

The Realm of the Hungry Ghosts.  
A Novel by Gary William Murning

Chapter Two.

We'd planned to meet at our local—a pub just down the road from me that had a fine selection of specialist beers, a fairly respectable menu and a charming, eavesdropping waitress by the name of Polly—but My Gay Friend Oliver Montgomery wasn't feeling particularly well, so I agreed to go round to his place and let him “bung something in the microwave” for us. It was not an arrangement I found all that attractive, but Oliver was a good mate and an excellent sounding board, so postponing until he was fit enough to leave his very ungay flat just wasn't an option.

I got there at ten thirty, knowing that if we were going to do lunch the Oliver Montgomery way it would require a few warm up laps first. Before leaving, I'd promised Ashley that I wouldn't get too drunk—but we both knew that there was no such thing as “too drunk” where Olly was concerned and she'd said with a wry smile that she'd expect me when she saw me.

“We ok?” I'd asked before heading out of the door.

“Of course.” It had come out a little hesitantly and she'd had to repeat herself—telling me that I'd been right, we both had, and she loved me all the more for caring as much as I did. Waiting for Oliver to return to his shit-heap of a living room, however, I couldn't help wondering just how “ok” things really were. There was a sense that we had both somehow let each other down, and overnight it had hung in the air between us.

“Ok,” Oliver said, thumping into the room with two microwaved tikka masalas. He is a big man, is our Oliver. Twenty-three stone and six foot two, we'd once decided after sharing an especially expensive single malt that Oliver had

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received as a birthday present from his agent that he was ninety-five percent pure muscle. He worked out just about every day, could bench press in excess of six hundred pounds and had the biggest, blackest beard you'd ever wish to meet.

“Ok,” he repeated, sitting down in the armchair opposite the badly sprung settee where I sat. “Tell me about this bit you read in the DeLillo novel. *White Noise*, yes?”

I forked with my tikka masala experimentally, and then took another large gulp of my third whisky to fortify myself. “DeLillo’s main character is a lecturer in Hitler studies,” I said.

“That’s a new one on me.” Oliver tucked into his lunch, the tray balanced rather precariously on his knee—his massive frame making him look as though he were somehow a part of the extra-large, no doubt reinforced armchair rather than merely its occupant. I tried not to look around the musty, manuscript- and book-cluttered room—knowing full well that my eye would light on something guaranteed to put me off my tikka masala. Not that that would take much doing.

Sure enough, I glanced to my left and spotted an old pair of Oliver’s voluminous boxers seemingly crawling out from beneath the sideboard he’d inherited from a maiden aunt he’d never liked.

“He invented the course,” I told him, not wanting to dwell on just what Olly’s boxers were doing beneath the sideboard in the first place.

“With the help of six million Jews,” Oliver said through a mouthful of rice.

“Which is beside the point.”

“Not if you’re a Jew.”

“And are you?”

“Not the last time I looked.”

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“Then shut the fuck up and let me tell you this, while I’m still sober enough to string a reasonably coherent sentence together.”

“Reasonably coherent? You flatter yourself.” I could see it was going to be a long day. Oliver was still rather full of himself after the success of his latest charity event (which had involved him pushing a mini bus a badly-measured mile) and experience had taught that attempting to resist his mood was futile. Better to just buy into it and hope there was plenty in to drink.

“You’re not interested,” I said flatly, shrugging and draining my glass.  
“You’re loss, mate.”

Oliver chewed thoughtfully for a short while, arching his back every now and then—nursing a strain from the “Big Event”. He eyed me suspiciously but I suspected that somewhere beneath that beard he was smiling.

“So this dumb-fuck American college professor runs a course on Hitler Studies and...?” he said, topping up our glasses.

“At the college where he works, there’s this other lecturer. I can’t remember his name. Not that it matters—the point is, he wants to do for Elvis what this other guy’s done for Hitler.”

“Let me guess. Elvis Studies?”

“Got it in one.” I loaded some rice and tikka masala onto my fork and put it into my mouth before I had chance to reconsider. It actually wasn’t too bad—swilled down with a hefty slug of cheap scotch.

“Sounds a fairly preposterous proposal from where I’m sitting,” Olly said.

“Couldn’t agree more—but the point is, during their discussions, this guy mentions that Elvis read the Bardo Thodol.”

“Ah.” Oliver nodded as a sliver of understanding peeped over the horizon.

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“The Tibetan Book of the Dead. Death and rebirth. I see where you’re going.”

That was one of the things I liked best about Oliver; his capacity as a fellow writer to understand the subtlety of the connections I made as I built myself up for a new project. He never failed to “tune in” and take pleasure in bouncing the ideas back and forth—and for that I was eternally grateful.

“I know the whole Elvis thing has been done to a death, if you’ll pardon the pun,” I said, “but my story won’t actually be about Elvis—it’ll be about the boy who convinces himself that the mysterious old man who’s just moved into his village is Elvis. A story of adolescent obsession and—“

“Unavoidably homoerotic.”

“What?” This hadn’t occurred to me and I could have almost been annoyed with him, had it not been for the gift of possibilities his comment provided.

“No matter how hard you try,” Oliver said, “you just aren’t going to be able to get away from the older man, younger boy thing. Christ, they even said it about King’s *Salem’s Lot*.”

“You always have to lower the tone, don’t you?”

“You think homoeroticism is lowering the tone?”

“I was referring to your mentioning King.”

Oliver twitched an eyebrow and I saw a flash of white teeth as he loaded more food into his mouth. I’d barely touched my “meal” so decided I better at least make an effort—managing to eat a good half of it before the over processed mush got the better of me and I found myself setting it aside on the floor and helping myself to another scotch. Oliver reached over and took my tray of half eaten food, scraping the remnants onto his and tucking in. For someone who was usually pretty careful and regimented about his food, Oliver had a hell of an appetite for junk.

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When he was done, he looked at me and said, “How did yesterday go? Sorry I couldn’t make it but... well, I was still too knackered after the bus push. Really twatted my back up, too.”

“That’s ok. You would have hated it, anyway.”

“Too many screaming kids?”

“Too many screaming adults,” I said. “Well, almost. You know.”

“I do?”

“Probably not.” I really didn’t feel like telling him about it, seeing the act as something of a betrayal and misrepresentative. What had happened had been a blip, a momentary aberration, and to talk about it made it more significant than it actually was. Nevertheless, I found myself sharing the full story with Oliver—finishing with some of what Ashley and I had said to each other before I had left that morning.

He stared at the arm of the settee when I had finished, and I saw the emotional exhaustion pass through him—something very physical and somehow removed, an alien presence that had little to do with the story I had told him. He took another drink, eyes still stubbornly refusing to meet mine, and I knew that he was thinking of Donnelly McCrane.

Oliver and Donnelly had met at the Frankfurt Book Fair a couple of years before—Oliver there to sit on a panel or three, Don, it seemed, simply because he had little better to do and his Daddy was “a much respected literary agent”. The two, Olly-lore had it, had hit it off immediately. There had been nothing overtly sexual about it initially, neither of them wearing their “fagginess”, as Oliver liked to put it, on their sleeves, but as the days had rolled on it had become obvious to the two of them that they were falling very heavily in love. The change in Oliver had been extremely noticeable. All of his friends had commented on it at one time or another and Ashley

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had been fond of saying, “I never realised just how lonely Olly was before he met Don. He seems so complete, now.” And this had been true. Oliver had entered rooms and claimed them—not because of his bulk, but simply because he was loved—and it had been a wonderful thing to see. Together, they were considerate and perpetually affectionate—even in company—but something happened, as it too often does, and that wonderfully precious thing that had existed between them became something else, something quite different.

It was a subject Oliver had never discussed in any depth—not even with me—and I admired that. Whatever had brought their relationship to an end was between the two of them, and no matter how many times Ashley quizzed him about the details I was still naïve enough to believe that Oliver would never tell.

“You were wrong, you know,” he now solemnly said, staring into his whisky glass. “But your reasons for being wrong were right. What you have... it’s not a fiction. Not something that can be rewritten. Once certain things are said and done there’s no taking them back.” Now he met my eyes and it occurred to me that this was perhaps as close as he would ever come to telling me just what had happened between him and Don. “Happiness writes white, mate. Keep the pages of the life you share with Ashley and Nadine clean and clear.”

I thought about this whilst Oliver went through to the poky kitchen to fetch dessert. The living room was like an oven, and as I got up to open another window I wondered just how wise it would be to take advice from a man like Oliver Montgomery. It was true that he had a degree of experience that I would never have, and that he could often think his way to the centre of the most complex of philosophies and concepts—but he was a man alone, a man who, whatever the success of his written work, still

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didn't have the things he wanted most from life. I felt for him, admired him, but his quoting Montherlant made me wonder; could listening to him ever make a difference?

The scotch was making me woozy and I hoped Oliver had something sweet and substantial for dessert. I was in the mood for something with rich, thick chocolate and lots of fresh cream, but what I got was warm apple pie with a house-brick sized slab of vanilla ice cream.

"Just like mother used to make," Oliver said, sitting back down in his armchair and putting his feet up on the cluttered coffee table. "One thing's been bothering me," he continued. "You and Maggie. Where the fuck were you? Ashley thought you were out there, but you weren't. So where?"

Oliver was about the only person other than Maggie and I that knew about the cottage in Wales and what had happened there, and he had never been shy of making his disapproval known. He liked Maggie, and he liked me—but he also thought the world of Ashley and he had told me many times that what I'd done had been despicable. The "premeditated" aspect of it all had especially repulsed him, and even though he seemed to accept that it was something that had never happened again and, I assured him, never would, he still got suspicious every once in a while.

On this occasion, I chose to ignore the implication and merely answered his question.

"Stalker spotting," I said. "Maggie's got a stalker. She reckons he phones her up and tells her everything she's done and everywhere she's been so I figured..."

"Stalk the stalker?"

"Something like that. Came to nothing, though."

"Didn't spot any likely candidates?"

"Unfortunately, no."

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Oliver grew introspective and since the apple pie and ice cream was actually rather good, I didn't push it. His booted feet twitched on the coffee table and he slurped melted ice cream between his teeth, staring into middle space and humming to himself.

"Do you believe her?" he suddenly asked.

I didn't hesitate. "Yes. Absolutely."

"She's a recently bereaved ex-lover," he said, as if I needed reminding. "Do you still believe her?"

A couple more drinks and it could have got nasty. As it was, I sat back, sighed and repeated my original answer, adding, "She mentioned it to Ashley before mentioning it to me—and before you say that that doesn't mean a bloody thing, it does to me, ok? And that apart, you weren't there. She was sincere and clearly worried about Wee Mark."

Oliver nodded and held up a massive hand by way of an apology, satisfied. "She tried the police?" he asked.

"Naturally."

"And?"

"What do you think?"

"As much use as a crepe paper condom."

"You do crepe paper condoms an injustice but, yes, that's about the long and short of it. I had a chat with her and Ashley about it, once Mad Molly had left, and I agreed to spend a little time following her myself over the next week or so—see if I can't spot who the hell it is that's doing this."

Oliver took his feet from the coffee table, knocking a stack of books on existentialism and Cartesian philosophy onto the floor. Sitting forward, he placed his

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bowl in the space left by the books and rested his Popeye forearms on his knees, his bearded face suddenly more animated.

Pointing a large, callused finger at me, he said, “Now *that’s* what I like to see. The proactive approach. Brilliant. Give the bastards a dose of their own medicine. When do we start?”

“We?”

“Maggie’s my friend as well. Plus I owe it to Jim.”

Jim and Oliver had never really got on—Jim possessing a barely concealed homophobic streak that had actually had the beautifully ironic effect of placing him in a minority of one in our little group of friends. I didn’t mention this, however, instead pointing out that it was going to be difficult to be inconspicuous with a twenty-three stone bus pusher in tow.

But Oliver was difficult to dissuade in his post bus push omnipotent euphoria. He sat there before me, happily making plans with very little by way of input from me other than the occasional grunt and all too reluctant nod. Apparently, inconspicuous was nothing more than a frame of mind. It was merely a question of pushing all thoughts of being noticed out of your head. Once that was done, Oliver assured me, you were home and dry.

“It’s very Cartesian,” he insisted. “If we exist because we think, the trick of inexistence is really very simple; stop thinking.”

He seemed deeply satisfied with this uncharacteristically inaccurate interpretation and I knew that any effort I now made to talk him out of “helping” me would be futile. He drunkenly saw an opportunity to apply and thereby test a fundamental of Cartesian philosophy—and this was not something he was about to pass up in a hurry. Sitting in his sweat-stinking little flat, alone, working through

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thesis and antithesis in order to arrive at a satisfying synthesis was all well and good, but it had its limits.

And so we agreed (or Oliver agreed—I simply didn't disagree) that we would start our surveillance the following week, since Maggie was reluctantly spending time with her mother over the weekend. Also, I wanted to spend time with Ashley and Oliver had a short story called *The Cup and the Cusp* that he really needed to get finished before Boots, his agent, really lost her patience, so Oliver decided we would start Monday morning—taking it in two hour shifts and keeping in touch by mobile phone.

As I was leaving later that evening, rather the worse for wear, Oliver said, “You know something? Life isn't so bad after all.” It was a strange thing to say, but I attributed it to an excess of alcohol. We said goodbye and I tried not to think about the following Monday.

The silence and stale, overpoweringly thick air hit me full on in the face as I entered the living room and I knew right away that Ashley wasn't home. I stood by the settee for a moment, listening and trying to imagine what it would be like if it was always this way. The emptiness sighed sadly against the back of my neck, brittle and icy even as it made me sweat, its weight bringing with it realisation and disharmony—and I remembered afresh the time before Ashley, the time before Nadine Verity. It could never be like that. That man had never known these two wonderful creatures—he had wandered, solitary and under the illusion that he had happiness of a kind right there in the simplicity and calm. He had been a fool, I decided—calling out Ashley's name, just in case, and receiving no response. Whatever complications it brought with it, I needed people in my life—I needed Ashley and Nadine. I heard natural movement,

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the house shifting somewhere as timbers warmed or cooled, and I knew I could never live with that alone. Peacefulness equated with spiritual emptiness and I determined that whatever problems Ashley and I were having, I was having none of that.

I decided to use the time alone productively, however, and headed upstairs to my office—the booze inspiring or misleading me, it was difficult to say which.

My PC was always on, even when no one was home, as was my 2Mbps broadband connection. I checked my email (more spam trying to sell me the usual selection of Viagra and debt consolidation), and then read through my notes again. My story felt closer than it ever had, so I tentatively opened a new Word document, set it for double spacing, and started typing...

*He was a boy who liked to look through other people's windows, I wrote. The lives of complete strangers held him, took him away from himself in a way that nothing else could, and often he would wonder just what it must be like to be that unknown woman—to eat as her, breath as her, to dream her dreams in the dead of the night. Sometimes he would imagine himself as the woman, naked before her mirror—depressingly alone as she slipped her fingers deep into her cunt, the pleasure and the pain, the comfort of her own body—and he would masturbate frantically, the come ripping from him violently as he imagined what she would smell like, sound like, taste like as she slipped her sopping fingers from inside her and sucked on them, eyes shut tight against the loneliness.*

*More often than not, however, it was the watching that held him, rather than the sexual possibilities. He liked to think that he owned a part of these people—that, unobserved, he could somehow reach deep inside them and touch something essential that even they themselves had been unaware of. Possession, he had once heard his drunken, thieving father say, was nine tenths of the law. Well, if that were the case,*

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*Richard was most assuredly a good, lawful citizen.*

*He was three days away from his fifteenth birthday when everything changed. He was sore from another drunken beating and Mrs. Sutherland was wearing the thinnest, clingiest summer dress he'd ever seen. The breeze pressed it against her and he knew today was a good day—a day of distractions and protracted wrist exercises. Her routine was by now so predictable that he had learned that he could actually pass by her at times and arrive at her eventual destination before her—thus making his surveillance even less conspicuous—and, so, when she followed him into the mini market, it was no surprise that she immediately headed for the newspapers over in the far corner, beneath the smeared convex mirror. He remained in his place by the freezers, their chill welcome on such a stubbornly humid day, and watched as she bent to pick up her copy of *The Sunday Times*. Her buttocks—still firm and pleasingly confined for a woman in her late thirties, he thought—stretched the dress's material and he played with the idea of just walking up behind her, brushing against her, allowing her to know he was there as he spilled into his shorts. How would she react if she knew? Richard wondered. Would she be horrified or amused? Or would some primitive part of her welcome and encourage his peculiar attentions?*

*She was standing now, the folded paper in her hand as she studied the headline. Her face was difficult to make out in the bulging mirror, but for just a moment he thought she glanced up and met his gaze. A fleeting recognition. An invitation, he was sure. I know, that look said. I know, and I like it.*

*Richard left the shop before her and walked south along the High Street before turning left onto Briarburn Lane and walking the few yards to his favourite bench. Mrs. Sutherland, a widow for more than a year and a half, now, lived at the end of Briarburn Lane and he knew that in a matter of minutes she would pass him*

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*and say good morning as if she didn't have a care in the world. It was the only occasion he ever allowed this to happen. All his other clients (for that was how he sometimes liked to think of them; unwitting wards to be guided in the most imperceptible of ways), he kept at distance—but with Mrs. Sutherland he had made this one concession because he believed it was something she needed... something they both needed.*

*Sure enough, she came breezing along a couple of minutes later. As she entered the quiet lane, he prepared himself—pushing the Armani sunglasses that his father had stolen for him further up his nose and flicking his long, lank hair out of his face. The newspaper was tucked under her arm and he imagined her sweat soaking into it—the print bleaching from the paper and staining her skin. “One right classy fuck,” his dad would have called her, and however much it irked him to do so, Richard would have had to agree. Mrs. Sutherland was the kind of woman who knew how to hold herself. She was elegant, but not snooty—clearly intelligent, but with a blood-rich sensuality that bubbled just beneath the surface.*

*Richard braced himself for the exchange of good mornings but, much to his surprise, the expected greeting didn't come. Mrs. Sutherland sat down on the bench beside him, slapping the folded newspaper down on the remaining seat space, tucking her hands between her legs in licentious prayer and smiling straight at him. He felt his cheeks flush and his cock twitch—suddenly certain that the game was over. She knew what he had been doing and, much to his surprise, he didn't care. It was right she should know. Although he hadn't realised it until now, that was the whole point.*

*Her sweet, cocoa-butter summer scent drifted to him and she said, “Our bedrooms look over at one another.”*

*She didn't need to say anymore. There could be no mistake. She did indeed*

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*know. A deep sigh whilst she waited for him to say something. A physical readjustment, her hip against his.*

*“Yes,” he said. Feigning ignorance was pointless. How could he have not noticed, given that she so often stood at her bedroom window—staring out across the field that stood between them and hugging herself?*

*“Why?” she said.*

*The question confused him. “Why what?”*

*“Why do you follow me all the time?”*

*All the time was a bit of an exaggeration, but he didn’t think she’d quite see it that way. “Summat to do.” He shrugged and let his hair fall over his face.*

*That sigh again. She slouched down and let her hands rest in her lap. Richard wondered if she realised just how fucking provocative that really was.*

*“Village life.” She smiled at him sadly and he noticed that her two front teeth were rather crooked. A dogtooth, he thought it was called. Like the check. “No cinema or nightclubs for miles,” she went on, “a crappy selection of DVDs at the local shop... is it any wonder we’re all a little fucked up?”*

*He relaxed a little. Maybe this was going to be ok after all. Hearing her voice so close, so conspiratorial was good enough—but for her to be comfortable enough to swear in front of him...*

*“You need the Internet,” he said, knowing something was required of him and grasping hold of the only area of expertise that he possessed. “That helps. You don’t feel so... you know.”*

*“Isolated?”*

*“Aye.”*

*“It’s something I’ve thought about,” she admitted. “Jim—my late husband—*

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*he left a laptop but we never got hooked up or whatever the correct term is. I expect it would be too difficult and expensive for me anyway.”*

*“Nah, it’s a piece of piss, and you could start off with a basic dial-up package to keep cost down.”*

*“Really?”*

*“Yes, really.”*

*The morning had certainly taken an unexpected detour, and as Richard found himself volunteering a little too enthusiastically to help the strange but wonderful Mrs. Sutherland set up an ISP, he wondered if any of this was wise. The lonely woman befriends the lonely boy. It was an act of charity, nothing more, he was sure.*

*As they said their goodbyes, after having arranged a time for Richard to call and set up her dial-up, Mrs. Sutherland lightly touched his arm and said, “I don’t mind, you know.”*

I read through what I had written, sitting back in my chair, legs stretched out beneath my desk. It occurred to me, as it so often did, that the story was already deviating from the course I had envisaged. I saw any number of possible ways of getting it back on track—but knew enough to understand that that would probably be fatal. Far better to just let the story be what it wanted to be.

I closed the document and briefly looked at my notes, highlighting the material I believed I needed to focus on next time and feeling the post-work, post-alcohol hangover start to kick in. Nauseated and a little shaky, I was about to close my notes and head downstairs for a glass of water when I noticed a highlighted comment at the bottom of the page. The highlighting was in red so I knew right away that this

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was none of my doing (I always used blue or lime green).

*Fill in the hole*, it said. *That I might happily return*. Shaking my head, I smiled at the screen. Ashley. The epitome of the persistent woman. I pictured her standing over the hole, me looking up at her, and I finally understood that I was fighting a losing battle. As attached as I had grown to my hole—and the work it involved—I had to concede that she was right. It was a pointless task, one that would probably never achieve the desired result, and my refusing to fill it in would merely serve to show how pig-headed and obsessive I could be.

Downstairs, the house seemed even emptier than it had earlier. I thought of calling Ash on her mobile but I knew she'd only resent it—thinking I was checking up on her. Maybe Oliver, then? Anything to break the imperious silence. But no. Oliver would be asleep or working, I was sure, cocooned in his own little world of dialectics and dirt.

I put the receiver back in its cradle without dialling and instead did what I knew I had to do. I headed out into the back garden to fill in my hole.

My father once told me that a garden was a place in which a man could safely lose himself. It was a realm of possibility only confined by the limits of one's imagination, a playground for the soul and a heavenly, spiritual release. As a boy, I would watch him late at night from what was now my office window—standing in the middle of the lawn, looking up at the sky with his hands in his pockets. A man comfortable in his skin. A man comfortable in his location.

At times like these, I missed him and Mam more than ever. Warm, almost intolerably quiet summer evenings—the sun dipping beneath our neighbouring houses, cool, long shadows reaching for the back door like unreadable portents, heat

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beneath one's feet as the air, still thick with midges, began to cool. These were times we, by rights, should have spent together. Mam, Dad, me, Ashley and Nadine. Family as it once was, family as it should be forevermore.

Looking down at the hole, spade in hand, I felt as though I was about to do something far more meaningful than it at first appeared. This was for the good of my marriage, the safety of my child—and as such, it was the right thing to do. Nevertheless, it felt somehow sacrilegious—a sin against something I wasn't entirely sure I believed in.

“Just fill it in,” Dad would have said. “You know damn well it isn't going to solve the drainage problem, so why fight it?”

I drove my spade into the mountainous pile of excavated soil, listening as Dad talked me through the process—Mam and Ashley laughing together in the kitchen—and stopped immediately, my spade hitting something unexpectedly metallic.

I looked around questioningly, but Dad wasn't there to provide any answers. On my own, I stooped—pulling out the spade and tossing it aside as I worked to uncover the mystery object. It was close to the surface, the soil loose and yielding, so it took no time at all to pull it out and brush it clean.

The rectangular tin looked like it might have once held biscuits or sweets—the faded picture on the lid showing a poor Turner-esque scene, the lettering scraped away and rusted. It had weight and as I turned it over in my hands, I felt movement. Whatever was inside was solid and... *soft*. It didn't clunk or clatter, just shifted dully. A quiet thud.

“What you got there?” I jumped and almost dropped the tin into the hole—getting quickly to my feet and juggling it before trapping it against my chest.

“Ashley. Don't do that, for Christ's sake.”

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“Don’t do what?”

“Creep up on me like that. I nearly had a bloody heart attack.”

She had a playful look in her eyes and I knew that she too had been drinking. Rocking back and forth on the back doorstep, her hands clasped before her, she giggled rather stupidly and said, “Who’s creeping? I’ve been banging and clattering about in here for the last five minutes. You’ve been spending too much time in that there hole of yours. You’ve got soil in your ears.”

“You’ve been drinking.”

“So have you.”

“Bet you’re drunker than I am.”

“Bet you I’m not.”

“Prove it, then.” Gotcha, I thought smugly.

She hopped down from the step, eyes squinting suspiciously. “How?”

“Fill in my hole for me.”

But Ashley was more interested in the tin I held. She stepped forward and chewed her lip thoughtfully—her eyes a little glassy and distant. More colourful than was usual, her skin looked ruddy and reassuringly healthy. A beautiful woman, I told myself proudly. One to cherish and accept—in spite of all her faults. A lock of hair flopped over her eye and she blew it away, her attention still focused on the tin.

“So what is it, then?” she asked.

I shrugged my shoulders and turned it over in my hands again, smelling the coolness of the soil on it and the sharp, metallic odour. “I don’t know,” I said. “Well, I do. It’s a tin—but I don’t know what it was doing buried here and I don’t know what’s inside it.”

“You think there’s something inside it?”

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“It feels like it.”

I handed the tin to her so that she could feel for herself and she shook it experimentally—grinning with a strange satisfaction. I’d forgotten she could be like this, youthful and easy to please, and I have to say, I think it brought out the best in me. I could have dismissed it, moved the conversation on until the tin was forgotten—as I might have at another time—but instead of so doing, I took the tin from her and said, “Let’s see what’s inside it, shall we?”

We squatted down and I placed the tin on the floor between us. The light was starting to fail and birdcall marked the beginning of night. I felt the evening waiting at my shoulder as Ashley and I held our breath—and in my heart I felt a sudden, inexplicable sense of loss.

“Go on, then,” she said. “What are you waiting for?”

I’d expected the lid to be rusted in place—immovable, bringing our excitement to an anticlimax. A good whack with a hammer and screwdriver would soon loosen it, of course—but, Ashley being Ashley, she would tire of the idea before I’d had chance to fetch my tools and it would simply be left on the patio for me to open the following day. And maybe if it had happened that way everything would have turned out differently. Maybe I would not be the man I am today.

As it was, of course, the lid came off the tin very easily and Ashley and I found ourselves staring down at the surprisingly well-preserved leather-bound journal of a woman who (although we didn’t know it at the time) would change our lives forever. It looked old, the dark blue leather worn and cracked—but it didn’t seem to have suffered unduly from its time buried beneath my father’s garden. I wondered briefly if it was something Dad had put there—a time capsule to annoy people who hadn’t even been born when he’d thought of the idea—but that had never really been

The Realm of the Hungry Ghosts.  
A Novel by Gary William Murning

his style. It was too forced for Dad, too deliberate, and if Mam had been the power behind this, well, she would certainly have seen to it that it had been packed with greater care.

“Whose is it, do you think?” Ashley said in a reverential whisper.

“I don’t know,” I answered. Neither of us had so far plucked up the courage to touch it—as if we imagined it might crumble apart in our hands. I thought of Richard in my story and said, “Ours, I suppose. Possession being nine tenths of the law.”

She nodded and looked at me expectantly—her mouth twitching impatiently.

“Well?” she said. “Are you going to, then, or what?”

“I thought that you might like the honour.”

“Scared?” She grinned and I shook my head, sticking out my tongue at her.

The truth was, though, the journal did frighten me a little. I understood the power of words—especially those never intended to be read by anyone else—and whatever this was, I felt certain that it was overflowing with personal mystery and grief. I ran my fingers over the leather binding, trying to summon up a sense of its history and any implicit warning—but all I was truly aware of was the leather’s grainy texture and the thumping of my hangover at my temples.

I carefully removed it from the tin and opened it. “It is certain to me that I should not be in this place,” I read.