

Charlie Cliché's Oft-Told Tales · Book Two

THE GLORIOUS GENIUS OF GILBERT O'SHAY

Revised Edition

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INTRODUCTION

Charlie's My Name; Storytelling's My Game

Confession: Charlie is *not* my name. My real name is Elmo Reginald Burfoot II. When I tell people that, they usually look at me at first with disbelief and then, when they realize it's not a joke, with pity. That really is my name.

So I knew early on that I wanted to go by something else. Oh, it's not that I couldn't make it through life with my given name. 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, and I don't need the hassle of a handle like Elmo Reginald Burfoot II.

You see, I'm what's casually termed a "transient." Because of my father's work, my little family of three has to relocate all the time. There have been plenty of years when I've had to attend three or more schools, and 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. Because I represent a second generation with the same name, I could always go by "Junior." Ugh! No thanks. As much as I like my dad, I want to establish my own identity as something other than a lower-ranking version of him. But as luck would have it, I was saved

from having to go through life using that unfortunate nickname or 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 likes to do the “show-and-tell” routine, and she loved to bestow that honor on the new students as soon as possible in a torturous attempt to help the rest of the class get to know them better. It was only 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 class.

I’m not one for remembering every little detail of everything that happens, but I remember that presentation and the speech accompanying it word for word. The reason it sticks in my mind is that, after my performance that day, I had a new name—a name that suits me perfectly, a name I like so much that I go by it to this day.

All throughout that day, all I’d seen was a sea of foreign, hostile faces. When it was time for show-and-tell, the teacher announced my name. I reluctantly left the relative safety of my desk and made the long journey to the front of the room amid a chorus of derisive laughter.

I had chosen to show the class my rock collection. I’d noticed when I was a little tyke that wherever my family lived, there were rocks. The scenery might change, the landscape might be radically different, but there were always rocks. Rocks represented something stable to me, something I could count on, so I started collecting them.

You can probably imagine that the second-grade class did not share my enthusiasm for rocks. I gave my little speech to

a roomful of faces that held a variety of listless stares. Before my speech was over, several hollow thuds had echoed around the room from unconscious 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's my speech:

“Good morning, my fellow students. 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 rocks and clue you in on their story.”

I reached into my bag and pulled out the first rock. “First, here's a stone that's solid as a rock. In fact, it's a piece of the rock. It's from the Rock of Gibraltar. I got it when my dad was stationed in England.”

“Next,” I said as I dug in the bag and clicked around in the pile of rocks, “is the mother of all rocks. It's a piece of flint shaped into an arrowhead. I got this in Ohio at Flint Hills State Park.” The response from the crowd was underwhelming.

“My next rock,” I informed the group, “is not to be taken lightly. It's a real hot item. It's a piece of pumice from Sunset Crater in Arizona.” The students were dropping like flies. I had a whole bag full of rocks, but I decided to show one more and be done with it. I pulled out one last rock.

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

A few glazed eyes flickered halfway to life at the mention of dinosaur dung but dulled quickly again at the sight of the drab hunk I held in my outstretched hand. I stuffed the rocks back into

the bag and retreated to my seat. I stopped mid-stride, however, at 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 mine. What Mrs. Roach said was, “Thank you, Charlie Cliché.”

The comment stopped me dead in my tracks. I turned around slowly. “What did you say?” I asked her.

A worried look spread across her face. She must have thought she’d insulted me. I’m sure visions of irate parents storming her room flooded her mind. “I...I just meant that your speech was filled with familiar sayings,” she stammered.

“Huh?” was my highly intellectual reply.

“You used several clichés in your speech. Clichés—you know, over-used expressions. That’s why I called you Charlie Cliché. No offense intended.”

A beat 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 the kids in the room remained in their catatonic states. The wheels in my head were turning like mad. Finally I spoke.

“I love that name!”

“Huh?” was Mrs. Roach’s highly intellectual reply.

“Charlie Cliché,” I said. “It’s awesome! In fact, it’s going to be my new name!”

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

“Charlie!” I corrected.

She shook her head slightly and stared at me again, apparently trying to decide whether or not I was serious. At last she said, “You may sit down now, Charlie.” And she 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.”

So that’s how I got my name. But despite my early proclivity for using clichés, I’ve learned plenty of good words and creative ways of using them. In fact, I have become a master storyteller. Let me explain.

Most of you probably fall into the fortunate category of those who spend their entire lives in one or two school systems. You’ve probably always gone to school with the same kids and have comfortable, reliable friends.

I, on the other hand, change schools several times a year. I don’t have permanent friends. So I learned early in life that I had to find some gimmick to fit in, some way to establish myself quickly in a new school environment. Even as early as the third grade, I watched the other new kids at school to see how they presented themselves.

The most obvious are the tough kids—the ones who make it their task to find the meanest, baddest kid in the school and challenge that kid to a duel of fists. The outcome of the fight is usually irrelevant. The new kid might get his brains beaten out,

but it doesn't matter; the challenge alone does the job. The new kid always emerges with a loyal following—a place in the system. I also discovered early that the “tough guy” approach isn't for me. I have no desire to beat someone up, much less to get beaten up.

Another method of establishing a place in the school pecking order is to take an offensive stance, like the tough kids, but without the physical fighting. These are the razor-tongued kids—the kids who can slice a person to shreds with nothing more than words and an attitude. These kids meet the world head-on with a snarl. The words they use need not be intelligent; a simple “Oh yeah?” or “You got a problem?” with the appropriate glare are usually enough to send a peer or even a school official into mute retreat.

I considered this approach for a while (I'm quick-witted enough to be able to do well at it) but decided against it. These students generally do establish a place for themselves, but at what cost! After they prove themselves, nobody messes with them, but nobody really likes them, either. The place these nasty actors find for themselves is a lonely one, populated only by the other nasties.

Withdrawing is a classic defensive method that transients use to avoid trouble in a new school. That's generally safe, but it's just as lonely as being razor-tongued. It's not that the withdrawn kids are shy; it's that they've learned to hide. They figure out how to become invisible. I could never be successful at hiding like that, though. I like to talk too much.

Some new students adopt a more socially constructive approach to finding their place in a new environment. There are three types of these approaches, which are designed to appeal to other students rather than to repel them. The first type is the kids who attack their new school with friendliness. They greet

everyone with an almost-aggressive “Hi!” and a huge smile, and they’re constantly (nauseatingly) sunny and upbeat. Sometimes this works, sometimes not. It all seems to depend on the atmosphere of the school toward the arrival of new students and on the commitment of the new student to wear the friendly mask indiscriminately.

The second of these approaches is to take on the role of the class clown. This, too, however, takes commitment. To fit into this role, the student has to be willing to play the comedian every second. But this student also must be willing to face the possible resentment of the reigning class clown, and those people can make for some tough adversaries. And of course, the new student 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 more constructive approach for fitting in at a new school is the toughest one: trying to impress the students and teachers by exhibiting a high level of intelligence. This seldom works because, even though the teachers usually love it, any student who’s no longer in elementary school usually hates it. The new student often ends up turning everybody off by being a know-it-all or a teacher’s pet, which just makes that student look arrogant and everyone else look bad. If you’re young enough, you can get away with this method, but if you need more than two hands to count your age with, it’s best to leave this approach alone.

I tried all three of these tactics, but none of them worked for me. So in the end, I realized that I had to develop my own method

of fitting in. And I did find one that works. I exhumed an old art form and perfected it. I became a storyteller.

I've lived in so many places and have met so many people that I've had the privilege of witnessing more in my young life than many people have by the time they're twice my age. I think it helps that I'm a good observer of human nature. Plus, I must spin a yarn pretty darn well because at the last dozen or so schools I've attended, I've been able to fit in quickly.

Usually within the first day of my arrival at a new school, I find an opportunity to tweak the interest of several students by planting seeds of curiosity for one of the several stories I've found popular. Often it starts at lunch or in gym class, where a small audience is already assembled. It generally begins when I'm asked a question about where I moved from, and I'm able to reference some funny or exciting anecdote. I never tell the whole story at once; I just give tantalizing tidbits until word gets around and I have a large group of students hungry for more of the story.

One of my favorite stories is the one I tell in this book. You can decide for yourself if I'm a good storyteller, although if you've read this far, I'd say you probably agree with me. But trust me: what you're about to read is one of my favorites for a reason. You'll see.

CHAPTER 1

My First Day with Gilbert

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 didn't have to find a gimmick to fit in; he could just be himself. The only trouble was that his "self" was not overly endearing to the rest of the students.

He was the quintessential nerd—so over the top that he seemed almost a caricature of the very idea of a nerd. His pants were either too short or too long. He often wore dress shirts and bow ties. He wore brown wing-tip dress shoes, and his face was always decorated with a pair of black, horn-rimmed glasses with a paperclip replacing a lost screw on one earpiece and a length of masking tape holding the glasses together at the nosepiece.

Gilbert spoke in a high-pitched, nasal voice. There was simply no way to enjoy hearing that voice, even if Gilbert was trying to tell you that you just won the lottery. He was truly an odd character—and of course, he made a beeline for me as soon as I set foot on the school grounds.

I've found that the first students whom transients attract at a new school are the misfits, as if those students are hoping they might finally find someone to relate to.

I had just entered the building on my first morning at Cottage Grove High School when I heard a voice that sounded

like someone talking right after sucking in a lungful of helium. “You’re new here, huh?”

I turned and saw behind me what looked like someone in costume. I seriously thought that no one would dress that way on purpose unless it was a joke. But none of the other students in the hallway were paying any attention to the strange figure talking to me, and I quickly realized that his outfit was indeed no joke.

“Uh, yeah,” I said, regaining my composure. “This is my first day.”

“Well, welcome,” Gilbert squeaked. “I’m Gilbert. I’ll show you around.”

Now, 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 whichever act they’re going to put on for the rest of the students, whether “tough guy” or “razor tongue” or “aggressive greeter” or whatever else. 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.

So Gilbert gave me a tour of the school. By the time he had helped me find my locker and locate all of my classrooms and the cafeteria, I had learned the basic outline of his life. 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 Cottage Grove and had lived there all his life but had no friends. The only kids he’d ever formed any ties with were those he’d met at science clubs and competitions, and he rarely saw them.

The thing I liked right away about Gilbert was that he was a realist. He lived under no delusions. He knew that he was

considered an oddball at his school, but it didn't seem to bother him too much, except that he said he sometimes felt lonely.

A warning bell rang, and I had to get to my homeroom—a different one from Gilbert's. Before we parted, Gilbert invited me to eat lunch with him, and I accepted. We had compared schedules and discovered 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 High was the first day of the second semester, and the school was just coming off a break, so everyone was busy figuring out their new schedules and catching up on the latest 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, tray in hand, but he was focused on what he wanted for lunch, so he didn't notice me when I got in the line a few kids behind him.

As I waited in the line, I could overhear 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 them. I realized at once that they were making fun of Gilbert.

“Nice clothes, Gil,” chided 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 personal shopper,” added the other boy, another young Adonis. “I need something to go with all my bow ties so I don't have to keep dressing like this.” He plucked at the trendy shirt he was wearing.

The girl chimed in next. “Gilbert, if I bring you my broken glasses, can you fix them to be just like yours?” She smiled proudly as the boys howled.

The girl was stereotypically beautiful. She had long, silky, straight black hair and dark, radiant eyes. She was slim and sexy. Heck, they were all slim and sexy. Why did they think they had to run down Gilbert? They were already cool; they didn’t need to show how much better they were than kids who weren’t. I didn’t get it.

Gilbert went on about his business and paid no more attention to the students behind him 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 went to Gilbert’s table. His face broke into a smile as I approached.

“Charles, please sit down!” he called out. 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, and it amused me. Of course, “Charlie” isn’t my real name, so it’s certainly not short for “Charles.” So as I sat down, I explained to him the origin of the name “Charlie.”

Gilbert listened attentively. When I was finished, he asked, “So, Charles, how’s your first day at our fair school?”

All I could do was laugh.

As we ate lunch, I learned more about Gilbert. It seemed that he perfectly fit the pattern of a stereotypical nerd: he got straight A's, he was terrible at all physical activity, and his social life was nearly nonexistent. His passion was science. He spent all of his free time reading about and experimenting with science. His idea of the perfect vacation was to go to a science camp or conference. 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 would soon find out, however, that there were plenty of things about Gilbert that did not fit the mold of a nerd, and some of them were things I really liked. His most obvious endearing quality, of course, was his childlike friendliness. But he also had a fabulous sense of humor, which he demonstrated repeatedly on that first day.

As we ate, Gilbert candidly explained his academic success to me, and it seemed clear that he was sailing through all of his classes. So I said, "Gilbert, I've been to many schools, and almost all of them offer bright students a chance to skip grades, or at least to advance to higher-level or accelerated classes. Doesn't Cottage Grove offer rapid advancement?"

"Oh, yes," Gilbert nodded. "I've had several opportunities to skip grades."

"Then why haven't you taken them?" I asked, puzzled.

Gilbert stopped eating and spoke in his most serious squeak. "I guess it was because my folks were worried that my being moved up a grade might stunt my social development. They were afraid I might not fit in with the rest of the kids."

I stared at Gilbert's face, incredulous. But then I saw the twinkle in his eyes, magnified by his thick glasses, and a grin began to spread across his face.

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

Now, in all my travels, I thought I'd seen and heard just about everything, but nothing had prepared me for Gilbert's laugh. His face contorted like he was in extreme pain, and his eyes immediately started watering. His small, tight mouth cracked open, and the sound that emitted from it was like the barking of a hyena recorded and played back at high speed.

Gilbert's laugh hit the cafeteria like an air-raid siren with a cracked speaker, and the moment it did, all other noises ceased. Every conversation, every gossip session, every dialogue, every soliloquy in the whole room immediately screeched to a halt, and all ears instinctively began trying to identify the alien sound.

For whatever reason, the heavy silence that closed in around Gilbert and me just made us laugh harder. In fact, the more people whose attention focused on us as they 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 facial muscles hurt, and my sides were beginning to ache.

And Gilbert? It was incredible! His unearthly chirping was interrupted every few minutes by a huge, even higher-pitched gasping sound. And his face was so contorted that it looked like a rubber mask that had been left on a hot radiator.

Finally the shock started wearing off on the gawking crowd, and one, then another started snickering. Soon kids began laughing, then howling, and just when I thought I was laughing as hard as was humanly possible, the rising roar sent me into near terminal mirth.

By that point, the assembled mass of students and teachers sounded like the canned laughter of a TV sitcom. It was enough to send the principal of the school tearing into the cafeteria to investigate, but no one could stop laughing to explain what was happening. All anyone could do was point in Gilbert's direction. The principal followed the pointing fingers to our table. He stood glaring at us for a few seconds, and then a reluctant smile spread across his face, followed by a chuckle and then a hardy laugh. Soon he was guffawing out of control like the rest of us. It was mass hysteria.

Suddenly Gilbert jumped up and started running, holding his crotch. "I'm going to pee my pants," he gasped as he hurried away. I fell right out of my chair.

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Gilbert and I were called into the principal's office that afternoon. We were not punished. The principal, Mr. Kerns, just wanted to give us a "talking to." He told Gilbert that he was disappointed in him for creating such a disturbance. He told me that, because I was a new student, he had no knowledge of my behavior yet but that he was going to "keep an eye on me." Gilbert and I nodded dutifully and obediently.



Now, before I go any further, I need to make something clear: my school experience at Cottage Grove High was atypical. I seldom got into trouble at my other schools; I just didn't like the hassle. Also, by the end of the first day, I'd usually started to work on my gimmick by capturing the interest of several students with an exciting, funny, or otherwise enjoyable anecdote, thereby securing my niche at the new school. But when I was at Cottage Grove, I never even started to work on my gimmick, and I never found a niche. After I got to know the place, I never wanted to. The only student I shared my stories with was Gilbert.

And that brings me to a most unusual feature of my experience at Cottage Grove: my attitude. I just didn't care. It's hard not to care what other people think of you in high school, but that first day with Gilbert changed something in me.

Another reason for my cavalier attitude was the fact that, when I entered Cottage Grove High, I knew exactly how long I would be attending the school: one semester. Usually, when my dad got transferred to a new place, he was assigned for an indefinite length of time. Sometimes we stayed for a few months, once in a while a whole year or more. But when we moved to Cottage Grove, the Army told Dad up front that he would be there for five months. So I wasn't exactly worried about fitting in at an environment that I knew would be so temporary.

The most unique thing about my stay at Cottage Grove, however, was that I found a best friend. Transients seldom develop close friendships. For a start, it takes time to develop that kind of friendship, but also, transients tend to be cautious concerning

close friends. After having to leave too many playmates and soul mates behind—usually never to see them again—most transients are reluctant to search out a good friend. It's too hard to say goodbye to someone you've grown close to. Sure, there are lots of ways to connect, but face it: when you're young, you don't usually keep up those connections very well. It's just better in the long run to keep everything casual and light.

But by the end of that first day at Cottage Grove High, I knew that Gilbert, the strangest little nerdy-looking guy I'd probably ever met, was something special.