

## THE LADY VANISHES

by Dan Fesperman

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Not a foreign dispatch, but a bizarre tale all the same, involving the notorious Madalyn Murray O'Hair, who was later found murdered

After 17 months without a word, William Murray figures that his mother, the famous atheist, must be dead by now, if only because she never could have kept her mouth shut this long.

That's 17 months without once railing against a televangelist, or browbeating her followers for money, or getting thrown out of a truck stop for profanity.

That's almost a year and a half without shouting her fading battle cry -- that she, Madalyn Murray O'Hair, the Pope of Organized Atheism, is the Most Hated Woman in America, and (please!) don't you ever forget it.

The noise stopped on a weekend morning in August 1995, when O'Hair disappeared along with younger son Jon and granddaughter Robin. By all signs, they bolted from an unfinished breakfast in their home in Austin, Texas, taped an urgent note to an office door and headed south to San Antonio.

There the trail goes cold: They were last heard from that September, then vanished into suburbia with a puff of credit card receipts, abandoned cars and cell phone static.

Oh, and nearly \$ 630,000 disappeared with them.

Jon took the money, draining it from two of the atheist organizations that he, Madalyn and Robin had ruled for years like an unholy trinity. Some people believe they tucked away millions more in Swiss banks.

Now, followers and enemies alike are looking for them. So is William Murray -- son of Madalyn, brother of Jon, father of Robin -- although he hasn't spoken to them in years. Joining the hunt are a handful of reporters and a few unenthusiastic police.

Some think the trail will lead to shallow graves, forlorn dimples upon the Texas sand covered by scrub and sagebrush. Others believe Madalyn simply up and died, that Jon and Robin scattered her ashes and fled, first for the banks, then for the hills. Or perhaps the whole trio ran off to New Zealand, to a hidy-hole of trust funds and government bonds.

If the latter is true, then the self-described "loudmouth housewife from Baltimore," who in 1963 helped knock organized prayer from America's public schools, may at this very moment be relaxing by the sea, a 77-year-old grandma lounging with her oddly inseparable companions, Jon, 42, and Robin, 31.

It would be quite a scene -- three chunky adults with the same narrowed eyes, the same slow and ponderous movements, dressed as conventionally as Kiwanians from Ohio. The soundtrack would be Madalyn's whining stream of venom with its Bawlamer "gawddamns," Jon snarling his blunt arsenal of insults with his Elmer Fudd R's, Robin occasionally shouting in self-defense. It is the way almost everyone remembers them -- nasty but witty, an angry, compressed universe of three hot and noisy planets revolving tightly around themselves. By now, they'd have turned their new Eden into the same old family Hell.

So don't try peddling any flight-to-paradise theories to atheist David Kent.

A one-time employee who long ago became disillusioned with Madalyn, he finds the idea as preposterous as Christianity.

"If Madalyn resurfaces," Kent says, "I will begin to believe in the resurrection of the dead."

It is only fitting that O'Hair's life has taken this strange final twist, for it never lacked bizarre characters or gothic turns of plot. Pull on just about any of the threads woven into the mystery and you unravel a loose bit of stitching from her past.

Friends and associates who haven't been interviewed for years have lately been sought once again by the media, and the irony of their encore is this:

After nearly 34 years of shouting to regain the public's attention, O'Hair has at last succeeded by turning as mute as a pillar of salt.

The silence has been a long time coming. She was born as Madalyn Mays on a Palm Sunday in Pittsburgh, April 1919. She was baptized a Presbyterian, said her prayers at bedtime and eventually went to college at an Ohio school run by the Church of the Brethren.

At 22, she eloped with steelworker John Roths; then they went off to World War II. She served in Europe in the Women's Army Corps, writing home that the Allies would win because "God is on our side."

With the war winding down, she met a married officer named William Murray Jr. and conceived her first child. Murray was a Catholic and wished to remain one.

He refused to divorce his wife to marry Madalyn. She took his name anyway, both for her baby and herself.

She returned home from the war to find her parents broke and living in a shack with a dirt floor, no electricity and no running water. When Roths returned, she asked for a divorce.

It was during those bleak times, her son William believes, that she decided there was no God. In his autobiography, "My Life Without God," he shares the family tale of her epiphany in the midst of a raging thunderstorm:

"Her mother and brother stood at the door as she strode dramatically out into the yard. When she was sure her audience was in place, she shook her hand menacingly toward the heavens and, at the top of her voice, unleashed blasphemies intended to provoke violent wrath from God. When enough time had passed to indicate God was not going to respond, she strode triumphantly back inside, saying excitedly: 'You see, you see! If God exists, he would surely have taken up my challenge. I've proved irrefutably that God does not exist!'"

In 1952, a new job for her father took the family to Baltimore. In a two-story brick rowhouse on Winford Road a few blocks off Loch Raven Boulevard, they nestled uneasily into the bosom of Cold War suburbia with its fears, comforts and pieties.

Two years later, a second son, Jon, was born of a liaison with a Michael Fiorello, although Jon also became a Murray. He joined a crowded household where the television was almost always at top volume, if only to drown out the arguments.

"It was," William says, "one of America's premier dysfunctional homes."

In those days, and in that kind of neighborhood, about the only things more socially unacceptable than children born out of wedlock were communism and atheism. Madalyn Mays Murray would embrace both, bursting upon the '60s as a harbinger of the upheaval to come.

America would never be quite the same.

Arnold Via, 72, points to the swing in his front yard where Madalyn sat two weeks before she disappeared. It is blanketed in snow now, swaying slightly in an icy breeze. Then he retrieves the picture he snapped that day, Aug. 11, 1995, the last known photo of Madalyn Murray O'Hair.

She is wearing a blue print dress, resting in dappled sunlight, legs crossed, a cane in her hand. She's smiling, if a bit warily. She, Jon and Robin had spent part of that week in Williamsburg before driving to Via's house, near the end of a dirt road at the foot of a mountain in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. Friendships with Madalyn seem to survive best on limited contact, and with few exceptions those claiming to feel closest to her live far away.

"We enjoyed the day together. Madalyn was very witty," Via recalls. "She took a nap. Everything was hunky-dory. There was no sign at all that they planned to skip the country."

Now he is of two minds about their disappearance. Either they've been kidnapped by the Vatican or they ran off with the money -- part of it his money, considering the thousands he gave over the years.

With his unruly silver beard and pale blue eyes, Via looks like an aging Confederate general, and sounds like Walter Brennan tuned to a lower register.

Some members grumble that he has gone off the deep end down there in his valley, hiking the forest with his .38 revolver, rules of the trail be damned. But, as a supporter from the beginning, he demonstrates why some atheists are so devoted to O'Hair, and the void they feel in her absence.

His atheism dates to World War II, on his 20th birthday, when he was a Navy seaman in the Pacific who had decided to be baptized. A chaplain began administering the rites, sprinkling holy water and muttering in Latin beneath a tiki roof, when, "All of a sudden," Via says, "I thought, 'This is a crock.' "

He ran from the chapel, shaken, convinced he was the only soul in the world who didn't believe in God. He felt that way until he was back in Virginia, when his brother gave him "The Bible Unmasked," a book by the Free Thought Press. But there was still plenty of thinking to do during years as a merchant seaman, standing the overnight watch on the decks of big ships, pondering the big questions alone beneath the stars, days removed from land.

So it was that by 1960, when O'Hair began to make headlines, Via and others like him were primed to become disciples for anyone bold enough to shout down the Christian masses. And until September 1995, he felt like he was getting his money's worth.

Madalyn O'Hair might never have filed the lawsuit that made her famous if she hadn't dabbled in communism. She held meetings in her basement and passed literature on the street, and in 1960 decided her family would be better off defecting to the Soviet Union.

They journeyed overseas to try, William says, but the Moscow bureaucrats kept them waiting too long. By the time they returned to Baltimore, school had started, and she had to explain William's late enrollment to teachers at Woodbourne Junior High (now Chinquapin Middle School). On their way they strolled by a classroom where the students were reciting the Lord's Prayer.

"Why in hell didn't you tell me about this?" she said to William, and when school officials refused to excuse her son from the daily ritual, she kept him home. Her protest would end 2 1/2 years later, in the halls of the Supreme Court.

When the ruling was announced in the summer of 1963, its decisiveness was stunning: 8-1 in favor of William Murray. By the time kids went back to school that September, prayers were no longer on the daily schedule.

Never mind that most of the credit should go to Ed Schempp, a Philadelphia Unitarian. Madalyn's case was merely tacked onto his. But she was quicker to seize the moment, reveling in the role of lightning rod, energized rather than melted by the jagged surge of public rage. And if that meant your son got beat up, or that your puppies, Marx and Engels, got taken to court for yapping, or that your family ended up on a wearisome odyssey from Baltimore to Hawaii to Mexico and, finally, up into Texas, well, that was the price you paid for attention.

Getting all those unsolicited contributions in the mail didn't hurt, either. Atheism, it seemed, paid better than communism.

David Travis sips iced tea in a cafe in Austin and recalls the day he lost faith in Madalyn. It was in March 1995, about five months before the disappearance, and he was opening the mail.

Usually Madalyn, Jon and Robin screened the important stuff before passing along the rest. Travis picked up a big envelope, bordered in red and green, typical of the junk that took about two seconds to scan and toss. He slit it open and saw an account statement from New Zealand Guardian Trust. The balance:  
\$ 900,000.

"Dear Jon," a note began.

And the scales fell from his eyes. "I knew immediately the O'Hairs had been lying," Travis said. "They had been pleading poverty."

Like Via, Travis had been a faithful follower, remembering the way the Supreme Court decision had stopped all those hated trips his Indiana class made to local Bible lessons. When he'd moved to Austin in 1991, he'd taken a job for \$ 7 an hour, sacrificing income for idealism.

He'd quickly learned the order of things. Madalyn was Queen, Jon was King, Robin was Princess, everyone else was a serf. And he could live with that, because the rulers were as intelligent as anyone he'd ever known. Madalyn could even be charming. He smiles thinking of the time he mentioned a line from "The Face on the Barroom Floor," the poem by Robert W. Service. She proceeded to rattle off every other line from memory.

But, oh, how the royalty shouted, as if the little rowhouse on Winford Road had been transferred to an office park on the outskirts of Austin.

"In a lot of ways," Travis said, "it was like working in a besieged city."

Even Madalyn must have felt that way sometimes. By 1995 the big issues had faded. Lawsuits over smaller items such as removing "In God We Trust" from coins had long since failed, and the tide of Christian conservatism was rising. A diabetic, her health in decline, she sometimes used a wheelchair. Yet there were newsletters to crank out, book orders to fill, weekly TV shows to tape.

The money, at least, was still rolling in, not so much from membership dues as from wills and estate settlements. And if the five or so staffers lived from hand to mouth and feared a layoff, Madalyn's family was comfortable.

"We're accustomed to good food, to eating in dining rooms with tablecloths, good dishes, a good bottle of wine," Jon told Texas writer Lawrence Wright a few years ago. " All of us have nice clothes. My suits cost a minimum of five, six hundred dollars. My shirts are custom made; my ties are all silk. We have a nice house in Northwest Hills, nice automobiles. I drive a Mercedes, Madalyn drives a Mercedes, and Robin drives a Porsche. We've been around the world three times "

Jon and Robin paid dearly for their wealth. Mom set the agenda. The three of them had breakfast together, worked together, lunched together and worked late together. At 7 or 8 p.m. they might break out the Scotch, then go home to watch the late news together and go to bed. Weekends and vacations were also family events. Madalyn placed lonely hearts ads for them in newsletters, but things never went very far.

"About 10 years ago, Jon got a little horny and got a girlfriend and let her move into the home," Via recalls, "and that was a big mistake. Madalyn locked horns with her fast, and that was the end of that love affair. Robin thought she had a boyfriend once until Madalyn cut the bonds. So Robin was pretty lonesome.

Very lonesome. Jon had to be the same."

In recent years, it seemed that the financial security might vanish as well, because of Madalyn's attempt to take over the \$ 15 million fortune of San Diego eccentric James Hervey Johnson, publisher of the wild Truth Seeker magazine.

Johnson retaliated with a racketeering lawsuit, and the litigation continued after his death in 1988. Madalyn, fearful of losing everything, told employees they might find the office padlocked any morning.

Roy Withers, a San Diego attorney representing the Johnson estate, uncovered what he called "a big scam" -- some 15 organizations and corporations, money moving between them like spiders across a web. "Every entity was the same three-headed beast [Madalyn, Jon and Robin]," he said. "I came across Swiss bank account numbers. There was also evidence of accounts in New Zealand and the Cayman Islands."

Ex-employees now talk of a fake set of books kept for auditors and a real one kept for the family. Others mention a secretary who claimed to have seen evidence of \$ 17 million in offshore accounts.

Orin "Spike" Tyson, who runs daily operations now for American Atheists, calls such tales ludicrous. As for the "secret" New Zealand account, he says, it 's a well-known trust fund mentioned in past newsletters.

Eventually a mistrial was declared in the Truth Seeker case, but a possible retrial loomed as Madalyn, Jon and Robin arrived home from Via's house in August 1995. Two weeks later, however, everything seemed to be business as usual. Pope

John Paul II was to visit New York soon, and they had bought airline tickets and organized a picket.

But on Monday, Aug. 28, Travis and others arrived at the office to find the urgent note on the door. Signed by Jon, it said the family had been called out of town on an emergency but would return before the next payday, Sept. 15.

Payday came and went. Someone checked the house and found rotting food and closets filled with clothes. Members began to worry, then to ask questions, and as the questions grew louder the vibrations reached all the way to William Murray.

That wasn't as easy as you'd think. William had long since become atheism's prodigal son. His life began a downward spiral the moment his mother took the school prayer case to court. He was beaten up, pushed in front of a bus. He hit a policeman and ran from the law. He got his 17-year-old girlfriend pregnant, married her, then split up not long after their daughter was born in Hawaii.

The daughter was Robin, and when his wife left to go back to school he dropped Robin off at Madalyn's and took off in pursuit of high times. In the late '70s, he crash-landed at Alcoholics Anonymous, which steered him toward the Bible. He read it, even prayed some, but nothing stuck.

On the night of Jan. 24, 1980, he slipped into a terrifying nightmare. Then,

as described in his book, it was as if the lightning that had failed to strike his defiant mother 34 years earlier came round at last, zeroing in on the sleeping William: "Suddenly, the nightmare was sliced in half by a mighty gleaming sword of gold and silver. A great winged angel stood with the sword in his hand. The blade of the sword pointed down, making it resemble a cross.

On the sword's hilt were inscribed the words 'IN HOC SIGNO VINCE.' ('By this symbol conquer.') The tip of the sword's blade touched an open Bible."

It's just the sort of testimonial that drives atheists into a rage, especially coming from the boy who once drove Christians into a rage. He and Madalyn never had a civil conversation again, and soon afterward he wrote *The Sun* to publicly repent the sins of his lawsuit.

But it was too late to reclaim Robin. Madalyn had legally adopted her. By then Madalyn had also found, and lost, a second husband. Richard O'Hair had died in 1977.

Nowadays William lobbies for conservative Christian causes. He can show you pictures of himself with Ronald Reagan, Sen. Jesse Helms and both the younger and older George Bush. He leads the Government is Not God political action committee, preaches on the speaking circuit, sails a nice yacht and throws himself into work for children's charities with the verve of an awakened Scrooge after his night among the three spirits.

If mother Madalyn seemed to be a sort of Antichrist, then William is the Antimadalyn, picketing her conventions and standing for everything she loathes.

In William's face, you can almost see Madalyn, especially in his eyes.

Other people detect traces of her venom as well, mostly in his tendency toward long litanies of aggrievement whenever something bugs him. But the volume is lower, and he carries himself with unmistakable ease.

On a recent morning, he eased back in a swivel chair in the basement office of his comfortable home in Garrisonville, Va., while a computer screen behind him

endlessly scrolled the words "God is Faithful" in Gothic lettering. He spoke of his two daughters from later marriages, whose pictures hang on a nearby wall.

And he spoke of Robin.

Around 1981, when she was about 15, "I wrote a long letter apologizing for ever dropping her off at that house. After they refused to allow me any more communication with her, after the phones were slammed down, I have over the years sent her cards, sent her things, with no response. When e-mail became more accessible and I found her address, I figured, well, maybe she never got any of those letters. So I wrote a long explanation to her of how she got there and how I wished that wouldn't have happened. Again there was no response."

Then one day her e-mail address was no longer active. He never did hear a word.

At first, he was bothered when reporters began calling to ask about the missing trio. He kept waiting for someone from American Atheists to file a missing persons report, and was mystified when no one did. Gradually he found himself being drawn back toward his mother's orbit, whether he liked it or not.

When a year had passed, the prodigal William filed a missing persons report.

And when four months more passed without any sign of an aggressive investigation, William asked his Republican friend, Gov. George Bush Jr., to put the Texas Rangers on the case.

But what really got him going was when Spike Tyson, his mother's employee, moved into the family's abandoned house. Then William began to talk of cover-ups and conspiracies to defraud.

Tyson, an affable fellow with brown curly hair, seems to have nothing to hide beyond a few extra pounds as he stands behind his desk, where a nameplate states, "The Atheist Is In." He, too, would like to see Madalyn's assets protected. He, too, wonders sometimes why the police haven't exactly leaped at the chance to join the hunt. And despite all the evidence of deceit by his former bosses, he remains loyal.

"Spike would go to the wall for them," Travis maintains. "He's their Sancho Panza."

By this time, Spike Tyson and the atheist brethren had already been dealing with their own fears and paranoias for more than a year. By late September 1995, four weeks had passed without a word from the missing trio. Then everyone's phone began ringing.

It was Madalyn, Jon and Robin calling in from the road on a cellular phone:

"It's OK, we're in San Antonio doing business. See you at the Pope picket in New York."

That was the gist of calls to Tyson, to new American Atheists president Ellen Johnson, and to supporters in Ohio, New Jersey and Florida.

But strange things had already happened. On Sept. 8, Jon's Mercedes was sold to a San Antonio couple who say the seller was not the bearded Jon but a mysterious, clean-shaven man who insisted on meeting in parking lots and dark taverns, offering the car at \$ 5,000 below book value. Yet, Jon's signature seems to appear on transfer papers. Police have concluded the transaction was legal.

Jon withdrew \$ 627,500 that month from the New Zealand trust fund, according to federal tax forms. Also that month, Robin's car was left at the Austin airport. The trio's passports were found in their home, but Madalyn has traveled under a false identity at least once before.

A call to Tyson from the trio on Sept. 28 would be the last. He tried the number a half-hour later and it was dead.

Later, Tyson tried retracing their steps from the receipts in their final credit card bills. Every transaction occurred in the northwest part of San Antonio, as if they'd been tethered to an area of a few square miles. Some believe they stayed at a hotel called the Warren Inn, where managers have turned over registration records to police.

Dominating the area is a huge medical center, including a Veteran's Administration Hospital where Madalyn supposedly wanted to go in case of a life-threatening emergency. She'd also written that when she died Jon and Robin should burn her body without telling anyone, lest any "Christers" pray over the corpse. But officials at the hospital have no record of any patient named Mays, Roths, Murray or O'Hair.

Early on, anytime someone promoted the theory that O'Hair and her kin had taken the money and run, a loyalist would always respond, "Then why did they leave their dogs? They were devoted to those three terriers."

In December 1995, two of the dogs disappeared from a locked fence surrounding the American Atheists office building. Both belonged to Robin. Madalyn's dog was left behind.

Nobody gets into the family's house on Greystone Drive these days. Even Spike Tyson has been kicked out. The IRS hauled away the furniture and padlocked the door 12 days ago, saying the absent family owes more than \$ 260,000 in back taxes.

But if you go to the Shenandoah Valley, Arnold Via can still offer you a vicarious tour.

"I used to house sit during their vacations," he explains.

He liked doing that, enjoyed the thrill of the closeness, admitting to an almost religious devotion. But his reverence didn't stop him from poking around in a few forbidden corners. In Jon's bedroom was a desk with pigeonholes, and inside one of those holes was a checkbook.

"I felt real ugly doing it, felt disloyal and everything else, but I pulled it out." He, too, had wondered about Madalyn's claims of poverty. And even though he found no rude

shocks, he palmed a few deposit slips anyway, figuring, "Maybe it would be useful someday. Then I took my Polaroid camera out and shot pictures of everything in the home."

The photos take you room by room through a place Ward and June Cleaver would find comfortable. With its console TVs and leather recliners, four-poster beds and valanced curtains, it is the embodiment of Middle America.

Two things stand apart. On a tabletop in Madalyn's room is a dollhouse. It is not some heirloom of her past but a plaything, "a kind of therapy for her,"

Via says. The furniture is neatly arranged, beds and tables strikingly like the ones in the home, only in this miniature world she could -- need we state the obvious -- play God.

The second surprise is on a wall above the piano. It is a portrait of William at about 16, the son she'd cut out of her life once he bolted to Christianity.

When William hears this, he is taken aback for the briefest of pauses. Then he says that, yes, it does surprise him, although he has Madalyn's picture hanging in his own house, Robin's as well. He, too, knows of a child's undying hold on a parent, long after the child is hopelessly estranged.

"My mother was a character and a half, and I don't think anyone will ever understand her," he says. "Probably deep down underneath was a decent person, and that decency would bubble up occasionally."

Travis recalls seeing her cry as she watched the live television coverage of the smoke and flames consuming the headquarters of the Branch Davidian religious cult in Waco, Texas. And some say that this woman who always had such flip answers for the big questions of the cosmos -- What created us? Fornication.

What comes after death? We rot. -- was stumped to the point of fear over more personal ones, like "Who am I?"

It was in this vulnerable side that some people detected signs of a nurtured desire to flee, to leave behind everything she'd ever built.

Jon had also hinted he was looking for a way out.

In the newsletter the month they left, he berated members for not giving as much money as Christians give to churches. Staff shortages, he wrote, "have reduced the trio who have dedicated their lives to speaking out to being clerks [it] is bringing us down to the point that we are dangerously close to saying, 'Okay, we quit.' "

Stroll into the offices of American Atheists these days, and at first the place seems moribund. Staring back at you is a large oil portrait of Madalyn. A plaster bust of her perches atop an Ionic column. Even after Madalyn's dog, Gallagher, comes trotting around the corner, the room seems more of a memorial than a lobby.

It is the stillness that is most unsettling, the lack of kinetic frenzy that must have once poured off the ruling trio like steam from a cooling thoroughbred. But in some ways American Atheists Inc. is livelier than it has been in years. Nearly 1,000 new members have signed on since the disappearance, says Spike Tyson. Freed from its three-Murray junta, there is a new sense of democracy, of a kinder, gentler atheism.

William Murray, meanwhile, has begun to back away from the mystery. Earlier this month he withdrew his petition to protect his mother's estate, believing that too many court-appointed lawyers and guardians were gathering at the trough.

In fielding the calls and faxes down in his basement, "That whole part of my life has started to bubble back up, and it's unpleasant," he says. "It's time for me to back off."

He does so with some reluctance, nagged by the thought that everyone somehow has missed the forest for the trees, that the answer would be obvious if we only knew what to look for.

But he still believes his mother is dead.

"My mother's mouth leaves a trail everywhere she goes," he says. "Nobody has ever sold this woman a postcard that doesn't know that they have done business with Madalyn Murray O'Hair, literally to their embarrassment. She would have to be hiding in a cave somewhere to have gone undetected this long."

To close the case, he suggests, why not convene a round-table of investigators, then ask them to assemble the clues into the strangest imaginable solution?

"Even then," he says, "the real answer will probably be more bizarre than anybody would think of. Unless we had Stephen King at the table."

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