

Missy Tonight

by Tom Lichtenberg

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## Alan Musted

Who knew there was money to be made in atheism? I sure didn't. Heck, when I was a kid, saying you were an atheist was a pretty sure way to get the crap beat out of you. All of a sudden, nowadays it's the thing to be. Everybody's piling on, cashing in. Why not me? That's what I thought when I heard they were looking for an official atheist on the Missy Tonight show. They had an opening all of a sudden when their regular guy, Gian Carlo Spallanzini, had some sort of a breakdown. Seems that all at once he wasn't so damn certain anymore. Heck with that! Wouldn't happen to me, I can tell you for sure. I've been born and raised and bred an atheist all the way, not like these johnny-come-lately bandwagon-jumpers you see on the bestseller lists and the afternoon shows. These guys are all "reason" this and "science" that, worrying about civilization and society and macro-trends and who knows what. All I can tell you is, I know a hand basket when I see one.

I got it from my mom, Alice Musted. She was once a Catholic girl, went to Catholic school, did those Catholic things all the while that she was growing up, until around the tender age of fourteen, as they say, when she unexpectedly gave birth to her one and only child, which would be me. Seems my dad was a priest but I only ever knew him as the mythical Father Judas.

After that she'd had enough church, I think, although you might not know it, come to look at her. Every day she's decked out in some kind of catholic school girl outfit, some gray and white plaid skirt and a sky blue sweater, all tied together with those regulation U.S. Army boots she achieved during her years of enlistment. She always liked to talk about God, all right, every chance she got. Didn't have a lot of good things to say about the guy, so I grew up with a definite impression.

Her "leanings", you might say, weren't so good for business. She ran a packing and shipping store called ShipShape, whose slogan, "the most trusted name in shipping shapes", is likely the cause of my implacable

hatred toward corporate slogans of any kind. She would man the front desk like a buccaneer, daring anyone to stump her with a package too large or too small, too heavy or too light, too expensive or too cheap. Couldn't be done, she'd declare. "We ship anything anywhere anytime anyhoo".

Now, being an atheist is probably the only thing of any distinction that I've ever accomplished. It is my signature trait, so to speak. At one time, there weren't too many of us, and we tended to keep it to ourselves. Certainly in my role as dispatcher at American Site Rentals ("when you think of portable toilets, think American!"), my atheism was hardly an asset, surrounded as I was by persons of persuasion. I used to think of organized religion as some sort of professional sporting league. In Division A, U.S.A., you'd have to give the Protestants the franchise tag as "America's Team", the New York Yankees or Dallas Cowboys of Belief. Catholics were in the ballpark, perennial runners-up, with Jews and Buddhists and Muslims in the cellar, decade after faithful decade. My team never came up, even in fantasy transactions. It didn't pay. Certainly not.

But things have changed. Pink City was built by Ronald Humm Enterprises, housing the Atheist Broadcasting Service, the Atheist Shopping Network, Atheism Today magazine and of course, the flagship, the symbol, the lynch pin, the Missy Tonight show with Missy D'Angelo. When it comes to Missy Tonight, I'm one of those 'regular viewers' you're always hearing about who should be giving money. I wouldn't miss it. Missy D'Angelo is the captain of my team, the team of the century, the team on the rise, the team the other teams had better look out for. Atheism's coming, baby. It's the next big thing.

And why shouldn't I cash in on it too? Me, who's been a devoted atheist since the very day I was malignantly conceived. I can do that thing. All my friends have seen my spot-on Spallanzini imitation. Okay, my friend Althea has seen it. And she laughed. And she is my only friend so I guess my previous statement stands. I've nothing else in my measly forty-three years to show for anything, no family, no career, no

talent, no ability, no significance of any kind except, I am an atheist, always been an atheist, don't believe in no god, no way, not this one, not that one, not any single one of them.

The problem was, how do you go about being a credentialed and worthy atheist that could be the official one of the Missy Tonight show. What did it take? I didn't know. Who was my competition? I didn't know. How could I find out? I figured I'd better make a trip down to the broadcasting center and see what I should do.

## Pink City

I thought the best thing I could do was head on down to Pink City as soon as possible. Or at least as soon as the bus could get me there, because my car was broken down again and it was just too far to ride my bike. If I had my way, I'd be living in Pink City. It's got everything you want right there. When they threw that thing together - and I mean, really, they threw it together almost overnight - they made sure you had your China Express and your Pizza Mizza and your Super Cold Ice Cream and your Pay'n'Pay and all the conveniences you couldn't possibly live without, surrounded of course by yellow brick sidewalks and fountains set with dubious figurines. And with the parking lots under the ground and the townhouses up above there is really nothing lacking, not even offices and wireless transmission capabilities. Only problem is, it costs a lot, and then you've got to meet their standards to even get yourself considered.

It's one of those planned community things, all the brainchild of Ronald Humm, a redusive old buzzard who's a legend and a mystery all at once. They say he's got some ideological bents and lucky for some of us, one of those bents is a deep-abiding hatred for all things spiritual that really borders on the supernatural. They say he can sniff out true believers from at least a mile away, and his favorite thing to do is put them on the Missy Tonight show and watch Missy tear them apart. That never stops them, though, they keep coming back for more, what with their evangelical missions and their masochism streaks, so there's no shortage of fodder, you know, of guest material. No one knows what's driving Ronald Humm. Some say it was his childhood. Of course, they always say that, don't they?

As for me, I didn't care. I wanted on that show, so I was out there waiting for the 77F bus promptly at six forty-five in the morning. Too bad for me it didn't come until eight oh nine. I've said it before and I'll say it again, but it's hard to control your destiny while you're waiting

for the bus. I live in Spring Hill Lake, a dozen miles down the interstate. In Spring Hill Lake you had better watch your step. You had better keep your mouth shut and your eyes wide open, because the cops in Spring Hill Lake are a brotherhood and they hate everybody. Seems they got a bad rep over the years because some kids got hurt one time, and now they're trying to live up to it. I'm out there waiting for the bus and the cops keep cruising by, giving me their dirty looks. I didn't say nothing. I was just shivering in peace.

But I got there, I got there, and found my way to the Atheist Broadcasting Service, which was stuck inside an office behind a Fig Leaf Natural Foods place. Nobody was there, though, no one but the janitor. He was a kind of crazy old guy, dressed up like some old drunken Santa Claus, with his red and black checked overcoat, his long white beard, his shredded loafers and paisley socks, shoving a big old push broom here and there across the tiles. There was a receptionist desk but no receptionist. I kind of stood there, waiting, while the janitor jabbed around me with the broom and didn't say anything for a while. I guess he was waiting for me to talk, because finally I asked him when the receptionist would be there, and he shrugged and mumbled something about Thursday.

It was only Tuesday.

I said I was hoping I could see someone about a job.

He said, what kind of job?

So I told him that I'd heard they needed another panel guy to take the place of Spallanzini and he just started laughing, coughing and sputtering like I thought he was going to keel over and kick it right then and there.

He wanted to know where I'd heard about that, so I told him, I just figured. I didn't tell him where I really heard it from, because I wasn't sure that source was so reliable. Okay, it was from another show, the Polly Mackerel show. Polly Mackerel is kind of Missy's nemesis; you can catch her show on XBS. She was joking, maybe. I don't know. It

sounded like it might make sense, but I was realizing right then that maybe I was looking like an idiot.

Finally the janitor settled down and started asking me all sorts of personal questions, like who was I and where did I come from and why did I think that I could do the job. I thought it was kind of weird being interviewed by a janitor but I answered him anyway. I figured it would be good practice. I told him what I told you already, about my lifelong status, my passion as it were, my crappy studio apartment there in Spring Hill Lake when I really ought to be in Pink City if only I could just get out of the Site Services thing and find my true calling in life. I told him I figure I can pundify with the best of them. He wanted a sample rant, so I went into my thing about scientists and their big bang hard-on, how it was just basically creationism with a masters degree, and how it's okay if you just don't know and really can't ever know, it's no big deal, so leave it alone.

I was in the middle of that when this solid-grey dressed iron-haired tough-looking lady came in the door and brushed right past me, almost knocking me aside, then looked back and said, to the janitor, "who let this one in?" She didn't wait for an answer but strode on down the hall and burst into an office, slamming the door behind her. I shut up and looked at the janitor who smiled a crazy grin and said, "that's Janet Balze. She's the producer. You got to talk to her".

Terrific.

I made a move to go down that hall but he held up his broom to block me and said, "you're going to need an appointment".

"How do I make an appointment?" I asked him.

"Receptionist", he replied.

"But", I started to say.

"Thursday", he repeated, and waved his broom in my face. I tried to push past him but he stood his ground, nearly stabbing me in the groin with that thing. He was an old man but he was actually kind of

ferocious, and was staring at me with evil eyes so I gave up.  
Maybe this was not going to be so easy as I thought.



## Althea Taylor

It's not true what Althea says that all atheists are mean. I'm not always mean, not all the time, at least. But that's what she says, and I try not to disagree with her too much. After all, she is my only friend, and she's got a tough enough situation without her best friend disagreeing with her too much. She's quiet, kind of mousy even, small and shy, old-fashioned in her own way; as old-fashioned as you can be when you're a local Wiccan rock star.

After my failed attempt to get anywhere with Missy Tonight, I went straight to Althea, just like I do after all my failed attempts at anything. She was working from home that day. You can pretty much be a dispatcher from anywhere there's a phone, so she likes to do it that way.

Althea lives in Spring Hill Lake, too, but she's got a way nicer place than mine, kind of a loft behind an abandoned freight loading station. Lots of parts of that town are abandoned. You'd think they'd just go fix up the places that are all run down instead of infesting new territory all the time, but that's the way they do it. Graze and move on. Not what you call sustainable. So she's got the loft and practically no neighbors and so quiet you can hear the traffic from eleven blocks away. Her big old place is empty, too, a couple of bean bags here and there, and a slab of foam rubber on the floor is where she sleeps. She's got more guitars than chairs. More guitars than plates, even. She don't eat much.

She thought it was pretty funny that I went down there all of a sudden as if I knew what I was doing, no appointment, no phone call, not even a help wanted advertisement. She was giving me a hard time. "Why don't you go down to the courthouse", she teased, "and ask them if they want any judges? Or how about hiking up to the state capitol to see if there's any senator openings?"

“Okay, okay. I'll call on Thursday, get an appointment”, I said. “I'll make up some story, like I'm doing some research, or, I'm a journalist, or, I'll think of something”.

She said I was probably going to need some kind of credentials. I don't have any college degree. I haven't written any books. I don't have any experience on radio or TV. So it's not like I'm loaded for bear. That's what she said. Loaded for bear.

“You know what you should do?” she suggested. “You should make some kind of video, put it online, like that Beauregard and Scooter guy. Even better, you should get some kind of angle and make it go like a virus so that everybody knows it, like that angry guy in Australia”.

I thought that was maybe a good idea. I would have to think about it. I already had the atheist angle, of course. It would have to be about that. I remembered that Beauregard and Scooter dude. He did these videos that took a good thing and made it bad, like, what if you find your soul mate and then you're stuck with her forever, like you can't get away from her, even if she's the most awful thing that ever happened to you, because she's your soul mate and it's like some kind of super glue when you find her. Then he had that bit about how do you know what you should be worrying about. Maybe you're worrying about the wrong things and wasting all that worry power when you really should be worrying about this other thing that you didn't even realize you ought to be worrying about instead. It's a problem!

Still, nobody ever paid attention to that guy. The angry guy in Australia, now, that guy's funny. Lots of dirty words of course, and heck, about the dirtiest word I ever use is 'heck', but still, the way he goes off on lousy drivers, idiots in the bathroom and typical program managers, I just always crack up when I see him.

Althea had a video camera and she said she'd help me do it, so the only thing was to think about something and then do it, and then I'd have it to show the people down at the station when I made my next stab at it. I had to think of my arsenal. Maybe I'd have to re-read my

favorite old atheist book, *Why I Am Not A Christian*, by Bertrand Russell. Plenty of good stuff in there. It would have to be an awesome rant, but without any dirty words. Spallanzini never used them, either. There's things you can say on the Internet that you can't say on TV.

So we were sitting around drinking some of that lousy feminist tea she always has - I don't know why it is that whenever you make the personal political you have to sacrifice your taste buds too, but that's just part of the price you pay, I guess. Althea's no atheist. I already told you that. She's a Wiccan. As if she didn't have enough strikes going against her already!

She suggested one of her usual angles - the patriarchy aspect of the monotheistic religions, and what's with God the Father and his Son and how come all his Messengers are also boys. I mean, everybody knows that men are dumber than women, so why would some almighty pick out the weakest link whenever He wanted to have a chat? And, like, every time? It couldn't be a coincidence!

I liked my angle better, the one about how if the universe had to have a Creator, then how come the Creator doesn't have to have a Creator, so who created God, huh? She said that's too babyish, too easy. And then she was on again about how atheists are always mean and I explained, it's not that we are mean, it's just we get so incredibly frustrated with people threatening us with their imaginary friend who's going to torture us forever just because we realize the incredibly obvious fact that there's no such thing at all! I hate to say it, but Jesus H. Christ, people, gimme a break!

Althea liked the imaginary friend bit. She thought that could make for a good rant. And she had some stuffed animals that I could use for props. We sat around for a long time drinking lousy tea and taking notes. In the end, we managed to put something together and videoed it. Afterwards, I felt like I had some real world broadcasting experience and I felt a lot better about my chances regarding Missy Tonight.

## Gian Carlo Spallanzini

But I go up and down and back and forth a lot at times like this. Well, at all times, really, which is why I've never gotten anywhere. By the time I got home and checked out the video online, the one I'd just been so happy with a few minutes before, I hated it. Absolutely hated it. Who did I think I was trying to be? It sort of sounded like my lame Spallanzini imitation, only worse. Why was I wearing sunglasses? How come I kept jumping around from one thing to the next. Then it seemed like I was mumbling. Whose idea was the teddy bear anyway and what did it have to do with anything? I had to turn the thing off, thinking it was hopeless.

I looked like an idiot. I am an idiot. What the heck was I thinking?

It reminded me of when I was in high school and decided to write a novel. It was going to be a big old thing, with tons of fascinating characters decked out in unusual outfits. Each one was going to have their own special way of talking so you could always tell who it was. It was going to be a deal where everyone was on their separate path or so it seemed until they all came crashing together in an amazing and stunning finale, and then it turned out that everything happened for a reason and all the questions would be answered and all the mysteries solved. So I wrote down lists of character's names. I still remember some of them. Gloria Borgeous. Hank Mathoon. Richard Krangkratz. Bilj Bjurnjurd. Mary Christmas (she was my favorite). Great names, some of them. And then the outfits. Mary wore nothing that didn't have spangles on it. Bilj was into super tight shorts with button-down dress shirts and open-toed sandals. Richard wore two ties, one on top of the other. Good stuff! And Bilj was going to have some kind of Norwegian accent. Gloria was going to omit every seventh word (which would have been a tricky thing to write, come to think of it), and then I heard this guy who wrote bestsellers on a talk show saying that he never even started to write anything down until he had a contract in

his pocket. Well, that really slowed me down.

How was I going to get a contract in my pocket? So I read up on getting agents and writing proposals and submitting manuscripts and the various desirable type-faces and formattings and even paper stock. I really had all that figured out down to a T. Only problem was, I didn't get anywhere. Who did I think I was? I finally told myself it didn't really matter, it's not like there's some shortage of entertainment out there in this world of ours. Heck, there's way too much, even, so I was saving the sales-taxpayer from shelling out some sales tax.

I've had a lot of failures like that. When I was ten I was going to be a rock star. Even wrote some lyrics on a paper towel. Not that the song was bad, mind you. I still hum it every now and then. I just have never had whatever it takes to succeed, to stick to it, to go like a virus, to get lucky, to saddle up and get that pony moving. It wasn't like I was any different now, just older, fatter, balder, and dumber.

Maybe I'm not dumb enough yet. Maybe that's my problem.

Or maybe not.

Well, I worked myself up into a tizzy of self-pity before I decided that I wasn't going to give up quite so easily this time. I made myself sit and watch that video four more times while taking notes. What was okay. What was not. What could be improved. What could be removed. And then I practiced. I wrote down the script and I memorized it. I selected a different costume. I got out my little camera and made the video myself. It took a lot of rehearsing, a lot of attempts, but by the end of the night, I was feeling better again.

Did I tell you I'm bi-polar?

There I go again, talking too much. That's always been one of my problems. I never seem to know when to shut up. You should see me on a date! Well, you hardly could because that hardly ever happens. Even before I sit down I've got my jaw wagging and the words are tumbling out. This is why I live alone. I would rather have a roommate but I never found one I could live with. Even Althea moved out on me.

Even my mom kicked me out of her house, finally. She said it was time. She said it was my thirtieth birthday present. Happy birthday, Alan. Now get the heck out!

I have to admit, it was getting kind of weird. Mom's not that much older than me as you know, and she was starting to date these guys my age and even younger. They'd come over and sit around the kitchen table, staring at me, wondering if and when I'd leave. I'd be talking, of course, about whatever. I can really talk about anything, anything at all. I've got a lot of range. Football, geology, cars, weather, history, bicycles, you name it, I can talk it. That's another reason why I thought I'd be a good fit on Missy Tonight.

Or Polly Mackerel. It seemed to me, now that I was thinking of it, that maybe I should be on XBS instead of ABS. Polly's show was one of those variety things. She just had guests, she didn't give a darn what they were known for, just as long as they were known and somebody somewhere wanted to see them on the screen and find out what their hairdo was that week or how they really felt about their stalker. Polly was one of those rare birds who always managed to seem awkward, even though you knew that she'd been doing that show for twenty-seven years. She liked to make it look like she was genuinely awed to be in the presence of some little girl who was the soap star cutie of the month on 'The Day We Breathed'.

I don't know. Polly Mackerel didn't have the kind of panel like Missy did. Missy liked to set up debates - her ringer against some unsuspecting rube of a victim. How those victims remained unsuspecting was astonishing to me. It was like they'd never watched the show. They were stunned at being ambushed, as if they didn't know it was coming. She'd get some congresswoman up there who thought she was going to talk about her bill restricting severance pay for retiring hotel workers, when suddenly one of her regular panelists, Will Roper or Harley Glanz, would bring out some photos of the lady taking money from a salvation army bucket and demand that she explain herself, while Missy D'Angelo, just swiveling there on her

barstool, would be cackling out loud like the vicious witch she is, and you'd be jumping up and down and yelling at the TV, why? Why would anyone ever go on that show? What is the matter with these people? Can they really be that stupid?

And I wanted to be Will Roper. I wanted to be Harley Glanz. I especially wanted to be Gian Carlo Spallanzini when he got a chance to shred someone like Preacher Pete, the famous "Good Jesus" priest who was always doing things like helping the poor and feeding the hungry and generally just begging to be put down. Spallanzini would go off on the whole history of the Bible thing, and how come all these other books got "edited out". I mean, who decided which of God's words were good enough and which were not? Preacher Pete was generally unflappable, but every now and then he'd snap, and that was what you watched for, like you watch the ice dancing at the Olympics just to see them fall on their ass.

Spallanzini was the best. He'd written books. He was a professor. He was on the Missy Tonight. He had a bunch of videos. Spallanzini had my slot. I'm not ashamed to say it. And then he flaked. He showed up all thin and wasted away and refused to insult some fundamentalist jackass. Oh, I was livid. This freak, this doughboy, this little monster of a man was going on and on about the end of days and the rapture and how you ought to be in Alaska if you wanted to be saved, and all that kind of creepy garbage and Spallanzini's just sitting there nodding and going, Alaska? Hmm. Who knew? Maybe Alaska.

It's enough to make you want to shout HECK as loud as you can. I mean, really.

Alaska?

So that was the end of Spallanzini. There were lots of rumors about what happened to him, but I don't really know the facts. All I know is that Missy let him have it, right there on the set on live TV. She told him if he ever showed his face around the studio again she'd have the janitor sweep him into the dumpster. Now I've seen the janitor, it's

starting to make some sense. Can you believe that guy was actually threatening to whack me with his broom? I was definitely going to make an appointment next time.



## Beauregard and Scooter

I don't know if I told you this already, because I'm not very good at remembering what I said, and also because I don't always tell exactly quite precisely the truth all the time, but sometimes I think I'm seeing things. Like I hallucinate. Thursday I was on the phone first thing and made an appointment to see Miz Balze that very same day and when I went downstairs and down the street to wait for the bus I am sure I saw a tree that was never there before. Like a redwood tree. In Spring Hill Lake. It's not like everyday you would see that kind of tree in my neighborhood, especially not right next to the sidewalk by the check cashing place. And then later on when I came home it wasn't there. I was totally convinced I had seen it though. Totally.

That was just the start of a very bad day, not that seeing a tree makes a day bad all by itself, not at all. It was a beautiful tree, in fact, totally out of place in Spring Hill Lake, where even the scraggiest shrub would feel like a beauty queen of nature. The very bad day part came later, when I arrived on time, all dressed up for my appointment and there's already somebody waiting there in the lobby, and it was that Beauregard and Scooter guy, the one with the lame online videos that Althea was showing me. What was he doing there, I wondered, so I asked him, and he said he was doing an interview for a job as a panelist on Missy Tonight. My job! Already there was competition. I asked him how he knew that there was a job even and he said he had got the information from "sources". I guessed that meant maybe he was the kind of guy who knew people who knew other people, but he wouldn't tell me anything more than that. He asked what I was doing there so I changed the subject and asked him which one he was, was he Beauregard or Scooter, because in all of his videos it says Beauregard AND Scooter but it's always only him. He got really annoyed and said that he was Beauregard AND Scooter, not just one or the other. That was his name. His "professional" name, as he put it.

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