

Madeline's Drug

Bryan Murphy

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Dark Future Books

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Table of Contents

[Madeleine's Drug](#)

[About the author](#)

[Other e-books by Bryan Murphy](#)

[Connect with Bryan Murphy on-line](#)

[Yama's Travels](#)

Madeleine's Drug

We'll call her plain Madeleine.

She insisted on it, whenever she could, as anyone would. In reality, she was far from plain, with trimmed auburn hair setting off the contours of her face and highlighting her English rose complexion and her sparkling Brighton eyes atop a slim, well-proportioned body. Yes, really.

Of her beauty, the young woman neither knew nor cared. Despite that, she was happy with life. In the evenings, indeed, she was deliriously happy.

In the evenings, Madeleine became part of a crowd. The air around her crackled with expectation and rising, silent tension. Madeleine felt her own tension, distinct among the emotions of the multitude. When the words started to flow, she strained to catch them. As she gradually relaxed, the words pervaded her, while she let her own imperfect personality drain out and away.

Madeleine paid little attention to the message of the words. She just let her feelings rise or recede and change in accordance with the vibrations she felt around her, vibrations which the words engendered and guided. She felt those emotions with a depth and commitment far beyond anything she experienced in her daytime life. Hate, solidarity, fear or hope surged through her veins like burning lava. They seared her mind and wracked her body as they pitched her out of herself into a transcendent ecstasy.

The evening's headline oration drew to an end. The voice stopped. The crowd was gone. Madeleine was alone, her body drained and weak, her mind empty. She felt both exhausted and happy.

She rose, stretched, unclipped the chip from behind her delicate ear, stepped out of her cabin and strolled along the corridor lined with similar cabins, most of them with the "occupied" sign on the door lit up. At the reception desk, Madeleine handed over her chip and took a ticket for the shower room.

There were several men and women in the shower room, but none she knew. This was a relief, for she still felt high enough to resent an intrusion of

mundane, friendly words. As a perpetual-ticket holder, Madeleine had her own locker, with her name engraved on it in fancy letters and numerals. She laid each item of clothing neatly inside after she took it off, then moved across into one of the cubicles and turned the shower on. The hot jets of water stung her skin back into response to the world outside it, helping her mind ease down from its heights, slowly and painlessly, as she recalled the speeches she had taken earlier. This time, though, her mind paid attention to the words, and to the voices that delivered them.

The last speech, the one Madeleine had just stepped out of, had been by one of the new-style internationalists, who had proclaimed the sisterhood of all humanity and urged world unification.

Before that, Madeleine had taken a local workist, who had lauded the results of the work policy in his district and denounced foreign administrations which, he insisted, were still refusing to concede adequate work to their people. He had ended by demanding that the work-blessed of Great Brighton concentrate both prayer and thought on those less fortunate than themselves. Madeleine wondered whether the performer had simply invented his facts. If so, he had at least made a good addition to his repertoire. Of course, if those facts were true, well, we should really put our minds to helping those poor, distant people deprived of so basic a need for no discernable reason. It made Madeleine appreciate how lucky she was to live under an enlightened administration.

Memory brought back to Madeleine's mind the pity the orator's gravel voice had unleashed in her, a pity of excruciating intensity. Yet even that had not released her from herself as much as the unheralded performer of her first take of the evening. His rant had led her, and the multitude she had sensed around her, through a full spectrum of feelings of hate and rejection, as he played a supposedly historical character, a nation-state demagogue, a man whose archaic name had two parts and no numerals, and was unfamiliar to her, researcher though she was. His bitter, frantic call to a long-forgotten barbarian war had given her the highest high she had experienced in months.

Twenty minutes later, washed, dressed and refreshed, Madeleine stepped out of the Huxley Centre and headed up Eubank Street in the bright night. At the junction with Eastern Road, she turned off to the right and was soon letting herself in to the ground floor, the Work floor, of Hereford Court. In the slow lift, she was struck by the name of her building.

Madeleine had always assumed that “Hereford” was a place, like “Eastern” or “Eubank”, but now she realised that it could have been a person. In fact, they all could. It was a very different name from her own, XLCR418MadeleineEC3GBrighton, but then so was the name of that ancient politician who had lifted her into ecstasy tonight. She felt sure that the name had been real, even if those burning words were not. She *had* to find out. Apart from her own feelings, you never knew what questions might come up in the Competition. Moreover, she was a researcher. It was her duty to find out. Her duty to the administration, and to the people of Great Brighton.

The next day, Madeleine woke up with her recall of the evening’s pleasure easy in her mind. She saw that it was not yet ten o’clock. Even though she could not go down to work for another hour or so, she felt pleased with the world.

After a sparse breakfast of milk-free yoghurt, Madeleine read her two messages. Both were brief, but each dented her feeling of well-being.

The first was a pink-label that set out her work schedule for the following week. She was losing half an hour in the morning! Half an hour! She only had two morning hours as it was! She tried positive thinking to soften the blow: she might get those precious thirty minutes back in the not-too-distant future. In any case, you should not hanker too much after luxury. The administration had its reasons, though it rarely saw fit to give them.

It was the brown-label which really unsettled her. It ordered her to report to Crown House at nine a.m. in fifteen days’ time.

Another of those weird, archaic names, she thought. Then Madeleine realised what the name implied, and froze. Crown House was used for just one purpose: Mate Protocol.

It was unusual for Madeleine to be unhappy, but she felt dejected as she rode the lift down past several floors of living units to the Work floor. Her mood carried the consolation of insulating her from disgust at the Drink-taker who pressed against her in the crowded lift and breathed the malodorous evidence of his choice all over her from the fourteenth floor downwards. Any other time, Madeleine would have sickened at the smell and the awful taste it revealed, but today all she registered was that the body tight against hers was that of a man, whom she gave what she hoped was a

painful elbowing as she pushed her way out when the lift reached the Work floor.

Once she had her day's work assignment in her hand, Madeleine felt better. She found her allotted space, and settled down to crossing out those names starting from XC through to XF on the list of last year's Great Brighton individual Competition entrants who had since died. The names had already been marked with an asterisk.

It was an absorbing task, but her concentration was broken after little more than an hour by a wave of unease. Memories of last year's Mate Protocol assailed her. The process of identification, selection and scheduling had soaked up her precious time, even time when she could have been at work. The meetings, the preparation and the mating itself had invaded her evenings. They had kept her from the cabins and the chips of the Huxley Centre, from the ecstasy of Oratory.

Fortunately, Madeleine had not conceived, for that would have denied the joys of life to her for long weeks. Last year, and the year before, and the year before that, too. All those few years since she became eligible for the brown-labelled message that called you to Crown House. Well, your luck could not hold out for ever, unfortunately. Madeleine shuddered, then made a big effort to pull herself together, and managed what had never before called for any effort: to focus on her work. For the next forty minutes, frightened for the future, she worked without enthusiasm, and was, for once, relieved when her supervisor tapped her on the shoulder to signal the end of her shift.

In the queue for the food machines, Madeleine looked at the people in front of her. The men were certainly different in appearance from the women. It was easy to tell who was which, even though they wore the same kind of loose-fitting clothes. She paid attention to individual voices in the chatter, and again she could distinguish the men. Madeleine had a brief, uneasy inkling that the world might be more complex than she yet realised.

When her turn came, she pressed for a substantial meal, one that was nevertheless simple and low-taste. Madeleine took pains to avoid making food a pleasure, otherwise it might grow into a distraction and eventually worm its way into her evening hours. Because she had seen this happen to people she knew, Madeleine, in her own mind, called Food-takers "worms". There was a group of them at a table to her left, loud and merry around

plates heaped with multi-coloured mush which she could hardly bear to look at, not even in the advertising corners of the glossies.

After lunch, Madeleine went on to her professional work as a researcher. Her morning work was a concession from the benevolent administration. This was the real thing.

Every month, all the municipal administrations in Independent Britain, together with the fifteen remaining rural ones, had the chance to take part in a knowledge Competition. They never spurned it. Madeleine's task as a researcher was to provide factual material from which the central algorithm formulated questions that might be used.

The prize for the Competition winner was a mountain of prestige. Great Brighton had a splendid Competition record, but in recent years its success had waned, and its fame was much diminished. Madeleine and her colleagues had fewer and fewer dealings with Competition tourists bargaining for access to their archives.

Madeleine loved her work among the archives, with its calm, regular patterns and the occasional challenge that called for a spark of originality, which she had. This afternoon was different: images of Food-takers, of men, and of administration messages swam in her mind before the calm pleasure of sorting purposefully through the stored chips banished them. But not for long. In mid-afternoon, Madeleine finished her inventory of Chichester C-vice industries and approached the head of her section, a hierarch with impeccable devotion to duty who was known to be fair, probably a woman.

“Here's the list.” Madeleine handed it over. “All sorted and checked.”

“Good. Now – ”

“Could I – ”

“What?”

“Do you think I could have the password for the Biographical Section?”

“What on earth for?”

“A name. To follow up a lead. Of my own.”

Her superior was astonished.

“Your own? You’re here to find input for the algorithm, not to waste our time following your own ideas. What do you think this is? It’s work, not a Hobby! Besides, I thought you were on Oratory.”

“Of course I am. Those Hobby people – But this is different. It could be useful for the administration to know.”

Her section chief hesitated, looking at Madeleine with kind eyes.

“In that case, put your enquiry in writing and I’ll make it a codicil to this afternoon’s search processing report. Someone detailed for names can deal with it.”

Madeleine was not satisfied.

“Oh, please! For – ”

“Now here’s another list for you to check.” The kindness had disappeared from the woman's eyes.

Madeleine waited for her anger to subside. That mention of what she took was uncalled-for. Section heads were expected to leave people’s choices in peace, a private matter. On the positive side, it looked as though she might eventually get the information she wanted.

“All right. Thank you.”

Madeleine checked the list. There were no mistakes. She turned it over to a filing clerk. The procedure was for her to pick up a new task immediately. Instead, Madeleine pulled up a chair, sat down and waited for the clerk to come back in person with the location code.

Madeleine let her body relax into the comfort of the leather-like upholstery and began to think about her colleagues in the section. Madeleine had done this before, but she had always classified them by what they took, be it Oratory, Drink, Dance, Narcotics, Contemplation, Hobbies or more exotic pursuits, and by the extent to which their choice dominated their off-work life. Now, for the first time, she classified them in her mind by physical sex and by voice: men or women, high or low in pitch. Thinking this way unnerved her, chilled her as she visualised the ordeal ahead. Most of her colleagues of a similar age would be going through it, too. It was

mandatory for everyone except those who had freely chosen to take Sex: they had been operated on to ensure they would not upset the population plan. Yet sharing the ordeal was cold comfort. What if Madeleine should conceive this time? *That wasn't possible!* Ah, but it was.

A poisonous thought crossed her mind, a lure, a way out. Madeleine swept it from her mind, but it had been there. It had laid its tracks and it came back to reinforce them.

“Don't go,” it whispered. “Don't go to Crown House for the Protocol. Avoid the Selection, miss the Preparation. Don't go to the Mating. Go to Work, go to the Huxley Centre. Take Work. Take Oratory. Take them while you're young.”

Then the thought shrivelled, leaving Madeleine numb with the knowledge that it had existed, had slipped into her mind and found sustenance there for its brief blooming. It was gone.

The shock it had produced was its own antidote. Madeleine would never again come so close to wrongdoing.

The numbness softened into feeling, and the feeling was remorse. Madeleine let waves of emotion flow over her, as she had done in the Oratory cabin. When she emerged from her reverie, she understood that the annual Mating Protocol, the Huxley Centre and the Work floor of the myriad living units of Hereford Court, were equally part of the administration's wonderful design. Her happiness, her very life, depended on all of them, on each element in the blueprint drawn up by the benevolent Great Brighton administration. Madeleine lost consciousness of everything except this fact as she slumped against the wood-panelled wall and slid to the grey carpet.

“Feeling all right?”

Madeleine's brain cleared enough for her eyes to focus. The speaker was a colleague whom Madeleine had recently classified as a man, a former acute Dance-taker, now a mild Narcotics-taker. This time, she just saw the concerned face of a friend.

“Er ... sort of. No, not really. I'm just recovering from a ... an ... an Epi-”

“An Episode? I’ll get the head of the section.” The friendly face disappeared, shortly to be replaced by another one. Madeleine recognised her section head.

“Oh dear. You don’t look good. I’m sorry if it was anything to do with me, what I said.”

“No. No. Nothing at all.”

“Look, why don’t you take half an hour’s extra work? I’ll make sure you get the information you wanted to dig out for yourself.”

Madeleine felt better already.

Shortly after seven in the evening, Madeleine was making her way down the steep part of Eubank Street. Her mind was calm. It was cured. She would without question report to Crown House in fifteen days’ time, subject herself to the bureaucratic and physical rigmarole of the Mating Protocol. She would return to work and Oratory if she did not conceive, or to the mystery of Confinement if she did.

The sky was brightening with the coming of evening. Madeleine spotted a group of Drink-takers gathering early outside Ye Olde New Alliance, the city's most notorious cider bar. As she crossed the road to avoid their fumes, she felt a rush of air and an odour of petrol and scorched rubber. A Velocity-taker had passed within an inch of her skin in the kind of vintage metallic vehicle that rarely found its way so deep into the city centre.

Both mental and physical peril had closed in on her within a few hours. Madeleine had withstood both, and a single thought echoed in her brain.

How fine it is to be alive!

She approached the building which was home to the Huxley Centre. Long ago, it had housed law courts and a police station. Now that wrongdoing was deemed more apparent, and its punishment was more drastic and less time-consuming, the police were quartered in smaller buildings, alongside the fusiliers.

When she closed herself inside the cabin, the cured citizen held a chip that could exploit her mood of regeneration and righteous certainty to the

full. In Madeleine's mind was the news her section head had given her at the end of Work. Yes, the politician had been real, and so had his speeches. The knowledge exhilarated her as she inserted the chip. This speech had been made at a place called Numburg, another strange word. It proclaimed the virtues of a "race" as well as an administration, and called upon the listening multitude to deliver up the enemies, the wrongdoers in their midst, so that those wrongdoers might be physically destroyed, once and for all.

The harsh, grating man's voice plunged into Madeleine's brain and stripped her of all emotions save those he could play upon to his own ends. The young researcher pictured him in what remained of her mind: tall, blond and potent, alone with her there in the cabin, naked, tense like her with the urge to Mate.

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About the author:

Bryan Murphy is a British author who travelled extensively as a teacher of English as a foreign language before settling in Italy, where he worked as a translator for a United Nations agency. He now lives in Portugal and concentrates on his own words.

Bryan Murphy's stories have an international following, and his poetry has appeared in places ranging from the Venice Biennale to the Brighton Evening Argus, as well as a multitude of literary magazines.

His short play, *Bar Londra*, is in the repertory of the Turin Theatre Company. He has appeared as an actor in both plays and films, including the award-winning Italian historical saga *Noi Credevamo*.

You can find his novel *Revolution Number One*, published under the pen name Zin Murphy, here: mybook.to/zin

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Now read Bryan Murphy's short satire, *Yama's Travels*.

Yama's Travels

The Puzzling Experiences Of A Thai Lecturer In England.

The taxi-driver stared at his palm in disbelief.

Yama checked again. Yes, the fare had been 18.35 English Baht, and the coins added up exactly. The taxi-driver closed his fist over the money and looked at the younger man with contempt.

"Fucking wanker," he said as Yama opened the door and drew his slight frame out of the taxi to tread the unnaturally natural grass of Brighton Buddhist University for the first time.

Isn't wanking what you do when you haven't got anyone to fuck?
Yama wondered, as he pulled his suitcases out of the boot.

The puzzled look on his face gave way to one of pleasure as he surveyed the low-rise, green and brick campus. *Brilliant idea*, he thought, *a campus without students*.

A shower of gravel interrupted his reverie as the taxi roared off. Yama picked up his two suitcases and lugged them towards the shimmering golden dome of what he assumed was the University's central office.

An hour after collecting his keys and surveying his allotted accommodation, the young Thai lecturer was back in the central office, facing Mr. Grice (pronounced to rhyme with the French city of Nice), the Head Porter. Grice took off his peaked cap to express surprise at seeing Yama back.

"Wozza matter? Can't you sleep?" Grice laughed even though he had said nothing funny.

"Room too big. No heater; no TV. Too quiet."

"Well, it's all we got, sunshine." Grice put his cap back on to express finality.

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