

# *Breakaway*

**Bryan Murphy**

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Table of Contents

[Breakaway](#)

[About the author](#)

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

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

[Interview](#)

[Marta Merajver](#)

## *Breakaway*

*Turin, Republic of Padania, 11 August 2032.*

The frames of the French window squalled like a baby as the handle turned. I pushed it gently. It opened without further complaint. Nothing stirred in the street below or behind the windows opposite. I stepped on to the small balcony now bare of plants and lifted my face to the soft rain.

I'd always liked August in Turin. It used to be the only time you could find a place to park within strolling distance of where you lived. As you strolled, you could look up at the buildings – there's always a detail to make the effort worthwhile – without bumping into your neighbours or coating your shoes with evidence that they kept dogs. On the other hand, you had to look hard to find shops that were open for business. Well, that hasn't changed much, but back then (twenty years ago) the reason was that the shop-keepers and their customers were leathering their skins on the Adriatic coast or chilling out in the mountains. Today, the sea is another country, and they cannot afford to go to the mountains.

The fresh, uncontaminated rain felt good and clean. I shook enough out of my eyes so that I could focus on the hospice opposite. It was not a pretty sight: opaque rectangular windows set in a featureless light brown façade. I mulled over the rumours about what was being done to the people inside and decided the rumours might be true. My stomach told me I couldn't stay here much longer. One more year. If I could hold together just one more year, if things around me didn't fall even further towards the Greenshirts' idea of paradise, I could collect my meagre pension and join Carmen in Italy. That would be a fine thing. But I'd miss the Turin rain.

The purr of the phone called me back inside. I switched it to sound-only and answered. A voice spoke to me in English. I answered in Italian, trying to inflect it with the local lilt, until I heard the name Daria. She was the caller I'd been waiting for. We arranged to meet in ten minutes. I hung up the phone, then took my outdoor gear off the hook next to it. As I struggled into my light blue smock, I tried to work out the quickest route to the Botanical Gardens. They were close.

In the street, I felt awkward and exposed, like a shepherd in a metropolis. At least the United Nations insignia would give more protection than my white skin alone could guarantee. My car gleamed in the rain. I got in and eased it down the narrow one-way street. As usual, traffic was sparse.

I followed the road works for the second underground line, then turned left in front of the baroque palace that housed the Faculty of Padanian Architecture. Something about it didn't seem right, but I couldn't put my finger on what it was. I parked in the shelter of some heavy oak trees, pulled from the glove compartment a supermarket bag that was bulging with hard currency, got out and locked the door. Pure force of habit: no-one would risk a twenty-year sentence for a nine-year-old Bulgarian Solaris. A short, stocky woman stood opposite, just outside the entrance to the Gardens. She was dressed in a green mock-sari emblazoned with a jagged blood-coloured cross. Her lustrous brown hair was streaked with artificial grey. She was alone. The city's parks were safe for women on their own, provided they had the right clothes, skin colour and accent. This one, Daria Rigoletti, had given herself all of those. Her steely eyes looked me up and down disapprovingly as I approached.

“Bôn dì,” she said.

“Cerea,” I answered – a standard greeting routine in the local dialect and our agreed passwords. She switched effortlessly to English.

“I have the goods.”

From a fold in her mock-sari, she took out a large white envelope and offered it to me.

“Please check.”

I lodged the supermarket bag under my left shoulder, feigning casualness, slipped out the two British passports, checked the photos, the personal details, the Padanian exit and re-entry visas, and the entry visas for England. It all seemed right. I checked again, going carefully over each detail on every page. The woman waited patiently.

“OK,” I said finally.

I pushed the passports into the envelope, took the bag from under my arm and handed it to Daria.

“As agreed, ten thousand new euros. Cheap at the price, if I may say so. Perhaps you’d like to count it in my car.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

My face must have registered surprise. She laughed shortly.

“Change of plan.”

“What do you mean?”

“New terms. You don’t pay. You just do us a favour.”

“What favour?”

She laughed again, but there was no amusement in her eyes. “We haven’t thought about it yet. If and when we do, we’ll let you know.”

It seemed a strange deal to me, but I wasn’t going to argue. I didn’t have time. I put the bag back under my arm. That was when I noticed what was wrong with the building. From this angle you could see that a narrow swathe had been cut right through the middle. Two imposing long-reach excavators - "Godzillas" they call them here - were standing

idle at the far end, their heads still raised, as though they were looking back with satisfaction at the line of destruction they had left in their wake.

My jaw dropped. Daria followed my line of vision and smiled, this time with amusement.

"They've ruined the city's most beautiful building!" I blurted.

Daria corrected me. "We."

I stared at her in disbelief. *This* young woman had been party to *that* act of vandalism?

"It's ours anyway. The City Council sold it to us, together with the land it's on. For redevelopment."

"But what you've done is monstrous!"

"Not really. Just a day's work for the Godzillas. The whole building is beyond saving now, even if the City Council has a change of heart tomorrow."

"People will protest!"

"No, they won't. It's more than their life is worth. And they know it. We're saving them by acting fast."

I may have let a few undignified words slip out before I pulled myself together to asked who "they" were.

"A consortium, let's say. An association with roots in the South of Italy. Calabria, to be precise. My homeland."

"What are you going to do with it?"

"We'll build an underground car park, a shopping centre on top of it, and luxury flats on top of that."

"In the middle of the worst economic crisis in a hundred years? When people don't have any money? How are you going to make any profit?"

"We don't need to. We're just happy to put our excess liquidity - which some people regard as tainted - in, and get nice clean money out. However much or however little."

"But that's, that's -"

"Turin has been our favourite laundry since the days when it was part of Italy. A nice little credit crunch tends to squeeze the life out of any scruples."

"But this is their history, their architectural and historical heritage!"

"Right. Sad isn't it? No, really, we started way back, with easy targets. Industrial buildings like a wonderful old Art Nouveau car factory. Once our Godzillas drive a wedge into these people's heritage, they get used to the idea of losing it. And banking the proceeds."

I wished we weren't having this conversation. I rather liked those hard brown eyes. Despite the green cosmetics, the lips those words had come from were sensual. I tried one more argument.

"But this is Padania. You're from Italy. The South of Italy!"

"When money talks it has no accent. Not even here."

I bid Daria farewell and walked back to my car. I almost tripped a couple of times. I was contemplating favours that might be asked of me.

Only as I was driving away did something about the woman which my eyes alone had registered click into my brain. Close up, the cross on her sari had looked wet.

It took ten minutes to drive to the campus where I worked. Small metal crosses beside the road marked the spots where Eastern European prostitutes had been murdered. There were plenty. Beautiful kids, most of them had been. They'd never stood a chance, either against the gangs of criminals who'd brought them over and forced them to walk the streets, or against the gangs of "cleansers" who later tried out their own final solution to the problem of propriety and vice.

The crosses were illegal, yet they reappeared after every sweep by the Public Works Department. It was almost the only sign of protest the government tolerated. Come to think of it, it was almost the only sign of protest there was.

At the gates, the guards checked my iris, fingerprints and chip as usual, and let me in. I assumed that bugs made sure the information reached police headquarters as well as the guards' computers, but I no longer cared. I parked the Solaris and started to cross the lawns towards my office, weaving among the tents. The place got more like a refugee camp every week. Inside my office, I locked the two new passports in the drawer where I kept my own, and checked my in-tray. It held two new documents for me to translate from Piedmontese into English. Local academics desperate to make their voices heard while the outside world was still listening. Well, they could wait.

I called on the computer, had it check the flight times to London, and booked three tickets for that evening. There were daily flights again, as tourism picked up again after the shock. Europeans were attracted by the clean, post-industrial environment, the folksy culture and, most of all, the free-falling currency. As long as you travelled with an approved company and wore the tourist insignia, nobody would bother even to spit in your face. Recently, a small party from Japan had dared to visit.

When it was time for Giada and Giò to change classes, I slipped over to the children's block. I picked them out easily enough in the throng of kids of all races and all mixtures of race. I ushered them out of earshot of the others and told them softly, "We're going this evening. This time tomorrow, you'll be with your mummy and daddy."

Giada looked at me steadily with her serious twelve-year-old eyes, then broke into a smile of joy. Her younger brother just looked confused.

"Be ready at five. We'll leave from the Reception."

I knew they'd been ready for months, ever since children of mixed race had been forcibly separated from their parents and their "foreign" parent expelled, usually with their partner following them. I couldn't see why the Padanians wanted to claim the kids. Maybe it was their version of blood being thinner than water. Or maybe the idea was to punish the whole family. Giada and Giò's father, Luigi, would have opted for exile in nearby Italy, but Ming was wary of the racist virus spreading south and saw the new China as a more tranquil option for the family. That's where the couple had gone, five months ago, and at last I was going to fulfil my promise to get their children on a plane to Peking.

I don't recall much of what I did to pass the time. Chatted with colleagues about football and grocery supplies, certainly. Checked my own packed and ever-ready travel bag. Maybe stared at my favourite desk photo, taken in a local Chinese restaurant some fifteen years back, with everyone smiling: Luigi and Ming, not yet parents, Sergio and Aura, Linda, Juan, Carmen, myself. With Aura doing her second Ph.D. in Melbourne, only Sergio and I were still here in Turin. No-one had any idea where Linda and Juan were now. Home in Uruguay, I hoped.

We left on the dot. The dark blue Mercedes Rover rolled out of United Nations territory, the flapping flags on its bonnet giving us a degree of protection that the opaque windows reinforced. Although driving was easy these days, Filippo's face was wrinkled with tension. I slipped him the fee we had agreed for this unauthorised use of the official car.

His life needed all the sweeteners it could get. The agency was required to hire local drivers, but the Greenshirts knew where they lived, and had provided two of Filippo's predecessors with an unpleasant early retirement. Filippo lived in comfort on the campus, an exile who had to return often to a dangerous homeland.



We were making good time when the first sign of trouble hit us.

The piece of rock struck the windscreen in front of me hard, but caused no damage. Filippo brought the car to a halt and I took in the scene ahead. I turned to see the children's reaction. Neither had screamed; both were pallid with fright.

"It's OK," I said, "there's no need to panic. It isn't us they're after."

Indeed, the local thugs, and the politicians who sponsored them, were finding enemies nearer and nearer home. The concept of Padania, which embraced most of the former north of Italy, had become too inclusive. Ahead of us, we could see banner-waving supporters of the Kingdom of Savoy Resurrection Rally being attacked by enforcers from the Piedmont Blood and Soil faction of the Greenshirts. They were fighting back.

Filippo reversed down the deserted road, then executed a three-point turn with sound effects that must have drawn attention to us.

"I know another route to the airport," he said laconically.

As he slowed to turn into a side road, two shots sounded closer than was polite, but I didn't think those were meant for us, either.

The immigration official had our three passports spread out. He examined each one slowly rather than painstakingly. Then he practised his hard look on me.

"So these are your grandchildren?"

"Yes. My daughter married a Chinese doctor."

I hoped Giò wouldn't laugh.

"I guess that was allowed back then," the official hissed.

"Marriage is still allowed," I answered.

The hardness in the official's gaze became genuine. Giò's incipient smile had vanished.

“Come on, Granddad,” he whined, “we’re thirsty.”

The official’s jaw unclamped a fraction. Maybe he had grandchildren. Still tuned to Medusa, he gathered the passports and placed them in front of me.

“Have a good flight. Please don’t come back.”

The flight was fine, except for the two false passports burning a hole in my shirt pocket. I’d tried to buy a couple of real ones from the English Embassy in Bergamo, but they’d shown me the door. That kind of corruption hadn’t become part of national life, except in sport, where the upshot was not all bad. Britons in general had become sick of scripted professional games, and were flocking to local amateur matches whose outcome depended on the players’ skills. My own small-town team was doing rather well.

Gatwick Airport™ was crowded with beginnings and endings of holidays. Passport control was as cursory as the service in the departure lounge coffee shops. As we came through the Arrivals gates, Giada and Giò whooped and ran to a short, elegant woman. They hadn’t seen their aunt for nearly four years. Ming’s sister, Xiuxi, clung to them, then glanced at me. She was crying and smiling at the same time.

“I got your message,” she said.

Right, and a woman who worked sixty hours a week making her catering business one of London’s finest had come at a moment’s notice to help her nephew and niece change planes. Chinese family values, I guess.

My job was nearly done. We took the youngsters over to the New China Air check-in. It was right next to the RyanItaly desk. That reminded me. I had a call to make. There was plenty of time before their flight. I excused myself and went to find a booth. Here they still had public phones. I even found one that was working.

I told Carmen where I was.

“I’m watching the moonlight dance on the Calabrian sea,” she replied. “When are you coming to join me?”

I thought about that for a while.

“I can hear you thinking,” she continued.

I was ten thousand new euros richer than I’d expected. Italy was my favourite country in the world, and Turin had become just too far from Italy.

“Turn on your intercom,” I intoned in my best artificial-Bogart manner. “That’s me you can see standing in your doorway.”

###

### [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](http://mybook.to/zin)

Here is its first chapter:

## Chapter 1

### *Birthday Boy*

The egg lent Joséphine's thin throat an adam's apple as it slid down.

“Ten!”

Joséphine diluted the taste with a gulp of her whisky and coke.

Warm autumn air carried the sound of music from the colonies across the city neighbourhood. Inside the party flat, on the top floor of a low-rise apartment block, Simão looked at the remaining hard-boiled eggs, all of them neatly shelled. His face had started to lose its Mediterranean colouring after the fourth egg. Now his skin turned even paler. He reached for the smallest egg, then drew his hand back.

“I can't.”

“You give up?”

“Yes. I give up.”

Simão looked crestfallen, though his eyes gave away a flicker of relief.

The guests set up a chorus of “Jo-sé-phine! Jo-sé-phine!!”

Joséphine raised her skinny arms in triumph.

Ed Scripps observed his young landlady from the back of the room. This was a new side to her. He was glad to see her so enthusiastic about something other than money. His party was warming up.

“Eleven!” he shouted.

Ed wondered whether this party game was a local tradition or a French import. Either way, his landlady had clearly had plenty of practice.

Joséphine grabbed another egg from one of the plates and stuffed it into her mouth. She chewed a couple of times, then swallowed.

“Jo-sé-phine! Jo-sé-phine!!”

“Twelve!” called Ed.

Joséphine paused. Pride fought unease on her face.

“All right,” she said, “but take off that ugly African music and put on one of my beautiful Brazilian records.”

Ed interrupted the voice of Rui Mingas, his own choice, and replaced it with the record he found at the top of the stack of Joséphine’s collection.

Accompanied now by the sound of Maria Bethânia, Joséphine eased her twelfth egg into her mouth and started to chew. Then stopped. Chewed again. She placed one hand on her throat and began to massage it. With her other hand, she snatched her tumbler, raised it to her lips, and took a draught. And another. She belched. The egg was down.

“Jo-sé-phine! Jo-sé-phine!! Jo-sé-phine!!!”

Clutching her belly, Joséphine rushed out of the lounge.

“Don’t go!”

“One more!”

A couple of people patted her as she went past, but no-one risked trying to stop her.

The cries of “Jo-sé-phine!” died down. Conversation resumed, rose and swirled to the background of Brazilian rhythm.

Ed's guests, Portuguese and foreign, talked mainly about music, cars, football, politics and clothes. And supermarkets, of course, when they spoke to their host. The heated political discussion was a surprise to Ed. He did not expect people to speak so openly, living, as they did, under a fascist regime.

"Things have got to change," said Hélder, one of his business contacts here in Lisbon. "The days of standing 'proudly alone' are over. We've got to open up to the outside world and get trading. Like it or not, that means becoming more democratic."

"It means ending the wars in the colonies," put in Mário, a friend of one of Ed's acquaintances back home. "Give them their independence. Let them run their own damned show."

"Bring our boys home! And keep them here!" This was Lourdes, a woman in her mid-30s whom Ed had met at the rowing club. "Can you imagine it, spending four years in the jungle, with the natives shooting at you?"

Ed shook his head. She was exaggerating, surely?

"Can you picture," she went on, "what those boys will be like when they get back? Traumatized and dangerous."

The only dissenting voice was that of Jorge. Ed had met Jorge in a bar frequented by teachers at the Sussex School, a language institute where Ed was taking Portuguese lessons. One of the teachers must have brought Jorge along this evening. Jorge prised Ed away from the group by asking him for a bottle of beer.

"Help yourself," said Ed. "The beer's in the fridge in the kitchen."

"Can you show me where that is, please?"

Ed excused himself and propelled Jorge down the corridor to the kitchen. He opened the fridge, pulled out a bottle of Sagres, handed it to Jorge and went to the drawers to rummage for an opener.

“Must be in the lounge,” he said.

“That’s OK.”

Ed turned to see Jorge drinking from the bottle.

Jorge wiped his luxuriant moustache with the back of his free hand.

“Having one yourself?” he asked Ed.

“Not just yet. I like to get some plain water inside me first. Gotta stay sober in front of my guests.”

“Look, Ed, the things those people were saying, they’ve got it all wrong. You don’t want to listen to them. For one thing, we don’t have any colonies. Mozambique, Angola, Guinea, they are not colonies. They are all part of Portugal, just as much as Lisbon is. Giving them away would be like cutting our arms off!”

Jorge caught Ed’s quizzical expression.

“Ed, tell me, how long have you been in Portugal now?”

“Two months to the day.”

“Right. That’s nothing, is it? Of course you don’t understand the way things are here, what is going on. But with time you’ll get to know us and to respect what we’re doing. We are only doing what we have to do.”

“Ooooh!! What are you two boys doing in here alone?”

The voice was followed into the kitchen by the voluptuous body of Anne, one of the English teachers from the Sussex School. She evidently knew Jorge quite well, because she pushed her hands into the thick hair



over his collar and brought his face forward and up to meet her lips, shoving him back against the fridge at the same time. They did not part. Indeed, Jorge's arms closed around Anne's back and pulled her tighter to him.

Ed removed the bottle of beer from Jorge's hand, which then disappeared under the back of Anne's blouse. Ed placed the bottle on the kitchen table and went back to the lounge, where an argument about music was brewing.

Lourdes wanted to go back to the classical music with which Ed had started the evening. Some of the others were adamant about sticking with Brazilian, or at least South American, music. One or two were arguing loudly for rock. None of them, it appeared, shared Ed's taste for African music, or wanted to hear Portuguese sounds.

Ed did not recognise the woman at the centre of the argument. He found her attractive, despite her boyish haircut. She was short, olive-skinned and curvaceous. Her eyes were dark and flashed fire to accompany the strong words shaped by her full lips. He reckoned she was about twenty years old. She was waving the disc she wanted played. Ed recognised his copy of *Genesis Live*. Mário and others had planted themselves between her and the record player, which was playing a number by Chico Buarque that had no words. Every so often, they would supply a chorus with relish. It sounded medical to Ed: "Tantum R" – not much fun. Rock would be better. Especially Genesis.

Ed approached the young woman.

"I see you like Genesis. I got that just before I left England. It's so new, most people here won't know it."

She looked at him steamily.

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