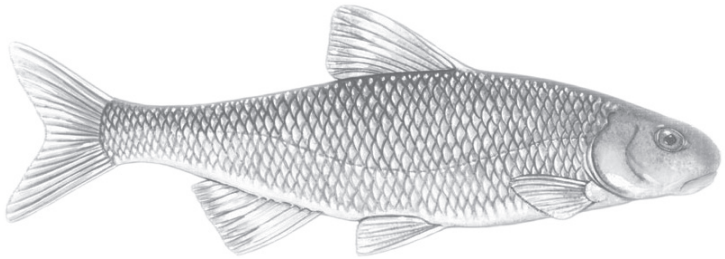


Charlie Cliché's Oft'-Told Tales

Nobody Like Toby



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
His Date for the Dance was His Science Project
Charlie's Rocky Mountain High School

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Unionville, NY 10988-0399
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website: rfwp.com



ISBN: 978-0-89824-483-0

Printed and bound in Unionville, New York, on acid-free paper using
vegetable-based inks at the Royal Fireworks facility.

Publisher: Dr. T.M. Kemnitz
Editors: Jennifer Ault, Rachel Semlyen, and Amanda Mulholland
Book and cover designer: Kerri Ann Ruhl
Cover art: Chris Dodge

Foreword

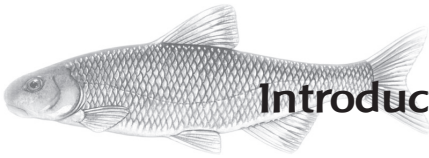


The first seven pages of this book constitute a short story in themselves. The story introduces our hero, Elmo Burfoot II (a.k.a. Charlie Cliché). After you read these opening pages, I hope you will understand why Charlie is so different from other kids, yet very much the same. You also will understand 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 (even if she is my mom) is 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 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), 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 about a kid I met named Toby.

Chapter 1



Toby, My Guide to Adventure

Of all the unusual characters I have met over the years, Toby was the most unique. I met him during the spring that my dad was transferred to western Pennsylvania. With every new move, Dad would try to use the experience as a learning venture, a chance for his family to face a new life experience. This time he decided we should become part-time farmers.

We rented a small twenty-acre spread with a huge old house and a big barn and some other outbuildings. It was early spring, and there was still snow on the ground the day we moved in. What little furniture we owned was stored in the last town we had lived in. This house was fully furnished. Actually the place had enough old worn-out tables, chairs, couches, and other stuff to fill up several homes. The house was not what I'd call "charming." I'd call it "run-down." It was so big that we didn't even use half the rooms. We kept them shut off and stuffed the extra furniture in those rooms. We lived in just five rooms, not counting the basement.

I remember well the first day we moved in. Dad had been there before and was taking on the role of tour guide for Mom and me. He led us through the whole house—even the rooms we weren't going to use—and then guided us through the rest of the buildings. He explained that the house was set on twenty acres of land, with ten acres of woods and a creek dividing the cleared land from the woods.

I was anxious to see all the land, but my folks said they would wait until the weather cleared and it wasn't so wet. After our tour of the barn, Mom and Dad went back into the house to start unpacking boxes. I stayed outside, trying to

decide whether to venture out to the woods and explore. I was standing at the back of the house, looking up and taking in the enormity of the old building, when I heard a deep, raspy voice coming from behind me. The abruptness of the voice startled me at first; then the meaning of the words sank in. “Hi, I’m Toby. Who are you?” were the words that were spoken.

I spun around and saw a young person, a little older than me, standing some twenty feet behind me. He had obviously just come from somewhere behind our barn. As I first viewed this person, I remember thinking that here was one guy who had the wrong name. I had never seen anyone whose physical appearance in no way matched the name he had just given me like this boy. He looked like a Bruno or a Chuck or a John, but surely not a Toby. Tobys should be small, pale guys with freckles. This guy was tall and solid with dark skin and the longest, slickest hair I had ever seen. Set in his rather dark face were eyes that were piercing brown gemstones. In fact, his eyes were the only expressive parts of his face. I don’t know how long I took scrutinizing the newcomer, but the time lapse didn’t seem to bother the tall, dark guy. He wasn’t paying much attention to me. He was gazing up at the back of our house. I finally got myself together enough to answer his greeting. “Hi, Toby. I’m Elmo, but everyone calls me Charlie. My folks and I just moved....”

“This old place isn’t huge or anything, is it?” Toby interrupted.

I just stood there, not having a clue on how to answer that question, but I could tell that he expected no reply. Toby just kept staring at the house. “You want to come and see the inside?” I asked.

“Yeah, someday, but not now. Let’s go bum around in the woods,” he said as he turned and started walking toward the back of our property.

“Uh...okay, sure, but I’ll go tell my folks first,” I said.

Toby stopped, turned, and looked at me. “Oh, a mama’s boy, huh?” he said, his face expressionless.

I looked back at him and smiled a little sheepishly. “Yeah, I guess so, at least enough to know how to get along with her.”

His eyes twinkled, and I could tell that my answer pleased him in some way. “I’ll meet you back by the creek,” Toby said as he turned his back on me again and walked off.

I ran into the house and told my folks that I had just met one of the neighborhood kids and was going out to explore with my new mate. My folks seemed pleased that I had met someone already and said to be back before supper.

I ran out of the house and around the barn. Across the shallow, snow-covered field, I saw the outline of a tall figure just reaching the line of trees that marked the boundary of the creek. The figure instantly disappeared into the trees. I rushed across the field toward the spot where the figure had entered the tree line.

I should say I tried to rush, but the light snow must have come right after a thaw because the ground wasn’t frozen. In fact, with every step, my sneakers picked up more and more pasty mud. By the time I reached the creek, each foot weighed about ten pounds. As soon as I reached the trees, I searched for a stick to clean my shoes off. As I poked around trying to dislodge clumps of mud, I became aware of Toby, kneeling down next to the creek a little to my left at the bottom of a short, steep bank. By now I was warm and perspiring from the exertion of trudging across the muddy field, even though all I had on was a hooded sweatshirt over

a tee shirt and jeans. I noticed I was dressed much like my companion, except he had on a pair of old boots.

“What the heck are you doing?” I asked as I threw the stick down, resigned to the fact that I would never get all the mud off my shoes.

“Looking for salamanders,” the boy answered absently as he turned over a large rock right next to the water. “If you find one this time of year, they’re easy to catch. They are sluggish and slow. Salamanders are cold-blooded, you know.”

“Why would you want to find salamanders?” I asked.

“I collect them,” he answered flatly as he lifted up a rotten tree limb and looked under it. He must have struck out, salamander-wise, because he stood up, arched his back to stretch, and looked around and across the creek. Suddenly, he became more animated. His attention was riveted to the swiftly moving water of the creek as he motioned with his arm and hand for me to come down to join him at the water’s edge.

I carefully made my way down the bank and arrived at his side. The boy was pointing at the rippling water. I followed the path of his pointing finger and saw only gurgling, cold-looking water.

“What?” I finally asked.

“The suckers are running!” he announced as he grinned in my direction.

My responsive expression must have been one of rank ignorance, for the new boy laughed aloud. I was nearly stunned by the transformation of the face in front of me. The dark, bland face lit up like a burst of fireworks. His bright white teeth sparkled, and his eyes crinkled and flashed. And like a rocket display, the emotional outburst was short-lived.

In a second the face cleared of emotion, and only the constant slight intelligent glint of his eyes remained.

“Suckers are fish,” he finally informed me. “Let’s catch some.”

“What for?” I asked.

“Dinner,” was his only reply as he waded across the creek. The boy had boots on, but the water was deeper than the tops, and his jeans were stuffed in his boots. It was obvious that water must have been running in on his feet, but he showed no shock or discomfort. When he reached the other bank, he made his way to a place where there was an overhang. I was about to remind my strange new companion that we had no pole or lines or hooks when he suddenly dropped to his knees and then to his belly and reached his whole arm into the water under the bank beneath him. He completely ignored the fact that the arm of his sweatshirt was getting soaking wet.

After a couple of minutes of fumbling around, he sat up and threw himself on his back. He then quickly stood up, and I saw that he had something in his hands. He swung his arms down and away from me and threw what he had in his hands across the creek in my direction. I jumped out of the way as a gray object flew past me and landed well up the bank. The thing hit the ground with a slap and started jumping and flopping all around. I ran over and looked down at, in my limited experience as a fisherman, the biggest fish I had ever seen outside an aquarium. The thing was a foot and a half long. It was also one of the strangest creatures I had ever seen. Its body was sleek. It was shiny gray and muscular, not unattractive at all. But its head made up for all the ugliness lacking from the body. It had beady little eyes and a mouth to give one nightmares. I knew instantly why it was called a sucker. The mouth was on the bottom of the face and looked like the opening of a vacuum cleaner hose.

One could easily picture the unfortunate critter swimming along sucking stuff off the bottom on the creek.

“Come on, Charlie, help out! Get to fishing!” Toby shouted from his prone position at another spot upstream. I turned and made my way to the water’s edge. I felt dumbfounded and useless as I stared down into the running water. All of a sudden, my eyes somehow adjusted, and I began seeing the fish. There were dozens of them darting around. How had I not seen them before? I quickly got caught up in the spirit of the moment. I reached down into the waters and started grabbing at the flashing figures. My heart started racing. After several futile attempts, I became aware that Toby was yelling at me.

“Find a place under the bank. They go there to rest and hide. They’re easier to catch there.”

I frantically looked around, found a likely spot, threw myself on the ground, and dug into the water. The first time my hand actually touched a fish, it scared the breath out of me. As the air rushed out, I made a pitiful scaredy-cat cry of shock. I shamefacedly looked up at my brave, adventurous new companion, but he was either too busy or too kind to acknowledge my girlish outburst. I steeled my courage and reached back under the bank into the cold, mysterious waters. In a second, I felt another cold, scaly figure, but this time I grabbed hold and jerked my hands out over the bank. The momentum of my frantic jerk caused me to roll completely over, and in the confusion, I let go of the fish. I jumped to my feet and was horror-struck to see that my fish was flopping dangerously close to the water. I panicked and dove at the fish, pinning it against the ground with my body before my prize got into the water, lost forever. As I lay flat on the ground, I heard laughing.

“And this round of the wrestling match goes to Charlie the Crusher, the greatest contender in the Greco-Roman fish

class!” Toby’s voice echoed across the water, amplifying one of the most infectious laughs I ever heard in my life. The happy noise emitting from my teasing fellow fisherman was a deep, hoarse “Har...Har” that cracked me up. As I reached under my body to retrieve my fish, I started laughing too. I stood up and admired my catch. It wasn’t as large as the fish Toby had landed, but it was by far the biggest fish I had ever caught. Toby and I continued laughing at my expense until I finally threw my fish up on the bank next to Toby’s.

“We gonna stand here all day and laugh our heads off, or we gonna fish?” I said as I looked around for another spot.

“I like the cut of your jib, matey,” he stated as he knelt back down to resume his search.

I wasn’t quite sure what that meant, but it somehow pleased me to think I had found favor with this bizarre character. I felt I had stumbled across a new companion who was going to be a guide to some new adventures. Boy, was I ever right about that!

The next hour or so was one of the best times I have ever had in my life. In no time at all, we had abandoned all maturity and common sense. Both of us were in the stream, flaying and falling as we grabbed fish and tossed them up on the bank over and over. When exhaustion finally took over, we had a pile of some two dozen flopping fish accumulated on the bank.

“I think we got enough,” Toby announced as he slapped me on the soggy back and encouraged me to join him in wading out of the creek toward our huge haul of fish.

“What the heck are we going to do with all these?” I asked.

“I don’t know about you, but I plan to take my half home and have some for supper tonight,” Toby informed me as he started looking around the area for something.

“I guess I’ll give you my half, too. I’m sure my folks would not have a clue what to do with these creatures if I brought them home.”

“Yeah,” he replied, “suckers are hard to clean. You really have to know what you are doing ’cause they’re real bony.” He spoke to me as he continued looking around. He finally started breaking a limb off a small willow tree.

“What the heck are you doing?” I asked.

“Well, unless you happen to have a big fish creel on you, we need some way to carry all these fish. Break yourself off a small branch, about three foot long. Make sure you leave a good-sized fork at one end to keep the fish from slipping off.”

I did as I was told. I watched my backwoods mentor and copied his actions. He took the skinny limb and stripped all the twigs and leaves off until he had a thin, pliable rod with a hook at one end formed by the remains of a branch. He went over to the pile of fish, grabbed one up, and started threading the pointed end of the stick through into the fish’s gill and out the mouth. The fish slid all the way down the green rod and was caught on the hooked end. Toby continued the process until he had over half the fish threaded on the stick, piled on each other, with enough of the limb left for a handle. In a few minutes I had the rest of the fish strung on my branch. We swung the fish over our shoulders and looked at each other in a smug, vain, manly way.

“That wasn’t fun or anything, was it?” Toby grinned at me.

I just grinned back.

We walked a few minutes down the river bank. “Where are we going?” I finally asked.

“Might as well go to my place, and I’ll show you how to clean suckers. I just live a little ways down the road from you.”

We walked along in silence, shivering now from the chilly air and our wet clothes but totally satisfied with ourselves and our rewarding adventure. After a time, Toby led us away from the creek across a field, not as muddy as the one we had crossed from my house to the creek. On the other end of the field, however, was not a large, old farmhouse. We were heading toward a pitiful, tiny, two-story concrete block shanty of a house.

“How long have you lived here?” I asked as we approached the little house.

“Uh, let’s see, three days,” was his surprising answer.