

Psychodick

Bryan Murphy

Dark Future Books

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Psychodick

I know this is going to end badly. I can feel it, and I'm never wrong. Let me tell you who I am: Micah Shaymo, psychic detective. Ugly devil with a heart of gold. Always gets his man. Or woman. It isn't always pretty, though *she* may be: more often than you might expect, for a criminal. For a criminal outside Hollywood, to be exact. Today is going to end very badly for one criminal.

The church is packed. The deceased, Paul Rand, had a lot of friends. And an overdose of enemies, as it turned out. He had needed all his friends while he worked his way up the hierarchy of the Conservative Party, one of England's mighty old institutions. He followed a trajectory of success from mere member to activist, to election candidate in ever less hopeless constituencies, until his loyalty finally earned him a safe seat that gave him a place in Parliament. That's where he started collecting *real* enemies. By the time he bagged a position as junior minister, making enemies had become a hobby, and once he entered the Cabinet, in the wake of the Party's landslide victory – you know, the one after it brought the country back into the European Union – and he was handed the Justice portfolio, there was no stopping him. Unfortunately, the new enemies that he succeeded in making were increasingly powerful ones.

We are surrounded by them now, here in the church. They have come to shed their crocodile tears at the great man's funeral and split themselves laughing inside at his untimely death. “We” is me and my sidekick, Detective Esau “Vape” Gunne. We used to call him “Smokin’” after his success in finding evidence that secured convictions, which, as you know, is the hardest part of our job, but that nickname was a bit obvious, so now we just reference his attachment, despite the evidence, to technological cancer sticks. In everything else he is deeply sceptical. Yeah, even about my psychic powers, which makes him a pain in the neck, but otherwise he is a good detective and even has a sense of humour, so I put up with him. I can tell that my competence is rubbing off on him. You see, it was plain old-fashioned competence at

basic police work that got me to my present elevated position, Not that being the son of a Chief Constable didn't help. What I mean is that I didn't have to make a big show of my psychic powers. In fact, it was always best to keep them to myself. Incredible though it must seem, it's not just Esau Gunne who won't accept the reality of the paranormal.

OK, back to business. Back to motive. Envy would be the main motive of Paul Rand's enemies within the Party. For one thing, they know *they* won't get a funeral like this, in a church packed to the rafters and even some real tears being shed. Envy and fear, actually. It isn't just his career they're happy to see ended. What they fear most, I can tell, is a libertarian takeover of their once-stodgy Party. With the Justice portfolio firmly in his grip, Rand pushed through the legalisation of heroin. He had the full support of the nation's police chiefs, including my old man, who wanted to go for the drug-trade monster's heads, not its victims. A year later, heroin addiction was at a record high, crime at a record low, and the public was demanding proper medical, social and humanitarian treatment of addicts, which Rand promised to provide. The money, he said, would come from the fall in prison costs. A year on from that, heroin addiction is falling, crime is falling further, and even we detectives are starting to feel insecure over the future of our jobs.

OK, let's see which of that bunch I can get into.

Prime Minister Gupta is impenetrable, damn her, wearing that fake hurting-inside expression she uses every year at the Trump Memorial. Read her face and you don't need to read her mind. Would she kill? I don't feel that. Would she have a rival killed? Why bother when there are so many others willing to save you the inconvenience?

RuFe, for instance. The good old Russian Federation, always ready, willing and able to do something nasty that might help dent the evil West's democratic credentials if exposed, something that would provide RuFe's intelligence services with juicy compromising material on a Western big-shot if it *didn't* come out.

So that's another class of the murdered man's enemies: secular dictatorships. Not just the ever-expanding RuFe, but others like Italy, Greater China or Korea. They

are all equally enraged by the success of Rand's drug legalisation programme. With good reason, too. I mean, if the idea spreads into their territory that people can just get pleasure for themselves, well, who will want dictators to provide and package it for them? Under the influence of good drugs, people might even start to think for themselves.

Anyhow, just look at that row of ambassadors, overpaid liars for their countries. Can I get into any of them? Not great material, but there's a chink in Salvatore Padria's mind armour. Hang on. Just a minute. Right, I'm in! What the hell? Can't understand a damn thing. The bastard's thinking in Italian! Not one of my lingos, I must confess. I do understand that he's ruminating on football: something about Benfica. Isn't that a Portuguese team? He looks pleased about it, anyway. Ouch, I'm out!

More pain: Vape has just elbowed me in the ribs, surreptitiously. Was I vocalising? He's giving me a reproving look. I lower my head, cover my eyes with a hand and press my temples: hurt and piety mingled. Vape does not understand the sacrifices you have to make for a touch of telepathy, never mind the wear and tear of more complex psychic skills. He'll become more amenable when he shares the glory of cracking this case, and I'll be more than happy for him.

It wasn't just secular dictatorships who hated Paul Rand's taking us out of the "war on drugs". The United Nations and the United States federal government were still stuck in that rut, and being very vocal about it, as were the surviving religious dictatorships. They grew louder as people deserted the desert into which they were preaching. We ourselves, merry England, were just following the trend set by Uruguay, Portugal, Canada, Mexico, Holland, all those other states whose politicians found it wiser in the end to base policy on evidence rather than prejudice.

Anyway, to business: a quick survey. Nothing instructive in the ambassadorial auras, be they lackeys of dictators or fine representatives of our noble allies. Let's get back to the Tory grandees. The Foreign Secretary, Sir Clive Aldi, is here, of course, as is Lord Southgate, the Home Secretary. Impassive as ever, both of them. Maycliffe, on the other hand, is decidedly fidgety. That's the Chief Whip, Duran Maycliffe,

young and ambitious, as everyone probably was once, and some of us still are. He's staring at the coffin. I wish I could see which way his feet are pointing. Jesus, he's almost *wringing* his hands! I can't find a way in, but he's one to come back to later. If I can get something that both he and Rand have touched, I'll learn a lot about their relationship; I can sense it was fraught.

What's Vape up to? Scribbling on his bloody phone! I've got this, Gunne. Just keep still and observe until I tell you to do something. He looks up because he has got my message.

The sight of Aldi reminds me of another group that Rand antagonised: the advertising industry. I mean, if happiness is free, or at least freely available, why buy crap? Even for them, it's hard to flog dead horses. I don't recognise any of that lot here today, though there must be a choice selection from big businesses that use their services. Plenty of Tory Party donors with an axe to grind, or to wield on someone prising their Party out of their own once-rock-solid grasp. But again, why bother if someone less obvious may well do it for you? Unless you're Aldi and have a foot in both the political and the business camp, and therefore have twice as much to lose if you don't stop Rand before he can do you too much damage.

At this point, I feel unusual vibes emanating from the bishop presiding over the ceremony. One of the new kind of clergy, that one, all positive energy, opening up to the wider world of faith and faiths. As you have to do when your Church no longer commands great loyalty from its shrinking flock. The vibes I can feel from the bishop are directed at the funeral casket, and they are not positive.

As you know, the Church of England's slow but steady decline drove it into the hands of the Inter-Faith Alliance, the final fruit of the late Lord Blair's dictum that all religions are good and none are more equal than others. The Church performed sterling service as a bulwark against the rising tide of unbelief, except among the young. It preached and ranted against Rand long and loud, proclaiming that drugs are immoral, that happiness takes people away from God, that people need to suffer. Any of its leading lights would have been well pleased to end Rand's suffering, and his immoral happiness.

Yes, you know, my psychic investigations have led me to conclude that Paul Rand was actually a *happy* man. His career was stellar. It wasn't a question of whether he'd get the top job, but when. His wealth, as Vape's mundane figure-gathering confirms, was considerable, and clean. His wife was devoted and accommodating; even their respective lovers got on. The three kids were innocuous: two grown-up sons ready to follow in his footsteps, only not just yet, and a late-developing daughter who had taken herself off for a gap year in Laos, where she could reduce her carbon footprint amid the delights of its new democracy and music scene. Rand's own vices were cricket and his cellar, which held a growing collection of fine wines, mostly laid down for his children to enjoy. He kept himself in good physical shape and did not partake of the drugs he decriminalised. Could plain envy have been the motive for his murder?

Vape is observing, and writing copious notes on his phone. I won't stoop to that level. I prefer to wait for the tech companies to produce a phone smart enough to take telepathic dictation from me. If I weren't such a dedicated flatfoot, I could work on it with them, earn myself a fortune, instead of ...

I see who Vape has got his eyes on. The Mafia crowd: a phalanx of acolytes surrounding Old Man Rigoletti in his impeccable three-piece black suit. The London representative of the 'Ndrangheta, the Mafia born in southern Italy's dirt-poor region of Calabria, the instep of the boot kicking Sicily into the Mediterranean Sea, still not tired of using the City of London as the ever-open laundromat for its drug money, after Turin and Milan got closed down. Hell, they had an enormous bone to pick with Paul Rand. At a stroke, he decimated their profits, sent them scampering to trade in meta-this and super-that while it was still lucrative. Once those became freely available too, they invested heavily in designing new drugs like "Dorian White", promising spurts of rejuvenation for the elderly, those of them who had survived, though at increasingly long intervals. The truth is the drug barons are a spent force, and they spend a fortune trying to disguise it, but everyone can see the "brutta figura" under the old emperor's new clothes.

Old Man Rigoletti, though, still has the body of a peasant and the face of a soldier turned professional poker player. Yet you can tell, or rather I can tell, by the dimming of his aura, that he is anxious about the little that is left of his future. Is my destiny to bring it to a close? I slip my shooting hand into my right trouser pocket and let it mould itself onto the handle of the gun I favour these days. Curiously, it is the same make as the one that shot Paul Rand dead, an Apple KwikKill. I'll know when it's time to use it.

My psychic antennae tell me that the service is coming to a close. I've been to enough funerals to know that even before it does, the rush for the door will start: most people can't get out into the fresh air quick enough. I give Vape the nod and we move to be among the first out, so that we can unobtrusively take up a good position to survey the so-called mourners as they leave.

The Prime Minister and her entourage are the first people of consequence to emerge into the autumn sunlight. Gupta's mask of expressions for once has slipped, revealing the blandness below. The effects of the experimental skin-darkening cream that only she and I know she uses must be wearing off, for her skin is splodgy and the wrinkles seem etched into it more deeply. If she wasn't a suspect, I might consider slipping her some Dorian White from our stash. I might just do that, give her a boost, because I sense that she is not our killer. Besides, having the Prime Minister owe you a favour will be useful to the big-shot cop I'm soon going to become. The dirt in the auras of her bodyguards and hangers-on is not murder-related, either. So I just watch them all go, even Maycliffe, the politico who hated Paul Rand the most: I understand that the Chief Whip is a sadist, but Rand's body bore no marks of torture, just blood from the bullet wound in his head.

Southgate leaves with Aldi, the two cabinet ministers shoulder to shoulder as though to console each other. *Do me a favour!*

Aldi trails a selection from the cream of English enterprise, not that the Scots left us with much. *Look at those two!* Pair of incompetents can't even run an advertising campaign without renting AlphaGet's platinum-priced algorithms. Mind you, I'd be tempted to buy some of that future-predicting certainty myself, if I had

these dimwits' bottomless funds instead of my psychic resources. Let them eff off!
Excuse my French.

Vape is staring at me again, disapproval turning down a corner of his mouth. I hate it when the boy does that. Jesus, though, I hope I haven't been vocalising again!

So much for business men. Actually, where are all the business women these days? Ah, here comes the fleet of ambassadors. God, they stink! Even in the sunlight, they pong like a room full of crime bosses deciding who to execute next. A rotten, rotten bunch, but the aura of death, which they all share, is faded.

Strangely, Salvatore Padria tips his hat to me as he passes. Can the Italian Ambassador have seen me before? I doubt it. I got close to him at the Saudia Stadium, when Queen's Park Rangers played the team he owned, TataFiat Lucca, in the ExEuropa League. I thought I might get the result of the return match out of his psyche, for incremental income purposes, times being hard you understand, but it turned out he hadn't fixed it yet. On that occasion, I was in and out like a flash: he had no cause even to glance in my direction.

Old Man Rigoletti follows Padria. As he passes, he opens his hands and holds his palms upwards as though praying to Allah. Or to let me see that he has neither blood nor stigmata upon them. Weird! He catches up with Padria and they fall into whispered conversation. Now, what is the link between those two? Ah yes, Padria was a founder of *Italiani Sopra*, the new Italy's ruling party, indeed its only party. Rigoletti would have helped deliver Calabria to it when they still had elections. Otherwise, he'd be in a high-security jail now instead of swanning around London spending what used to be other people's money on Harley Davidsons for posh rent boys and on top Harley Street physicians for himself.

My dim sidekick is busy on his smartphowner again as I detach myself from his silent, irritating company and follow the two Italians. He catches up with me, and I realise how much I need to get him out of the way if I am to do what has to be done to provide our murdered minister with justice.

Now that we're outside the church, we can speak. I can get into most people's mind's, most of the time, but Vape can be elusive, and of course he hasn't a clue what I'm thinking unless I tell him out loud. So I do.

“Little job for you, Esau.” I don't call him “Vape” to his face, since we have to work together. “Put that smartphowner of yours to good use for a change.”

“Whatever you say, chief.” Is that a note of irony in his voice? I'll pretend I didn't pick it up.

“Get on to HQ and check the status of the alibis of the following suspects, I mean persons of interest to the investigation: Gupta, Aldi, Southgate, Ngugi, Mrs Rand, Giles Rand, Marmaduke Rand, Ambassador Padria, Rigoletti.”

“Right you are.”

I leave Vape to exercise his calloused thumbs while I follow the Italians. I keep a respectful distance from both them and the graveside, and, while they chat in low tones about horses, I turn my powers of telepathy to our chief sus – people of interest as they emerge from the church into the damp afternoon. A change in air pressure often affords a quick avenue into the unguarded mind.

The Prime Minister is thinking about her appearance on Sky News this evening: how to look suitably sad without appearing haggard, which does not appeal to voters. I'm so glad I personally am expected to look like the reptilian ex-boxer I really do look like! Though of course I'm completely different inside, all sweetness and light. Ask anyone who really knows me.

The two Cabinet Ministers are actually thinking about their departed colleague, Southgate with regret at his passing and Aldi with regret at how, even dead, Paul Rand is still causing trouble for the Party and its leaders. The Chief Whip, Maycliffe, in contrast, is speculating about his coming evening's entertainment, which is going to depart rather drastically from his professed family values and has no bearing at all on the present case, so I'll spare you the details.

Bishop Ngugi, now, a true man of the Church. He's full of sorrow for the late lamented, but he's also pleased with the attention this understated but star-studded funeral has brought to the nation's Church, and proud of the sermon that he designed

and delivered with such skill that it brought tears to the eyes even of hardened ambassadors. *OK, Bishop, now tell me who walloped Paul Rand. No, you won't will you? You only see the good in anyone. No wonder you need such thick lenses in your spectacles.* Of course, the good bishop's good faith does not mean the Inter-Faith Alliance is not getting ready to dance on Paul Rand's grave. Only not just now, because none of them have shown up for the funeral. Not ecumenical enough for them: it was strictly Church of England, as far as I could tell. Be that as it may, I feel certain that the killer is present here today. Feel? I just *know!*

The widow wobbles out, kept upright by two young male adults who I intuit are her sons: they share something of their mother's aura. The daughter isn't here. Couldn't get back from Laos in time, most likely, intercontinental air schedules being much sparser than they once were. I can tell that the trio's grief is genuine.

Where are those discordant vibrations emanating from? Ah, someone who was not at the ceremony, hovering around the edges of the churchyard. A woman. Not the lover. Not the official lover, anyway, known to be on surprisingly good terms with the wife. Something odd there, but not relevant now. Trust me. This one now, in what you might call the business scum conglomerate, exudes an aura of schadenfreude that is well over the top, even for that crowd. I've seen that face before: male, white, careworn but smug, shining with privilege, burnished by experience, utterly self-confident. Oh yes, who among us could fail to recognise Sir Richard Pickle, even shorn of his once-flowing locks? They all hated Rand because the drugs he decriminalised destroyed the myth that happiness depended on amassing possessions and then "upgrading" them with ever-increasing regularity. Bit short-sighted really. I mean, it's not as though drugs are *free*, although street prices have taken a dive. Now why did Pickle hate Paul Rand more than the other robber barons did? Let's see. Yeah, strange mind: maximum cunning, minimum intellect. Oh, I see. Pickle was trying to change horses in mid-stream, transforming himself from old-style business predator to new-style surveillance capitalist. He was already trailing in the wake of Bezos, Zuckerberg, Thiel and the like, so Rand's libertarian insistence on personal freedom and privacy might have proved the last straw. Well, that threat is out of the

way. No wonder he looks so happy. No trace of guilt, though, neither on his face nor in his mind. Guess he's just having a good day and looking forward to an even better future. Damn, I mustn't get distracted!

OK, they're all out now, out of the church. Some have wended their sad or merry way elsewhere, but most have moved towards the freshly-dug grave. The killer wants to watch the coffin lowered and be sure that the man he put in it is dead. No-one has poked a smoking gun from their mind into mine, but I've learnt to put whatever crumbs of evidence get offered by hunches, intuition, telepathy, auras, vibrations, messages from the beyond, in short the working tools of the psychic detective – put them all together and reach the right conclusion. Done. I've got it. As you know, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. That being so, it's time to act!

This was as private a funeral as such a public personage could have, even in this day and age, and so, to respect the widow's wishes, not many mourners are at the graveside. Like the killer, I stand opposite the principal bereaved: Mrs Rand and her two sons. Their grief looks genuine and *I* know that it is real. As the coffin is lowered, I set my psyche free to confirm my suspicions. It does.

Salvatore Padria, the Italian Ambassador and neo-fascist politician, turns away from the graveside and walks with Rigoletti in the direction of the long line of parked trophy cars, where their guardians are waiting for them. As I follow, my hand slips into my pocket and clasps my faithful *KwikKill*, as though of its own volition. The two Italians leave the road, clearly intent on having a totally private conversation, and face each other amid a stand of oak trees. Ha! A fine last glimpse of Olde England.

I pull out my pistol, prime it to fire and move up silently behind them, shielded by the broad back of the Ambassador. When I am almost upon him, he hears me and turns. An elbow to the face sends him crashing to the ground, out of my way. Now Rigoletti sees me, and the shock on his face warms my heart. Didn't expect me, did you? An avenging angel! His hand goes to his pocket, but before he can draw his weapon, I fire a bullet into his thick chest.

Rigoletti is on his back. I stand over him. He is still breathing. His lips are moving. He is trying to speak. “No ... no...” I can make out. I bend lower to see if he adds anything of interest. “No ... no...” he repeats, then: “No Rigoletti ... no 'Ndrangheta ... anal con ...”

“Anal con yourself” I snarl. He has got my temper rising. His shooting hand inside his pocket twitches. I end the threat by silencing him with a bullet to the brain. Nice one, Shaymo!

The shots have caught people's attention. Several are hurrying this way. My trusty sidekick is in the vanguard, running to be the first to congratulate me.

His face is full of amazement when he reaches me.

“Micah Shaymo,” he says, “I'm arresting you for the murder of Giuseppe Diotallevi Rigoletti. Anything you say ...”

The little shit handcuffs me!

“You bleeding idiot,” he has the temerity to add. “I checked the alibis. Every one is cast in iron.”

They can't do this to me. It's illogical, illegal, and immoral! The clink! Gaol! Life imprisonment, with a recommendation that I serve at least twenty years. This place will kill me before they let me out! I'll have to deploy my psychic powers to achieve an early exit. Hypnotise a warder and have him hand over the key. That would be a start, but getting out of my cell is just the first step in getting out prison. And even if I get out into the streets of London, where do I go next? A fugitive, an eternal fugitive, running till I drop, living off my wits and my special talents until they wane or someone recognises me and shops me, and then it's back to square one with little hope of ever getting out and free again.

Best to do it legally, or at any rate through the law. Get my appeal launched and take over the brain of the presiding judge. Hmm, tried that ploy at the first trial, didn't work too well: must've been one of those impermeable buggers. Yeah, freaks of nature, but they do exist. Still, not likely to run up against one of those twice in a row. If I can't nobble him – or her – I can get the jury, the defence lawyers, give my own

brief my recipe for an eloquence potion, not that *that* was his problem, smooth-tongued git, glad he was on my side, though it didn't do much good in the face of the evidence. Smoking gun, no less, with a matching bullet in the victim's brain.

Victim! Now there's a word was never less appropriate. Didn't I do the world a favour, ridding it of one of its bloodiest crime bosses, the Coke King of Calabria and Laundry Lord of London? Bloody medal is what I deserve, not life imprisonment! You'd think the Italians would be more grateful, too. I not only beheaded their most powerful Mafia of this day and age, my trial also laid bare its links to the regime. If they ever get their democracy back, they should give me the freedom of Rome or something. Only that Saviano bloke even spoke up for me, from his secret hideaway in exile in New Zealand or wherever. A great man, but no movers and shakers listen to him much in these times, more's the pity.

Anyway, I didn't do it. No, actually, I did. I did do it, but it was self-defence. He was going to pull his gun on me. He was about to pull it from his pocket and blast my superior brain to smithereens. From his empty pocket, as it turned out. All his hand held was a tacky rosary. Well, I only had a split second. You need longer than a split second to look into the future. Sometimes you just have to be guided by instinct. I mean I *knew* he killed Paul Rand! Alibi? Alibi, schmalibi! If *he* didn't kill the minister, who did? Yeah, I wonder. Who did kill Paul Rand?

I'll be out of here soon. I mean, my appeal failed, but that is just a detail. I can feel my powers coming back. Yes, I admit, they took a hit. For a time, I could barely tell you what next week's weather would be like, but *now*? Now, I can tell you what it'll be like *this time next year*. Watch this space!

The thing is, stuff came out at the appeal which proved I'd been right all along. Old Man Rigoletti *had* killed Paul Rand! Didn't I say so? You heard me! OK, it wasn't his hand that fired the bullet that ended the minister's life, but his organisation played a major part in putting the gun in the killer's hand, and in funding the whole murderous operation. Was I right or was I right? The corrupt judge said I was guilty

of murder nevertheless, so I'm back in this cell for the duration, which won't be long, you'll see!

I won't tell you my plans for getting out of here. You'll read about them soon enough, once I've done it. Instead, let me tell you a little story about revenge, one that came to light during those recent proceedings.

Imagine you're an ordinary, middle-class white English girl, privileged, a bit thick to be honest. As you grow up, your Daddy does well for himself; you become richer, less ordinary, but no brighter. You follow the fads of the time, which happen to be both feminist and environmentalist. After joining Extinction Rebellion, you find it increasingly hard to live with your meat-eating parents, especially your misogynist Daddy, who has become a big-shot in the Party that is still polluting your country for profit and votes. So, once you get your third-class degree from a pricey private university, at Daddy's expense, you hot-foot it to the Far East to commune with nature and aid the exotic locals with your presence. There you learn two things: that pollution for profit is destroying the whole world, not just your little island, and that, as the Buddhists say, all life is suffering, so that the people responsible for your hard times are the people who forced you into this world: Mummy and Daddy. You hasten back to London. With the planet's suicide now clearly unstoppable, Extinction Rebellion has morphed into Extinction Revenge, and you are one of its most earnest disciples. As you are of the Anti-Natalist movement. Not a figurehead, but an activist. Mummy can wait, but Daddy must get what's coming to him. His just desserts.

I would have seen all that, of course, but I'd focused my superpowers on the bigger picture. Remember Rigoletti's dying words? "Anal con". I thought it was an insult, but it turned out to be "AnalCon", short for "the Analysis Consortium", a company following in the tradition of the unlamented Cambridge Analytica in convincing Joe Q Public to buy shit, vote for evil bastards and generally act against its own best interests the world over. The man was making a confession, telling me who had put the murder weapon in Rand's daughter's hand and trained her to use it. But AnalCon don't do owt for nowt, so who paid *them*? Well, all kinds of people had a good motive to have Paul Rand killed: his rivals within the Party, the Inter-Faith

Alliance or any of its members, the advertising industry and all of its clients, foreign dictatorships, any of the Mafias. The ones we checked, the villainous Vape and I, have alibis for the actual murder, but not for ordering it. Only I, Micah Shaymo, know that it was Rigoletti and the Ndrangheta, and when I make that clear to all and sundry, they'll have to let me out of here and treat me like the hero that I am.

When exactly will that be? Can't say, not precisely. I mean, even psychic superpowers can get muddled by the effulgences of the multiverse. Know what I mean?

[end]

About the author

Bryan Murphy 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 concentrates on his own words.

Bryan Murphy's stories have gained 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 first novel, *Revolution Number One*, is set in Portugal in the turbulent, magnificent 1970s.

To discover new work by Bryan Murphy, sign up for his newsletter:

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Now enjoy Bryan Murphy's short horror story *The Day Before*.

The author wishes to point out that it was written for a Halloween gathering in 2017, and was not intended to be a prediction.

The Day Before

The Pope was dead. The luminaries of the Christian world's largest Church gathered in Rome and were sequestered in the heart of the Eternal City until they would succeed in choosing a new leader.

"I'm getting out of here for a day. Want to come?"

It was natural for Cardinal Healy to have struck up a friendship with Cardinal Varela. Not only were they by far the youngest at the Conclave, they were also both from the New World, Healy being an Irish-American from Saint Paul, Minnesota, and Varela hailing from São Paulo in Brazil.

Cardinal Varela coughed a few times, then drew breath and answered, "I am with you. But how we get away? And back?"

"I know some hidden passages. This place is riddled with them." Healy's eyes gleamed with more than the slight fever he had picked up.

"They will miss us, no?"

"No. There's nothing on today. Just the Chamberlain droning on about procedure."

And so the two young cardinals went out into the city, unobserved.

The Chamberlain, Cardinal Grugliasco, however, did not drone on about procedure. Instead, he came straight to the point.

"I am joyful to announce my conversion to the one true, true faith, to which I submit, and for which I shall be a martyr. Yes. I have infected myself with a virus that will soon kill me. We are taking this rare opportunity to eliminate the foremost members of our main rival, in numerical terms. Most of you already have the virus,

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