

YOUR VOICE

**A solo play
by
David Skeele**

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(A radio station, in the middle of the night. A man enters, flicks a light switch, then sits in a chair behind a mike. There is an angry red welt on one cheek, maybe a bruise elsewhere on his face. He picks up a small hand mirror and examines the damage. He takes a quick, bracing swig from a bottle of tequila, then flips some switches. He speaks into the mike.)

STROM

Hello, hello. Anybody out there? Anybody awake? It's me. It's your friend, Strom Blaylock.

(Pause)

You don't believe me.

(He hits a switch. Music begins)

See? Official theme music. It's really me. Hello and welcome to the award-winning, ratings-killing, heart-stirring, consciousness-raising *Strom Blaylock Show*. I am the scourge of the liberal elite, I am the heavy artillery in the battle for America's soul, I am your voice, Akron. I. Am. You.

Well. It's...an unorthodox show tonight, as you've undoubtedly noticed. "Unorthodox?" you say. "No! Not Strom! How could that be?" But tonight, or this morning, rather, when I say it's an unorthodox show, I truly mean it. For instance, this is the very first Strom Blaylock show ever to air—live—at *(he checks his watch)* three-sixteen a.m.

(Pause)

Also, technically this is an illegal broadcast. Technically, the station is not actually open at three-sixteen a.m. But I do have a key—one of the perks of being the highest-rated talk-radio show this great city has ever seen.

(Pause)

So. What would you like to talk about tonight? You all like to call and ask me questions, but do you know, I sometimes like to ask *myself* questions. And when I'm asking myself questions, one of my favorite questions is: "Strom, what are you going to talk about on your last show?" I've thought and thought about that one, and believe me, I've come up with any number of answers, but here I am, and it's all escaping me.

S'okay. We don't need to talk about anything important. We can just talk.

(Pause)

Ever heard of a guy named...Jim Blielecki? *(He laughs a little)* No, of course not. No reason you should have. He was a young man who came here, many years ago.

Worked as a production intern. Wanted to be a DJ. Not a commentator, not a journalist—God forbid. Just a DJ. Not especially idealistic. Not especially ambitious. He just knew he loved to talk. And he loved music. Jazz, mostly, but rock and roll, too. Everything, really. I wonder if you would have liked him. I don't remember him, really. Not very memorable. Certainly didn't know much about politics. Except that he really liked Strom Thurmond's name.

I'd welcome a call. But who am I kidding? You're all asleep, aren't you? My listeners, now there's no earthly reason why you'd be awake. Maybe one or two hard-working night-shift guys. How about it? You out there, guys? You know who *is* awake? That's right: liberals. You're *all* awake, aren't you? This is your time. Like vampires. Coming home late from your after-hours dance clubs, your one-night stands, your all-night vigils for some crack-dealer slash triple murderer on death row. And you'd love nothing more than running to the police and telling them that Strom Blaylock is illegally broadcasting—*waah, waah, waah!* Because after all, he's the real criminal here. He's not some poor, misguided triple-murderer crack dealer, oh no. Strom Blaylock, he brazenly flouted the Regulations of a Government Agency. Yes, I'm the real criminal. I'm the real (*softly*)...criminal.

(Pause. He drinks again)

There *is* something. Something that occurred to me, the other day, in the middle of downtown traffic, which is, as you know, where I do my best thinking. This is a work in progress, so bear with me.

(Slight pause)

There's a fantasy I have sometimes. No. *All* the time. These days. I don't know why. I carry it around like a...dull ache in my heart. It's that one, that fantasy, where you go back to high school. You know the one? You go back to high school, right now, knowing everything you do now. Where you take all of that middle-aged wisdom—and just start your adult life completely fresh.

What about you? You ever have that fantasy? Sure you have. Everybody has. And why not? It's a wonderful fantasy. And tell me something: it always ends the same way, doesn't it? With you *ruling* that high school. And that is exactly the way it should be. After all, face it: you're smarter than everybody else. You're not...haunted by childhood fears and superstitions. Your hormones aren't running you around like electrodes on a rat.

But you know, it struck me—this was my traffic epiphany—that, as Americans, we don't have to walk around aching for this fantasy. We're already living it. That's right. All you have to do is open your eyes and see what God has done. He waited, bided his time, until human civilization finally reached middle age—the Age of Enlightenment, they call it—he waited until then to create this marvelous new country. Founded on the wisdom of the old, but still: a *young* country. A place we could start fresh, unburdened by ancient hatreds, the superstitions and ignorance bred into the bones of those from Lithuania, Botswana, France.

Do you see? America, the world is your high school. Rule it.

(Pause)

Work in progress.

(Pause)

I would welcome a call.

(Slight pause)

It would be a...great comfort to know there is someone there. So if you're there, just pick up the phone and call. There's no producer, nobody screening your calls. Just me. Strom.

(Pause)

You see, I need you. *I...need...you.* Think about all the times you've needed me. You've needed me to stiffen your backbone, to convince you that you're right about something when you haven't quite had the strength of your own convictions. Isn't that so?

Well, I need you now. I need...I need a friend.

(Slight pause)

How about you, liberals? We can be friends, right? You're so famous for your mercy and forgiveness and understanding, aren't you? Right. You're as full of black bile as everyone else. Worse, really. Because you can't even admit it. Hypocrites. Cowards.

Tell you what, I'll let you call up and trash the war. Trash the troops. The president, whatever. Make your pathetic, mewling arguments and I'll give you your soapbox for as long as you want. "Violence is never the answer." "Violence only begets violence."

(Pause)

Let me tell you something about violence, my friends. There's a group out in California—a "sect," if you will. They call themselves "Fruitarians." Not vegetarians, not even vegans. No, they go beyond all that—way beyond. Not only do they refuse to eat animals and animal products, they actually refuse to eat the leaves of any plants, for fear of harming the plants. I'm not making this up. And not only do they refuse to eat plant leaves, they refuse to eat any fruits or vegetables that are still *on the vine*, for fear of doing the plants and trees the violence of tearing them off. No, get this, they will only eat fruits, and perhaps the occasional vegetable, that *falls off* the tree or plant. They skulk around in their robes—made out of...what, do you suppose?—and they carry these soft-

bristled brooms, whisking the ground in front of them so as not to harm any unwary little insects that might unwittingly venture beneath their sandals. And they *wait*, they actually wait for apples and pears to drop off trees. They starve themselves nearly to death, because they are so committed to non-violence.

(Slight pause)

I admire those people. Yes, you heard right—those people have my admiration. Because they, my liberal friends, are *not* hypocrites. Because they, as ridiculous as they are, are showing me true commitment. You have no idea what that means, I know, but if you want to see the logical extension of the pacifism you pretend to believe in, drop in on a Fruitarian. But I'll tell you something: even those people, even the *Fruitarians* cannot escape doing violence, because *everything* in our world is violence.

I'll say it again: everything is violence. What is it that makes your car move? Violence. An electric arc explodes the gasoline, so powerfully that it blasts metal pistons into motion, at heats so unimaginably high the atoms of that metal can barely hold together. Once every second, a mini-Hiroshima, under your hood. But you don't care. You can't see it, you can't hear it. It's hidden so well, it's down so deep it doesn't even skip your Peter, Paul and Mary CD. Like everything else, you don't care as long as you don't have to deal with it, don't have to understand it. As long as it keeps your world moving.

Every time you wash your face, you're violently destroying bacteria, germs, all sorts of things. Tiny mites that live in your pores. If you could hear their microscopic little screams, what agony you would hear, as you crush them to death, thousands at a time. As you drown them in boiling water and poisonous chemicals. It's their 9/11. Every day. On your face.

And I could go on and on. Talk about the animal kingdom. And that other animal kingdom known as The City. How it is run by violence, or at least the *threat* of violence. I could make the obvious point that everywhere you turn there are many, many folks who would love nothing more than to knock you right out of your Birkenstocks and stomp you to death, *but* for their fear of encountering even greater violence themselves at the hands of the law enforcement officers you're always dragging through the mud.

Yep. It's all violence, my friends. A sewer of violence, swirling all around us, all day long. We're in it, and of it.

(Pause)

“So, what are you saying, Strom? Are you saying we're all no better than animals?” No, no, I suppose what I'm saying is... Yes: maybe we *are* all animals. Maybe that is what I'm saying. We're all just rabid dogs, ravening jackals, and the only thing holding us back from tearing each other to shreds is our own cowardice. There you have it. That's the world. Me, you, all of us psychopathically violent cowards. What do you think? Hmm? What do you think of that?

Oh, we're having fun now. Yes, we are.

How about giving me a call? Tell me what you think. Call me an idiot: an aging, balding, thickening, driveling moron. Or hey, maybe just a good old-fashioned dose of sycophantic bullshit. “You said it, Strom—whatever it was.” “You tell ‘em, buddy!” “You’re the man, Strom!”

Just call. Phone’s right there on the nightstand. You’re tired, okay, but... Look, I’ve been there for you, day after day, five days a week, every afternoon for fourteen years, comforting you, making you feel good about yourself, relieving the soul-crushing tedium of your horrible jobs, giving you the illusion that your voice counts for something, and now...

Please. Please don’t let me spend my last moments here alone.

(Pause)

All right. Fine.

Let me ask you this, then. What would you say if, oh, I don’t know, our Vice President were revealed to be a...a... Let’s just say that our Vice President were revealed to have some terrible personal failing, of a...moral nature. Would it immediately render worthless all that he believes in? All the courage and common human decency he has demonstrated over the last seven years—would that vanish? Vaporized in the blast of righteous indignation?

Liberals would say yes, of course. They would dance in the street, ecstatic that our ideology has been proven bankrupt. Ted Kennedy would be doing pirouettes of joy, jowls flapping in the Boston breeze—but what would you say? Can’t you tell me?

Maybe you’d say that it’s a culture of decay, and even Vice Presidents—and radio personalities—can step in the cesspool from time to time. Would you say that?

“What are you driving at, Strom? This is getting weird.” Yes, indeed.

What I’m driving at...what I’m trying to do is tell you that tomorrow they *will* be dancing in the street, that I can promise you. You will be taking a hit tomorrow. You will be hurt. Because I wasn’t strong enough. I’m sorry. I feel very...very...

(Slight pause. A revelation)

Actually, I don’t feel anything at all. I don’t feel especially sorry. I thought I did. But I don’t. At the moment, I can’t summon one shred of sympathy for you. There’s just...nothing. It’s very curious.

(Pause)

Hmm. How about this. A news segment. This just in: Tonight, at approximately 10:45 p.m., city police swooped down upon a particular...institution. A particularly infamous institution, apparently, long known to them. Though I didn’t realize this, didn’t

realize it was long known to them. I thought it was unknown. Which is why they were able to catch me there.

Yes. I was there. A paying customer, a participant in...this. There's going to be no doubt about that. "What was it, Strom? A gambling club? A little illegal Texas Hold 'Em?" Nope. Not that kind of place. Not that kind of...

You've heard of this type of place, perhaps, a place certain adults go to relieve certain stresses...associated with their lives. It's a kind of... Oh, who am I talking to? We're not Bill Clinton, are we? We know what "is" is, don't we?

Brothel. Whorehouse. Whatever word you like to use.

Illegal, of course, but still the police might have been content to let things alone, let sleeping dogs lie, except that they were called to the scene in response to reports of a violent altercation between a middle-aged businessman—must have been the tie—and his prostitute.

(Slight pause)

Okay, I'm ready, you can call and forgive me now. Yes. "You're human, Strom. We never thought you were perfect." Or how about this: "Big minds have big appetites, Strom!" That's right, forgive me. After all, I'm on your team, right? And isn't that the only thing that matters? We can forgive anything...to someone on our team.

Okay, I'm forgiven! Wonderful. Except I left out one convenient detail: this prostitute...this prostitute was a young man.

"Stop it, Strom! You're embarrassing me! We don't need to hear all the sordid details of your private life." You're right: you don't. But you will. Tomorrow afternoon's news, at the latest. I thought you'd rather hear about it from me. This show makes a habit of facing hard truths, after all. Let's face it together. You and I. C'mon.

So. You've heard. We're facing it. What now? *Now* are you going to pick up your fucking phones and tell me what you *think*?

(Slight pause)

Howls of outrage. Storms of indignation. C'mon, give me your best shot, I can take it.

Liberals! Call to tell me about my hypocrisy! Throw my opinions on gay marriage right back in my face! Go ahead. I can take it. I could even respect that. I *am* a hypocrite, after all. By my own arguments, I shouldn't even wait for judgment day, I should find a fiery pit to fling myself into right now.

Or hey, I know: you could forgive me, too. Offer me your special liberal absolution for all things weak and corrupt. "You see, Strom? It's all genetic. You don't have a choice. You were *born* this way."

Bullshit. Whining bullshit. I have a choice! I've always had a choice.

It just seems that it's an...increasingly difficult choice not to make.

Your silence is telling. So telling. You're not asleep. You just have nothing to say. Not one thing. You've been struck dumb—and I do mean stupid. I mean, what am I doing here? I've been listening to you for years, *being you* for years, and I *knew* the chances you'd have anything valuable to say about this...thing were zero. Zero. Nothing in your head right now but a big, stupid blank space. I know, because I'm staring at that same space right now. I...don't have the words for this.

(He grabs a piece of paper taped to a console, tears it off)

Trade secret. I have here a kind of “cheat sheet.” I prepare it with two production assistants every month or so. It's a...sort of flow chart for our liberal callers, tells me into which sewer drains I might direct your arguments. For instance, want to talk a little...gun control? How about a little gun control? Our flow-chart goes to the story of a Minnesota farmer, his home invaded and his family murdered by vagrants on the second day of his three-day waiting period. *Flush!* Or maybe you're feeling old-school, in the mood for some Reagan-bashing? Talk a little Iran-Contra? Go ahead—we follow the arrow and you find yourself complicit in the Sandinista slaughter of Miskito Indians. *Flush flush!* Get the idea? Well. Let's see what our little flow chart has to say about our present situation. Of course, the idea that someone might call in defending the homo warehouses of Akron was a bit outside the realm of our imagination, but we do have...let's see...well, Gay Marriage, of course. If you're nice, you get “activist judges;” if you're obnoxious, or if ratings are sluggish that week, then *you* are part of a perverse cabal of whining special interest groups that includes radical polygamy cults, the National Man-Boy Love Association and an obscure Canadian outfit that wants to legitimize sex with cattle. Hmm. Doesn't help us much, does it?

(Pause. Shrugs, then crumples the paper)

I suppose that's it, then. Sign-off time. Not with a bang, but with a whimper.

Or, and I like this better: maybe it's like certain animals—bears, wolves, I think—and certain Indian warriors. When they receive a mortal wound, they don't cry for help. They crawl off into the darkness to make that final journey...alone. Because I am alone now, aren't I? And I think, just maybe, that I always have been.

(He reaches for the switch to kill the transmission, then pulls his hand back.)

Hmm. This is funny. You can't see me, but I'm trying to flip this switch. But I can't. It's repelling my hand like a reverse magnet. Because, you see, the moment I flip this switch, I'm no longer Strom Blaylock. I will be Jim Blielecki. And that's scary. Because...because I don't have any idea who Jim Blielecki is. Not anymore. I've been your voice for so long, Akron, that I'm not quite sure what Jim Blielecki's voice sounds like anymore.

Well, I guess this is good night. And farewell. I am your voice, Akron. I am you. Liberals, conservatives. I am you. *All of you.* And I hate you all.

(He reaches out and flips the switch. He sits for a moment, then picks up the hand mirror, and begins to examine his face, this time with a sense of wonder, as the lights fade.)