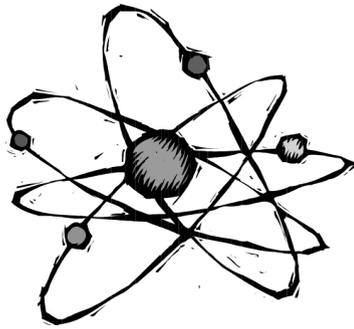


Charlie Cliché's Oft'-Told Tales

# Hís Date for the Dance Was Hís Science Project



**David Kenneth Mull**

Royal Fireworks Press  
Unionville, New York



Also by David Kenneth Mull,  
published by Royal Fireworks Press:  
*The Death of Old Man Hanson*

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Royal Fireworks Press  
First Avenue, PO Box 399  
Unionville, NY 10988-0399  
(845) 726-4444  
FAX: (845) 726-3824  
email: [mail@rfwp.com](mailto:mail@rfwp.com)  
website: [rfwp.com](http://rfwp.com)

ISBN: 978-0-89824-371-0

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.

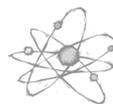
## Foreword

The first eight pages of this book constitutes a short story in itself. 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 will also 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 where I don't need the hassle of a handle like Elmo Reginald Burfoot, II.

You see, I am what is 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 when 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). 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. Plus the fact that 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 that exhibited a variety of unconscious stares. Before my talk was over, several hollow thuds could be heard from heads hitting desk tops, 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 Flint Hills State Park.” The response from the crowd was 0.

“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 out-stretched 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 a guy who dated his science project, 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 life in one or two school systems. You 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 of him. The challenge alone did the job. The new kid always emerged with a loyal following. He or she always 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. Those kids could slice a person to shreds with the use of words and an attitude to match. These 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 yea!” or “Your mama” with the appropriate glare and flip of the head was usually enough to send a peer or school official into an apologetic 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 a bunch of 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 on 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 at 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 ten 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 starts 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 of 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. I often start with one of my favorite tales, about a strange little guy who can't find a date for the end-of-school formal dance, so he brings his science fair project. The school that he attended has never been the same since....

His date for the dance was his science project.



# Chapter 1

Gilbert O'Shay was not a transient. He had been going to Cottage Grove Public Schools all his life. And not being a transient, Gilbert did not really have to find a gimmick to fit in. He could just be himself. The only trouble was that Gilbert's "self" was not too endearing to the rest of the school kids. If one finds the word nerd in a thesaurus, the first synonym listed just might be Gilbert O'Shay. He always dressed and acted like he was at a Halloween party and was competing for the prize for best character. His pants were always too short or too long. He often wore dress shirts and ties. He wore brown wing-tip dress shoes, and (honest) his face was always decorated with a black pair of horn-rimmed glasses with a paperclip replacing a lost screw that was holding an earpiece, and a chunk of masking tape was perpetually holding the glasses together at the nosepiece.

Gilbert spoke in a high-pitched, nasal voice that would irritate a person, even if Gilbert were announcing the person as the winner of the lottery. He was a work of art, and of course, Gilbert made a beeline for me as soon as I set foot on the school grounds. I have found that the first people transients attract at a new school are the misfits. It's as if the weirdos rush to the new person, hoping that they might finally find someone to relate to.

I had just entered the building my first morning at Cottage Grove when I heard a voice that sounded like someone talking right after sucking in a lung-full of helium.

"Hi, you're new here, huh?"

I spun around and saw coming toward me what looked like a comic figure from a "B" teen movie.

"Uh...yeah," I said, trying to regain my composure. "This is my first day."



“Great, I’ll show you around,” Gilbert squeaked as he caught up to me, and we walked down the hall together.

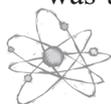
I’ve noticed, over the years, that many transients resent the heck out of being a magnet for the oddballs in the new school. Having the cast-offs hang around them interferes with the new students’ act of “tough guy” or “razor tongue,” etc. I, on the other hand, like to get to know the eccentrics. And right away, I saw in this nerdy-looking guy potential for a great story.

After Gilbert introduced himself, he gave me a tour of the school. By the time he had helped me find my locker and locate all my classrooms and the cafeteria, I had a pretty good knowledge of his life history. It seemed that both of his parents were engineers for a company that did research on plastics, polymers, and robotics. Gilbert had been born in the town and had lived there all his life but had no friends. The only kids he had ever formed any ties with were those he had met at intellectual science clubs and competitions, and he rarely got to see them.

The thing that I liked about Gilbert, right away, was that he was such a realist. He lived under no delusions. He knew that he was considered an oddball at his school. It didn’t seem to bother him too much, though, except that he said he often was lonely.

A warning bell rang, and I had to get to my homeroom—a different one from Gilbert’s. Gilbert invited me to eat lunch with him, and I accepted. We had compared schedules right away and found that, although we were both sophomores, we didn’t have any of the same classes, mainly because Gilbert was in all accelerated courses.

My first day at Cottage Grove was the first day of the second semester, and the school was just coming off a week’s break, so I didn’t talk to many people. Everyone was too busy gathering new books, avoiding their teachers,



and catching up on gossip. I went pretty much unnoticed, so when lunchtime arrived, I was ready to see a familiar face—even a nerdy one. I hurried to the cafeteria and saw Gilbert in line, his tray in hand. He was concentrating on choosing his food. He didn't notice me when I got in the line three people behind him. As soon as I picked up my tray, I overheard the conversation going on between the girl and two boys in line between Gilbert and me. I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but the kids were loud, and I couldn't help overhearing. I realized at once that the three of them were making fun of Gilbert.

“Nice clothes, Gil,” said one boy, a tall, handsome, blond-haired, blue-eyed upperclassman who looked like he might have stepped out of a teen fashion magazine.

“Yeah, Gil, be sure and give me the name of your tailor,” the other boy, another young Adonis, added.

The girl chimed in, “Gilbert, old man, have you seen the new documentary movie *How to Date a Nerd?* The girl smiled proudly as the boys howled. I figured I must have missed something; I didn't get the joke. The girl was stereotypically cute/pretty. She had long, silky, straight, black hair and dark, radiant eyes. She was slim, and short, and sexy.

Gilbert went on about his business and paid no more attention to the three than a highway worker notices the honking horns of impatient motorists. He paid for his lunch and went and sat at an empty table.

The three students-beautiful forgot Gilbert as soon as he walked away. I got through the line and approached Gilbert's table. His face beamed into a smile as I approached. “Charles, please sit down here!” His shrill voice pierced through the cafeteria hubbub.

I smiled back at Gilbert for two reasons; one was because a friendly face was such a welcome sight, and the other was because no one had ever called me “Charles” before. As I



sat down, I began explaining the origin of the name “Charlie.” Gilbert listened attentively, and when I had finished, he said, “So, Charles, how is your first day at our fair school?” All I could do was laugh out loud.

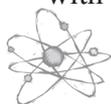
As we ate lunch, I learned some more about Gilbert. It seemed he perfectly fit the pattern of a stereotypical egg-head. He was terrible at all physical activity; he made all “A’s” in his subjects, and his social life was nearly nonexistent. The passion of his life was science. He spent all of his free time reading about and experimenting with science. His idea of a perfect vacation was to go to a space camp or science workshop. His life’s goal was to be a research scientist. His only dilemma was whether to be a chemical engineer like his father or a mechanical engineer like his mother.

I was to find out, however, that there were many things about Gilbert that did not fit the mold of a nerd. There were many things about Gilbert that were surprising indeed. The first endearing quality I found in Gilbert, besides his child-like friendliness and loyalty, was his sense of humor. The first evidence I saw of this was that first day at noon. As we were talking and Gilbert was explaining his academic success, I said, “Gilbert, I’ve been to many schools, and almost all of them offer very bright students a chance to skip grades or to advance more rapidly than normal students. Doesn’t Cottage Grove Public Schools offer rapid advancement?”

“Oh, yes,” he explained. “I have had several opportunities to skip grades.”

“Then why haven’t you taken those opportunities?” I asked, unknowingly playing the straight man.

Gilbert stopped eating for a second and spoke in his most serious, manly squeak. “I guess it was because my folks were afraid that my being moved up in grades might stunt my social development. They were afraid I might not fit in with the rest of the kids.”



That last statement snapped my attention to Gilbert's face. It was then that I saw the twinkle in his eyes, magnified by his thick glasses, and I saw his grin start to spread.

I burst out laughing. I laughed so hard I started choking on the last bite of food I had just taken. That made Gilbert start laughing.

Now, in all my travels, I thought I had heard and seen everything, but nothing on earth could compare to the sight and sound of Gilbert's laugh. His face contorted like he was in extreme pain, and his eyes immediately started watering. His small, tight mouth opened, and a sound emitted like the barking of a hyena, taped and played back at high speed. I stopped choking but was still laughing when the sound of Gilbert's laugh hit the air in the cafeteria. The instant that his cackle broadcast like an air-raid siren with a cracked speaker into the crowded room, all other noises ceased. Every conversation, every gossip session, every dialogue, every soliloquy in the whole cafeteria immediately was suspended, and all ears instinctively began trying to identify the alien sound.

When the heavy, ominous silence closed in all around us, the effect on Gilbert and me was rather remarkable—we started laughing harder. The more attention focused on us as more and more people discovered the source of the cacophonous disturbance, the funnier it seemed. By the time everyone had found us and were staring stupidly at our table, I was laughing myself into oxygen debt. My mouth muscles were strained so that I thought they would tear, and my sides were beginning to ache.

And Gilbert? Oh my gosh! The unearthly chirping was interrupted every couple of minutes by a huge, even higher-pitched gasping sound. And his face was so convoluted that it looked like a rubber Halloween mask left on a hot radiator.

Finally the shock started wearing off the gawking crowd, and one, then another, started snickering. Then laughing be-

