

Missy Tonight

by Tom Lichtenberg

copyright 2009 by Tom Lichtenberg

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.

I didn't like this guy. He was wearing some kind of red ski cap and when he talked his mouth went open wide like he was trying to swallow a mouse, and he was loud, the kind of loud that makes you feel embarrassed to even be in the same room as him even though he's the one who should have been embarrassed. I was going to try to make him even more upset so he would screw up his interview but I didn't get the chance, because the receptionist called him over and he went in Miz Balze's office. I was stuck out there in the waiting area for another forty-five minutes.

Forty-five minutes! What the heck were they talking about for so long? And when he finally did come out, Miz Balze was laughing and he was laughing and they were hugging and being friendly and I didn't like the looks of that. I almost thought about leaving and tailing him just to find out where he lived because that might have come in handy later on. Instead, I just stood up and waited for Miz Balze to call me over, but she didn't. She went back in her office and I was left there standing like an idiot.

After a few more minutes I finally sat down again because the receptionist kept looking at me, and that was making me nervous. She was a young and pretty woman, really stunning actually, like a nineteen fifties movie star, with a big pale face, big black hair, and pretty much big all around, and all that made me mad because I hate it when I have to be alone somewhere with a good looking female I don't even know, not just because I'm shy which I am but because it makes me feel like I'm supposed to be doing something and I don't know what that is. Either I'm supposed to be smiling, in which case she might think I'm hitting on her whether I am doing that or not, or I'm supposed to be ignoring her, which she might think was being mean, or else I'm supposed to be courteous and formal but how do you keep that up? Maybe I should be friendly and do a little chit-chat because she's sitting there not doing any work at all that I can see, but then what am I supposed to say? I know I can talk about anything, anything at all. I'm a good talker and all but you've got to get me started. I'm not a good starter at talking, just a good goer once I get started.

She had a nameplate on her desk and it was slightly turned the other way so I couldn't even see it. That was bothering me too. I couldn't think of any reason to take a few steps over in that direction just to get a better look at the nameplate and I was trying to think of reasons. The bathrooms were the other way, so that was out. Anyway, I was supposed to be in there for an interview instead of that Beauregard and Scooter guy who took my time slot.

He really did. When another ten pointless minutes had passed, I heard a buzzing sound and the receptionist picked up the phone and nodded. Then she put it down and said to me, I'm sorry but Miz Balze is unavailable for the rest of the day and she asked me to reschedule you.

Unavailable? That got me. I jumped up and without a word I marched right past the receptionist and burst into Miz Balze's door and she wasn't in there. How was that possible? I had seen her go in there after dismissing B & S, and I hadn't seen her leave and there was no other exit, so she had to be in there, and yet she wasn't. Was it some kind of magic trick? Not to mention that I looked like a total idiot in the eyes of the receptionist, which was a foregone conclusion anyway, right? I always end up looking like an idiot. It's one of my major talents.

And then the tree wasn't there when I got off the bus going home. I had been thinking and thinking and thinking about that tree, and then it wasn't even there. I must have been imagining the whole thing. Maybe the whole morning was a dream, a nightmare. Maybe I was still in bed and never had woken up.

I wish.

I had to work the swing shift, two to ten, which sucked.

All shift long I was thinking of revenge. Nobody treats me like that and gets away with it. Well. Actually, they usually do.

Thomas Kuntz

I don't usually mind working that swing shift because it means that by the time I get home it's almost time for the Missy Tonight show. I've been relying on it for years. I've got a lot of rage inside in case you didn't know, mostly because of my accumulated failures in life. I know that. I'm not trying to hide or pretend that I don't know I haven't amounted to much of anything in spite of all my vivid daydreams, and I do have extremely lifelike fantasies, larger than lifelike even. I have succeeded in everything I have ever undertaken in make-believe. It's only in the so-called real world where I haven't had a date in seven, okay, twelve years. It's only in the so-called real world where I've been stuck in the same dead end job for a decade. It's only in the so-called real world where before that I was stuck in a different yet still totally dead end job. It's not like I didn't go to college. I did. I dropped out but I went. It's not like I'm an idiot. I only look like one in most situations to other people if they even notice me at all.

So I go home and I watch my Missy Tonight at eleven o'clock on ABS. Before there was an ABS, she was on the UHF local channel 20. She's been on for something like forty years now, since I was wearing diapers. My mom used to watch her all the time so that is how I got attached. My mom also has some issues similar to mine, like being a loser and angry about it. Missy D'Angelo, with her sheepdog face and her afghan hair, her tiny frame and her booming voice, her attitude of nobody gets away with anything phony or fake, not on my show they don't, she's been the one that gets me through those times when I can't take it anymore, when I just want to get up and jump around the house and start yelling and shouting HECK and DARN and GEE WILLICKERS ALREADY!

They call her The Queen of Mean and she tries to live up to that. She doesn't know any boundaries. One time she had a nun on her show and she got up and ripped the habit off the nun's head and shouted,

“get a hair style, lady!” Or the time she was badgering some evangelist about what happens if you get raptured by mistake. Do they have a process for handling contingencies like that? In the old days, when the show and Missy were young, she stayed away from controversial topics like that, confining herself mostly to starlets and local celebrities, people she could insult and they'd go along with it because their publicist told them to. It was kind of a standing joke that Missy D'Angelo was harmless, a gag, but useful for budding careers. I think this really got under her skin as time went on, because she got more and more nasty, and more and more vulgar, and then she started adding these panelists to be even meaner than her, and then when the Atheist Broadcasting Service came along and picked up her show, she started going way over the top and made her name not just as the Queen of Mean but as the Queen of Atheist Mean. Like I said before, who knew there was money to be made? Missy did. And Ronald Humm.

That was so perfect. I already loved her from just her regular bitchiness, but then to add the atheist stuff on top of that? It was like she was made just for me, and my mom. It got to the point where really it was the main thing in my day I looked forward to. I even started recording all the shows and now I have a ton of them in various formats (because you never know which ones will become obsolete tomorrow). I spend a lot of time on copying and indexing and organizing my Missy Tonight collection, sometimes even staying up all night. I even joined some of those fan clubs but I quit because of all the stupid comments people make. You can go to anywhere online and if you look at the comments section it's bound to make you sick, because all of these people are saying stuff all the time and it's pointless, really it is. It makes you think you shouldn't even bother. Who cares what anybody has to say about anything?

That's usually the point I get to when I try to write a story. Then I just stop.

Who cares? It's not like there's any shortage out there.

Anyway, I get home, I heat up my frozen bagel bites, I sit down with my tray and my glass of strawberry milk, I turn on the set, and YAY! It's Missy Tonight! (They always play this little sing-songy song which ends with some guy's voice saying "YAY! It's Missy Tonight!")

There is Missy. She is wearing a jet black pants suit. Her sheet of thin silver hair is hanging off her head like a waterfall. Her big round nose and small black eyes are peering out from under her bangs. She's kind of wobbling on black platform shoes as she staggers across the stage to her barstool. She dings on to the table as she pulls herself up onto her seat, where she rearranges her top and shakes her sleeves out. Then she looks at the camera and scowls.

But that's not her usual grimace. Something's different. She looks uneasy.

"Hey everybody", she says in her deep gruff voice. "We've got a show for you tonight". (She always says this, not "we've got a good show" or "we've got a terrific show" but just "we've got a show").

"Professor Kuntz is here".

"What?"

"Coonts?"

"Oh, it's pronounced Coonts, I'm told. Thomas Kuntz, the gay pastor of the Fourth Redemption Church and Profesor of Comparable Religions at New Harbinger College here in Pink City. Also a friend of your old friend and mine, Gian Carlo Spallanzini."

There is applause from the studio audience at the mention of Spallanzini's name. The pastor comes on and makes his way over to the guest stool provided and sits down after reaching over and shaking Missy's hand.

"Nice to see you", Missy says.

Nice?

"Let's start off by asking what everybody wants to know", she says,

"and that is, what happened to Spallanzini? One day he's here as usual, saying 'what the hell is that?', doing his bit, and then he disappears for like a month, and then he shows up again and he's totally changed, he's weird, and then he's gone for good. What is going on, professor?"

Kuntz nods and replies, in a very calm, very smooth and soothing voice,

"Gian Carlo's going through some changes, but he's happy. He is. I want all his fans and friends to know that. He's maybe never been happier in his life".

Someone in the audience boos. They don't want to hear about happiness. This is Missy Tonight. They want bitter. They want angry. They want mean.

"Oh good", replies Missy D'Angelo. "That's nice".

Nice?

Suddenly I realized that something really weird was going on with Missy Tonight.

Preacher Pete

The rest of the show was just baffling. They chatted a little more about Spallanzini, and life-changing events and stuff that happens, and then they moved on to comparative religions, as in, what the hell is that, as Spallanzini used to say, and the professor explained how he teaches his classes and Missy merely nodded and every now and then muttered something about how interesting, and so on. After some commercials they were back with some kids from a group called In Favor Of Youth, as if there was anybody who wasn't in favor of youth, and then there was actually a dog trainer.

I don't know if you're a Missy fan or not, but there's one thing Missy would never stoop to, and everybody knows it's stupid pet stuff. Heck. She never even has a gardener on or anything the least bit to do with nature. Halfway through the show my mom calls up and asks me if I'm watching Missy, which of course I am like I always do, and my mom is worried and wonders if she should call somebody. I told her I already tried and the lines are busy at the Atheist Broadcasting Service.

The show finally ended and Missy looked relieved - she barely looked in the camera when she said her usual "good night and get lost" and staggered off the set. I had to go outside and get some air myself. I had kept calling the station but the lines were always busy. I thought about even going down there but there aren't any buses at that time of night and even if there were it probably wouldn't have done any good. So I just wandered around the 'neighborhood', if you can call it that.

It was a slow night at the liquor store - only half a dozen drunks were sprawled in front of the door. Otherwise all the lights were out all up and down my street, and the only cars were cruising by, looking for things that you don't want to know about. I realized I shouldn't really be out there but suddenly I didn't care. Let somebody jump me, I thought. Wouldn't be the first time. I had a twenty dollar bill that I could do without, my carrying around money. I was really mad. It felt

like everything I knew was wrong. I wanted to have an argument with someone. That's when I remembered about Preacher Pete.

Back when the atheist thing was first catching on, the show was inviting pretty much every sort of religious guest. They had Buddhists, they had Rabbis. They had Evangelicals and Catholic priests. Missy was taking them on all by herself at first, but then they got the idea of pairing up the visitors with the panelists. So they would match up Will Roper against a Catholic, because Will knew a lot about that stuff since he was a former priest himself. They had Harley Glanz take on the fundamentalists because he was a scientist who got really really vicious with his British accent and superior attitude. And they had Gian Carlo Spallanzini for all the weirdos and the miscellaneous freaks, like the astrologers and the metaphysics and the witches and whatever, because he was the head of the department of Defunct Sciences and knew everything about the history of superstitions. The one guy they could never match up well against was Preacher Pete.

There was a time when nobody made me angrier than Preacher Pete. He must have been eighty if he was a day, and spry as anything with twinkly eyes like some kind of miniature smelly Santa Claus. He used to go on the Missy Tonight show and just let them all take their shots, and he'd just smile back with his Good Jesus smile and let them know that he forgave them. Nothing gets an atheist like being forgiven. You want to shout 'forgive yourself you, you, you dumb person, you', because forgiving is something you do when someone does you wrong and you want to let them know that it's okay, that you're not mad at them. Telling someone that his imaginary friend does not exist is maybe doing them wrong, but you do not want to be forgiven for saying that. How smug that Preacher Pete was, forgiving everybody all the time, driving everybody crazy. Spallanzini couldn't touch him, Glanz couldn't get his goat, Roper couldn't find a chink in Preacher Pete's perfectly insoluble armor.

I remember thinking that I could have got to him where those other guys couldn't. Maybe that's even when I got the idea that I should be a

panelist on that show. It was like watching a game show. Category is sin. What's the different between a menial and a hardass sin. They didn't know. I knew. A menial sin is one of those where you get paid by the hour. A hardass sin's got benefits. Okay, I'm joking but I figured the way to get to Preacher Pete was laughter. They never tried that. They tried making fun of stuff, sure, but not really juvenile laughter, like fart jokes involving God in some way. You could pretend to cough and say 'fuckgod' really fast at the same time. He'd probably smile and bob his head for awhile like he always did, because his secret lay in really not listening to anything at all, but after awhile it would get to him. I knew it.

I always wanted to try, and now seemed as good a time as any. I knew that he ran his little do-gooder mission right there in Spring Hill Lake and I figured he would still be there in the middle of the night, like the gosh darn saint he was, helping all the helpless, feeding all the hungry, all that sort of nonsense, so I headed over that way.

I worked out the whole thing in my head, everything I was going to say to that old man, and everything he was going to say back, and then everything I was going to say after that. He hadn't been on Missy Tonight in a while but I was pretty sure I'd read about him still being around and doing good works and generally being annoying.

It was a long walk. I had to go over by the City University, and walk by all the fast food conveniences and all the young people sitting around drinking out of red plastic cups and smoking herbal cigarettes. It was kind of chilly and I didn't bring my sweater so I was not very comfortable. I kept my eyes focused straight ahead and pretended not to notice all the people pointing at me and laughing. If they were. I don't know for sure that they were because I kept my eyes focused straight ahead, but I imagined that they were. After all, they were young and enjoying life and here was this middle-aged man without a sweater marching through their conveniences and obviously wishing he were somewhere else. In between the blocks with people and stuff, there were blocks with no people and no stuff. Those were kind of

scary so I walked a little faster there. I think it was something like twenty blocks all together. It was already after midnight when I came to the Saint Matthews Church and Mission building.

It was closed and locked up tight.

There was a bum or two relaxing on the sidewalk but I didn't feel like talking to anyone but Preacher Pete.

Just my luck.

There was nothing I could do but head for home. All the way back I made up another conversation that I would have with him the next time I went over there, and just like the argument on the way over, I won this one too, hands down. This time I looked around even less, so I didn't even notice much the mist that was getting me soaked, or the stores that were closing, or the kids who were all going home. The streetlights were all that were on by the time I got home. I was super tired so I just went to bed.

It had been a lousy day.

Harold

It was pretty clear to me that there was something very wrong with the Missy Tonight show, and it was just as clear that I was the very person who was exactly what it needed. I had the knowledge and the skills, and remember, I can pundify with the best of them, so I woke up in the morning feeling confident and refreshed. I figured I didn't need to try and make an appointment since that didn't do me any good and if I was going to get lucky than I was going to have to make my own luck. I woke up at exactly 7:11 so I took that as a good sign and it's true the day did start out pretty lucky. I only had to wait ten minutes for the bus and I got my favorite seat (the window seat in the first row right behind the back door). And then the total score was green lights eleven, red lights six, which was a pretty good ratio. You can't hardly do any better than that.

The next bit of luck was that the ABS office was open and the janitor wasn't there and the receptionist wasn't there too, so I walked straight back to the producer's office, opened the door and was about to walk right in when instead she walked right out, almost as if she'd been standing there waiting for the door to be opened. She was a brisk marcher too. I almost lost her before she got to the front door, but I hustled and caught up to her, just in time to push that door open for her as well and she walked right through as if all this was totally expected, as if she always had some volunteer bodyguard who was waiting on her every move.

She turned a sharp right turn and swung away towards the coffee shop, me following close behind. I tried to get her attention by running up along beside her and shouting "Miz Balze! Miz Balze!" but she seemed to have some attention deficit disorder going on, or else I was completely invisible. Of all the times! I've often wanted to become invisible, but not right then. I was quick on my feet though and hurled myself in front of her, blocking the door to the coffee shop. She had to

stop and notice me this time. I thought.

Nope. She made a sharp left turn and bolted for the side door. I ran on ahead and flung myself in front of that one too, shouting her name out again and again. This time she stopped, and she sighed, very loudly.

"Ball-Zay", she corrected my pronunciation.

"Oh", I replied. "Sorry"

"Now can I get my coffee?" she asked.

"Let me", I offered, and ushering her in I rushed to the counter and told the coffee person there to get the lady whatever she wanted. Then, while we waited for the order, I did my thing, speaking as rapidly as I could because I didn't know how much time I'd have.

"I want to be a panelist", I said, "a panelist on the Missy Tonight show. My name is Alan Musted and I've been watching Missy Tonight for years and years and years. I know exactly how it's done. I do the greatest Spallanzini. Also, people are always laughing at me and I've always been an atheist ever since I was a single cell and here I've got a video I made of myself being a panelist so you and Missy can see for yourselves that I am perfect for the job", and with that I thrust a disc at her, a copy of the online thing I'd done the other day.

Miz Balze actually took the disc, which really made my day, and she took her coffee drink, and she turned and walked away. I was taken by surprise again and hurried to open the door for her, then scampered along down the sidewalk beside her while she made her beeline back to the ABS building. There I opened two more doors and was about to follow her into her office when she turned and blocked my way.

"Mister Mustard", she announced, "there is no panelist job on Missy Tonight".

"But", I sputtered, "I was just here for an interview the other day, the receptionist made an appointment, and there was another guy who was here for an interview as well, that Beauregard and Scooter guy."

"Who?"

"Beauregard and Scooter. The guy from the online videos."

"I don't know what you're talking about", she said and then she actually yelled, "now get the hell out of here before I call the cops"

Well, I guess you could say my luck had pretty much run out. I almost wished I had saved some for later. Like maybe if I'd woken up at 8:13, or had more red lights or waited longer for the bus.

"But the guy who was here", I began.

"My nephew Harold", she told me. "You must be referring to Harold", and then she pushed me. She actually did. She stretched forth her arm and shoved me into the hall, and slammed and even locked the door behind me.

This is when I turned around and sure enough, there was the pretty receptionist standing there, staring at me. Did I mention I'd already developed this unbearable crush on her? I snuck out as quietly and as fast as I could. The day was pretty much shot, so I showed up for work about five hours early that day, let Manny go home, and put in an extra, extra long shift directing portable toilets to their profitable destinations.

But I can tell you one thing. I didn't believe that mean lady. I didn't trust her at all. It was obvious that she was scheming to get her nephew the job, if he even was her nephew. There was something fishy going on and I wasn't going to let it stop me.

Sidney Viesel

Turns out it was a busy night for people needing site services. I've often wondered what drives people to order temporary fencing at nine o'clock at night, not to mention the midnight clamor for portable toilets from coast to coast. It's been rumored that our dispatcher jobs will get shipped off to the Indian subcontinent any day now, but so far I still have a job at least. And Althea does too.

After she and I had chatted a bit on the phone - because we often spend a portion of our shifts just gabbing with each other when we're not gabbing with customers - she must have got the feeling that I was kind of down, because she showed up at the office with a giant bowl of home-made spaghetti and some garlic bread on the side. I took my break and we sat there in the so-called cafeteria talking about luck and how it is you can have it and then run out, and trying to figure out how you can find out exactly how much luck you have on any given day so you can try and use it most efficiently.

Althea says she knows for a fact that if she has any luck on a day then it is bound to be just a little tiny bit, so the moment she detects anything lucky occurring, she immediately stops doing whatever it was that was using it, so she can save it for something later. I know what she means. Usually when she tells me stuff about her life and what's going on there's almost no luck whatsoever. Her girlfriends are usually mean to her - they start out sympathetic enough but they quickly get tired of her whining and drop her. It's true. She's a whiner. I should know. I'm not the world's best listener, but I've listened to more Althea-complaining than practically anybody else.

This time I tried to keep the conversation stuck on my problem for a change. What was I going to do about these Balze people? It wasn't fair that the fix was in, that just because this guy's her nephew he should get the first and only crack at the job. I knew I should have followed that guy home the other day. At least I would know where he

lived, and maybe I could do something about him. I didn't know what.

Althea was saying I should go direct to the source, go right to Missy D'Angelo and get around that producer and receptionist and janitor. Maybe that was really the best idea, but I still wanted to level the playing field. I had to figure out how I was going to track down this Harold guy. I've always wanted to do something like that, anyway. You know how in all the crime books and the TV shows, the detectives are hot on the trail, snooping around, staking people out, calling in favors, and bringing down the hammer. I was wanting to bring down a hammer too.

She's like, "no, you can't do that. You can't go around dropping the hammer on people, or whatever the saying is. And anyway", she said, "you don't have any way to find out where this guy lives", so I said, "why are you always being so negative? They do this kind of thing all the time in books and movies" and she says "that's because it's all made up!" As if I didn't know that! So I said, "just because something is all made up doesn't mean it doesn't happen in reality, too".

She was just trying to get the conversation back to her stuff. I know it. She started in again on her latest girlfriend, Leslie Van something-or-other, one of the typical wealthy white chicks that comes to her concerts and wants to buy her drinks even though she knows Althea's an alcoholic because half of her songs are about exactly that, and this clueless woman goes tottering down the path of all the other clueless girlfriends she has, where first they're so in love because Althea's so talented - and really, she is - and then they're possessive, and then they're jealous, and then they're bored, and then they get tired of her, and then they slink off with somebody else, leaving her feeling used and abandoned which is exactly what she is - used and abandoned.

I have heard this story so many times I can practically sing you the soundtrack.

But this is my time to whine. I'm the one who had a lousy day. I'm the one who worked a twelve hour shift. I'm the one who's getting

squeezed out of my natural-born gig by some nepotistic two-named creep. I decided, by the time I got home and discovered that Missy D'Angelo was taking the night off and was replaced by some previously unknown guest host by the name of Sidney Viesel, a remarkably short young man with a pencil mustache and a snippy attitude, that I was going to get to the bottom of everything, and nothing and no one was going to get in my way.

Gulag Bob

I could not get to sleep that night, which was not terribly unusual. Did I tell you I've always had insomnia? As long as I can remember, at least. I think it comes from living next door to Mr. and Mrs. Bigelow when I was a kid. My bedroom was right next to their bedroom, and you never knew if they were going to have a monster fight or be all lovey-dovey. Every night was an adventure. I would stay up waiting, and then I would stay up listening, because either way they were incredibly loud and made the walls shake. It's more than thirty years since the Mrs. did away with the Mr., and for all I now she might still be rotting in jail or dead herself, but I can still hear it clear as anything when I lay awake in my bed, unsleeping in the middle of the night.

“Martha? Martha! Come here you little bitch! What are you hiding back there for? You know you ain't gettin' away from me”.

Oh, she finally got away, she did. My mom was all surprised, and all the neighbors, too. I guess I was the only one who wasn't.

Anyway, with Danny Bigelow ringing in my ears, I got up and paced around the room. My apartment is really, really small, so it doesn't take much pacing. From the bed (which is really just a foam pad on the closet floor) to the table (when it's folded out from the wall) it's only about eight steps. Then from the table to the kitchenette is another four or five. Sometimes when I'm pacing I include the bathroom too, which adds another couple of steps to the route. It doesn't help much.

I really wish I lived somewhere else, because the only thing that lets me get to sleep is going for a walk, and Spring Hill Lake is just no place to walk at night. It's pretty scary actually. I've been walking it now in the middle of the night for years and every time I think I maybe won't get back alive. I can't really move away, though, because I have no money and the rent is cheapest here.

It really sucks being poor.

So I went out of course, and since it was a Friday night it was crowded down along Front Street. The bars were full and the fights were spilling outside. Along the underpass the whores were all lined up and smoking. I turned past the Armory and walked up Hangar Blvd where the airplane factory used to be. The empty buildings boasted the latest in colorful graffiti and jagged broken windows. The cars that passed drove slowly, cruising. I thought that maybe I would head out to the park, but then I realized that was crazy, so I followed the freeway instead.

That's when I saw that tree again. There it was, where it never was before, where it never ever should have been, a redwood tree, sixty, seventy feet in height, planted at the corner of Bilbao and the onramp. There were no other trees for blocks around, not even scraggly citified bonzai, and this tree looked good and strong and, there was something strange about that tree.

I walked over to it, and I walked around it a couple of times, looking for loose dirt, or any hint how it had got there. No way the city was going to plant a tree like that in a place like this. I didn't see any disturbances, no indication that it was recently arrived, but I was certain it was new, and I was certain it was the same tree that had been over by the bus stop just the other day.

Does this make sense to you? I didn't think so. It didn't make sense to me. Trees don't get up and walk around, and they don't go where they don't belong.

I was wondering what I should do about this thing. Should I call the city? Who would I call? Is there a tree-catcher department like they have for dogs?

That's when I heard a voice, a quiet voice, saying "excuse me".

I was all alone out there. I looked around to be sure. There was no one else.

It was the tree.

It doesn't seem so strange to me now since I've gotten to know him. Turned out his name was Plankton and he wasn't really a redwood tree but an alien from galaxy Ninety Four Seven, who just happens to look like a redwood tree. He didn't talk like we do, with a mouth or anything like that. I guess you would call it telepathic, mind to mind. I figured out pretty quick that he could read my mind and I didn't have to talk out loud, which is good, because the last thing I wanted was for people to see me chatting with a tree.

Plankton had a problem. He was supposed to meet his friend here, someone called Gulag Bob or something like that. The way he described him, this friend was sort of like a bird, in the same way that Plankton was sort of like a tree.

Gulag Bob had come to Earth first, and he was supposed to build a landing strip for Plankton so it would be easy to find him. The landing strip was supposed to be a long rectangle of black compacted rock with white lines down the sides. They figured that would be distinctive enough. After all, it had worked on every other planet they'd visited. Too bad for them this area was completely blanketed with exactly that kind of thing - what we call 'roads'.

Now he was stuck. He'd been going from road to road (in the dead of night, and quickly too, so no one could notice), but it looked like it was going to be hopeless. There were so many roads! And birds, lots and lots of birds, although none of them were really like Gulag Bob, who sounded like a parrot from the description I heard. Plankton was depressed.

And so was I. I was dead set on tracking down this Beauregard and Scooter guy and getting him out of the way, but I had no idea where to look for him. Plankton and I were kind of in the same boat. We talked about teaming up. I'd help him look for Gulag Bob and he'd help me look for Harold.

Talk about the blind leading the blind!

Pay 'n 'Pay

Okay, I know what you're thinking. You're wondering, what the heck just happened here? I was telling you about my insomnia, and then I was walking down the dirty and dangerous streets at night, and then all of a sudden there's a talking redwood tree from outer space. Do you think I don't know how that looks? Embarrassing! As if I didn't have enough things going against me already!

The truth of the matter is I didn't even know if my plan to put Beauregard and Scooter out of action was even going to work. I thought about breaking his legs. That might be the easiest solution, but I didn't even know the best way of going about breaking somebody's legs. You could run them over I guess but I didn't even have a car. You could maybe whack them with a baseball bat. Push them down some stairs. But to even do that you first have to find the fellow, and this is a major metropolitan area we are talking about. Aside from Spring Hill Lake and Pink City there's also the Greater Wetford Area, and maybe the guy was even visiting from out of town.

I had checked his online videos to see if there was any indication of where he might be from. Nothing. I had searched online for any other references to the guy, but nothing. I tried looking up his real name, or at least I guessed it was Harold Balze but maybe it wasn't because there was nothing at all. Just because his aunt was Janet Balze didn't mean that he was also a Balze. His last name could be anything and there was no way to know or find out.

Besides, I was having second thoughts. Maybe Althea was right. Maybe I should be talking to Missy D'Angelo directly. If I could only find out where she was. That should be easier - just go the office and ask, but then there was that receptionist I couldn't talk to, and that janitor who was threatening me with his broom, and I already knew I wouldn't get anywhere with the producer. Maybe she was in the phone book or her address was online.

Plankton relocated to the patch of broken up concrete behind my apartment building so we could work together more closely. I had promised him I would go online and look for any possible want ads of a parrot seeking a tree, or a lost parrot, or a lost tree, or any such combination. First I tried to find out Missy D'Angelo's location, but failed.

This was going to be tougher than I thought.

Then I got the idea of putting in our own want ad. Tree Seeking Parrot! There's a lot of sites where you can post a thing like that. So we had to figure out the wording, like Hey Gulag Bob It's Me Plankton I'm Over Here In Spring Hill Lake So Where The Heck Are You?

I was fresh out of ideas about my own situation. I tried to tell Plankton all about it to see what he'd suggest, but it was all a kind of blur to him I think. TV shows, atheism, panelists, rivals, nepotism, none of that made any sense to him and it was really hard to try and explain.

He knew what it was like to be lonely, though. He'd been weeks and weeks in outer space with no one to talk to, nothing much to see except for billions of stars, galaxies, nebulae, comets, planets and moons. Apparently, other space travelers were few and far between. He said there wasn't much call for it, not a lot of demand. It was tiring, took a long time, and wherever you went, there you were. Life forms followed a basic pattern pretty much everywhere, whether organic or inorganic, sentient or idiotic, it was all about self-perpetuation, reproduction, struggle and dumb luck. That wasn't very encouraging!

Friendship is what really matters, Plankton said, which is why he was so intent on finding Gulag Bob. Which reminded me of Althea and made me kind of regret the petty things I was thinking about her when after all, she did come down to the office just to cheer me up and even brought me dinner, and there I was complaining about how she's always complaining! I should be a better friend than that.

And I don't know why, but all of a sudden I remembered something from one of Beuregard and Scooter's videos, so I went back and took

a closer look, and sure enough, right there, at one minute and twelve seconds in, when he leaned over in front of a window, you could see, in the background, and kind of way in the background, the clock tower above the Pay'n'Pay right there in Pink City!!

That was the breakthrough I was looking for. I could probably track down that house or apartment from that portion of the view. I even had Plankton take a look and he was pretty sure he could triangulate from the air and get a bead on the place.

It had been a long night, and it was already almost Saturday morning. With the weekend coming up, and no shifts set up, I had a feeling that my luck was about to change.

Gurkamin

You could learn a lot from a sentient, space-traveling, tree-like organism. Plankton had amazing navigational capabilities. He was able to travel light-years through space and land on a dime, if the dime was approximately twelve feet in diameter. It wasn't a matter of aim. He said that any old computer program could figure out the shortest distance between two points, but no one who'd never gone that way before could ever anticipate the unexpected obstacles along the way. We on Earth have these ideas about 'laws of nature' and 'universal' constants, but it turns out there's no such thing, or rather, there are billions and billions of such things. The laws of nature differ between regions of space, and those regions might be vast or they might be teeny tiny. You don't know until you get there. Traveling throughout the galaxies is more about improvisation and adaptation than you would ever have imagined.

The concept of light years itself is at best a wild guess, because the speed of light is rarely constant for long. There are also many variations, short cuts and long cuts, pot holes and sections of the universe that are, in a sense, slippery when wet. Plankton was amused to see how many of our common road signs were fairly apt metaphors for traveling in space. The best way to travel, he told me, is completely self-sufficiently. You have your own power source, your own sustenance, the ability to satisfy each essential need along the way. As long as you make it through the minefield of unknown traps and pitfalls, and as long as you're able to live for a long time, you can pretty much go anywhere you want. He was unable to estimate his own age in our terms (revolutions of Earth around its sun did not have any meaning for him) but he guessed it must be in the tens of thousands of our years. The same was true for his friend, the bird.

He missed his friend. He'd expected Gulag Bob to find him fairly easily, since he knew that the bird was able to view his travels through any

clear sphere of a glass or quartz-like material - they'd built those on many planets and certainly the materials were plentiful on Earth, so he guessed that Bob already knew he'd landed, and must have foreseen the landing strip confusion potential. This is why Plankton was deliberately planting himself in neighborhoods where there were no other trees. He would stick out like a sore thumb. And yet, so far, no Bob. He was worried that either something bad had happened to his friend or that his friend was being too well taken care of - the bird had a tendency to get fat and lazy. I thought this was probably what happened. People love parrots and give them nice homes.

Despite his worries, Plankton took on my job with pleasure, and literally solved the puzzle in one night. Like I said, the tree could triangulate like nobody's business. Given the clock tower and the camera angle through the window, he had Beauregard and Scooter's apartment nailed down by first thing Saturday morning. He even gave me the street address and apartment number before settling down for a long day's nap. It had never occurred to me before that trees were essentially nocturnal, but then again, there's a lot I don't know anything about.

One thing I did know was bus maps and schedules. I'm sort of a fanatic about that. I collect bus maps. I've got them from cities around the world, places I will never in my life ever go, and I don't just have them, I read them, and I know them. I can tell you about the Erberlest elevated line from Gurkamin to Vardarvok in Bucharest, how many stops it makes, how long it takes, how often it runs, and even what times on weekends and holidays. I know, it's embarrassing. I'm sorry. That's just the way I am. I've got my little foibles just like anybody else. At least I don't collect coffee-stirring spoons, like some people I know, mom.

My problem was the weekend-and-holidays schedule for my own local bus from Spring Hill Lake to the West Kettle section of Pink City, where my target lived. Heck. Weekends the bus hardly ever ran at all - every three hours if you can believe it, and only at nine, twelve, three and

six. Returns trips as well. The alternative was to take the K from Fern to Bascom, transfer to the Halgrin and then again at River Edge. Three buses and that would have taken almost as long, assuming I made all of the connections, which you can never be too sure about, especially on weekends, because they tend to put the lousiest drivers on those shifts. Basically, I was in a pickle. I had to dash out and scramble just to get the nine o'clock bus, which I just barely managed to do.

That was a relief but at the same time, I realized that I had not had time to take a shower, boil my egg, or drink my one point seven cups of coffee. I'm a creature of routine, pretty much. And one sure way to tamper with my luck, if I was even going to have any that day, was to mess with my routine. Some of the worst days I've ever experienced came after missing my morning egg. Or even from boiling it less than the exact eleven minutes it requires. There may be shortcuts in outer space, but there are no shortcuts when it comes to getting your day off to a good start.

I was in a bit of a state while I was riding on that bus along with one old lady who was holding a howling cat in a carrier case on her lap, and a woman with a red pillbox hat tilted oddly off the side of her head. I was waiting for that thing to fall on the floor any second, but it's possible that the laws of gravity on her head were a localized phenomenon, like some of those regions in space the tree was telling me about. I was distracted, in any case, and had to force myself to focus on the matter at hand. What was I going to do about Beauregard and Scooter? I didn't have a plan, or even the beginning of a plan. I decided I would proceed in an iterative fashion - which is a fancy way of saying I would just make it up as I went along.

Salamanders

I have to say that for a tree, Plankton provided excellent directions. I had a pretty decent red light to green light ratio on the way to West Kettle, not that it really mattered because I wasn't on a schedule and it was a Saturday in any case. Soon enough I found myself outside the apartment building, and even though his name was not on the label downstairs, I already knew he lived in apartment four so I didn't have to worry about that. What I did have to worry about was that there was a buzzer downstairs and no other way to get inside the building! I thought that maybe I could wait a bit and someone was bound to come downstairs and open the door, but then again there were only four apartments and it was early on a weekend, and anyway, they probably wouldn't even let me in if they saw me just hanging around waiting like that. This was a real problem and definitely something worth worrying about, which reminded me of Beauregard and Scooter's video about not knowing what to worry about and the irony was there if not amusing.

So I stood there looking like an idiot, trying to think of what to do, and knowing that I didn't have my proper egg and coffee, when right away a very nice looking young woman comes out the front door. Naturally, because every time I'm looking like an idiot there's a pretty girl, and I totally freeze up like usual, trying to think of what am I going to say so that she will let me in the building. It turned out I didn't have to think of anything because my other ultimate talent, being completely invisible, came in very handy. She just pushed the door open and walked right by me. I was lucky that the door was heavy and slow to close, so I just managed to dash inside. Now I was in there it was time to think of a plan.

I couldn't think of one.

Before I knew what I was doing I was walking up the stairs and knocking on his door. Moments later he opened it and there he was,

just like I remembered him, gaping at me with that carp-like mouth and sounding out the words, "what can I do for you?"

I could think of a lot of things he could do for me, like get lost, get out of my way, stop ruining my life, and tell his aunt to give me the job, but right then my mind was racing. I had forgotten to bring the crowbar I'd been planning to use to break his legs. There must be another way to break somebody's legs. Maybe I could push him out the window I saw behind him, in the kitchen. Maybe I could lock him in that closet in the corner. Maybe I could stuff him in the freezer. These were all ideas that were worth considering, but first I had to say something, anything to get inside.

"Remember me?" I said. "From the ABS office on Thursday? I was applying for that job you were."

I sounded like a total moron. Was that even a sentence I said? Harold Balze merely scratched his head and said, "you want to come in?" Before I knew it, I was sitting at his kitchen table with a cup of fresh coffee in front of me. Harold was being super friendly. He offered me a blueberry muffin, which I accepted, because I was hungry. I could see that the window in the kitchen led on to a small deck. Pushing him out of it would gain me nothing, and that closet door did not even have a lock.

"I'm really hoping I can get that job", Harold said. "I've been practicing real hard. I figure if I'm fast enough and funny enough and mean enough and think of enough things to say then it really shouldn't be too hard."

"I can pundify too", I declared. "I really think the job should be mine, but your aunt wouldn't even talk to me. She even said there was no job. I think maybe she is not being fair about this, being your aunt and all. It wouldn't be right."

"She really said there was no job?" Harold asked. "That's weird. She told me I should come in Monday at nine to meet with Ronald Humm. Maybe you should come in then too."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Maybe I wouldn't have to break his legs after all. I breathed a sigh of relief because I really could not think of any effective way to do that.

Harold was getting ready to make another video that morning. He'd been rehearsing when I got there, so he asked me if I wouldn't mind watching him do a practice run and tell him what I thought. He would really value the input, he said. He never got much feedback from people. Most of the time the comments they left were "you're a douche bag" or "get a life, jackass". Not very helpful, generally.

His idea for the video was what if you were selected for a conversation with God (like you were Moses or Mohammed or something) and it turned out that God was incredibly boring and long-winded, and you kept looking at your watch and trying not to yawn and wondering how you could get away tactfully. At first he was just telling this about the plot and then just sitting there looking bored, but that didn't make for a very interesting video. I suggested maybe I could be God, off camera you know, talking in a boring way, which I thought I could do pretty well.

So we spent a couple of hours writing up a script for me to read in my best God voice, and when I did it we recorded me speaking through a toilet paper tube. I was saying things like, then on the fifth day I got around to inventing the salamander. Interesting creature, the salamander. Did you notice I gave them four toes in the front and five toes in the back? Also, I made them have a really moist skin, so they have to live near water or else they'll dry out and die. Ha ha. I like doing things like that, just so you know who's boss. And then I'd go and start in naming the something like five hundred species of salamander, and in the meantime Beaugard and Scooter was the one on camera, occasionally nodding and mumbling something, but usually doing what I said earlier, and he was cracking me up. The guy has got this elastic face that can make all sorts of funny expressions so it was hard for me to keep the boring God voice droning on and on.

I really had a good time, though, and I was glad I didn't hurt the guy

like I was planning to.

Jesus

Sunday morning Althea came over for the usual pancake breakfast. It's been a tradition between us for years now. I can't tell you how many of her girlfriends I've made pancakes for over that time! This time, however, there was nobody else but us, nobody else except for Plankton, that is. I was really excited for Althea to meet him because in all the excitement I hadn't even gotten around to telling her about him yet. So there she is, we're settling down, making coffee, and I casually ask her if she notices anything different outside the window. She glances over, shakes her head, and says

"No. Should I?"

I'm like

"Yeah, duh! Like that giant redwood tree just outside there."

She gives me the funniest look, walks over to the window, takes a good long look, turns back to me and says,

"Are you feeling okay?"

That's when I discovered something that Plankton might have mentioned to me before. That he has the power of invisibility. Of course, I should have realized, otherwise he would have been chopped down already. He would have stuck out like a sore thumb in my crappy little ghetto. So I went over to the window and glared at him. He read my thoughts perfectly well and explained it all nice and calmly. I was kind of miffed, looking like an idiot one more time. What else is new?

All the while I was telepathically communicating with him, Althea was shaking her head and mixing the batter. At least I wasn't talking out loud! But I had questions now. How come if he was so smart he couldn't find his bird friend. What about the crystal ball trick? What about mind-reading and mind-talking. I was getting suspicious of this flying arboreal creature. He told me he was crystal-blind, had been for

a few thousand of our years now, and that he and Gulag Bob had never been able to mind-talk. They'd always had to chatter out loud. It was one of those things that made their friendship special, because they could never know exactly what the other was thinking all the time, and that was a relief for beings who went around being omniscient about everybody else they came in contact with. For instance, Plankton told me, "your friend with the pancake mix doesn't believe I exist whatsoever!"

That was really annoying, so I turned away and said to Althea,

"He's a space traveling alien redwood tree named Plankton who came all the way from another galaxy to visit his friend who looks like a parrot but is also a space traveling alien."

"That's nice", Althea replied. "I'm glad you finally have your own imaginary friend, after hassling me about mine all my life."

"No no", I shouted, "this is different. He's right there. He's right there right now outside the window. I was just talking to him. We communicate telepathically!"

"Sounds handy", she said. "That could save a lot of talking"

"He really is there", I told her, and then I told her all about my adventure with Beauregard and Scooter, and about how Plankton had figured out where the guy lived from just a fuzzy frame of an online video. Althea looked like the cat that swallowed the parrot, or whatever. She had the biggest grin on her face and at least she didn't burst out laughing, at least not for a few minutes. Finally when we were clearing the table she just had to let go.

"You and all your talk all this time mister atheist, you are really a piece of work, do you know that? Don't believe in God, oh no, that would be too much. God, after all, is invisible and knows what you're thinking all the time. Impossible, you say. Ridiculous. Stupid, even. But now you've got yourself an imaginary tree that's invisible and knows what you're thinking all the time. Oh, that's so much more likely. Give me a break", and she laughed and laughed, in fact I've never seen her laugh so much

and I was almost happy to have given her such joy except that I was, you guessed it, feeling like an idiot.

"Ok, Don't believe me", I shouted, "I could prove it to you, but I won't. I could get him to tell me anything you're thinking, but just because you're making fun of me, I won't bother.'

"Oh no you don't", she said, "now that you're bragging you have got to carry through. I'm thinking of a number between one and ten thousand. What is it?"

Instantly, I knew. Plankton told me, and so within a second I replied

"Four thousand three hundred and seventy two"

We did the same thing five more times, including the number seven billion, nine hundred and eight five million, six hundred and twelve thousand, five hundred and three, before she gave up and admitted that maybe there was an incredibly amazing invisible tree outside of the window after all.

"I'd like to see your goddess pull off a stunt like that", I teased her.

"She could, easily", she replied, "And speaking of seeing, how come you can see your tree and I can't?"

That was a good question, so I asked Plankton in my mind and he told me that it doesn't work that way.

"So how does it work?" she wanted to know, but Plankton said he really had no idea. There were billions of things in the universe he knew nothing about and frankly, he'd given up long ago trying to figure everything out. I wanted to ask him more in detail but he got cranky and told me he was tired and was not going to talk about it any longer.

I let it go after that. Althea and I had already made plans to take a paddle boat out on the lake that day, so that is what we did.

Carmody Tooten

I made sure to get to Pink City early on Monday morning. I arrived before the office was even open, so I had to wait around outside. I did notice something I hadn't seen before, a small window just over six feet off the ground that offered a side view into the reception area. I had to jump up and down several times to get a hang of the view, and then I had to jump up and down several more times because from that angle I could see the receptionist's name plate, but I didn't believe what my eyes were telling me, which was that her name was Carmody Tooten. I was convinced I had to be seeing it wrong. What kind of a name is that?

While I was out there on the sidewalk making a fool of myself, several pedestrians passed by and probably thought I was up to no good, so eventually I stopped leaping and went back to waiting by the door. Harold showed up soon enough and we waited together, planning how we would handle the interview. We agreed we would take turns at answering each question, and alternate who would go first. When the janitor finally came around and opened the door, we went inside and sat down together, still planning. The janitor didn't have his broom this time, and we noticed after a few minutes that he was just kind of standing there, looking at us. I was thinking of saying something really rude to him, like, "where's your mop, buddy", but it's a good thing I didn't because moments later he came right over to Harold and said,

"Are you Harold Balze?"

"Yes, I am", Harold replied, "Why do you ask?"

"Well", the old man said, "My name is Ronald Humm and I was expecting to see you this morning at nine. As it's nine and you are you, I suppose we ought to conduct our little business, don't you think?"

I don't know who was more surprised, Harold or me. This disheveled old bastard of a janitor was the richest man around, the owner of the

Pay'n'Pay grocery monopoly? The man who built Pink City single handedly? The man who founded the Atheist Broadcasting Service and the Atheist Shopping Network!

"Um, okay", Harold recovered, and stood up. "Right here?"

"Sure, why not", replied Humm, "I've got plenty to do so let's get it over with quick. Your aunt told me you had something you wanted to ask me about."

"Why yes, "Harold replied, "It's about the Missy Tonight show. My friend and I - this is my friend here, Alan Musted", he continued, gesturing towards me as I stood up too. "we heard that the show needed someone to replace Spallanzini since he got himself booted off the show."

"Replace?" Humm grumbled, "what do you mean replace. Spallanzini was what he was and that's all".

"But he filled a slot", Harold said, "the fat bearded know-it-all, the master of the put down, the sarcastic, biting atheist"

"It's true", Humm replied, with a chuckle, "I always enjoyed Gian Carlo's little rants. That's why we had him on so much. Ah well."

He said this last bit with such sadness, I really believed that he meant it.

"Well, we think we can do what he did", Harold said, "or at least fill his shoes. We've been practicing. I've got a bunch of routines, on videos. Maybe you've seen one or two. They're online."

Ronald Humm shook his head.

"And my friend has one too," Harold said. "And he's been a bitter and comical atheist forever. All of his life, right Alan?"

"That's right", I finally spoke, "all my life".

Right then, as I was about to launch into my thing, who should walk in the door but her, the receptionist, Carmody Tooten, looking more

beautiful than ever, and she went right up to Humm and I couldn't believe it. She leaned over and gave him a kiss on the cheek!

"Good morning, my pet", he told her.

"Good morning, my love", she replied, and stood there beside him, gazing at us.

"Who are these two?" she asked.

"A couple of jokers," Humm said. "They want to be guests on Missy Tonight. Is that right?"

"Well, panelists, actually," said Harold.

"That's right," Humm laughed, "they think that they're little Gian Carlo's."

Carmody Tooten, if indeed that really was her idiotic name, opened her trap and guffawed like a jackal. I never saw someone so pretty turn into something so ugly so quickly.

"Well, I'll let you get back to your serious business," she cackled, and turned and sashayed to her desk. I was left speechless of course by this point. I could only gape after her and completely forgot my routine.

"I guess I should ask you some interview questions," said Humm.

"Okay, shoot," said Harold, who I have to admit was all confidence. He really impressed me with the calm and the poise he was showing.

"Tell me about a time," said Humm, "when you assaulted a federal agent," and he burst out laughing again. Harold opened his mouth to reply, but Humm interrupted.

"No no no," he continued, "tell me about your strong suit and your weak suit"

Once again Harold thought of an answer, and again Ronald Humm would not let him speak.

"Never mind, never mind," he informed us. "There is no job opening on

Missy Tonight, and if there was, I would go out and find who I wanted. I wouldn't be taking someone in off the street who happens to think he'd do well on TV! That's not how it works. You've got to be somebody first. Do something. Be someone. Go on, go and do it, and then maybe, probably not but just maybe, if I ever do hear of one or the other of you two, then maybe you'll hear from me some other time, but not now, not like this. Good day, gentlemen. I'll thank you to leave."

And with that he left us, he just walked away, and I could see Carmody Tooten laughing at me, and I did feel pretty stupid, but then I saw Harold and the look on his face, and I realized that he just felt awful, so I patted him on the back and invited him to that bakery where I'd followed his aunt, and I bought him a coffee and donut. There we sat, on the patio, watching the traffic, and trying to absorb what just happened.

Ants and Tropical Fish

Harold was only down for about five minutes, if that, and then he was back to his usual cheerful self. I could hardly believe it. All of our hopes and dreams had just been brutally crushed by that nasty little fraud of a janitor, and I was already planning vicious schemes of revenge. I would find Humm's car and pour sugar in the gas tank. I would break into his house and fling his tropical fish collection out the window. I would find some way to give his precious "pet" some sort of really itchy rash. That would show her. Who did they think they were dealing with, anyway? I'd been pushed around enough in my life, it was time to do some pushing right back.

But Harold didn't want to listen to my schemes. No, no, he told me, that's not the way to do it. Don't give up hope, he advised. Where there's a will there's a way. I said I sure hoped old Ronald Humm had made his will!

I didn't know it yet, but Harold Balze was probably the most positive person ever born. He worked, I discovered, as a tour guide in the Pink City Science and Nature Museum, which was of course founded and funded by Mr. Ronald Humm. Harold had gone into museuming straight out of college, and by now was a seasoned professional, having worked in museums both large and small. He was always helping little old ladies cross the street, and helping small lost children find their mommies and daddies, and explaining fascinating things to people in ways in which they could understand and even learn something. He had the patience of a stoplight and the smile of a puppy.

The Science Museum was where he'd come to his atheism, like a revelation. Like most Americans, he was raised a half-assed Christian, praying to the Lord for his team to win on Sunday. His parents rushed through grace at mealtimes, and attended all the required church services, but otherwise, nothing. God was here, God was there, God

was everywhere, knew everything, and generally gave a damn. He knew if you'd been naughty or nice, that kind of thing. Harold had reached the age of thirty (a few years earlier) without ever really having wondered about any of that stuff at all. At the Museum an old docent mentioned the number of stars there are in our galaxy, and the number of galaxies there are in the universe - roughly four hundred billion each. That's a four with twenty two zeroes behind it. 400,000,000,000,000,000,000.

What we have here is a failure of imagination, Harold told himself. The human mind cannot conceive of this quantity. It cannot hold such a number of things. Not even if those things are grains of sand, let alone stars. He researched the matter and found an estimate that there are 100 times more stars in the universe than the total number of grains of sand on the Earth!! Then consider that the grains of sand are packed right up next to each other, whereas the stars are vastly separated from each other in space, and you have the even more unimaginable concept of the size of the universe. We think that we can "know" these facts, these ideas, but we cannot hold them in our minds. We can only hold much smaller, much simpler notions, such as 'there is a God who created'.

This God who created also cares. Across all that space, across all those stars, and across all the planets which may orbit those stars, and also their moons, and across all the living things that must inevitably exist on so many of those places, and of all the types of living things, all of the species therein, and all of the populations of those species (and Harold had read there are more individual ants on his block than there are individual people on Earth), this God who created cares about you.

The thought made him laugh out loud while conducting a tour of the Natural History portion of the Museum one day and ever since he had been an atheist. I was happy to hear his story. He told me all of this right then and there at the coffee shop that day, and then he told me that this was why he felt it was so important that he get on the Missy Tonight show. He felt a need to tell the world.

Now it was my turn to laugh, and I chided him for falling for the evangelical fever on the other side of the ditch. Atheists don't need to convert anyone, I said. We only need to mock and make fun. That's where all the joy comes in. Why be an atheist if you cannot ridicule the innocents? My point of view, at least.

He said it was for the children. Imagine, he said, how much damage it does to little minds, to be made to believe without question in things both impossible and frightening. Believing in God makes it easy to believe in the Devil, in ghosts, in the Evil Eye, in bad luck.

Well, I certainly believe in bad luck, I told him. I was living proof of the existence of bad luck. Just look at my life! Look at what had just happened to us! It was my destiny to fail at whatever I attempted. Harold marveled at how I could believe in such things as destiny and fate if I did not believe in a god.

I said, whatever, it is what it is!

Harold refused to give in to my whining. "I have an idea", he said.

"Oh yeah? What's that?" I inquired.

"Let's see Missy D'Angelo", he said. "It's our final and our last best chance to get on the show."

I didn't think it would work. After all, Ronald Humm owned the station and he'd flat out rejected us. How could Missy D'Angelo go against him?

"Where there's a will there's a way", he repeated, and he got on the phone to his aunt to get Missy's address.

Grepford

It was no surprise that Missy D'Angelo was rich, but come on, the place she lived in - all alone, it seemed - was ridiculous even in the age of miniature mansions. She lived in Grepford, the artificial hilltop on the edge of Pink City, a gated community where the security guards wore gloves and gold spangles on their unis. We needed to borrow a pass from Harold's aunt to even get into the place. I don't know why she was always so nice to him, and always so mean to me, but that's family, I guess. I was only along for the ride.

We drove up to the castle - that's what I called it - and had the "young man" take the car. Imagine, valet parking at your house! I don't even want to go into the details; the three lakes, the seven patios, the four dining rooms, everything was a quantity. She had servants and maids and maidservants and cooks, like she was some kind of royalty. It really was weird. Just from being a talk show host? Okay, she was successful and famous and had been doing it for decades, but it didn't add up in my mind. There had to be another source for all that wealth, a rich daddy or something.

We found her by one of the pools on one of the terraces near one of the verandas. There the tiny wretched thing sat in a giant wicker rocker, looking like nothing so much as a rag doll that someone once loved but had lost. Her waterfall of thin white hair hung over her face and covered it so that only her little pug nose was still visible. She had drawn up her knees and was hugging them to her chest and was stone still like an autistic child in the midst of a meltdown. We approached and Harold attempted to get her attention, but she didn't seem to hear us at all.

Harold knelt down (since there were no other chairs in sight) in front of her and reached out his hand and touched her elbow. She reacted as if she'd been struck by lightning, nearly leaping up out of the chair, and shouted,

"Who? What? Who? What?" before calmly down and settling back into her pose.

"Do I know you?" she peered carefully at Harold. "How did you get in my house?"

Harold explained that he was Janet's nephew and that seemed to be good enough for Missy.

"Oh, Janet, okay," she said quietly. "Janet, okay."

"Are you all right, Miss D'Angelo?" Harold asked. "Is there anything I can get you? Anything I can do for you?"

"I've got a billion servants", she snapped. "If I ever want anything at all but I don't. I WANT NOTHING!! DO YOU HEAR?" she suddenly yelled, as if intending to alert the whole world.

I realized then she was crazy.

"But everyone wants something from me," she continued, "oh yes, yes of course. They're all wanting something from me. And what do you want from me, young man?" she stared at Harold with a very mean look. "I'm sure you want something so out with it, OUT WITH IT!!"

"Well", Harold replied, "we were sort of hoping, I mean that we wanted, well, we wanted to be on your show." I knew that he felt as dumb saying it as he looked, and I was glad it was him and not me making a fool of himself.

"Oh, you do," she said bitterly. "Well, why not? What the hell? As if it's my show! It isn't, you know. It's not anymore. It belongs to that vicious little creature now, that Carmody thing. She wants it, oh yes, and the hussy will get what she wants now, won't she?"

I was startled, to say the least. That language! And coming from such a tiny old lady!

"She's trying to get rid of me, I know," she went on. "Even convincing old Ronnie that we need a new look. A new look? Can you believe it? A look? Says we ought to be nice to the fundies, nice to the crazies,

happy and friendly and sweet. FUCK ALL THAT!! How'm I supposed to be nice? What do I know about nice? Did you see me on Thursday? Did you? Horrendous. Horrible. Hateful."

Missy suddenly lapsed into silence and withdrew back into her catatonic posture. Harold looked back at me, and I at him. We were both pretty much in shock, I believe. At least that explained about Thursday, the show with In Favor of Youth and the pet tricks. I'd been wondering about that. But if Missy was supposed to be nice on her show now, that didn't bode well for my dream. I wanted the mean slot, the Spallanzini seat.

"But," I started to say, and I couldn't believe I had opened my mouth, "but that is just wrong. It's just wrong. Why should we ever be nice to those people? When have they ever been that way to us? For hundreds of years they've condemned us, and burned us, and tortured us, and forced us to hide in the shadows, and denied us, and enslaved us, and killed us." I was just babbling then.

"You sound like my Gianni", she spoke. "My Spally, my guy. He is the one who started this mess. I blame it on him."

"But why?" Harold asked.

"When he came on my show all converted. Carmody pounced. She was all over that. See? She told Ronnie, if it can happen to him it can happen to her. Like I want it to happen to me! Going all soft like he did. Now what am going to do?" and with that she burst into tears, she was actually weeping and snorting out loud. Harold got up and tried to put his arms around her but she shoved him away and yelled.

"I'm supposed to be at the studio at two. How can I even go there? How can I even show up? I'm calling in sick. Let that jackass Weasel guy do it again. Maybe I'll never go back. NEVER!!!"

"That would be terrible", I said. "We love you, Missy, lots of us love you, exactly the way that you've been all these years. Don't change now!"

"Do you think I want to, young man?" she scolded me. "It isn't my choice. Nice or nothing, that's what he said. Nice. Or nothing!" and she retreated again into silence.

I signaled for Harold to come over and he did. We stepped closer to the pool and had a rushed, hushed conference.

"What are we going to do?" I whispered, "It sounds like there may not even be a Missy Tonight show anymore! We can't let that happen. We've got to save the show."

"Yeah," he agreed. "We could never get on the show if there isn't a show".

"We've got to come up with something," I muttered, but I had no idea what that was. We were silent for a few moments, and then Harold came up with the plan of his life.

"I've got it!" he declared, and without consulting with me, he rushed back to Missy and told her his notion.

"What if we get your Gian Carlo back?" he said. "What if we get him back and converted, just like he used to be. What if we could do that?"

"If you can do that," Missy murmured, "then you can both come on my show."

"Yes!" Harold jumped up with joy. "We'll do it!" he promised. "Come on, Alan", he said, "we've got something to do. I won't let you down", he told Missy as we left, but she didn't respond. She was lost in her madness again.

New Harbinger

"What the heck?" I nearly shouted at Harold as we got back into his car and left the heavily guarded premises. "How are we supposed to, I mean, come on!" I was having trouble getting the words out.

"Not a problem," he calmly replied. "I know exactly what I'm doing."

"Oh right," I slouched in my seat. "You promised Missy D'Angelo that not only would you bring back Gian Carlo Spallanzini, but you'd bring back the old Gian Carlo Spallanzini, after the guy has practically disappeared not to mentioned completely changed his on-air personality! Where are we even going to find him?"

"Well", replied Harold, after a bit of a silence. "I didn't exactly promise all that, and even if I did, don't forget this fact: failure is always an option."

"That's not very reassuring," I replied. "Heck, what do you even mean by that?"

"I mean," he smiled, "the easy part should be getting Spallanzini back on the show. Whether it's the original Spallanzini or not, well, that's not strictly our problem, now is it?"

I didn't see where he was going with this. I didn't even see why the easy part should be easy. Oh, she wanted him back, that was clear, but why would he even consider it? She had really chewed him out that last time.

I should have known better than to doubt Harold Balze. He really did seem to have a plan. He drove us directly to the New Harbinger College campus and walked us straight over to the offices of Professor Thomas Kuntz, Spallanzini's best friend. He even knew the guy. He later explained he'd taken his class and had been one of the better students in it. Kuntz was happy to see Harold and happy to tell us everything he knew about Spallanzini, his condition, and his whereabouts.

"I don't know that much," he shook his head sadly. "We were really good friends, Gian Carlo and I. I've visited his home many times. Well, what was his home. His wife and the kids are still there, but not him. His wife told me that they'd broken up. Something to do with a car and a bird, she said. He's never since called me or answered my emails. Before he finally left the college for good, he wouldn't even say hello to me anymore. I think he was mad at me. He's supposed to be up on some ranch in the hills nowadays. I blame myself," Kuntz went on. "We had a sort of a bet."

"What bet?" Harold asked after Kuntz had fallen silent.

"The bet?" Kuntz came back to life. "Oh, yes. Not really a bet. More like a challenge, a test. The idea was to pick some random stranger and somehow discover their secret."

"Sounds fishy to me," I said. "How was he going to do that?"

"Didn't matter how", he replied. "It was only to prove that everybody's unique, that at bottom no two are alike."

"Ridiculous", I snorted, "we're like ants, we're like blades of grass. Our differences pale compared to how we're alike."

"Exactly his point", Kuntz replied, and I was pleased with myself for aligning so close with my idol.

"It's the fundamental problem with religions," I continued, "in almost all of the man-made beliefs, the center of everything is man, and the reason they give is that man is unique - not just individual men among men, but humans among creatures as well; we're special, we're different, we're better. 'God gave man dominion over all things'. That's the error at the bottom of it all."

"We know that we're not," added Harold. "Look at a dog, for example. We share almost all of the same body parts, internal organs, skeletal structure, brain activity, we're conceived and we're born the same way, we share hunger and thirst and sexual drives, we're pack animals too, we have eyes that look at the world, all the senses. We differ from

them in degree of these things, but ninety-nine point nine percent we're the same. We're diurnal. We sleep and we rise. We dream in our sleep."

"We're living creatures, mammalian creatures of the planet Earth," I added. "Creatures of this planet alone and we're like all the others that way. Creatures of only this planet."

"Okay," Kuntz replied, looking thoughtful. "I understand what you're saying, and the universe is vast, and so on and so forth. Our differences may be tiny, but the story that each of us tells is unique. That was my only point. That there even are variations among us. Spallanzini was convinced it was nonsense. That everyone's story is exactly the same. He just couldn't admit he was wrong."

"So what happened?" I wanted to know, but Kuntz shook his head.

"He never did tell me", he said. "But I think I can guess. He found out I was right, he was wrong. It seems he found out he was wrong about other things too, things he'd been teaching for years."

"I wonder," Harold said, but then I suddenly realized something that Kuntz had just said and I jumped up and shouted,

"Did you say a bird?"

"A bird?" Kuntz replied.

"You said something about a car and a bird"

"Oh yes, what his wife said one time."

"What kind of a bird," I wanted to know, but Kuntz shook his head and said that he had no idea.

"Where did you say the ranch was?" I insisted.

"Johnson Ranch Road", he replied "Up in the hills near Los Arboles".

"Thanks very much," I replied, and to Harold I said, "come on, let's go"

I made Harold drive us back to my home. I just had a hunch that

Plankton was going to be all over this, and after what happened with Althea, I didn't want to tell Harold a thing until I knew whether he could see Plankton or not.

Mom

It was a little embarrassing to have to show Harold where I lived. I'd seen his place, a very nice, clean apartment in a nice, clean part of Pink City, and we'd just come directly from the mansion home of Missy D'Angelo, so to come back to Spring Hill Lake, and especially the crappiest part of it too was, like I said, embarrassing. Harold didn't seem to notice or mind. He just asked for directions and drove, all the while chattering about interesting things that seemed to pop into his mind from all angles. He discussed the geotechnical details of tiebacks, the origin of divergent species of wood ducks, the number of shades of blue he'd encountered at a paint store, and I don't know how many other items that came and went out of his mouth like a ticker tape on the bottom of a news channel TV screen. The guy was a fountain of ideas but he seemed to pay no attention to reality, such as maybe it wasn't the best idea to park in the handicapped space in the front of the police station, so I made him move the car and park again.

When we got to my apartment I rushed right in so I could tell Plankton the news but there, in the kitchen, was my mom and Althea, just sitting there drinking my tea and eating my last few Wheat Thins. What the heck? Did I tell you that Althea and my mom were an item? Not now, but a long time ago. Which is how I met Althea and how we became friends. For a while she was almost my step-mom. Now they never invade my apartment like this, so I was surprised.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Who's your friend?" asked my mom. "Should I know him?"

I introduced Harold, which led to a whole bunch of questions, because my mother was always a talker. I would have guessed that Harold and her would have hit it off big time because the both of them never shut up. It was incredible. Here I was sitting on the biggest news of the week and my mother and Harold were chatting away about who was

born where and who had lived where and who had done what and who had known who and dang, it was enough to make me scream HECK! But Althea was the first one to break in and say,

"I was telling your mom about Plankton."

So that explained it. Althea was worried about me going insane because of my invisible alien tree friend, so she'd called up my mom and they'd decided to ambush me in my own home. Terrific! I'd thought that Althea was over all that because of the random number thing, but maybe she was only pretending?

"Plankton?" recited Harold, "drifting organisms that inhabit the pelagic zone of oceans, seas, or bodies of fresh water ..."

"Not that kind", Althea said, "It's a name. It's a tree. It's an alien redwood."

"Huh", Harold said, a little confused.

"Is it still there?" asked my mom, looking out the kitchen window, "because I have to tell you the truth, hon. I don't see a thing."

"Yes, he's still there", I sighed, and I mentally signalled to Plankton I had something important to tell him.

"Are you talking about that tree?" asked Harold, pointing at the window. "It looks like a typical redwood to me."

I could have shouted for joy! Harold could see him! Thank goodness.

"Yes, yes," I said, "Do you see him? Right there?"

"Of course," Harold said, "must be fifty feet high. It's odd. I didn't notice any other trees around here. Seems pretty urban and all. Is that the only one?"

"He's actually not from around here," I said, and I turned to Althea and mom and I said, "Harold can see him, so why don't you two just find something else to do. We've got important business to take care of."

"Oh, important business," said mom. "Do you hear that, Althy? He's

got business all of a sudden. Since when did you ever have business? Some crapper needs shipping to Fresno?"

Did I tell you my mom wasn't very supportive of my current profession? She thought I'd do more, that I had 'potential'. It didn't bother her that Althea did exactly the same thing for a living. That was all right for her, but for me? Not at all. My mother would never be happy.

"Go away mom," I said. "It IS business but it's none of yours."

"Well," she declared, standing up, "I'd just hate to be in your way. After all, I only brought you into the world. What you do with your life is your problem."

Althea motioned for me to apologize and make it up with my mom, but I shook my head to say "no", and I motioned right back for her to get lost, and motioned again that I'd talk to her later by phone. All that motioning! But she understood. We could communicate without using words just as well as any old alien redwood.

Mom and Althea cleared out. Harold was already standing right by the window, examining Plankton up close.

"Is he talking to you?" I asked.

"I don't think so", said Harold. "At least I'm not hearing him. Where did he come from, anyway?"

I quickly filled him in on the details. I mentally asked Plankton if he could read Harold's mind and Plankton said no. Plankton was even surprised when I told him that Harold could see him, but he shrugged (in my mind, a telepathic shrug you might say) and said,

"That's just how it goes. Who knows why?"

I told him about Spallanzini and the bird. Plankton got very excited. His branches shook as if there was suddenly a wind, and some of his brown nettles fell to the ground. He wanted to leave right away. I tried to tell him that I couldn't be sure about anything, that maybe it was

only a parakeet, but Plankton had stopped listening and said he'd be back, and with that he uprooted himself and took off. Harold and I were both stunned.

"You never see that every day," Harold said with a low whistle. "That tree just, amazing."

"He said he'd be back," I replied.

Johnson Ranch

Since the tea stuff was already out, we had some, and the rest of the Wheat Thins too. I was still so embarrassed that Harold had to meet my mom and Althea like that, but at least he was cool about Plankton. In fact, he made me tell him everything, which made me wish I knew more. I mean, I hadn't even found out the most obvious things, like where exactly Plankton had come from, and where he had been out in space, all of those details. Harold said we could have looked all that up, even gone to the planetarium and seen for ourselves. Plus there was the matter of locomotion, energy sources, black holes, quasars, all of that stuff I hadn't even bothered to ask. Maybe because I don't know about that, so it wouldn't have made any sense if I had. Harold pulled out a notebook and started writing down questions to ask.

Plankton was gone for a while, a long time. We were beginning to think he would never come back. If he did find his friend, then why would he bother with me? After all, who was I? Just a dumb little earthling. Well, goodbye and good luck I was thinking, when all of a sudden, Plankton appeared - rooted right back in his spot.

"Alan!" he called. "You were right! I found Bob! I can never ever thank you enough. There was the landing strip too, just like he said it would be."

"Awesome," I replied. "Was Spallanzini there too?"

"Was what?" he asked.

"Spallanzini," I repeated, but then I remembered that I hadn't even mentioned to Plankton I was looking for someone. He told me he hadn't really noticed any people, but he was on his way back to the ranch and he only came by to give me directions, just in case I wanted to go and meet Bob before they took off. I said sure and relayed the directions to Harold so he could copy them down in his book. Harold wanted to start in on his questions to Plankton, but Plankton took off,

saying 'see you at the ranch' as he left.

We didn't have any problem finding the place. We just drove up a long, winding mountain highway until we came to Johnson Ranch Road, and followed it up a short way until we got to what had to be Johnson Ranch. All I saw was a house and a barn and some fenced-in pastures for horses. It seemed like a typical farm, except for the alien spacecraft landing strip at the end of the driveway.

We parked and got out and went up to the house. There was no one around. I didn't see Plankton, or at least I couldn't tell him apart from the dozens of redwood trees that surrounded the place. We were totally out in the woods. It was hard to believe we were less than ten miles from the freeway and the cities we'd come from. This was like another world entirely. It was quiet, for one thing, and green. No traffic, no lights. Nothing but trees, grass and horses.

We stood on the porch and waited. Nobody came to the door. I couldn't believe it. We came all this way on the word of a tree!

Harold stepped off the porch and walked over to explore the barn. I sighed and followed, discouraged and tired. I was definitely not having any luck. I was so disoriented I'd even forgotten to count the red lights we had hit on the way out of town. All I could think of was how badly the place smelled of horse shit, when I heard some clopping noises and looked up to see a man and a horse coming out of the barn. On top of the head of the horse was a bird. An African Parrot, it looked like to me.

"Woah, what do you know, it's the Worrying Guy!" said the bird, and he flew off the horse and came over and landed on Harold's right shoulder.

"Beauregard and Scooter!" said the bird.

"You know me?" asked Harold, surprised.

"Love your work," said the bird. "Sometimes I even tell people to call me Scooter. Love the name! That thing that you did, 'What to Worry

About and How'? Cracks me up every time! You've got a gift there, pal."

"Thanks, I guess", replied Harold, who was trying to turn his head to see the bird, but the bird kept evading his glance, hopping around on the back of his neck, on his shoulder-blades, then on his head.

"You must be Alan", the bird said to me. "Thank you for helping my friend. I don't know how he got lost. I gave him explicit directions, and usually he's good about that."

"I know", I said, "he'd make an excellent cartographer".

Boy, was that a dumb thing to say! Even when talking to alien parrots I managed to look like an idiot.

"Right," said the bird, sarcastically. "He's only navigated the entire known universe a boatload of times already."

"There's no need for any of that", Plankton's voice came into my mind, only not. This time I heard it out loud, and even Harold could hear him now.

"All's well that ends well," said the tree.

"I'm glad you showed up," said the bird. "I am really just getting so sick of this place, I can't tell you. These creatures, these humans, ugh," he shuddered and shook all his feathers.

"Don't listen to him", Plankton said, "he's always like that. Everywhere we go, the life forms are never quite good enough for him. He thinks they should all be advanced, but guess what? It takes time. Lots of time. Maybe in three or four million more years there'll be life forms even here that have what it takes."

"They've got to start over", said Gulag Bob. "I'm telling you, this is what happens when you start from the sea. Nothing worthwhile ever comes out that way. Evolve from the air! That's what I say"

"He's got a bit of a bias", I heard someone saying, and at first I thought the voice came from the horse, which wouldn't have surprised me at

all at that point, but it turned out to be from the man who was leading it. I didn't even recognize my hero, but indeed it was he, Gian Carlo Spallanzini. The man I had previously seen on TV was big all around with a bushy brown beard and tortoise-shell glasses. This was a skinny old clean-shaven guy in filthy overalls and shit-covered boots.

"He thinks he's hot shit," Spallanzini went on, with a smile.

"Damn straight," said the bird, "and don't you forget it."

I could swear the bird winked. He hopped back on to the horse's head and looked straight at Harold and me.

"I like a good joke," said the parrot. "You humans are at least good for that."

"Mr. Spallanzini," I began, but he interrupted,

"Call me Gian Carlo."

"Okay, Gian Carlo," I continued, "We came out here hoping to find you."

"Find ME?" Spallanzini laughed. "I guess you boys aren't too excited about this here parrot from outer space or his friend the traveling rocket ship tree."

"Rocket ship?" I asked, "Plankton is a rocket ship?"

"That's right," Spallanzini replied. "He's carrying a whole bunch of passengers, too. Ain't that right, Goo-laa-baa?"

"I told you never to call me that," said the bird, "but you're right. Plankton's carrying all of my kids. Come on out, little ones", he called, and then, from every one of Plankton's long branches (and in the process, revealing his own location nearby) came dozens of very small birds, rushing into the sky and flying and diving and chirping it up so loudly you could hardly hear anything else. These little birds weren't parrots, they were more like sparrows, or nut-hatches, as Harold would later confirm. They were tiny and brown with black heads and white wing tips, and they seemed just as normal as any little birds you

would see in the woods.

"We're off to Dwingeloo 1," said the parrot. "The kids have been wanting to go home for awhile. We just stopped off on Earth for a breather. It's a long way to go all at once."

"I could have kept driving, easy", said Plankton.

"You know how you get after too many light years," Bob replied. "You get cranky and start shedding nettles."

"Whatever," Plankton replied. I could tell this was a sore subject.

"But we're all ready now," said the parrot.

"You're going?" asked Spallanzini.

"That's right," said the bird. "So you take it easy, okay? And don't be so hard on yourself."

"Okay", Spallanzini quietly replied. Apparently there was some secret.

"Everybody get set!" yelled the parrot, and the hundreds of birdlets gathered together in a mass in the sky. Plankton lifted out of the ground and took himself over to the middle of the paved landing strip. Spallanzini ran over to the barn and hit some switches. A cirde of bright blue lights came on, surrounding the tree on the launch pad. The birds all screamed even louder and swooped down, back into the tree, each one in its place, disappearing in holes that I'd never even noticed before. The parrot - Gulag Bob, Goo-laa-baa, Scooter - flew up and perched on the very top branch of the tree. He turned his head up to the blue sky above and made a very strange sound which I couldn't describe and then, like a flash, with a burst of green light they were gone, just like that.

Henrik Trachtenfeld

We stood there and gaped for a while, staring up at the sky where they'd gone, seeing nothing, of course. They were far, far away. Finally, Spallanzini announced that he needed to take the horse out to the yard, and invited us to join him inside after that.

"I'm pretty sure we still have some muffins that our friend Mr. Comcat just baked this morning."

He apologized for the mess in the kitchen, explaining that his housemates were all on the road at the moment. They'd be sorry they'd missed what just happened.

"I'm going to miss Goo-laa-baa," he said sadly, as he brought over muffins and tea, "but he always warned us he wouldn't stay long."

We were seated around a giant oak table – it seemed there were vast distances between us, and that I had to talk loud to be heard. It was Harold who did most of the talking, asking about the house mates, the daily routine, the life at the ranch in general. I finally worked up the courage to ask him what happened to him, not to get too personal, of course, but as a fan, I just wondered.

"Going through changes," he said. "I was sleep-walking my way through my life. My eyes were suddenly opened, not by choice, nor by chance, come to think of it, but by life, by its mystery, by its ways. I supposed I ought to visit my kids," he sighed, "but I don't think they miss me too much. I wasn't that great of a dad."

"There's still time," Harold said, and Spallanzini nodded and smiled.

He was writing a book now, he said, about the original people thereabouts, the Mintiks, who apparently had a much more advanced society than they'd ever been given credit for. His book was going to change all that. Of course, he said, he was going to publish it under a pseudonym - Henrik Trachtenfeld - so people wouldn't get it confused

with all of the crap he'd published before. "Everything turned out to be wrong," he said.

"You know that game, whisper down the lane?" He asked. "Where you line up a bunch of people, and each one whispers a phrase to his neighbor, who passes it along, and by the time you get to the end it's totally garbled and wrong? Well, that's exactly what happened with the so-called wisdom of the ancients. Mis-translations, mis-hearings, mis-interpretations. Finally, it comes out all wrong. That bit in the Bible about a camel going through the eye of a needle? Well, it wasn't a camel, it was a rope, a thick sailor's rope. You had to take merely a strand, not the whole. When you hear it like that, it makes sense. But a camel's absurd, and the reason is simple - the word was translated wrong. There's so many things just like that. Astrology, for example. What if they picked the wrong stars? And that saying, 'you make your own luck', well, it's almost true. You can find your own luck, if you line yourself up with the world. Not make it, though, find it. See what a difference that one word can make?"

"Which reminds me", Harold said, "of why we're even here. We wanted to be on the Missy Tonight show."

"We want to be you," I sheepishly added.

"Well, I don't think I can help you out there," said Gian Carlo. "I'm not someone they want on that show anymore"

"No, no," Harold said, "just the opposite. Missy just told us herself. She doesn't even want to go back on the air without you."

"Seriously?" said Spallanzini, "that's odd. The last time I saw her she was really pissed off."

"Things have changed," I explained. "She asked us to find you. She promised that if you'd go on then we could go on, and we really, really want to go on"

"I'll call her," announced Harold, and he pulled out his phone and punched in her number, which I was not surprised to notice he'd

memorized. The man was a walking notebook.

He had to get through a couple of servants first, but eventually Missy herself came on the line. Harold put her on speaker phone.

"Who did you say you were?" she grumbled.

"Harold Balze."

"That's what the boy told me," she replied, "but just who is Harold Balze?"

"Janet's nephew. Your producer's nephew. We just met you this morning, my friend Alan and I. You said we could go on your show if we found Spallanzini".

"Oh yes," she perked up, "I remember. And did you? Did you find him?"

"I'm sitting right here, Missy," Gian Carlo spoke up. "They found me all right."

"Thank God", Missy said, "or thank Someone at least. Did they explain it to you? Did they tell you what they're doing to me?"

"They told me you wanted me on. I have to admit I'm surprised."

"I need you," she said. "It'll be like old times."

"If you say so," Gian Carlo replied.

"You know we shoot live", Missy said, "Can you be there tonight? At eleven? I'll have Janet let you in the side door, by the bank. That way old Hummer won't know."

"Okay," said Gian Carlo, cautiously. He was definitely feeling confused.

"What about us?" I cried out.

"You be there too," she said, excitedly. "I'm going to get Preacher Pete. Remember old Pete? You never could get him, Gian Carlo. You never could shake him. Well, tonight is the night, do you think you can do it? You think you can rattle the old bugger's cage?"

"Oh, I don't know," Spallanzini said, "He's a hard one to ruffle"

"Game on!" Missy said. "Oh, this will be good. I'll show that old bastard what he thinks he can do. And the little bitch too. Ha ha ha!" and with that Missy slammed down the phone.

Gian Carlo looked over at Harold and me. We just shrugged. Harold said,

"You know her better than we do."

"Should we come pick you up later?" I asked, anxious to get out of there before one of us messed up and said too much.

"Um, sure," he said.

"Okay, great", I said. "Come on, Harold, let's go. We've got things to do."

"We do?" he asked.

"Yep, yep."

I made him get up. We hurriedly said goodbye to Gian Carlo, promised to come back by nine o'clock later that night. Back in the car, we shouted and laughed. Yes, we did it! We did it! We're really going to be going on Missy Tonight and tonight! Let all the chips fall and the cookies all crumble. So we were stretching the truth just a bit, and so what? Sometimes you've just got to line yourself up with the world. Spallanzini just said so himself.

Ronald Humm

We drove back out to the ranch later that night, and picked up Spallanzini, then headed to the Pink City studio. Harold's aunt Janet met us at the side door. She really had a fondness for the guy. She was all smiles and hugs for the three of us – and I hadn't forgotten her rudeness to me just a few days before! We'd all done our best to get ready. I was wearing my best outfit, which is not saying much. Harold too, which was. Spallanzini at least had changed out of that ranch-hand outfit and seemed to have taken a shower. Janet hushed us and made us promise to be as quiet as mice, and snuck us into a side dressing room until it was time. Humm didn't know we were coming, she said. Missy had told him a story about how she was ready to do it his way. We all knew it wasn't true, Janet winked, but the old guy seemed to fall for it. He was happy to hear about Preacher Pete but as far as he knew that was it, just Missy and the Good Jesus Minister.

We could hear the show a little from the dressing room, but mostly it was just muffled sounds. Harold and Gian Carlo seemed calm but I was more nervous than I'd ever been. Was I really going to be on the show? I thought about what I should say, how I should act. Play it cool, I was telling myself. As if I knew how to do that!

Fortunately we did not have to wait for too long. Janet came and unlocked the door and we followed her backstage on tiptoes, where we could hear Missy announce that she had a very, very special guest coming up, "right after this". Janet was almost giddy with excitement. Missy too. I had not seen her smiling like that ever before. The audience, however, was restless. I later discovered that they didn't know that Missy was going to be "nice." They thought, they assumed, it was going to be Missy as usual, the Missy they knew, the Missy they loved, but she was all sweetness and light. She had asked Preacher Pete about all his good works, and asked him for his favorite "nice" quotes from the Bible. "There's a lot of good stuff in that book", she

even said, to audible gasps from the crowd. She had even patted his arm!

Ronald Humm was in the front row, looking uncertain. Beside him sat Carmody Tooten, very nicely dressed and made up. She was watching the show very closely. From what Missy had said, we guessed that Miss Tooten was hoping she'd fail, hoping she'd crack and go nuts with the strain. She was plotting to take over the show and just waiting for Missy to fall. But Missy wasn't messing up. She was actually pulling it off!

And that is where we came in on the scene.

"Ladies and gentlemen, friends", she declared, "it's distinctly my pleasure to welcome back to the show, one of our all-time favorite guests, the one, the only, Gian Carlo Spallanzini and oh, and his friends."

We walked out on stage and the audience roared. They thought they were in for a treat. Gian Carlo waved, bashfully, while Harold and I waved madly and happily. We all took our seats at the table. Gian Carlo sat right next to Missy, with Preacher Pete right next to him, and then Harold and then me at the end.

I could see the old man standing up in the front row and it looked for a moment like he was going to come charging onto the stage, but then Carmody reached out and pulled him back down in his seat. He was muttering something to her and she made him shut up with her hand on his mouth.

"You certainly remember our friend, Preacher Pete," Missy said to Gian Carlo, after she had introduced him and he had introduced us, very briefly.

"Of course," Spallanzini replied, and he reached over and shook hands with the priest, as did we.

"Wonderful to see you again," the jolly old priest said to him, "and a pleasure to meet both of you", to us.

"I have an idea", Missy said. "I want to do something we've not done for awhile. I call it 'free association'. I have a list of topics right here. I'm going to say them, and you will respond, as quick as you can. Okay? Here we go."

It was pretty clear what she was up to. She was trying to draw out the old, nasty Gian Carlo. She knew all his buttons and would push them relentlessly. Unfortunately for her, his buttons had been decommissioned."

"Suicide bombers," she started off.

"Poor, misguided souls," said the priest.

"Yet they do have a point," said Gian Carlo. "They believe that the next world is better than this one. Isn't that true for all Christians as well?"

"But we value this gift of our Lord we call life," said the priest, and Gian Carlo nodded and said,

"As we should."

"The devil!" said Missy D'Angelo.

"The spirit of evil in man", said the priest, who did not believe in the literal Satan.

"Agreed," shrugged Spallanzini. "Quite so"

"Polytheism," she said.

"Well, why not?" Spallanzini said.

"The many facets of the one," said the priest.

And so it went on, rapid fire. She went down her list and the two guests replied. Harold and I didn't get to say much. Harold got a word in about virgin sacrifices. He thought it was very mysterious, why anyone would think it would work. Even the gods like to go where no man's gone before, was Gian Carlo's rejoinder to that!

I was just so happy to be there, I forgot I ought to do something to

make an impression. The lights were so bright, and the audience so interesting to look at. Besides, these guys were all talking so fast. I suppose it was like what they say about facing big league pitching for the first time. You don't realize the speed of the game. I was clearly not ready for this. All of my daydreams were shattered. It was nothing like I had imagined.

Harold and I fell into watching the whole back and forth like a tennis match, our heads swiveling this way and that. Missy was getting restless, and running out of her list. More than once I caught her glaring at Harold and me. We had promised her the old Spallanzini, and what we had brought was just more of the new. This was not the plan we agreed on. This was not the idea.

Her voice got louder and louder. Her face got redder and redder. During the next commercial break she hissed at Spallanzini.

"What the hell is this?" she said, paraphrasing his most famous tag line.

"I'm just playing along," he replied. "You were expecting something else?"

"I was expecting the real Gian Carlo," she spat. "What's your game? What're you selling now? I don't trust you one bit."

"He seems to have grown up a lot," said the priest.

"You shut up, you old bag!" she snapped at old Pete. "I know what I'll get out of you. It's been the same old crap for twenty years now. Feed the hungry. Heal the sick. What the fuck would Good Jesus do?"

"Language", cautioned the priest.

"Go fuck yourself", Missy said. "And you", she turned on Harold and me, "you promised me the old Spallanzini. You'd said you would save my show. Now she's going to win. I can't take anymore. God damn it! Why'd I ever listen to you?"

But the show must go on. They counted down back from commercial

and Missy snapped to. She tried to stay nice. She tried to keep smiling. She was stuck and she knew it. She was just on the verge of exploding, and every minute the audience was getting more and more unhappy. When Gian Carlo praised the Catholic Church for its history of charity, they even started to shout and to boo.

"They steal all your money, then hand you some crumbs," someone shouted.

"Murderers and thieves," cried another.

"To hell with the Church," yelled somebody else.

At the same time, as we later found out, the phone lines were going crazy with viewers at home calling in to complain. This was a hardcore "New Atheist" crowd. Any minute now they'd start throwing things. Missy raised the topic of pedophile priests, and Gian Carlo was starting to say something about a few bad apples, when, literally, bad apples came hurtling out from the crowd, exploding on the desk and the floor all around us.

Harold and I dove for cover. Suddenly I heard someone shout

"Religion is evil!"

I saw it was Carmody Tooten. She jumped out of her seat and came right on the stage and stood up before Spallanzini.

"How dare you defend him! He's been covering up for those criminals!" she accused.

"Yeah," I managed to say. "A priest raped my mom and that's how I was born!"

I kind of wished I hadn't said that out loud. It was actually the only thing I said on that show. Oh well.

The next thing I knew, security guards had been called, and Gian Carlo and Harold and I were all walked off the set. They said it was for our protection, but they left the old man sitting there. Carmody Tooten just took our place and started in yelling at old Preacher Pete, calling

him a child molester, a vulture, a fraud. Old Pete wasn't rattled at all. He smiled and said, no, no, and no, and finally,

“God will forgive you, my child.”

That's all that I heard. By the time he said that we were all on our way to the police station. Ronald Humm had charged us with illegal trespass, and as all knew, old Humm had a lot of juice in that town.

We spent a long night in the jail cell. Spallanzini wasn't very amused. We'd finally had to admit what we'd done, how we'd tricked Missy into letting us on. He did think it was funny, but still. It had been a very strange day.

Missy D'Angelo

At least something good came out of all that. We saved Missy's show after all. Carmody Tooten had jumped on the chance, realizing which way the wind blew, and set herself up as the permanent malevolent sidekick to the bad, nasty Missy beloved by all.

She got to be Spallanzini! See? I knew there was an opening for that job! And she was damn good at it too. The woman was even more vicious and cruel than Gian Carlo or even than Missy. I had a feeling she had a long future in store for herself on TV.

But I never got any thanks. You'd think that I would. After all, if it weren't for me, none of that would have happened at all. But did I ever hear back from Missy? No. Did I ever get credit it all? Not a bit.

And I still haven't figured out how I can cash in on this atheist thing. I've just never had any luck. I never had anyone's help, and I never have caught any breaks. I just don't know how to line myself up with the world.

Harold, on the other hand, well, Harold's done better than me. Encouraged by Goo-laa-baa, he continued making his videos and even published some books. He became quite well-known, filling in the niche Spallanzini left behind in the online world.

Spallanzini, as Trachtenfeld, is doing quite well for himself too. His books on the Mintiks have caused quite a stir. I heard that he even went home to his wife and his kids. All's well that ends well, as Plankton would say.

As for me, I hate to admit it. I'm still sending toilets around nationwide, and thinking of writing a book, but I know that I'll never get anywhere doing that. Nobody cares what I have to say and why should they? It's not like there's any shortage out there. People are jabbering about stuff all the time.

And it's true I evolved from the sea!!

Maybe there's money to be made in collectible bus maps. Maybe there's someone out there who'd be curious to know about redwood tree rockets in space, but I doubt it. I remember what Plankton once told me, that all of us life forms follow a pattern, and it's pretty much the same everywhere. What matters, he told me, is friendship, and at least I have that. Harold didn't forget me. We are friends, and there's Althea, and mom, and who knows? Maybe someday I'll wake up in the night and I'll look out my window and there'll be a tree, a beautiful gigantic redwood tree, towering over my home, and filled with the singing of birds.

THE END

Check out the companion story, "Orange Car with Stripes", in which other stuff happens.

Thanks for reading! Reviews and comments of all kinds are always welcome and appreciated. For more Pigeon Weather Productions, please visit <http://pigeonweather.wordpress.com>

