

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

Chapter Four.

Ashley sat on the edge of the bed in jeans and T-shirt, bare feet rubbing thoughtfully against the carpet. I watched her from the doorway, listening to Nadine playing in her room across the landing, then entered and sat on the bed beside her.

Pippa had left a good fifteen minutes ago, and by rights I should have been meeting Oliver for our possibly quite ridiculous surveillance of Maggie—but something had changed with Ashley since her mother had left, and I wasn't too comfortable leaving her alone.

She smiled rather unimpressively, her eyes not in the least convincing, then turned her attention back to the carpet and her feet. When she sighed, I felt Sunday afternoon returning and tried desperately to think of some way to get the Ashley of earlier that morning back.

"You shouldn't be here," she told me quietly.

"I know but..."

"But what?"

I considered possible answers. Make something up, or stick with the truth? I reached over and took her hand. It felt cool, a little clammy. Maybe she was sickening for something. I sincerely hoped so.

"What's up?" I asked. "Did Pippa say something wrong?"

"Not to my face," she said. And I immediately understood. "Why did she do that, love? Why couldn't she just ask me how I was instead of treating me like... I don't know, someone you have to tiptoe around? I'm not that bad, surely."

I had to tread very carefully—without letting it show. Ashley was watching

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

me intently and I knew that if I leant too far in either direction I'd be in big trouble. "I just think that she didn't wan to risk bringing you back down if you'd picked yourself up again," I said. "I can't say I was too comfortable with it, but I think I understand it. A little."

She nodded and got a better grip of my hand. "I know," she said. "I just don't like it. It's too reminiscent."

"Of what?"

"Of childhood," she told me.

I will never forget the day Ashley and I first met. I was twenty-four and generally rather full of myself. University was behind me and I was now finally fluffing my feathers and preparing to be the one thing I'd always dreamed of becoming; a successful writer... any kind of writer, for that matter. I idealistically saw opportunity everywhere, optimism dripping from me like perspiration, and it didn't matter to me in the least that I hadn't yet published anything, or that I was doing any menial job I could find just to make ends meet. The fact was, I was writing—and when I told people I was a writer, rather than a bartender or window cleaner, it no longer felt like a lie.

It was a good time for me. A new decade, a new outlook. I partied with friends, forever bemoaning the decline in the innovative delights of the music we played, wrote a thousand words a morning come hell or high water and worked at whatever temporary work I could find, delightfully seeking inspiration in my surroundings and sifting through the minutiae for "true meaning". A good time... or perhaps not. I fooled myself, I suppose, like many of us do. Nothing was fixed or pinned down. I drifted and the world about me drifted. Transient and quite possibly

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

highly unforgiving, I wrote about damaged, lost souls—and ignored the flashes of recognition.

I'd never really liked Estby Bay. It was a seedy seaside town that seemed perpetually out of season—bleak and broken, the arcades shiny but flaky, the beach a minefield of dog shit and broken bottles. So why did I end up there on that fateful weekend? Quite simple, really; Oliver. Had it not been for his insisting that I should hook up with him and a few “scene” gays he was having a lot of fun with at the time, I would have stayed at home, written a few thousand words, had a quiet wank and never met the beautiful (and young) Ashley Levine.

“We’ve got a caravan,” Olly had told me. “It won’t cost you a fucking penny, mate. And those fuckers’ll love you so much you won’t have to buy a drink all weekend.” I remember I’d expressed some concerns about his friends possibly expecting “something in return”, but Olly had been quick to put my mind at ease. “With me there, you won’t have a thing to worry about,” he’d told me. “And apart from that, you’ll pull a cute girly the first night there.”

It had struck me as a whole load of nightmares rolled into one, but Oliver hadn’t been about to take no for an answer. And so we had arrived late Friday afternoon in three cars, the rain bouncing and the temperature more reminiscent of January than July, and my fate was sealed. Oliver and his friends (Rich, Christian and a few others I can only remember by their dreads and piercings) fussed about unpacking, Oliver frequently telling the others not to be such a “bunch of fucking obsessive pansies” and squeezing in and out the inadequate door on his way to and from the cars. I knew right off I was out of my depth—especially when Rich flung his arms around my neck and started crying, telling me that he would never forgive that “horridific, beastly man” (Olly) for what he had said (“you’ve got a pimple on your

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

nose, mate”)—and so, within half an hour or thereabouts, I decided a walk alone in the rain was my best option.

The Esplanade was relatively deserted, the families that had braved the beach for the day long gone—either returning to their caravans or B&Bs, or feeding coins into the clattering and buzzing machines in the arcades—and as I walked, my shirt and jeans already soaked through, I tried unsuccessfully to think of somewhere I’d less rather be. Cars and lorries passed on my right, burning exhaust fumes mixing with the curiously filthy and unappetising smell of fish and chips, and the sea rolled in shades of grey on my left—and the only promise of shelter or respite I saw was the roofed-in brick and wood seating areas that looked out to sea. It was either that or cross the road for the shops and arcades I found so unappealing.

I jogged the remaining few yards as the rain started to come down more heavily, cursing Oliver for talking me into coming with him, and finally plonking down on the bench, mumbling to myself obscenely. Only when I’d finished talking to myself did I glance around and notice the young woman sitting at the far end of the bench—feet up as she huddled into the corner made by the bench and the shelter reading Joseph Heller’s *Good As Gold*.

I remember she wore heavy-duty, black leather work boots, torn and tattered 501s and a red and black plaid shirt—her shoulder-length hair shaggy about her face, complexion tanned and a little ruddy. She eyed me suspiciously over her book and then, unable to help herself, grinned and said the first words I ever heard her speak:

“If it helps,” she said, “you’ve cheered me up no end.”

Ashley had never really been inclined to talk about her childhood. As she told it, it had been fairly typical and uneventful—something to be forgotten simply because

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

there was little to remember—but that had always seemed somehow suspicious to me. So to be finally sitting on the end of our bed together discussing this was both a relief and a worry. I imagined every childhood horror under the sun, torturing myself with ominous and wholly uncharacteristic images of her father, but felt myself relaxing as she spoke.

“That’s what I remember more than anything,” she told me. “People talking about me. Behind my back. Even from my bedroom, I’d hear Mam and Dad going on about me, worried about this, worried about that. It was bloody ridiculous.”

“They’re parents,” I insisted. “That’s what they do... we’ll be the same with Nadine.”

She looked at me sharply, pulling her hand away from mine. “No, we won’t,” she said, an edge of anger communicating just how serious this was. “We’ll be anything but the same, Sonny. I don’t want Nadine being brought up feeling that... that she doesn’t have a say in her own life. If we discuss anything about her, we do it with her around.”

“That isn’t possible,” I said softly, taking her hand again and hoping I was doing this right. “Sometimes we’ll have to discuss her privately, just between the two of us—it’s vital.”

She nodded and I felt something start to uncoil just beneath my diaphragm. “But only when it’s absolutely necessary and only when we are quite sure she can’t hear us, right?”

“That sounds about right to me,” I told her.

I still didn’t really understand what was going on here. I knew as well as anyone the various resentments that could develop and fester over the years between parents and a child, but it still seemed virtually unthinkable that Pippa and Len could

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

have done anything to warrant this kind of reaction. I thought of my own parents—my own childhood—and felt a flash of anger at Ashley’s ingratitude; she still had her parents, could still fix the things that were broken, if she so wished. Whereas I... I had nothing in need of fixing. My parents and I had reached a place of balance and unspoken acceptance. We had been who we had been, and whatever our faults, we had admitted a quiet admiration for one another. But that still didn’t mean that there were not things I wanted to discuss with them—both trivial and of great importance—or that I missed them any less.

“They’ve always thought of me as a problem,” Ashley continued. “That’s what it comes down to.”

“I don’t think that’s strictly true, love.” Pippa and Len had always seemed reasonable, loving people to me (although Len had been something of an obstacle in the early days) and this just didn’t fit with my image of them at all. I was doing my best to be patient, but this just seemed to be getting more ludicrous with each passing minute.

“Take my word for it, first and foremost, I’m a problem to them. A whole fucking *series* of problems.... Don’t look like that, Sonny. You don’t know. You’ve only seen what they want you to see. The truth is, whether I’m right or wrong, that’s how it seemed all the way through my childhood. That’s how they made me feel—sitting in the living room, talking about my ‘moods’, about whether I was doing drugs or fucking boys, wondering if they should get me ‘professional help’. I was a *normal* kid, for fuck’s sake. A *normal* teenager, but to them I was... I was going to say I was some kind of freak, but that’s too excessive. Even *I* can see that. They were wrong, but they weren’t quite *that* bad.”

That was something, at least. I started to tell her that I understood what she

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

was saying, where she was coming from, but before I'd said more than a couple of words, she was speaking again.

“Did I ever tell you about the time they caught me reading de Sade?” she asked.

We spent the rest of the afternoon and early evening talking in the shelter—looking out to sea at the ships waiting to be piloted into port and resisting the temptation to shuffle closer to one another. Heller sat on the bench between us like a wordy old chaperone and I tried not to dwell on the fact that it had been he who had introduced me to the word “oxymoron”. Ashley laughed easily, but always seemed to attempt to deny it with a quickly following frown—and this made me work all the harder, delighting in this insight into her nature. When she moved to make herself more comfortable, I thought for a moment she was about to leave, and my sense of relief when she stayed was both fascinating and revealing.

I knew she was younger than me, of course. She looked eighteen or nineteen, but spoke to me like an emotional and intellectual equal—so it wasn't something I was unduly concerned about. If she was old enough to appreciate Heller, I couldn't see that there was a problem.

“So what brings you to the wonderful Estby Bay?” she asked me.

“My Gay Friend, Oliver Montgomery,” I told her. “I'm spending two whole nights in a caravan full of queers.”

“Looking forward to it?” She smirked and set Heller on her lap. I wondered if this was an invitation to move closer.

“I'll be sleeping on my back with one eye open,” I said.

“I'm sure they'll be gentle with you.”

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

Looking back now, with all that has happened in the intervening years, it's difficult to recognise the two people we were. I realise that is something of a cliché, but it's nevertheless true. We were in many ways a different breed entirely to the people we were to become—optimistic, though we would never see it thus, and both fixated on the futures we dreamed of and expected. Failure was for other people. Whatever we set our minds to we would achieve.

The evening grew late. We drank coffee and ate cakes in a café just off the High Street, and then Ashley announced that she had to be getting off. Her parents would be wondering where she'd got to. I offered to walk her back to her B&B, but she assured me she would be fine—and anyway, it was just around the corner and, as she told me, I had a caravan of queers to take care of.

Before parting outside the café, we made plans to meet the following morning and Ashley leant in and kissed me. It was a rather chaste, tentative little closed-mouth kiss on the lips—but still I found it both touching and arousing. She blushed and smiled at me and, impulsively, I reached out and caressed the side of her face.

“Nine thirty,” she said. “At our shelter.”

“I'll be there at nine.”

“Playing hard to get, eh?”

“I get the feeling it'd be a waste of time,” I said.

“I think you could well be right.”

We were standing in the doorway to Nadine's bedroom, watching her play with her Action Men. Her favourites were a couple I'd preserved from my own childhood—far superior to the modern equivalent, with spiky hair and hands that still gripped. She picked up the one I'd always called Jack (Blue polo neck, jeans and a beard) and sat

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

him on the edge of the bed, maternally patting him on the head and chattering away to him in Baby-Speak. Ashley held my hand as we watched and I waited for her to continue telling me about the de Sade incident.

“I don’t remember ever being like that,” she told me. “Carefree. Maybe I was and just don’t remember it, I don’t know...” She trailed off, smiling as Nadine pushed Jack from the bed with one hand and caught him with the other. “I tried, but I just... I wanted to understand everything, I suppose, and I guess that might have made me seem moody and introspective to Mam and Dad. I don’t know. Either way, I think they should have known better.”

“You were telling me about de Sade,” I reminded her.

She stared at me blankly, then nodded and leant against the jamb, hugging herself. “De Sade,” she muttered. “What a thing to get so uptight about. A tosspot pornographer-philosopher. You know what he’s like. Literary tedium at its best. Once the novelty wears off, it just gets predictable and anything but arousing. I’d read a couple of hundred pages of Juliette, played with myself a few times, but I’d just about had enough of it. It was too twisted for me, but, well, that in itself was interesting. I was fifteen and I was already beginning to understand that everything, no matter how perverse, can be rationalised and justified, if one was willing to work hard enough at it. Granted, it might not be a rationale or justification you or I would recognise or accept, but I already understood that morality is highly subjective. For all his faults, de Sade taught me that.

“Of course, Mam and Dad didn’t ‘get’ any of that. All they saw was their fifteen-year-old daughter with her hand down the front of her jeans reading a mucky book. It didn’t matter that I was just scratching the top of my leg, or that I was reading it in the living room and not trying to hide anything from them. I considered myself

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

old enough to read whatever the hell I liked—Mam used to lend me her Jackie Collins when I was just fourteen, for God’s sake!—but apparently I was mistaken. De Sade was the spawn of Satan. They never said as much, but they might as well have. I tried to talk to them about the book. Explain that I had learnt some important stuff from reading him, primarily that he was a twisted old tosser who tried to intellectualise his filth—but they just wouldn’t listen. That was what was really awful—the way they both just kept right on talking as if I hadn’t said a word. They just didn’t hear me, Sonny. No matter how calm I was, no matter how loudly I shouted—they just didn’t hear me. They didn’t want explanations, they didn’t want the truth, they just wanted me out of the way so they could talk about me and revel in the drama of it all....

“They sent me to bed without any supper, can you believe that?” she said. “Just like a kid who’s broken a window with a football, they sent me to bed without any supper and stayed up until three in the morning discussing what was to be done with me. I sat at the top of the stairs and listened, of course. They might not have let me have a say, but I wasn’t about to let them talk about me without my at least having some idea what they were saying. They’re C of E—you know that, right?”

I nodded, almost too overwhelmed to speak.

“Well can you believe that at one point they actually mooted the idea of taking me to a Catholic priest?”

“Let me guess,” I said, trying to lighten things a little. “They wanted to have you exorcised?”

“Something like that, yes,” she answered flatly, my attempt at humour going straight over her head. “Maybe exorcism is exaggerating it a bit, but they wanted to scare me into seeing that some of the choices I was making were bad—and for all of fifteen minutes they were convinced a Catholic priest was the perfect solution.”

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

It seemed preposterous that Pippa could consider something so bizarre and, well, plain stupid—but I was now utterly convinced that Ashley was making none of this up. All these years, she'd kept this to herself and, yes, that had initially made me doubt her, if I'm truthful. I was her husband, for Heaven's sake—and I was supposed to know everything there was to know about her. But now it was out, and I thought that maybe I understood her a little better. It was an added insight I'd never figured on.

Ashley looked at me and smiled a heartbreaking smile. "It's not as bad as it sounds, I suppose," she told me. "I had friends who had it a hell of a lot worse. It's just that when I hear her talking like that it brings it all back, makes me feel powerless and insignificant."

"Maybe you need to talk to her," I suggested. "To both of them."

"Maybe I do." It was the closet we had been in a long time, and we both seemed to acknowledge this. I thought that perhaps this was what had been needed all along—Ashley opening up, letting me in—but I also knew that that was probably too much to hope for. Life was more complicated than that. Relationships were more complicated than that.

When I finally left to go meet Oliver, she seemed rather more settled—still introspective, but settled nevertheless. She carried Nadine downstairs with her and stood at the living room window, watching me go, the two of them waving. Proud, I walked with purpose and the utterly misguided sense that everything was going to be all right. A corner had been turned, I believed, and we were once again heading in the right direction.

We met at our shelter the following morning, as arranged, and the first thing I noticed

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

and took as an encouraging sign was that Ashley had made something of an effort. Gone was the work-wear, only to be replaced by a short, pale yellow skirt and a tight, white sleeveless top. Her hair tied back loosely and her face lightly made up, she looked beautiful and, as Oliver would say when he met her later that evening, far too good for me.

It was much brighter and drier than the day before, the sun already starting to burn through the clouds and warm the pavement beneath our feet. It suddenly seemed a mammoth task to fill the day ahead of us and I felt a pang of doubt, finding it momentarily impossible to believe that the magic of the evening before could be maintained. The conversation would be stilted and hackneyed, and whatever the warmth of the day, the air between us would be dead and cold—in spite of my best efforts.

But I needn't have worried. Ashley all but skipped over to me and immediately linked my arm—talking ten to the dozen and leading me down the concrete ramp used by the fishing boats and the lifeboat to the sorrowful, shifting sands. She was well rested and in good spirits, open (I thought) and enthusiastic. She was really looking forward to our day together, she told me. She wanted to know everything there was to know about Sonuel Moore—about my writing and my life, the things that made me “tick”. I smelt her freshness on the breeze—a citrus smell and something that had more to do with her youth and enthusiasm than what she had washed her hair in that morning—and relished my closeness to her, already aroused, already a little in love.

“Have you read *God Knows*?” she asked me. We'd found a fairly safe patch of beach, free of broken glass and dog shit, and sat ourselves down—side-by-side, staring out to sea and watching the fishing boats. The breeze was a little cooler down

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

here and I wished we'd had a windbreak. Colourful stripes and as much nostalgia as you could handle.

"For my sins, yes," I said. I didn't want to talk about Heller. He was a one-book wonder, with little to recommend him other than the occasional belly laugh. Better than some, but still vastly overrated.

"You don't like it?"

"I've read better," I said, with little real enthusiasm—remembering something Oliver had said to me the night before. I'd been telling him about Ashley. His E-inspired friends had apparently decided that arguing about the sleeping arrangements was a "silly" thing to do and had decided to draw lots. Oliver had looked jaded and seemed to be regretting the whole weekend—which was satisfyingly ironic, given that I was now enjoying almost every minute of it. Sitting down on the opposite side of the table to me with a can of beer and a packet of KP salted peanuts, barely managing to squeeze in, he'd sighed and rolled his eyes at me, shaking his head at the squealing.

"What is it they say?" he asked. "Be careful what you wish for?"

Now I thought about that as Ashley considered what I'd just said about the Heller novel. I'd always wanted someone like her—beautiful, young, intelligent and well read. Someone I could have a conversation with *and* have fun with between the sheets with. But maybe, I now thought, *just maybe* that was too much to ask of myself. I had the distinct feeling that Ashley was about to prove that she understood Heller far better than I ever would.

But she was smarter than that. I assumed she wanted something more from our budding friendship for instead of launching into a discourse on Heller's merits, she merely shrugged and said, "I know what you mean. I enjoyed it but he can be so irritating in places."

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

“That applies to most writers,” I said. “Even me.”

“I’m sure it doesn’t.”

“I’m sure it does.”

We argued playfully for a while longer and then, much to my surprise, Ashley took hold of my hand and stood, pulling me to my feet. “There’s something I want to show you,” she said, leading the way north along the beach.

It took us a good fifteen minutes to get there, walking on the sand making it feel more like half an hour, and when we arrived my first reaction was to wonder if it had really been worth it.

The sand dunes were deserted. It was a harsh and somehow barren place—even with its razor-like blades of lyme grass—and I understood why few people chose to make the walk this far north along the beach. From the top of the highest dune, a view of a nearby chemical plant was the biggest treat—heavy industry further to the north—and as I slid back down to be with Ashley it was all I could do not to comment ironically on the wonderful sights.

“I never said it was picturesque,” she told me—grinning wryly and reading me thoughts. “But that’s not why I brought you here.”

“It’s not?”

“I thought you’d have worked that one out for yourself. Clever man like you.”

“I’ve led a very sheltered life.”

“Brought up by nuns?”

I nodded. “And every one a novice.”

“Bless. I can see I’m going to have to teach you a thing or two.”

“I’m a fast learner.”

As private as this place seemed to be, I didn’t really expect Ashley to be so

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

uninhibited. I was expecting sex with our clothes on—hurried fumbblings whilst we anxiously looked over our shoulders—but what I in fact got was a completely naked Ashley who didn't really seem to care whether we were observed or not. It was awkward but sensitive, and we giggled uncontrollably afterwards, but there were now no doubts in my mind; as quickly as this had come about, it was not just about sex. I had fallen for her as surely as the tides washed the shore—and as we lay together afterwards, my hand resting against the warmth of her sex, I braved all the possible outcomes and told her so.

“You telling me you love me?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. “I love you. I'm *in* love with you.”

“That's good, then.”

“It is?”

“Naturally. I don't do that for just anyone, you know.”

“I'm pleased to hear it.”

She snuggled in closer to me—pulling her skirt and blouse over her, but not yet ready to get dressed. “Sonny?” she said quietly.

“Yes?”

“Is this where we should be? This moment. Is it what was intended or did we make it happen?”

Post coitus, I preferred conversation that was a little less challenging—who would be number one next Sunday, that kind of thing—so this caught me a little unprepared. I shuffled about a bit and made thoughtful noises, and then rolled on my side to get a better look at her.

“I don't think there's a distinction,” I said. “What we make happen is what was intended. Free Will and all that shit. Where we are is where we should be,

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

because we made the necessary choices to get there.”

“But what if we make the wrong choices?” She was on her side, too, now, her clothes pressed to her and her eyes large and wet with emotion. “What if... what if we don’t know all the facts and, because of that, make choices we wouldn’t normally make?”

“You having regrets?” I asked quietly, feeling an icy, nauseating dread bleed through me.

She shook her head. “No,” she said. “But I think you might. I’m only sixteen.”

Back at the caravan, Oliver chased Rich, Christian and the others the hell out of it and sat me down in the living area with a large scotch and what I thought was a sympathetic look (it was hard to tell with the beard). He sat down on the adjacent couch-bench thing and gave my knee a pat.

“Right,” he said, “now we are alone, do you want to run that one by me again?”

“I’ve fallen for a sixteen year old,” I told him. “Ashley. The girl I was telling you about. We made love in the sand dunes, and then she told me. She’s only sixteen.”

Even then, Oliver had seemed somehow imbued with wisdom. He possessed such self-confidence that the natural effect of this was to make him look as if he had all the answers, had done it all before and had every imaginable experience already tucked firmly under his belt. Whether this was the case or not didn’t really matter; I saw a man not much older than myself, someone I trusted and believed in, and I instinctively knew that that was enough.

“And the problem in that is?” Oliver asked.

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

“She’s *sixteen*,” I repeated.

“Not jailbait, then.” Oliver sighed and tried to make himself more comfortable on the too-small couch. “I repeat, and the problem in that is?”

“Not everything that is legal is right,” I told him.

“So you think your relationship with this girl—“

“Ashley.”

“You think your relationship with Ashley is wrong?”

Straight to the crux of the matter. Oliver’s beard twitched and I got the impression that on some level he was finding all of this rather amusing. His disproportionately small nose crinkled and he quickly put a large, roughened hand to his face and sneezed.

“Look,” he continued, before I had chance to reply. “I probably know you better than anyone, right?”

“Probably.” I didn’t bother checking him against a list; Oliver was too perceptive for it not to be true.

“And I know from years of association that you don’t fall in love easily. Correct?”

This was true. I was good at keeping a part of myself back. For a long time it had seemed a prerequisite to survival. I nodded.

“So when you tell me you’ve fallen for this Ashley, I know it’s no joke. You love her and you’re in love with her, and I’d bet you’ve already told her as much.”

“After we made love in the sand dunes,” I confirmed. “It seemed the right thing to do.”

“And she’s in love with you?”

“It certainly seems that way, yes. Apparently she doesn’t do that with just

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

anyone.”

Oliver was starting to look a little smug. He finally seemed to have managed to get comfortable and the conversation was on track. All was well with the world.

“Right. So we’ve established that the feeling between the two of you is mutual and as real as any of us can assume. Now we come to the age thing. She’s over—or on—the legal age of consent, but you still don’t think of the relationship as ‘right’—“

“I didn’t say that.”

“But you—“

“What I said was that everything that’s legal isn’t necessarily right. I didn’t say I actually believed that.”

Oliver’s brows were knitting and the little I could see of his lips suggested he was, at the very least, growing impatient with me. I’d seen the same expression earlier that morning and five minutes later Rich had been crying again.

“Then what *do* you believe?” he practically hissed.

I shrugged. “I dunno. It... she seems older than sixteen. She’s well-read, intelligent and funny, and I’m comfortable with her—but some people are going to have a problem with it, aren’t they?”

“‘Some people’ will always have a problem with something,” Oliver told me. He reminded me of someone trying to potty-train a toddler. “That doesn’t mean it is or should be a problem.”

“Other people’s attitudes will create yet another obstacle, though,” I said. “There’s no getting away from that.”

“Do you want to be with her, for fuck’s sake?” he said angrily.

“Yes,” I stammered.

“And she wants to be with you?”

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

A quick little nod.

“Then stop being such an arse. We’re having a party tonight. Bring her along.”