

The Radio

Based on true events.

Rural Minnesota, 1960s. The attic of a crowded house on the river, shared by the two eldest brothers of a family.

Characters:

John

Michael

Reporter/Mom (*pre-recorded*)

Scene One

[The stage is set as a room with two makeshift beds, a floor radio between the two. A tackle box and fishing pole sit at the end of one bed.]

JOHN enters. He is telling a story- a true story.]

[John] *to the audience.*

The year was once 1961, and Michael and I were teenagers, sleeping across from each other in the attic of our small crowded home on the river.

[Michael enters with a toolbox. He doesn't acknowledge John- he can't see him yet. Sitting beside the radio, he begins to work.]

[John]

We were the two eldest brothers- raised up in Minnesota and always off on our own adventures- but we would always find our way back to the same room every night.

[John enters the scene now. He moves to his bed, crawling under the covers. Michael looks up.]

[Michael]

Hey, hand me one of your hooks, will ya John?

[John turns over in his bed, pretending not to listen.]

Michael picks up one of his pliers and tosses it at John.]

[Michael]

John, would you give me those needle-nose pliers?

[John, completely unamused, slides them back across the floor.]

[Michael]

While you're at it, lend me a hook?

[John] *exasperated.*

If it'll get you to be quiet.

[John rolls out of bed and retrieves a hook from his bait box, and hands it to Michael. John starts to walk back.]

[Michael]

And while you're here, would-

[John]

Can we not do this again?

[Michael]

Do what?

[John]

This whole 'trying to get me to be your assistant,' thing. I'm not gonna help you with the radio, Michael.

[A beat.]

[Michael]

Alright.

[Another beat. Michael leans over conspiratorially]

[Michael]

I guess that means you don't want to know what's going to happen when I hook this up?

[John ignores him]

[Michael] *holding up a wire and antenna.*

Well, that's a shame. All I needed was one of your hooks to secure it to the tree outside, but if you're not interested...

[John] *suddenly intrigued.*

The tree?

[Michael]

You bet.

[They hold for a moment, but John gives in, curious.]

[John]

Fine- just this once.

[John retrieves a hook and hands it to Michael.]

[Michael]

Thanks.

[Michael immediately takes a couple of tools and moves off stage. While he's gone, John returns to address the audience, moving around the space as if it were an old photograph.]

[John]

This is the year Michael brought back the all-wave floor radio to the house. No one was certain where he found it, but the television was suddenly affordable- well, affordable to everyone but us- and these bulky old radios were being thrown out like loose change. We always assumed it came from the junkyard- he had a habit of finding stuff there to fix.

[Michael re-enters with the wire, connecting it to the back of the radio.]

[Michael]

Alright, let's see what this can do now.

[Michael makes a few more adjustments before starting to tune. At first, there is only static, but soon we can hear local news stations and radio shows.]

[John] *to Michael.*

Oh, big deal. We already knew this old thing could get the local waves, Michael. What's the tree gonna change?

[Without answering, Michael tunes more, and the radio begins to pick up something different- something in another language. The radio starts to play something from the United Kingdom.]

[Michael]

That's what the tree changes.

[John]

What is that?

[Michael] *proud.*

It's the news from across the Atlantic.

[John]

What? How?

[Michael begins to explain, but gets quieter as John turns back to the audience.]

[John]

You know, Michael refused to get above a C in school, but he could dismantle and rebuild an engine in an evening. Mom and him would fight about it all the time, always trying to get him to be a good student.

[He looks back at Michael, a memory.]

But he was a genius in a different way- a stubborn, reckless genius.

[Michael waves his hand in front of John's face, trying to get his attention]

[Michael]

John, where'd you go? Are you even listening to me?

[John] *back to Michael.*

Yeah, yeah. I am.

[Michael]

What did I just say then?

[John]

You, um...

[Michael]

Huh. Interesting.

[John]

You know I don't care about that crap anyway, can we just move on?

[Michael rolls his eyes but begins to twist the knobs on the radio. As it tunes, we can hear a series of different waves- music, news, radio plays- in different languages.]

[John], *amazed.*

Wow.

[Michael]

Can you imagine everything we can hear with this thing? I mean, stories across the whole world, right here in St. Cloud. Almost as if we were there.

[Michael changes the channel again, and John pulls himself from the scene again.]

[John]

I think about this day a lot, you know. Michael always felt so holed up here, but the radio opened up the whole world to him.

[Michael]

Wait! I just remembered- turn it to the local news.

[John], *back to Michael.*

What?? We could be listening to the news in Japan right now and you wanna listen to the local radio? You'r-

[Michael changes it, tuning it to hear the voice of a reporter for the local area]

[Reporter], *pre-recorded, with static.*

...claims a local mechanic sabotaged the engine of his car, causing it to catch fire seconds before the finish line. The driver has been charged with a misdemeanor for participating in a drag race,

but local law enforcement reminds motorists to be wary of the condition of their vehicle and to pull over if they feel something may be wrong...

[John turns down the volume.]

[John]

Oh, you didn't...

[Michael], *laughing*.

Sure did. The dude made me supe-up his car without pay, so I figured it was the least I could do.

[John]

I mean- how?

[Michael]

Well, when you know your way around an engine the way I do, it's not hard to know exactly where to drill a few holes that will keep him just a few feet away from the tape.

[John]

You'll be lucky if he doesn't come after you for that.

[Michael]

I'm not too worried. Besides, I won't be goin' out there for a bit. After graduation, I'm enlisting, you know.

[John]

What?

[Michael]

Yep, flyin' right out-

[John]

You're gonna graduate?

[Michael], *socking him in the arm.*

Oh, shut it.

[John], *chuckling.*

So you're really gonna enlist?

[Michael]

Yeah, I am. The airforce.

[John]

Does mom know?

[Michael]

Well, not yet. But I'll tell her soon.

[Mom], *pre-recorded.*

Boys, time for supper!

[John]

Speaking of...

[Michael], *standing.*

Aw man... Hey, do you think she would let me take one of her hair rollers? I think it'll help with the transmission.

[He exits the stage, but John stays, looking on. He holds like this for a moment before turning back to the audience.]

[John]

He loved the airforce more than anything, you know. He tested into a high-level mechanical program, even. It was probably the first test he ever passed. Michael couldn't come home much

after he enlisted, spending all his free time racing, but he would always write to mom. He wrote her maybe a hundred letters. She was so proud of him.

[He pauses, the next words hard to say.]

A couple of years into his enlistment, mom and dad got a phone call. It was a man saying Michael was in the hospital in critical condition. He was riding his motorcycle down a road in Florida, a truck pulled out on him and... well, you know him. Always going too fast.

They got the call one night, and the next morning he was gone.

I was 17 when that happened.

Everything in the months after is still a bit hazy, but I know mom wasn't the same. She never talked about him much, but those letters he wrote her? She kept every single one. Every single one until she passed only about a year ago now. I didn't even know she kept it all until we were cleaning out her room. Apparently, she had been reading and re-reading those letters in private for years, trying to hold onto anything she could of her first child. The one she was always at odds with.

She was a hundred and three when she died.

And I... well, after he was gone, I was the eldest, then. I stuck around in Minnesota, became a paramedic, got married, had kids, and got divorced. I helped mom move into the nursing home where I would visit her almost every day. I did all the things the oldest son should- the things I know Michael would have.

I wish I could say I've thought of him every day since he passed, but life gets in the way and it gets messy. It gets harder to keep a memory alive when you start to get too old to remember it. But I tried. When my son was born, I named him after Michael. At least, then, his name could live on, even after I die.

I tell my grandkids about the radio, too. How Michael brought it home, how he fixed it up, and how we could hear all the way to the other side of the world with it.

And I still have it. I keep that old radio in my living room, right next to a window. It turns on and all, but can't tune a channel to save its life. Maybe I should have let Michael teach me how to fix stuff the way he did. I guess, in most ways, I was as stubborn as him.

It's been a whole life lived since he died. Almost sixty years now.

But sometimes I miss being the little brother, the one who was always trying so hard to be different from him.

Sometimes, I wish I could just sit and listen to the radio with him again.

[Michael re-enters in a rush.]

[Michael]

Hey, are you coming? Mom's waiting.

[John is back to Michael- but he's older now, wiser.]

[John]

Yeah, I'm comin'.

[Michael]

Race you down there?

[John]

You know I'm not as fast as you.

[Michael], *teasing*.

I know.

[John looks back at the audience, knowing. But he smiles once more, taking off with his bother.]

END.