



# RADIO GIRL

Carol Brendler

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Summary: In 1938, fourteen-year-old Cece, an aspiring radio actress, encounters lies, secrets, and hoaxes both at home and in the studio where she is transcribing the script for Orson Welles's "War of the Worlds" broadcast.

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*For Sarah, Tim, Uma, and Leda,  
and in memory of Pop*



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# CHAPTER 1

"Criminy," I said, rushing across the parlor. "Why haven't you got the radio on? It's almost time." I glanced at the clock. It figured, the trolleys just *bad* to run slow, today of all days. I dropped my skates next to the Zenith console and clicked it on.

My aunt Nory sat on one of the mismatched davenports that cluttered the room, her feet tucked under her, reading a magazine. She looked up at me, then over at the radio. "Is it five-thirty already?"

"Will be, by the time this old thing warms up," I said. "I can't believe we almost missed the beginning."

Nory still had on her pink A&P supermarket smock with "Noreen" embroidered on the pocket. She smelled faintly of vanilla extract. "Where've you been all afternoon?" she asked.

"Sledding," I said, pointing to my roller-skate bag. "Where d'you think, Nor?"

I waited for the set to crackle to life. "A proper copper coffeepot," I recited, tapping out the rhythm on the radio. "A proper copper coffeepot, a proper copper coffeepot."

Nory groaned. "*Can it*, can't you?" she said. "I swear, you'll drive me crazy with those tongue twisters."

"I'm practicing."

My aunt Nory was only seventeen but she still made a hobby

out of bossing me around. She had been living with us for three years now, which added up to over one thousand days of me, Cecelia Maloney, having to share my room, my hair dryer, and my radio with my father's youngest sister. On most days this situation griped my soul. Today, though, nothing could spoil my mood.

I felt the top of the radio console to make sure it was warming up. "A proper copper—"

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!" Nory flung her magazine at me. "Enough already!"

I ducked. The magazine missed me by a mile.

Static came through the Zenith's speaker. I twisted the dial past lousy cowboy music on 860, past a boring news report on 810, and finally to 710, WOR and the Mutual Broadcasting System. Pop's station. That was the place to be Sundays at five-thirty. Especially *this* Sunday, the start of the 1938 radio season and all the new fall serials.

"A proper copper coffeepot," I said again. "A proper copper coffeepot." There wasn't a single mistake in my pronunciation. I was one slick number and I couldn't wait to show Pop. "Don't you get it, Nor? I have to practice. My very future depends on having Utterly Perfect Elocution."

"Elocution?" Nory wrinkled her nose. "Where do you come up with those big words, anyhow?"

"It's radio talk, is all," I said. "You wouldn't understand."

Aunt Nory didn't give a fig about the radio business. She wasn't the least bit interested in anything but church and working at the A&P. Truth was, only two people in the Maloney family knew anything about radio: Pop was one, seeing as how he was the best sound-effects man on the East Coast; and I was the other, because I was going to make a career out of radio acting myself. Pop had promised months ago to get me a weekend job at his radio station now that I was old enough—so long as he could convince Ma to let me. I had pleaded with her all summer for permission, but

she wouldn't budge. I guessed my Utterly Perfect Elocution didn't work on Ma, but surely Pop's boyish charm would.

Once I was "in" at the Mutual, it was only a matter of time before I landed a role on a program like *Hilltop House*, the-continuing-story-of-a-woman-who-must-choose-between-love-and-the-career-of-raising-other-women's-children, presented by Palmolive soap.

The radio announcer came on to remind us to buy Reinfeld's Frankfurters.

**So be sure to ask for Reinfeld's. They're a treat to eat!**

"All right, already! Enough about franks—get to Pop's program, bub!" I kicked aside the magazine Nory had thrown at me and flopped down on the rug, my head just inches from the Zenith. My ankles ached on account of roller-skating all afternoon at the Florham Park rink, but I barely noticed. "A proper copper—hey, where's Ma, anyhow?" I asked. "Doesn't she want to listen?"

Nory didn't answer. She stared out the window, rubbing at a cross on a chain around her neck.

Pop had been away for eleven months now, traveling with President Roosevelt's Federal Theater Project. The radio station had loaned him out to the FTP on account of he knew all about installing sound equipment in the auditoriums for plays they were putting on across the country. But tonight he was finally coming home. We had a very special supper planned for him, a fancy meal with the good tablecloth and matching plates. On the menu: pork chops—Pop's favorite, and a rare treat around here. A person might think my mother would be eager to see him, so eager that she'd already be heating up the oven. But Ma was nowhere to be seen.

"Where's Ma?" I asked again. Still no response. Seemed like Nory had something weighing on her mind. "A proper copper, proper copper cof-fee-pot," I recited, good and loud.

That snapped her out of it. "I said to can it, didn't I, Cece?"

Cece, that was my nickname—rhymes with peace, which I wished Nory would give me once in a while.

**You're listening to WOR, part of the Mutual Broadcasting System.**

Nory kept on rubbing her cross. Sometimes I wondered whether she was trying to rub her sins into it, or trying to rub some of Jesus off on herself. A moment later she dropped the cross back down the front of her smock and, stepping over my legs, went to the windows looking out onto South Orange Avenue.

"Nor-*een*! What are you doing? Pop's on any minute now! Your own brother, for crying out loud." I nudged her foot with my saddle shoe. "And where's Ma? I mean, geez Louise."

"Hmm?" Nory shifted out of nudging range. "Oh, Alma? She's downstairs."

"In the store?" I asked. "What for?"

"Phone call."

Ever since Ma had canceled our telephone service last winter, we had to go all the way to Loomis Hardware below our apartment to make and take phone calls. My mother was completely and utterly certifiable.

Nory had a funny look on her face, with her mouth all puckered up like she'd swallowed a stale Communion wafer. "I think I'll go see what's keeping her," she added, drifting toward the stairs.

Our clock chimed five-thirty. The familiar organ chords on the radio started up. I fine-tuned the dial to clear the static so the music could ooze from the Zenith and spread out across the rug where I lay. When the organ faded, there came that eerie laugh which everybody on the planet recognized, and finally:

**Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows!**

Then another creepy laugh, the Shadow's laugh, one of Pop's sound-effect inventions. I bet other listeners didn't know that the announcer held a glass up next to his mouth to make his laugh all echo-y like that. Crazy keen, and all Pop's idea.

The organ chords swelled again, and then the announcer returned:

**Ladies and Gentlemen, before the curtain goes up on the Shadow's latest exciting adventure, let me say this . . .**

. . . and he told us to order Blue Coal for our furnaces this winter. *Colored blue for your protection!*

**The Shadow, Lamont Cranston, a man of wealth, a student of science, and a master of other people's minds . . . Never seen, only heard . . . As inevitable as a guilty conscience.**

I cranked up the volume loud enough that folks could hear our Zenith all over Newark, and lay back on the rug. I didn't care what Nory or Ma would say.

**Don't bother to try and see where I am, gentlemen. You can't see me. I am *the Shadow*.**

The new actor playing the Shadow was a certain Mr. Orson Welles and I had to admit it: He sent me over the moon. Twenty-three years old and already the star of not one, but two radio shows. Yowsah! Of course Ma would say he was too old for me just yet, but in four years I'd be eighteen and famous and he'd be twenty-seven and more famous. And we'd fall in love. That's how I pictured it. Anyhow, starting tonight, Pop would be working with Mr. Welles *in person* at the Mutual Broadcasting System studios. Soon I'd be working at "the Mutual," too, as a page—running errands, delivering scripts, things like that. In New York City. With Orson Welles himself. Then we'd be on the radio, Orson and me, sharing a microphone, and later sharing an order of lobster thermidor and caviar in a corner booth at the Stork Club.

I leaned closer to the set and let Orson-Welles-as-Lamont-Cranston's deep voice soak into my pores. A voice like that made it easy to imagine that the Shadow really did have "the power to cloud men's minds." And knowing Pop was there, too, that we were connected by the airwaves—it was just like

old times. I tried identifying every sound effect in the background, picturing Pop like I'd seen him the times he had snuck me into the studio. Pop, with his shirtsleeves rolled up. Pop, with turntables and records on one side of him and oodles of gadgets and odd machines on the other. When the wealthy-young-man-about-town-Lamont-Cranston and his trusty-friend-and-companion-the-lovely-Margo-Lane sailed on the ocean, the stormy winds blowing outside the cabin were really Pop cranking the wind machine I'd helped him make with canvas from Mr. Loomis's hardware store and the slats from my old baby crib. The sound of an airplane engine came from a recording Pop had made at the Newark airport. Many of the effects on Pop's programs were fake, but they sounded real over the air.

When actress Agnes Moorehead as Margo Lane said her lines in tonight's exciting episode, I listened closely to her and noted how she elocuted things. When their plane was about to go down in the South Pacific, Margo Lane cried out, all agitated:

**Look! We're heading toward that island!**

Just the way I would do it once I had my chance in front of the microphone. *Look*, I'd say, *we're heading toward that island!* And instead of millions of radio fans listening to Agnes Moorehead, they'd be listening to me.

Tonight's episode was riveting. There was this island with a giant magnetic field around it and a bunch of chanting natives with torches. And an evil scientist. I couldn't wait to hear how the Shadow was going to cloud someone's mind to get them out of this one. Then, just when some man was about to get dropped into a volcano, the station took a break. Time for a word from our sponsor, Blue Coal. That's when Ma finally came upstairs, with Nory right behind her.

"You missed half of it already," I told them.

"Why's it turned up so loud?" My mother brushed past me

and dialed the volume way down. "Get up off the floor, sweetheart. You'll wreck those pleats."

Ma tucked a lock of graying hair behind her ear. "Your father just called, Cece." She glanced at Nory.

My heart leaped the way it did every time I learned that Pop had telephoned. But then I realized it couldn't be. "That's booshwash," I said. "He's on the air."

"No, he's not," said Nory. That cross of hers was getting a nice polishing. "Jack's not even coming home tonight. He's still in Philadelphia."

"Aw, tell me another." I reached over and twisted the volume knob all the way up. Eerie organ chords came out of the Zenith again.

"He's been delayed," Ma said, turning the sound back down. "He won't be home until tomorrow morning."

"But he promised," I insisted. "He promised me when we talked last time." Pop never broke his promises.

"Honey, I know he promised, but"—a look passed between Ma and Nory—"he'll be here as soon as he can." Ma folded her apron over her arm. "Tomorrow, all right?"

I looked away.

She turned to Nory. "Do you think the pork chops will be okay until tomorrow, Noreen?"

They left me alone in the parlor where I gave myself permission to fall into a full sulk. Orson burst back into the room. He and Margo had made their way inside the volcano. Although the radio's volume was low, Orson's voice was still clear and deep:

**There's water down below. Dive into it, Margo!**

I stared at the cracked ivory knobs on the old Zenith. More sound effects came, splashing sounds made with a plunger in a bucket. Not Pop after all, but some other sound artist.

I reached over and clicked the set off.

## CHAPTER 2

The pipes next to my head made a murmuring sound as I lay there in the gray dawn. I watched my pinups of radio stars flutter in the breeze from the open window: Orson Welles. Ursula Parker. Deanna Durbin, only fifteen and already a star. Mickey Rooney, ditto.

Murmuring pipes meant that T.K. Loomis was downstairs in his little room in back of Loomis Hardware, talking on his ham radio. The Loomises lived up on the third floor and kept the hardware store down on the first floor. Us Maloneys, we lived right in between on the second floor. Ma called our setup a Maloney sandwich. It was cozy, all right. We knew where everyone was in the building on account of the plumbing's being such a good broadcaster.

I put an ear to the pipes, listening to the buzz of T.K.'s voice.

Nory lay in bed next to me, snoring gently. Soon the alarm would ring and she'd be up and getting ready for Monday morning Mass with Ma. I could stay in bed and risk having to go with, or I could escape now and wait for Pop from the safety of T.K.'s ham radio room. I scuttled out of bed and got dressed.

I tapped on the pipes to see if the coast was clear. "Clear"

meant Mr. Loomis, T.K.'s father, wasn't lurking downstairs. If Mr. Loomis caught me he'd send me back up to face Ma and Mass.

*Dab-dab-dab, dab-di-dab.* That was T.K.'s answer to my taps, Morse code for "OK."

I hardly made a sound climbing out of the window onto the fire escape. This was my escape route when I was under house arrest for sassing Ma, the only way to get downstairs without passing both my parents' bedroom and the kitchen. T.K. kept a pocket-sized radio in his room just for me so I could tune in to my programs even when I was supposed to be missing them.

I stood on the fire escape's landing for a moment, taking in the Eau de Alley fragrance, a mix of horse manure (courtesy of the milkman's brown mare) and the smell of malt that wafted over from the breweries. The pink morning sun snuck down the alley, putting the shine to everyone's trash cans. It filled me so full of optimism that I even waved at crabby old Mrs. Kam-meyer pinning up her wash across the way.

"Hey, pup," T.K. said as I swung my legs over the window-sill. "Aren't you going to church?"

"It's Monday," I reminded him. "Me and you and God had a nice visit just yesterday." I reached under the desk and pulled out my usual seat, a little folding stool T.K. kept around just for my visits.

Timothy Kelsey Loomis, called T.K., was eighteen, and the youngest of the Loomises' five children. The rest had all married and moved away. T.K.'s mother died soon after he was born, so my ma kind of helped Mr. Loomis raise him. He was like a brother to me.

"I got Calcutta, Cece. Listen," he said. He put a pair of headphones over my ears. "The signal's not too strong."

T.K.'s ham radio equipment filled an entire room behind

Loomis Hardware. I didn't know why he called it "ham." All I knew was, he was as crazy about amateur radio as I was about the real thing. He sat at an old oak desk loaded down with all kinds of electronic boxes and gadgets. There was a microphone, a notepad and pencils, and a Morse code thingamajig like a little stapler-shaped paddle, which he called a straight key. The walls were plastered with hundreds of postcards from other ham radio people all over, places like California and Iceland.

I adjusted the headphones so they fit snugly over my ears. "Hello? This is Cecelia Maloney. In Newark, New Jersey, United States of America. Do you read?"

I could just barely hear the man in Calcutta. "I am being very pleased to meet you, Y.L. You are a friend of KM2SO, yes?"

"Roger," I said. KM2SO was T.K.'s ham radio name. "What's Y.L.?" I whispered. That was a new one on me.

"Short for Young Lady," T.K. said.

I nodded, then continued talking. It was truly like being "on the air" with my voice going into those little black wires and through the sky to faraway places. It was beyond crazy keen to think I was actually speaking to a man on the other side of the *planet*. And he was listening to *me*. Next thing we knew, T.K. and I would be yapping with little green men from Mars.

The man's voice crackled. "Uh-oh," I said, "I'm losing him, T.K."

T.K. took the microphone from me and I fitted the headphones over his dark, curly hair. "QSB, QSB," he said into the transmitter. "You're breaking up. Signal's fading."

A moment later, he pulled off the headphones. "Calcutta! Incredible." He found a straight pin and poked it into India on the world map over the desk. There were lots of pins sticking

out of all forty-eight states and quite a few in Europe. T.K. radioed oodles of people living in France and England. I guessed that was why he was always talking about the crisis across the Atlantic. And why he wanted to go for a soldier one day, even though Mr. Loomis was dead-set against it. T.K. kept saying that if it came to war against Germany the United States should join in and help our allies. He thought it could turn into another Great War.

I thought he was certifiable. President Roosevelt had promised we wouldn't get involved. Our president would keep his word.

T.K. began fiddling with the dials, hunting for Morse code messages. "Heard your dad didn't make it home last night."

"He just got delayed, is all."

"Sure." He tossed his stub of a pencil into a coffee mug full of even stubbier pencils. "Sure, if that's what he told you. *Delayed.*"

"Cecelia!" My mother's voice called out from the top of the stairwell. "I know where you are."

Those ding-danged pipes! Ma could hear us. I kept quiet as she and Nory clomped down the stairs, on their way to Sacred Heart. "We're leaving, Cece!" she called out cheerily. "Last chance to come out of there and go along."

"You should go with them," T.K. said, grinning.

I shook my head. "Isn't it enough I have to go Sundays?"

He made as if to grab me and haul me out into the open.

"No!" I cried, pulling away. "I'm not going."

I waited until the bell jingled on the hardware store entrance, signaling that Ma and Nory had given up on me and left. "Geez Louise, Teek. Thanks a lot."

"Don't mention it." T.K. twisted another dial on his set. He held one earpiece up to his ear, listening for a signal. "Listen,

Cece. Do you think . . . Nory would like . . . has she seen *Carefree* yet?"

"How should I know? You'd have to ask *her* what movies she's seen."

He sighed.

"Oh, for crying out loud." I leaned forward, trying to catch his eye. "Still?"

T.K. had had a crush on Nory ever since she moved in with us. But would he ever get up the nerve to ask her out on a date? Not hardly. A person would think that a boy who talked to people all over the world would be able to ask one lousy girl living in his very own building out to the pictures.

"She's probably seen it," T.K. said, his voice dripping with utter despair and wretchedness.

"She probably *hasn't*," I corrected him. "Nory never goes to the pictures. She spends all her time at work and church." After my granny died, Nory wanted to keep attending West Side High, so Ma insisted that we take her in, on account of our apartment being convenient to school. Was I ever annoyed later when Nory quit school anyhow, during her junior year.

"She does spend a lot of time at Sacred Heart," T.K. said.

"And how! I'm beginning to think the only man she'll ever keep company with is our-trusty-friend-and-companion-the-Lord-Jesus-Christ."

T.K. nodded, the headphone earpiece still held against his ear. "I think she'll become a nun."

"Yeah, she probably will, if no boy ever asks her out." I shoved him in the shoulder. "Just gather up your courage and start a conversation. Easy."

He sighed again, shook his head, and fitted the headphones back over both ears—which was just the way our conversations about Nory always seemed to end.

I drummed my heels on the floor, watching T.K. tap on the straight key and take notes. It was getting close to the time when I would have to go back upstairs and finish getting ready for school. If Pop didn't come home soon I wouldn't see him until that night.

"Lovely lemon liniment," I said.

"What was that?" T.K. asked, lifting an earpiece.

"Just a tongue twister."

"Oh." He nodded. "I get it. You're practicing—what's that you call it?"

"Utterly Perfect Elocution," I said. "It's all about breathing properly, see, and exercising my vocal apparatus." I squared my shoulders. "Lovely lemon liniment. Lovely lemon liminent, limen—oh, nerts."

T.K. snickered. "Better work on that one some more." He scribbled down some notes.

"Lovely. Lemon. Liniment," I elocuted, thinking maybe I ought to head back upstairs for some breakfast. "Lovely lemon. Lemon liniment."

Just then an engine revved in the back alley. Could it be . . . ? I jumped up and looked out the window. The passenger door opened on a big cream-colored Packard and a red-haired man hopped out.

"It's Pop!" I squealed, bouncing on my toes.

"A convertible," murmured T.K. He had gotten up and was looking over my shoulder. "Don't see many of them around here."

The car drove off. Pop stepped onto the back porch, whistling:

*Would you like to swing on a star?*

I ran to the screen door at the back of the hardware store and whistled the next line:

*Carry moonbeams home in a jar?*

"That's my girl!"

"Pop!" I whipped open the screen door.

Pop dropped his suitcase in the hall and took me up in his arms. He tried to twirl me around, but being as how I had an inch or two on him, he had to put me down. "Hey, baby," he said. I leaned down so's to let him kiss my forehead. "You've grown even taller, I swear. How's tricks?"

"Great, now you're home." I shut the door behind him. "You look great, Pop. You look ducky."

"Ducky, eh? I don't feel so ducky. What's the hot stuff, Timothy?" He stuck out his hand toward T.K., who had followed me into the hall.

"Not much, Jack." T.K. didn't shake. He was busy fastening his work apron. "That was some fancy car you rode up in."

"Huh?" Pop said. "Oh, that. Yeah. Just someone from the station dropping me off, is all." Pop clapped his hands and rubbed them together. "Say, you kids eat yet? What say we get my bags upstairs and have us some breakfast?" He punched T.K.'s shoulder. "How about it, old sport? You hungry for some Vim?"

"No, thanks," T.K. said, twisting away. "Store's about to open."

"Well, we'll see you later, then. C'mon baby-girl. We've got a lot of catching up to do."