

Charlie Cliché's Oft-Told Tales · Book Three

THE MYSTERIOUS MR. MORGAN

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

Look, Ma, I'm a Quarterback!

My junior year of high school began as the rarest of school years for me. I was actually going to start the year without being a total stranger to everyone.

Dad had received his new assignment the first week in June, but the Pentagon gave him some time off before he had to start. Everyone deserves a vacation, after all. 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 house and stay put for a while.

We moved into the Denver area on the 10th of June. We'd found a little house to rent close to the high school that I would be attending. I spent the first couple of days helping to unpack and set up the house, but on the third day after our arrival, I went for a hike to explore the neighborhood. I walked by a small city park beside the high school and saw a bunch of guys playing sandlot football. So I sat on a concrete bench and watched for a while.

There were about a dozen guys of various sizes and athletic abilities playing. Two of them 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. They

called him by a variety of nicknames: “Gorilla,” “Kong,” “Ape Man,” etc. The other obvious athlete was the only Black guy in the game. He was a tall, slender 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 “Tony” and “Tone.”

The guys were playing that strange and universal brand of sandlot touch football in which 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?” he yelled. “You suck! You couldn’t hit the ground with a bowling ball.”

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

“I guess that’s why I play wide receiver on the high school team,” Tony replied in a relaxed voice. “Why don’t *you* play quarterback, Mr. Self-Appointed Coach?”

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

Sid smiled wryly and answered, “I’m no quarterback. You all know that. But I make a mean trumpet player—which reminds me: I gotta go for a music lesson.”

“Ah, come on, Sid. That’ll make the sides uneven,” Tone pleaded.

Sid just shrugged his shoulders and started walking away. He was headed in my direction, and he stopped and pointed right at me. “Why don’t you ask this guy?” he shouted over his shoulder at the other boys.

The players on the field all looked expectantly at me.

“Hey, Mr. Spectator, come here!” Kong yelled with authority.

I got up off the bench and walked obediently onto the field toward the group. I tried to keep my pace steady and casual so I wouldn’t look like I was intimidated by the big, no-neck guy and his friends—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’ve played this game on three continents and several islands with other military brats.” But instead I just cleared my nervous throat and said, “Yeah.”

Tone trotted over, smiling. “Well, you’re quarterback,” he said in a friendly voice, and he gave me a quick pat on the shoulder before he jogged into position.

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 around and see where my teammates were. As soon as I returned to my position behind the center, Kong hiked me the ball, and everybody started scattering.

The one guy who stayed back to guard me was a short, skinny guy who was fast as lightning. I’d seen him run earlier and knew that I didn’t have much time before he’d tag me for a sack. I scanned the action downfield 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.

But 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 was aiming to get the ball in front of him and let him run to it.

It was a perfect throw, if I do say so myself. 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 trotted over and slapped me on the back.

Tone came up to me, all out of breath. “Nice toss,” he panted.

Kong came over, too. He had on his face what was about the closest thing to a smile that I'd ever see on him. "Well, at least you don't suck," he said.

I smiled back.

I don't think I'll ever forget that afternoon. For whatever reason, I was in the zone. I threw about thirty passes and completed at least twenty-five of them. I was having a blast, but I was also glad to be able to make a good first impression!

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 had I come from? What grade I was going to be in? They were friendly and interested, and I answered their questions and asked a few of my own. At last I got up to head for home.

"Will you be back to play again tomorrow?" I asked.

"Nah," Tone answered. "At least, not most of us. Our vacation is just about over. High school football practice starts tomorrow." There were groans all around.

I was surprised at that reaction; they all seemed to love playing so much. But I didn't ask. I just thanked them for inviting me to play and started walking away when suddenly Kong, who was still sitting on the ground, grabbed my ankle with one of his huge hands.

"I can't allow you to leave just yet," he said. "We may have a proposition for you." He let go of my ankle and stood up. "Accompany us to the local refreshment establishment, and we'll discuss matters over some soft drinks—our treat, of course." Then 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 the burger joint.”

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 sophisticated, genteel speech to rough street talk 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's not one of Coach Schwaben's henchmen. Whatdaya say?”

I was stunned. I opened my mouth to reply, but no words came out.

Tone, sitting across the table from me, started laughing. He looked from me to Kong and rolled his eyes. “Take it easy, Kong. Give the poor guy a chance to order his drink first!”

I smiled gratefully.

Tone began introducing the guys sitting at the table. Our group was so large that we had to use two tables. At the one where I was seated were Tone, whose full name was Anthony Wise; Kong, who was really Carl Stringer; Potts, the quick little guy who had defended me during the game and whose 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'd like to play but couldn't stand the coach. The guys at the

other table were listening to everything but didn't take part much in the conversation.

When I introduced myself as Charlie Cliché, Tone replied, "Cliché? What, is that French or something?"

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

"Gracious," remarked Kong. "I can certainly see why one would want to alter a moniker like that."

All of the guys, including me, started laughing.

When the laughter died down, Tone looked at me and asked, "Well, Charlie, what do you think of Kong's proposal? Any chance you might want to play on the high school football team?"

"I'd love to," I said, "but I've never played on a school team before. My family moves around a lot, and I'm usually not around long enough. But this time, I'm pretty sure we'll be in Denver at least through football season. What I'm not sure about is if I could make the team."

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