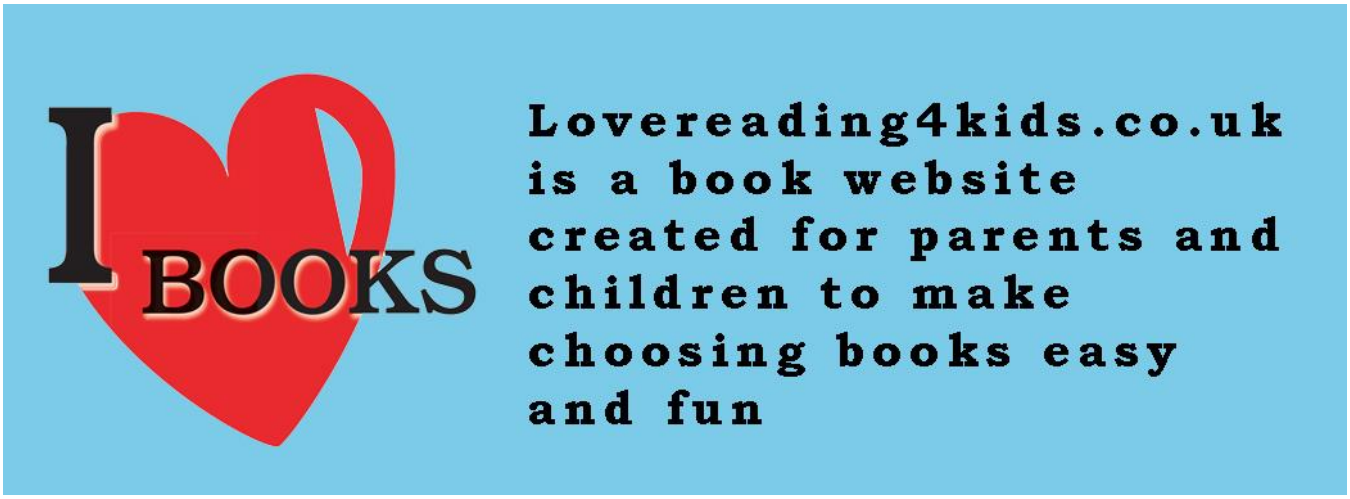


Opening extract from

Radio Boy (Radio Boy, Book 1)

Written by

Christian O'Connell

Published by

HarperCollins Children's Books an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

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To my mum and dad, Liam and Jenni. Thanks for always encouraging my dreams and never laughing at them, even when they included becoming:

- Boxing middleweight champion of the world
- World BMX champion
- A DJ

If your parents laugh at your dreams, sack them.



Chapter 1

FIRED

"You're fired."

I stared at the man sitting opposite me. The programme controller of St Kevin's hospital radio. Barry Dingle, or 'Bazza' as he insisted we call him. No one ever did.

"What?" I said. "But I haven't done anything wrong."

"I… I know that, Spike. But you can't work here any more. I'm sorry."





What kind of a man sacks an eleven-year-old boy from his dream job? A monster, that's who.

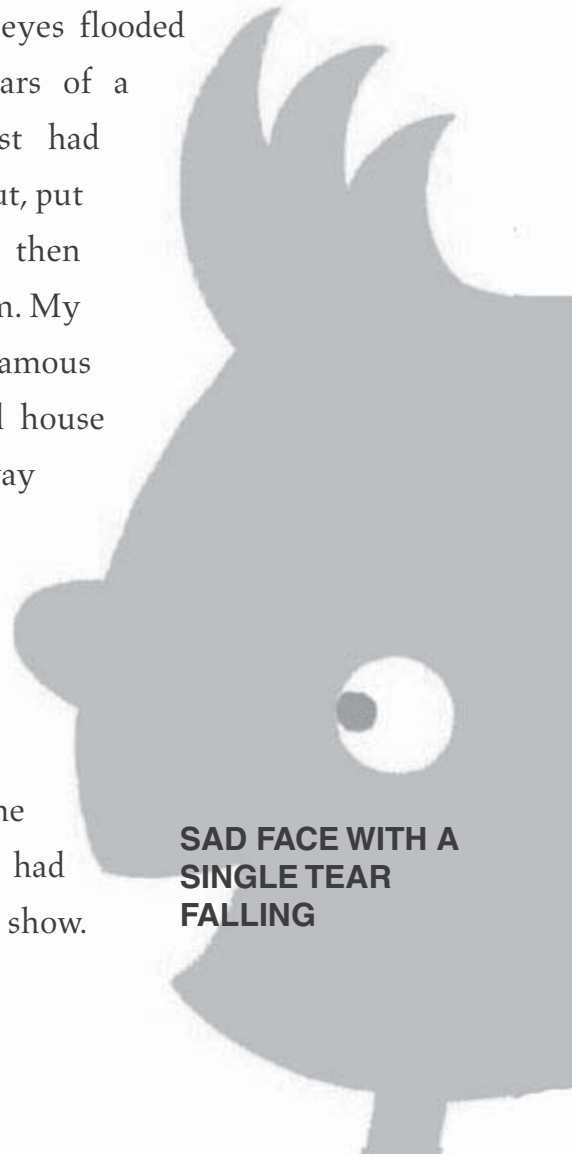
"*Why?*" I spluttered. Later, on the bus home, when I replayed this moment in my mind (as I will do for the rest of my life), there were many things I wished I'd said to the bald-headed man ruining my life. Such as:

1. You're a monster.
2. Technically, you can't actually fire me as I'm a volunteer.
3. My mum said you live in your mum's basement. Who's the bigger loser here?
4. Have you got any tissues as I think I'm going to cry?



But I didn't say any of those. Annoyingly, my face was letting me down. My bottom lip started to wobble and my eyes flooded with tears. The tears of a dreamer who'd just had his heart RIPPED out, put into a blender and then force-fed back to him. My fantasy of being a famous DJ with a detached house and gravel driveway (personalised gold-plated headphones) was no more.

Barry Dingle was firing me from the only hour of joy I had in my life, my radio show.



SAD FACE WITH A SINGLE TEAR FALLING



The *Wacky Kids' Wonder Hour*, Saturday mornings at 6am. Maybe the show name hadn't helped. For the record, it came from 'Bazza', not me. I loved doing that show. It was one hour a week when for once I felt I was funny and good at something. It was the highlight of my week.

Well, it had been.

Sure, it was only hospital radio and most people don't even know hospitals have their own radio stations. But they do: run, for the most part, by overly enthusiastic volunteers with bad breath and sandals. The thing was, I'd read in all the interviews with my favourite DJs that they'd started off in hospital radio. I collected these interviews in a special folder under my bed, safe from my sister's prying eyes. Codenamed 'My Favourite Stamps'. I'd learnt my lesson after she found a notebook I'd been practising my autograph in.

I thought I was following in these DJs' footsteps. Not any more. Me getting fired was also going to be bad news for the fellow members of our AV Club at school. The AV (Audio Visual) Club is an after-school club run by Mr Taggart. There are only three members: me and my best mates, Artie and Holly, and each week Mr Taggart does his best to school us in the magical worlds of broadcasting, video and print.

There had been a fourth member, Dave Simpson, but he quit for Jazz Club. We could hear them practising and I'm no expert, but it sounded like they were all playing from different pages in different books.

I like to think I'm held in some regard by Mr Taggart and the AV Club, as I was actually *doing*

radio. Spike Hughes – the country's youngest radio DJ.

Now I was the youngest *sacked* radio DJ. A scandal like this could ruin the AV Club. I just hoped we were strong enough to survive.

The bald-headed monster man started to speak again, his coffee-flavoured breath hitting me in the face. Ugh.

"It's awkward, Spike, and I feel dreadful having to do this face to face. I was going to tell your mum, but…"

He drifted off, a thousand-yard stare coming over his face. This was a look I'd seen a million times when people said the 'M' word.

Mum.

It was the look of fear and my mum was the source of this. A force to be reckoned with. Confident, protective – *very* protective – and always on the lookout for possible danger in everything around me and my sister. She's a ward manager at the hospital and that's how I got the show. My mum 'persuaded' Barry Dingle to give me my own hour on the radio. Her ability to get people to do what she wanted was, according to my dad, "nothing short of a superpower". Running a hospital ward is the ideal job for my mum. It puts her in charge, looking after people, and it provides her with an endless supply of grisly stories to justify her need to protect us from the modern world.

"See, just today we had a boy come in who got a skateboard for his birthday. Yes, it seemed like fun to him, Spike, for the two minutes before he fell off… Now he only has one eye, one leg and no arms. They have to pull him around everywhere on the skateboard."

No, Barry Dingle wouldn't have dared give my mum this news or she would have done something to him that would've made him a patient at St Kevin's. I'm not saying she would've

physically hurt him. No. She would've made him hurt *himself*, using her special powers.

'Bazza' started to clear his throat to bring his attention back to the job in hand: sacking me.

"You know I like you, Spike, and you're a talented kid; you're a bit odd but I don't mind that. It's just that we've got the results back from our yearly audience review. It tells me which shows are the most popular and which are… and that leads me to your show… I'll just come out and say it…"

"What?" I snapped, defensively.

"It has no listeners. Actually, that's not true – there was one."

"Well, that's good; you always said the key to radio is to imagine you're talking to just one person," I reasoned.

"Yes, but it turns out that one person was an elderly lady called Beryl who had sadly passed away and no one turned her radio off. Tragic really."

Oh.

"Look," Barry went on, "I can't justify your kids' show any more. The show after you, *Graham's Gardening Gang*, is our biggest by far so I'm extending his slot by an hour."

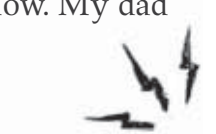
This was even worse news. The shame of it. Graham Bingham is a really patronising old man with a huge beard that has bits of food in it and on one occasion I think I saw a small mouse in there. Graham actually resembles a garden gnome. All that's missing is a red hat and a fishing rod.

I was being sacked and replaced by a show about allotments and hedges presented by a gnome.

"When's my last show?" I asked. Thinking at least I could have a big send-off.

"You've just done it."

And that's how my career in radio ended. The dream was over. Part of me wished it had never begun. How cruel to be given hope and then have it taken away. By a gardening show. My dad



always said supporting England at football was like this.

"It's the hope that kills you, son."

As I was packing away my headphones, I saw something in the bottom of my bag. A gift Artie got me from his recent holiday to France. Stink bombs. Banned from our school after some boys threw them into the staffroom. Poor Miss Mills fainted into the eager arms of the PE teacher, Mr Lewis. (Quick update on this: they've just returned from their honeymoon.)

No I couldn't, I thought.

Yes I could. I really could.

"Sorry, Bazza, I've left my keys in the studio. Can I just pop in and get them?" I asked, innocently.

"Yes of course, Spike. It's a tulip special this week. Graham's just setting up."

Indeed he was. Graham and his garden show, now extended by an hour. As I walked to the studio, past all the hospital supplies, Graham and his beard were in the studio, sorting through some tulip bulbs.

"Ah, Spike, so sorry to hear about your show. No hard feelings, lad. You're young, you'll be fine. Probably too young really to have a show, much to learn still. Hey, stick around and help out on my show if you like – see how it's done!"

With that, Graham let out a loud cackle and stroked his beard. As I said goodbye and walked past the flowerpots and compost he'd brought in, I placed not one, not two, but three stink bombs around the studio. One for each hour of his newly 'extended' show. My gift. The barely audible crunch they made as I left the studio, treading on them, will always be the greatest sound I'll ever hear. No, second. The best was a few minutes later when Graham's theme tune started playing. As he began discussing the merits of Dutch tulips, all that could be heard was the sound of a human

gnome coughing violently and swearing at the top of his booming voice as he threw up into his beard.

I later found out that as a result of some complaints (from my mum) about his language, they had to move Graham's show to the graveyard slot.

1– 4am.

A RADIO WAVE: I WILL CURVE ALL CHAPTER TEXT AROUND IT.

Chapter 2

GATEAUX CHATEAU

I sprinted up the steps out of the hospital basement, fleeing the scene of the dreadful crime. The crime of Barry Dingle killing my radio career. I walked past the dozing security guard. Quite why there was a security guard at the hospital always puzzled me. Was someone trying to steal the patients? What would they do with them? Sell them on eBay? I was about to hand in my security pass when I thought better of it.

