The Inspiring, Untold Story of the Making of a Holiday Classic

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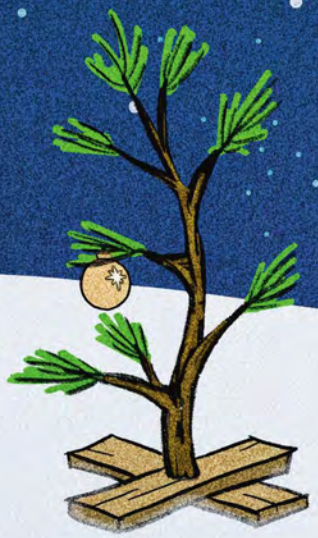
Charlie Brown's Christmas Miracle



Michael Keane

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Charlie Brown's Christmas Miracle

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And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of
the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."
And the angel departed from her.
—Luke 1:38

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McCann-Erickson

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PREFACE

PREDAWN
TAL AFAR, IRAQ
DECEMBER 2003

Sir, the colonel needs to see you outside." I immediately bolt upright on my cot. From a deep, blackout sleep from exhaustion a moment ago, I'm now fully awake, my mind sharp and racing with worry. The soldier retreats back into the hallway. In the darkness it would be impossible to search his face for any hint of what's happening. But something must be wrong. I don't need to dress, since I sleep fully clothed, with my boots on, so in a moment I'm on my feet.

I scan the hallway left and right, looking for our translator, but he's not here. An Iraqi who apparently spoke little to no English had somehow become our interpreter. Soldiers, who have a wicked gift for nicknames, came to call him Mr. No Problem, because, as we approached any tense situation, he would guide us with the only two phrases in English that he seemed to know: *Problem* and *No problem*. After an initial period of exasperation, we quickly discovered that in a war zone the man's limited vocabulary provided a Zen-like clarity into almost any situation. (Years later I would find myself nostalgic for his succinct guidance when, for example, I was trying to discern the nuance in a text received after an argument,

or wondering about the significance of a missed call from a doctor's office after an examination, or when walking down an unfamiliar street at night past impenetrable faces. *Problem* or *No Problem*?)

I follow my messenger outside into the starless night, moving carefully in the inky blackness. For days everything in the sky has been obscured by a cataract of dust, reducing even the sun to an obscure orb, like the pupil of a milky eye. I see the colonel who is standing stiffly in the dark, not far from the complex of buildings housing our brigade. When he sees me there is no greeting, his face emotionless, his hands thrust in his pockets. I halt, waiting for him to break the silence with some news, but there is nothing but awkwardness. He then nods to someone whose presence I hadn't even noticed. My memory of what happens next is oddly both vivid and blurry, like the afterimage following the stun of a flash-bang grenade.

Memories in a war zone are a pastiche of wide-ranging styles and impressions. (*Pastiche* being a word that would have subjected me to endless ribbing if I had ever used it on a patrol. *What? Pasta-teesh? Is that an Italian dish?*) It's a cliché that war is a mash-up of comedic and tragic, sometimes both in the same day, or even the same moment. My own memories are a Bohemian Rhapsody of recollections: a photorealistic mental snapshot of two grieving lieutenants whose beloved sergeant had been gunned down by the enemy; the profane grumbling and annoyed looks of soldiers subsisting for a third day on only cereal with strawberry milk because a promised supply truck had still not appeared; the feeling of isolation from soldiers avoiding standing next to me on a patrol, and the sergeant explaining sheepishly, *Because, well, you look like somebody important* (I wasn't important, but I was older, and, as the soldiers understood, the distinction could be lost through the telescopic sight of a sniper rifle); the pained face of our chaplain delivering a halting benediction before a patrol, overcome with emotion, before stepping back

and waving us off with the stern admonition "Just be careful!"; the dull eyes and impassive face of an Iraqi man slowly edging toward me outside our base, throwing open his garment to reveal a mortar shell, and how my heart stopped before I realized that, instead of detonating it, he was surrendering it to me; the warmth in my lap from a steaming hot meal of turkey and mashed potatoes wrapped in tinfoil and delivered on New Year's Eve; our convoy sneaking out of our outpost at night through an adjacent cemetery to avoid the gunfire we would typically receive when we exited from the front gate (and the irony of my terror being greater in the graveyard of tilted tombstones eerily illuminated by moonlight than in the encounter with the enemy).

The colonel nods, and there is a second's pause before the darkness is shattered by a brilliant white floodlight. I follow his eyes, and I see the dramatic focal point of his attention—it's a surreal scene of a majestic evergreen tree, fifteen feet in height, surrounded by a semicircle of soldiers. The tree's rich green color defies adjectives and is further accentuated by the monochromatic setting of endless mud and dirt and paper-bag-brown buildings. A perfectly formed triangle of branches and pine needles, the tree is unadorned with any decorations. Even the most dazzling ornament would have seemed a vulgar affront to the evergreen's dignified and imposing beauty.

The colonel allows me a moment to drink in the scene before he speaks. "Merry Christmas." Until that moment, I had not realized that it was Christmas Day. After a few seconds of stunned silence, I am forced to ask the obvious question. *A tree? In the middle of the desert? How?* The colonel's mischievous eyes pair with a lopsided grin. He nods to my right. "He got it. In Syria." I look over my shoulder, and a disheveled uniform steps forward. A beaming Mr. No Problem. "Christmas tree. No problem." Suddenly I'm overwhelmed with a powerful feeling of déjà vu. And in a flashback it comes to me.

A scene that was imprinted on my memory so many Christmases ago. The singular tree. Encircled by smiling faces in the dark. I blink away tears. But the emotion is too powerful. I close my eyes, and I'm magically transported away. Away from the war. Away from fear. And away from the sorrow that had brought me here.

In my mind I see a small boy desperately fiddling with a tuning knob to horizontally stabilize the flickering images of a tiny black-and-white television perched precariously on a chair. He's anxious because it's only minutes before the broadcast begins, and he doesn't want to miss a second. He can't miss a moment. It's only thirty precious minutes, and then it's over. Until the next year. He struggles to properly position the rabbit-ear antenna, a task made more difficult because one of the ears is broken and a coat hanger has been appropriated to improve the reception. Finally everything is adjusted, if not perfectly, as best it can be. So the boy sits on the floor, his eyes inches away from the screen. He watches the final minutes of the news broadcast and is awed by the televised images of American soldiers fighting in the jungle, in a distant war that he struggles to understand. He sits impatiently through commercials. And then it begins with the strains of a melancholic melody and images of skating cartoon characters, tracing loops and circles on a frozen pond.

I close my eyes. And I'm home. We're all home.

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When I returned from Iraq, I wanted to write a story that would honor the sacrifices made by the US military members and their families who were separated at Christmastime. After a subsequent posting to Afghanistan, I recalled in my own childhood I had been thrilled by the tracking of Santa Claus on Christmas Eve by the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD).

Building on that military tradition, which dates to 1955, I crafted a story that revolved around Santa Claus being lost in a blizzard while being tracked by NORAD. A military team eventually rescues Santa, but so much time has elapsed by the time he and his team of reindeer are discovered that Santa is unable to deliver all his toys to the world's children before they awaken on Christmas Day. (Spoiler alert: the Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force, and Coast Guard all work together to use their planes, tanks, trucks, submarines, and ships to help deliver Santa's presents on time and save the day!)

In truth I had written the story for the eyes of only one reader, my young niece, Katie, whose two parents were both officers in the military, one of whom was deployed overseas at the time. I wrote the story on Christmas Day and emailed it to her parents. Later that day, when I received a call and heard peals of laughter, it was the best Christmas present an uncle could receive. Emboldened by the positive review from my diminutive critic, I sent the story to a publisher shortly thereafter. I was shocked when, just days later, the president of the publishing house called me saying they loved it and wanted to publish it. (Note to prospective authors: this never happens!) The book was published as *The Night Santa Got Lost: How NORAD Saved Christmas*, and received glowing reviews from readers, military mom blogs, and the *School Library Journal*.

Many of the book's fans told me that they felt the story had a cinematic feel. Noted illustrator Michael Garland had done a phenomenal job with the story's artwork, and the story itself (which in the micro-pitch lingo of Hollywood can be summarized as "Santa with jets!") has a certain *Top Gun* type of flair to it. Fueled by that encouragement, I set out to produce an animated adaptation of the book. That process immersed me in the fascinating world of animation, including script writing, storyboarding, computer animation, casting voice talent, and recording a musical soundtrack. I had

become familiar with the process of filmmaking while serving as an executive with Digital Domain, a leading Hollywood digital movie studio, which was founded by famed director James Cameron and notables Scott Ross and Stan Winston. Like any other endeavor, however, there is no substitute for rolling up your sleeves and diving into your own project.

As part of the research for my own production, I began to look more closely at other animated Christmas specials, including *Mr. Magoo's Christmas Carol*, *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, *Frosty the Snowman*, and, of course, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. Perhaps because it had been my favorite as a child, I focused on the story of the making of the *Peanuts* special. I was enthralled by the against-all-odds challenges that the program faced with only a six-month production schedule. I learned that Schulz was a combat veteran of World War II, which gave me a newfound appreciation for the cartoonist's annual shout-out to famed Army cartoonist Bill Mauldin in the *Peanuts* comic strip, as well as for Snoopy's aerial engagements with the Red Baron and his adventures behind enemy lines. (In addition to Schulz, all the other principals behind the creation of the special were veterans of the US military, including Lee Mendelson, Bill Melendez, and Vince Guaraldi.)

I thought the story of the making of the special would be an interesting book, providing more context for the millions of fans of the Charlie Brown Christmas special as well as fans of the *Peanuts* comic strip. I felt that my own work producing an animated short film as well as my personal wartime experience could bring an understanding of Charles Schulz's frame of mind in 1965 as he worked on the special. As with any artistic creation, I quickly concluded that the story was impossible to understand without telling the personal stories of those involved in its creation. How can one understand *The Starry Night* without peering through a window into

the mind (and soul) of Vincent Van Gogh? No piece of art can truly be understood without studying its creator.

As I dug into the story I discovered conflicting accounts, sometimes given by the same person. Two meetings would be conflated into one meeting. Dates would be moved around. Sometimes writers would confuse the names Melendez and Mendelson. Much of my work was untangling these balls of yarn. Unraveling the mysteries behind many questions surrounding the production from decades ago became a detective story. There would be crushing moments, like discovering that the folder labeled "Charlie Brown special" in the extensive Coca-Cola archives was maddeningly empty, its contents perhaps misplaced, or more likely pilfered. There would be other eureka moments, when I would discover an important missing piece of the special's puzzle and be filled with elation.

I quickly discovered that there were equally important stories of other key characters who played significant roles in the special's greenlighting and broadcast. And as I pulled back the lens to examine these players and the powerful institutions they worked for—CBS, Coca-Cola, *Time* magazine, and McCann-Erickson—I came across a bigger story: America in 1965.

In that critical hinge year of history, the nation was at a crossroads, just healing from the shock of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy but about to lurch into a tragic war in Vietnam. At the same time Americans were wrestling with excising the ugly scar of segregation. The very soundtrack of the country was changing with the British Invasion. Television (now broadcast in color) was transforming how Americans consumed entertainment, but, in many ways, it was also transforming America as well.

So much of America today sadly resembles America then—racial unrest, cultural divisions, rumblings of war. But today, as it did then, one troubled, round-headed cartoon character's probing

question—*Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?*—strikes just as meaningful a chord with children and adults. That question would be poignantly answered by another small boy speaking with a lisp and clutching a blanket. His inspired response, concluding with "and on earth peace, good will toward men," remains as simple a remedy to what troubles us today as it did in 1965. And it is as timeless as it was on that first Christmas Day two thousand years ago.

Michael Keane
Malibu, California

Charlie Brown's Christmas Miracle

INTRODUCTION

Charles Schulz had a problem. Several, in fact.

The forty-two-year-old cartoonist had lost twenty pounds. He felt unwell. He was anxious, nervous, reluctant to even leave his home. But the physician who examined him in the summer of 1965 found nothing medically wrong with him. Schulz knew he was under stress. He had been suffering from general anxiety disorder for years. Televised images of the escalating Vietnam conflict that were now being broadcast into American living rooms may have triggered PTSD in the World War II combat veteran. The cartoonist also now had the additional stress of a televised Christmas special he was racing to produce. However, when his doctor delicately suggested Schulz see a psychiatrist to treat his anxiety, Schulz demurred.

The creator of the *Peanuts* comics, the most popular comic strip in the country, believed that his worries were the wellspring of his creativity, and he was terrified that if he were ever cured of his disorder he would be stripped of the muse that fueled his imagination. He needed all the creativity he could harness for the new project he was working on—a television Christmas special—his most ambitious (and risky) effort since he launched the *Peanuts* comic strip in 1950. But Schulz wasn't just trying to bring Charlie Brown, Linus, Lucy, and their friends to a new audience in a new medium. He wanted to

carry a message he felt was desperately needed in a country on the edge. It was a message of faith that sprang from the gratitude the Army veteran felt toward God every single day for having spared his life amid the horrors of war.

When the production neared completion, Schulz's two partners confronted him (not for the first time) regarding a lingering issue that concerned both of them: the inclusion of a lengthy recitation from Scripture in the program by blanket-clutching Linus, the most thoughtful and mature of all the *Peanuts* characters. Schulz had selected a reading from the book of Luke, chapter 2, verses 8–14, which begins, *And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.*

Mendelson and Melendez argued that the scene might offend both secular audiences, who could see the content as "preachy," as well as devout Christian viewers, who might view recitation of Bible passages by a cartoon character as sacrilegious. Inserting a not-so-subtle religious message into an entertainment product had never been done before. Hanna-Barbera had never done it. It seemed impious that such divine words could come out of the mouths of the likes of Yogi Bear or the Jetsons. Warner Bros. wouldn't do it. It was unthinkable for the likes of Bugs Bunny or Daffy Duck. Neither, Melendez pointed out, would his former boss, the great Walt Disney, ever venture into religious content. It was a dangerous place to go, thought Melendez, who began questioning if he wanted to be involved in the production.

"This is an entertainment show," Mendelson objected. "I don't know if you can animate from the Bible."

Schulz patiently listened to his partners' objections, but the arguments his collaborators made about Disney and Warner Bros.

only seemed to strengthen his resolve. The cartoonist stood firm in wanting the show to communicate the true meaning of Christmas. "If we don't do it," he finally asked, "who will?"

Schulz knew that he was also taking a tremendous risk that if the show disappointed or offended audiences, it could have a crushing effect on how readers viewed the daily *Peanuts* strip, potentially leading to hundreds of newspapers canceling the cartoon. Putting aside what the characters were saying, particularly Linus's religious recitation of Scripture, it was notable that with the exception of a few seconds of some Ford commercials, most *Peanuts* fans had never before heard voices applied to the comic strip characters, other than what they had assigned Charlie Brown and his cartoon colleagues in their own heads. The inevitable mismatch between readers' preconceived notions of the look and sound of the characters and what they would soon witness in the TV special might be jarring. Schulz was gambling fifteen years of hard work in building the *Peanuts* franchise from a handful of newspapers in 1950 to millions of readers in almost a thousand newspapers.

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In early December, Lee Mendelson, the special's producer, flew to New York and screened *A Charlie Brown Christmas* for the CBS network's highest programming executives. The two CBS vice presidents were shocked by what they saw. Disappointed in the animation, dismayed by the jazz soundtrack, and nervous about the show's overt religiosity. Mendelson was bluntly told the network would never buy another program from him or Schulz again. Was it possible that the special might be yanked from its broadcast slot the following week? The network executives would bring the matter to the attention of the president of CBS himself.

Charlie Brown would need his own Christmas miracle.

THE MIRACLE

This book tells the inspiring, against-all-odds story of how *A Charlie Brown Christmas* overcame production difficulties, an incredibly tight six-month delivery schedule, and the skepticism of television network executives to become the most popular animated holiday special in history. The ultimately successful making of *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, as well as its enthusiastic embrace by audiences for more than fifty years, was the culmination of an improbable series of events, including:

- The persistence of an inexperienced producer whose previous works consisted of historical documentaries and whose most recent production had been a flop.
- The fortuitous firing of the powerful head of CBS Television.
- The appointment of the president of Coca-Cola to the board of directors of General Electric in 1964, the same year that company sponsored a televised holiday special named *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*.
- The selection of the *Peanuts* characters for the cover of an April 1965 issue of *Time* magazine.

- A young Mexican immigrant's chance meeting with the hiring manager at Walt Disney, which launched him on a career in animation.
- The radio broadcast of the song "Cast Your Fate to the Wind," which was heard by the Christmas special's producer as he drove across the Golden Gate Bridge while desperate to find a composer who could craft music to match the quirky *Peanuts* characters.
- The sympathetic collusion of an advertising executive who, fearing the production would be shut down, agreed to provide an upbeat assessment of a rough cut of the special to his colleagues in McCann-Erickson's New York office despite his own serious misgivings about its quality.
- The assignment of a Jewish TV critic at *Time* magazine to write the exclusive pre-broadcast review about the Charlie Brown special.
- Charles Schulz's quiet insistence that the *Peanuts* special answer the question pointedly posed by the program's protagonist, Charlie Brown: "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?"

As Lee Mendelson, the special's producer, told an interviewer years later, "I've never looked up the word in the dictionary, but yes, I believe in serendipity. I had it with *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, and it continued for forty more years. It's happened too often not to believe in it."

This is the story of Charlie Brown's Christmas miracle.

1965

To properly understand the making of *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, it is critically important to understand the cultural landscape of 1965, a hinge year between the optimism of the early 1960s and the seismic rumblings of an emerging counterculture.

The United States made a fateful decision to intervene in Vietnam, sending Marines to Da Nang and commencing Operation Rolling Thunder, the aerial bombardment of North Vietnam. On August 5 CBS News broadcast images of Marines burning huts of villagers with cigarette lighters, which shocked America. An infuriated President Lyndon Johnson would call CBS chief Frank Stanton and demand that the war reporter, Morley Safer, be fired. By the end of the year, the Pentagon was requesting four hundred thousand troops for the war while at the same time tens of thousands of antiwar protesters descended on Washington, DC.

The civil rights of Black Americans were a prominent issue. Congress passed the Voting Rights Act, and Martin Luther King Jr. led thousands of nonviolent protesters on a march in Selma, Alabama. Cassius Clay changed his name to Muhammad Ali and knocked out Sonny Liston in the first round of their rematch bout, and Malcolm X was gunned down in New York City.

At the movie theater audiences were enjoying comedies like *That Darn Cat!*, *The Great Race*, and *What's New Pussycat*, as well as the drama *Doctor Zhivago*. The biggest film of the year, however, was the musical *The Sound of Music*. Best-selling fiction books of the year included *Up the Down Staircase* by Bel Kaufman, *Herzog* by Saul Bellow, *Hotel* by Arthur Hailey, and *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* by John le Carré. Nonfiction bestsellers included *The Making of the President 1964* by Theodore White, *Is Paris Burning?* by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, *My Shadow Ran Fast* by Bill Sands, and *Kennedy* by Theodore Sorensen.

Leading shows on television included *Bonanza*, *The Lucy Show*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Bewitched*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, and *Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.*, as well as two new breakout programs, *Hogan's Heroes* and *Days of Our Lives*—programs many Americans enjoyed while eating frozen TV dinners from aluminum trays on top of tray tables. The color revolution was happening in television broadcasting as NBC announced that almost all of their prime-time programming would now be broadcast in color. Comedian Soupy Sales, who hosted a children's television program in New York City, jokingly encouraged his young viewers to send him money. He was suspended for two weeks.

Top 40 music hits included "Wooly Bully" by Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs, "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" by the Rolling Stones, and "Help Me, Rhonda" by the Beach Boys. The Grammy for Best New Artist was awarded to a British group called the Beatles, whose hits in 1965 included "Yesterday," "Ticket to Ride," and "Help!" The Fab Four launched their US tour on August 15 with a concert at Shea Stadium.

Rapid advancements were made in space exploration and technology. NASA launched an unmanned vehicle to the moon that transmitted live televised images. Another probe to Mars sent back

the first images of that planet. The world's first commercial satellite, Intelsat I, was also sent into space, while on Earth Sony introduced the first home video tape recorder. PDP-8, the world's first minicomputer with a 12-bit microprocessor, was brought to market by Digital Equipment Corporation.

Americans' eating habits changed with the introduction of SpaghettiOs, Apple Jacks, and Honeycomb—all first stocked on grocery store shelves in 1965, as were Bounty paper towels. McDonald's nationwide introduced a Filet-O-Fish sandwich and completed its initial public offering. The first Subway sandwich shop opened in August in Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The Los Angeles Dodgers defeated the Minnesota Twins in the World Series, despite losing the first two games. Sandy Koufax did not pitch in game 1 of the series because it fell on Yom Kippur, but he would pitch three of the seven games and win two by shutouts, earning the Series MVP title. The baseball season had been marred by an epic fight between the Dodgers and Giants, who were in a pennant race. When Giants pitcher Juan Marichal was at bat, he became furious when the Dodger catcher deliberately buzzed his head when throwing the ball back to the pitcher, and he took revenge by striking the catcher twice in the face with his baseball bat.

The first Super Bowl was still two years away. The AFL champions were the Buffalo Bills and the NFL champions were the Green Bay Packers (although the game shifted from December to January of the following year for the first time, making 1965 the only year without an NFL championship game). CBS broadcast the first color telecast of an NFL game, a Thanksgiving Day contest between the Detroit Lions and the Baltimore Colts.

And also in 1965, fifteen years after its launch in a handful of newspapers, the *Peanuts* cartoon strip was published in seven hundred newspapers in the US, reaching tens of millions of readers,

and its quirky characters were becoming firmly embedded in pop culture. Five of the *Peanuts* characters—Charlie Brown, Schroeder, Lucy, Linus, and Snoopy—would be featured on the April 9, 1965, cover of *Time* magazine. The sell line on the cover, "The World according to Peanuts," and its accompanying story would be seen by an advertising executive at McCann-Erickson, and it would set off a chain of events that would change television forever.