

On the last set of plays that I watched, Tony threw a pass to Kong but missed by a mile, and the ball was nearly intercepted by one of the opposing team members. Kong picked up the ball and went stomping back toward Tony. "You know something, Tone? You suck. You couldn't hit the ground with a bowling ball," Kong yelled angrily at the other boy.

I thought for a moment that a fight might break out, but neither Tony nor the other boys seemed in the least worried. Tone let Kong stomp right up to him and spike the ball at his feet, and he never even flinched.

"Duh, I guess that's why I play wide receiver on the high school team," Tony replied in a loud but relaxed voice. "Why don't you play quarterback, Mr. Self-Appointed Coach?"

Kong looked sheepish and laughed. "You know the reason for that one. I'm a center. I throw the ball worse than you do." Kong then turned to one of the other boys, a short, slight-of-build guy. "How about you, Sid? You're the only one who hasn't had a try at quarterback today. Maybe a miracle has happened since last week, and you developed some throwing skill."



Sid answered, “As a quarterback, I make a great trumpet player...which reminds me—I gotta go for a music lesson.”

“Oh, come on, Sid. That will make the sides uneven,” Tone pleaded. Sid just shrugged his shoulders and started walking away toward my direction. He stopped and pointed right at me. “Why don’t you ask that guy?” he shouted back at the other boys.

The attention of all the players was abruptly turned toward me, and I suddenly felt naked. “Hey, Mr. Spectator, come here,” Kong yelled with authority. I got up off the bench and walked onto the field toward the group. I tried to measure my pace so I wouldn’t hurry and look like I was intimidated by the big, no-neck Kong and the host of strangers—even though I was.

When I got within a few feet of Kong, he reached down, picked up the football, and flipped it to me. “Are you acquainted with this particular sport?” he asked me.

I could have answered, “Are you kidding? I have played this game on three continents and several islands with other military brats.” But instead I just cleared my nervous throat and said, “Yeah.”

“Well, you’re quarterback,” Tone said in a warm, friendly voice. Then the guys lined up in opposing teams, and Kong took the ball back from me and got down in the center position. I lined up behind Kong but stepped back a second to look over my team to see who I could throw to. As soon as I stepped back behind the center, Kong hiked me the ball, and everybody started scattering.

The one guy who stayed back to guard me was a skinny, short guy whom I had noticed, from watching earlier, was fast as lightning. I knew I didn’t have much time before the quick little dude would tag me for a sack. I scanned the action down field and saw my teammates scrambling to



get open. The guy guarding me was counting down: “10, 9, 8...” I started running back and forth, searching for an open receiver. “7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, go.” The little guy came charging at me. Just as he was about to tap me, I saw Tone put a move on his man and head down the sideline running for all he was worth. I threw the ball as hard as I could. I tried to lead Tone by throwing the ball in front of him and let him run to it.

If I do say so myself, the throw was perfect. Tone scooped the ball into his arms and ran the rest of the way for a touchdown. I started jumping up and down like a jack-in-the-box run amuck. A couple of the guys on my team came back and slapped me on the back. Tone came up to me, all out of breath. “Nice toss,” he gasped. Kong sauntered up and had on his face what was about the closest thing to a smile that I’d almost ever see on him. “Well, at least you don’t suck,” is all he said.

I don’t think I will ever forget that afternoon. I was in a zone and could do no wrong. I threw maybe 30 passes and completed at least 25 of them. When the guys were tired of playing, we all collapsed on the grass. Some of the boys started asking me questions: would I be going to the high school, where did I come from, what grade I was going to be in, etc. I suddenly felt very thirsty and got up to head for home. I asked the guys if they would be back the next day to play more ball.

“Na,” Tone answered. “At least not most of us. Our vacation is just about over. High school football practice starts tomorrow.” There were groans and moans all around.

I was surprised at their dread of football practice. They all seemed to love playing so much. I said some short thanks for inviting me to play and was just starting to walk away when Kong, who was still sitting on the ground, grabbed my ankle in one of his huge hands.



“I can’t allow you to leave at this moment. We may have a proposition in which you might be quite interested.” He let go of my ankle and stood up. “Come accompany us to the local refreshment establishment, and we will discuss matters over some soft drinks—our treat, of course.”

After Kong spoke, he turned to the rest of the group and growled, “All right, you scumbuckets, dig into those pockets and fork over some change, and let’s go to Burger King.”

I followed along. I was curious to find out what Kong’s proposition might be, but I was also taking a liking to these guys, especially to friendly, soft-spoken Tone. I also liked Kong, who flipped from rough street talk to sophisticated, genteel speech as if he couldn’t make up his mind who he really wanted to be.

As soon as we sat down at a table in the restaurant, Kong blurted out to me, “How about playing football on the high school team? We need a back-up quarterback bad, especially one who is not one of Coach Schwaben’s henchmen. Come on, what do ya say?” I was flabbergasted. I opened my mouth to respond, but no words came out.

Tone, sitting across the table from me, started laughing, looked from me to Kong, and rolled his eyes as if in exasperation. “Take it easy, Kong. Give the poor guy a chance.”

Tone then started introducing the guys sitting at the table. Our group was so large we had to use two tables. At the one where I was seated were Tone, whose full name was Anthony Wise; Kong, really Carl Stringer; Potts, the quick little guy who had defended me during the game (his real name was Danny Potter); and three other guys whose real names I missed but who were nicknamed Sniggs, Red, and Mule. All of the guys were seniors except Red, who was a junior. They all played on the high school football team except Mule, who said he would like to play but couldn’t



stand the coach. The guys at the other table were listening to all that was said but didn't take part much in the conversation.

When I told the guys that my name was Charlie Cliché, Tone replied, "That's an unusual last name. What, is it French or something like that?"

At any other time, I would have used a cue like this to lead in to the beginning of a story, but I just let it slide by and only said, "Actually, it's just a nickname. My real name is Elmo Burfoot."

"My goodness," said Kong, "I can certainly see why one would want to alter a title like that." All the guys, including me, started laughing.

"Well, Charlie, what do you think of Kong's suggestion? Any chance you might want to play on the high school football team?" Tone asked after the good-natured laughter had died down.

"I would love to," I said, "but I have never played on a school team before. My family moves around a lot, and I usually am not around long enough. But this time, I am sure that we will be in Denver at least through football season. I'm not sure I could make the team, though."

"Believe you me, Charlie; if you can throw even half as well as you did today, you'll make the team," Tone reassured me.

