

June Sixteenth at Anna's by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Kristine Kathryn Rusch is the only person to win the Hugo award for both editing and writing. Her Asimov's story, "Millennium Babies" (January 2000), won the Hugo in 2001 for best novelette. That year, she also won the Herodotus Award for best historical mystery (for *A Dangerous Road*, written as Kris Nelscott) and the Romantic Times Reviewers Choice Award (for *Utterly Charming*, a paranormal romance written as Kristine Grayson). Her most recent novel, *Extremes*, will be published in June by Roc Books.

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June Sixteenth at Anna's. To a conversation connoisseur, those words evoke the most pivotal afternoon in early twenty-first century historical entertainment. No one knows why these conversations have elevated themselves against the thousands of others found and catalogued.

Theories abound. Some speculate that the variety of conversational types makes this one afternoon special. Others believe this performance is the conversational equivalent of early jazz jam sessions—the points and counterpoints have a beauty unrelated to the words. Still others hypothesize that it is the presence of the single empty chair which allows the visitor to join the proceedings without feeling like an intruder....

—liner notes from

June Sixteenth at Anna's,

special six-hour edition

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On the night after his wife's funeral, Mac pulled a chair in front of the special bookcase, the one he'd built for Leta over forty years ago, and flicked on the light attached to the top shelf. Two copies of every edition ever produced of *June Sixteenth at Anna's*—one opened and one permanently in its wrapper—winked back at him as if they shared a joke.

Scattered between them, copies of the books, the e-jackets, the DVDs, the out-dated Palms, all carrying analysis, all holding maybe a mention of Leta and what she once called the most important day of her life.

A whiff of lilacs, a jangle of gold bracelets, and then a bejeweled hand reached across his line of sight and turned the light off.

"Don't torture yourself, Dad," his daughter Cherie said. She was older than the shelf, her face softening with age, just as her mother's had. With another jangle of bracelets, she clicked on a table lamp, then sat on the couch across from him, a couch she used to flounce into when she was a teenager—which seemed to him, in his current state, just weeks ago. "Mom wouldn't have wanted it."

Mac threaded his fingers together, rested his elbows on his thighs and stared at the floor so that his daughter wouldn't see the flash of anger in his eyes. Leta didn't want anything any more. She was dead, and he was alone, with her memories taunting him from a homemade shelf.

"I'll be all right," he said.

"I'm a little worried to leave you here," Cherie said. "Why don't you come to my place for a few days? I'll fix you dinner, you can sleep in the guest room, have a look at the park. We can talk."

He had talked to Cherie. To Cherie, her soon-to-be second husband, her grown son, all of Leta's sisters and cousins, and friends, Lord knew how many friends they'd had. And reporters. Strange that one woman's death, one woman's relatively insignificant life, had drawn so many reporters.

"I want to sleep in my own bed," he said.

"Fine." Cherie stood as if she hadn't heard him. "We'll get you a cab when it's time to come home. Dad—"

"Cherie." He looked up at her, eyes puffy from her own tears, hair slightly mussed. "I won't stop missing her just because I'm at your place. The mourning doesn't go away once the funeral's over."

Her nose got red, as it always had when someone hit a nerve. "I just thought it might be easier, that's all."

Easier for whom, baby? he wanted to ask, but knew better. "I'll be all right," he said again, and left it at that.

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The first time travel breakthroughs came slowly. The breakthroughs built on each other, though, and in the early thirties, scientists predicted that human beings would be visiting their own pasts by the end of the decade.

It turns out these scientists were right, but not in the way they expected. Human beings could not interact with time. They could only open a window into the time-space continuum, and make a record—an expensive record—of past events.

Historians valued the opportunity, but no one else did until Susan Yashimoto combined time recordings with virtual reality technology, and holography, added a few augmentations of her own, and began marketing holocordings.

Her first choices were brilliant. By using a list of historic events voted most likely to be visited should a time machine be invented, she created 'cordings of the birth of Christ, Mohammed's triumphal return to Mecca, the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, and dozens of others.

Soon, other companies entered the fray. Finding their choices limited by copyrights placed on a time period by worried historians afraid of losing their jobs, these companies began opening portals into daily life....

—From A History of Conversation

J. Booth Centuri, 2066.

Download Reference Number:

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at Library of Congress [loc.org]

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Mac had lied to Cherie. He would not sleep in his own bed. The bedroom was still filled with Leta—the blue and black bedspread they'd compromised on fifteen years before, the matching but frayed sheets she wanted to die on, the tiny strands of long gray hairs that—no matter how much he cleaned—still

covered her favorite pillow.

He'd thrown out her treatment bottles, taken the Kleenex off the nightstand, put the old-fashioned hardcover of Gulliver's Travels that she would now never finish on their collectibles bookshelf, but he couldn't get rid of her scent—faintly musky, slightly apricot, and always, no matter how sick she got, making him think of youth.

He carried a blanket and pillow to the couch, as he had for the last six months of Leta's life, pulled down the shade of the large picture window overlooking the George Washington Bridge—the view was the reason he'd taken the apartment in that first week of the new millennium, when he'd been filled with hopes and dreams as yet unspoiled.

He wandered toward the small kitchen for a glass of something—water, beer, he wasn't certain—stopping instead by Leta's shelf and flicking on the light, a small act of rebellion against his own daughter.

The 'cordings glinted again, like diamonds in a jewelry store window, tempting, teasing. He'd walked past this shelf a thousand times, laughed at Leta for her vanity—sometimes I think you're the only reason the June Sixteenth at Anna's 'cordings make any money, he used to say to her—and derided her for attaching so much significance to that one day in her past.

You didn't even think it important until some holographer guy decided it was, he'd say, and she'd nod in acknowledgement.

Sometimes, she said to him once, we don't know what's important until it's too late.

He found himself holding the deluxe retrospective edition—six hours long, with the Latest Updates and Innovations!—the only set of June Sixteenth at Anna's with both copies still in their wrappers. It had arrived days before Leta died.

He'd carried the package in to her, brought her newest player out, the one he'd bought her that final Christmas, and placed them both on the edge of the bed.

“I'll set you up if you want,” he'd said.

She had been leaning against nearly a dozen pillows, a cocoon he'd built for her when he realized that nothing would stop her inevitable march to the end. Her eyes were just slightly glazed as she took his hand.

“I've been there before,” she said, her voice raspy and nearly gone.

“But not this one,” he said. “You don't know the changes they've made. Maybe they have all five senses this time—”

“Mac,” she whispered. “This time, I want to stay here with you.”

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In New York's second Gilded Age, Anna's was considered the premier spot for conversation. Like the cafes of the French Revolution or Hemingway's Movable Feast, Anna's became a pivotal place to sit, converse, and exchange ideas.

Director Hiram Goldman remembered Anna's. He applied for a time recording permit, and scanned appropriate days, finally settling on June 16, 2001 for its mix of customers, its wide-ranging

conversational high points, and the empty chair that rests against a far wall, allowing the viewer to feel a part of the scene before him....

—liner notes from

June Sixteenth at Anna's,

original edition

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Mac had never used a holocording, never saw the need to go back in time, especially to a period he'd already lived through. He'd said so to Leta right from the start, and after she picked up her fifth copy of June Sixteenth, she'd stopped asking him to join her.

He always glanced politely at the interviews, nodded at the crowds who gathered at the retrospectives, and never really listened to the speeches or the long, involved discussions of the fans.

Leta collected everything associated with that day, enjoying her minor celebrity, pleased that it had come to her after she had raised Cherie and, Leta would tell him, already had a chance to live a real life.

It was a shame she'd never opened the last 'cording. It was a sign of how ill she had been toward the end. Any other time, she might have read the liner notes—or had the box read them to her—looked at the still holos, and giggled over the inevitable analysis which, she said, was always pretentious and always wrong.

Mac opened the wrapping, felt it crinkle beneath his fingers as he tossed it in the trash. The plastic surface of the case had been engineered to feel like high-end leather. Someone had even added the faint odor of calfskin for verisimilitude.

He opened the case, saw the shiny silver disk on the right side, and all his other choices on the left: analysis at the touch of a finger, in any form he wanted—hard-copy, audio, e-copy (format of his choice), holographic discussion; history of the 'cording; a biography of the participants, including but not limited to what happened to them after June 16, 2001; and half a dozen other things including plug-ins (for an extra charge) that would enhance the experience.

Leta used to spend hours over each piece, reviewing it as if she were going to be quizzed on it, carrying parts of it to him and sharing it with him against his will.

He was no longer certain why he was so against participating. Perhaps because he felt that life moved forward, not backward, and someone else's perspective on the past was as valid as a stranger's opinion of a book no one had ever read.

Or perhaps it was his way of dealing with minor celebrity, being Leta Thayer's husband, having his life scratched and pawed at without ever really being understood.

Mac left the case open on the shelf, next to all the other June Sixteenth's, and stuck his finger through the hole in the center of the silver 'cording, carrying it with him.

The player was still in the hall closet where he'd left it two weeks before. He dragged it out, knocking over one of Leta's boots, still marked by last winter's slush, and felt a wave of such sadness he thought he wouldn't be able to stand upright.

He tried anyway, and thought it a small victory that he succeeded.

Then he carried the player and the ‘cording into the bedroom, and placed them on the foot of the bed.

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Two hundred and fifty people crossed the threshold at Anna's that afternoon, and although they were ethnically and culturally diverse, the sample was too small to provide a representative cross-section of the Manhattan population of that period. The restaurant was too obscure to appeal to the famous, too small to attract people from outside the neighborhood, and too new to have cachet. The appeal of June Sixteenth is the ordinariness of the patrons, the fact that on June 16, 2001 not one of them is known outside their small circle of friends and family. Their very obscurity raises their conversations to new heights.

—From

A History of June Sixteenth at Anna's

Erik Reese,

University of Idaho Press, 2051

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Maybe it was the trace of her still left in the room. Maybe it was a hedge against the loneliness that threatened to overwhelm him. Maybe it was simply his only way to banish those final images—her skin yellowish and so thin that it revealed the bones in her face, the drool on the side of her mouth, and the complete lack of recognition in her eyes.

Whatever the reason, he put the ‘cording in the player, sat the requisite distance from the wireless technology—so new and different when he was young, not even remarked on now—and flicked on the machine.

It didn't take him away as he'd expected it to. Instead it surrounded him in words and pictures and names. He didn't know how to jump past the opening credits, so he sat very still and waited for the actual ‘cording to begin.

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Because June Sixteenth at Anna's is a conversation piece, its packagers never wasted their resources on sensual reconstructions. Sound is present and near perfect. Even the rattle of pans in the kitchen resonates in the dining room. The vision is also perfect—colors rich and lifelike, light and shadow so accurate that if you step into the sunlight you can almost feel the heat.

But almost is the key word here. Except for fundamentals like making certain that solid objects are indeed solid, required of all successful holocordings, June Sixteenth at Anna's lacks the essentials of a true historical projection. We cannot smell the garlic, the frying meat, the strawberries that look so fresh and ripe on the table nearest our chair.

Purists claim this is so that we can concentrate on the conversation. But somehow the lack of sensation limits the spoken word. When Rufolio Field lights his illegal cigar three hours into our afternoon and management rebuffs him, we see the offense but do not take it. We are reminded that we are observers—part of the scene, but in no way of the scene.

Once the illusion is shattered, June Sixteenth at Anna's is reduced to its component parts. It becomes a flat screen documentary remixed for the holocorders, both lifeless and old-fashioned, when what we long

for is the kind of attention to detail given to truly historic moments, like The Gettysburg Address (Weekend Edition) or the newly released Assassination of Archduke Ferdinand...

—Review of

June Sixteenth at Anna's,

Special Six Hour Edition

in The Essential Holographer

February 22, 2050

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The restaurant comes into view very slowly. Out of the post-credits darkness, he hears laughter, the gentle flow of voices, the clink of silverware. Then pieces appear—the maître d's station, a simple podium flanked by two small indoor trees, the doorway leading into the restaurant proper, the couple—whom he would have termed elderly in 2001—slipping past him toward a table in the back.

Mac stands in the doorway, feeling a sense of *déjà vu* that would have been ridiculous if it weren't so accurate. He has been here before. Of course. A hundred times before the restaurant closed in 2021. Only he never saw the early décor—the round bistro tables covered with red checked cloths; the padded sweetheart chairs that didn't look comfortable; the floor-to-ceiling windows on the street level, an indulgence that went away only a few months later, shattered by ash and falling debris.

The restaurant is almost full. A busboy removes a sweetheart chair from the table closest to the window, holding the chair by its wire frame. He carries the chair to the wall closest to Mac, sets it down, and nods at the maître d', who leads a young couple into the dining room.

Mac needs no more than the sway of her long black hair to recognize Leta. His heart leaps, and for a moment he thinks: she isn't dead. She's right here, trapped in a temporal loop, and if he frees her, she'll come home again.

Instead, he sits in the empty chair.

A speaker above him plays Charlie Burnet's "Skyliner," a CD from its poor quality, remastered from the original tapes. Pans rattle in the kitchen, and voices murmur around him, talking about the best place to eat foie gras, the history of graveyards in Manhattan, new ways to celebrate Juneteenth.

He cannot hear Leta. She is all the way across the room from him, several famous conversations away, her hand outstretched as if waiting for him to take it.

He has a good view of her face, illuminated by the thin light filtering through the windows—the canyons of the city blocking any real sun. She is smiling, nodding at something her companion says, her eyes twinkling in that way she had when she thought everything she heard was bullshit but she was too polite to say so.

Mac hadn't known her when she was here—they met in October, during that seemingly endless round of funerals, and he remembered telling her he felt guilty for feeling that spark of attraction, for beginning something new when everything else was ending.

She had put her hand on his, the skin on her palms dry and rough from all the assistance she'd been giving friends: dishes, packing, childcare. Her eyes had had shadows so deep he could barely see their shape. It

wasn't until their second date that he realized her eyes had a slightly almond cast, and they were an impossible shade of blue.

There are no shadows under her eyes here, in Anna's. Leta is smiling, looking incredibly young. Mac never knew her this young, this carefree. Her skin has no lines, and that single white strand that appeared above her right temple—the one she'd plucked on their first date and looked at in horror—isn't visible at all.

She wears a white summer dress that accents her sun-darkened skin, and as she talks, she takes a white sweater from the suitcase she used to call a purse. He recognizes the shudder, the gestures, as she puts the sweater over her shoulders.

She is clearly complaining about the cold, about air conditioning he cannot feel. The air here is the same as the air in his bedroom, a little too warm. So much is missing, things his memory is supplying—the garlic and wine scent of Anna's, the mixture of perfumes that always seemed to linger in front of the door. He isn't hungry, and he should be. He always got hungry after a few moments in here, the rich fragrances of spiced pork in red sauce and beef sautéed in garlic and wine—Anna's specialties—making him wish that the restaurant hurried its service instead of priding itself on its European pace.

But Anna's had been a favorite of Leta's long before Mac ate there. She had been the one who showed it to him, at the grand re-opening that December, filled with survivors and firefighters and local heroes, all trying to celebrate a Christmas that had more melancholy than joy.

Six months away for this Leta. Six months and an entire lifetime away.

A waiter walks past with a full tray—polenta with a mushroom sauce, several side dishes of pasta, and breadsticks so warm their steam floats past Mac. He cannot smell them, although he wants to. He reaches for one and his fingers find bread so hard and crusty it feels stale. He cannot pull the breadstick off, of course. This is a construct, a group memory—the solidity added to make the scene feel real.

He's not confined to the chair—he knows that much about 'cordings. He can walk from table to table, listen to each conversation, maybe even go into the kitchen, depending on how deluxe this edition is.

He is not tempted to move around. He wants to stay here, where he can see the young woman who would someday become his wife flirting with a man whom she decides, one week later, to never see again after he gives her the only black eye she will ever have.

One of the many stories, she used to say, that never made it into the analysis.

Leta tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, laughs, sips some white wine. Mac watches her, enthralled. There is a carefreeness to her he has never seen before, a lightness that had vanished by the time he met her.

He isn't sure he would be interested in this Leta. She has beauty and style, but the substance, the caring that so touched him the day of his uncle's funeral, isn't present at all.

Maybe the substance is in the conversation. The famous conversation. After a moment's hesitation, he decides to listen after all.

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June Sixteenth at Anna's has often been compared with jazz—the lively, free-flowing jazz of the 1950s and 60s, recorded on vinyl with all the scratches and nicks, recorded live so that each cough and smattering of early applause adds to the sense of a past so close that it's almost tangible.

Yet June Sixteenth at Anna's has more than that. It has community, a feeling that all the observer has to do is pull his chair to the closest table, and he will belong.

Perhaps it is the setting—very few holocordings take place in restaurants because of the ambient noise—or perhaps it is the palpable sense of enjoyment, the feeling that everyone in the room participates fully in their lives, leaving no moment unobserved....

—"The Longevity of

June Sixteenth at Anna's,"

by Michael Meller,

first given as a speech at

the June Sixteenth Retrospective

held at the

Museum of Conversational Arts

June 16, 2076

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The cheap CD is playing "Sentimental Journey," Doris Day's melancholy voice at odds with the laughter in this well-lit place. Mac walks past table after table, bumping one. The water glasses do not shake, the table doesn't even move, and although he reflexively apologizes, no one hears him.

He feels like a ghost in a room full of strangers.

The conversations float around him, intense, serious, sincere. He's not sure what makes these discussions famous. Is it the unintentional irony of incorrect predictions, like the group of businessmen discussing October's annual stock market decline? Or the poignancy of plans that would never come about, lives with less than three months left, all the obvious changes ahead?

He does not know. The conversations don't seem special to him. They seem like regular discussions, the kind people still have in restaurants all over the city. Perhaps that's the appeal, the link that sends the conversation collector from the present to the past.

His link still sits at her table, flipping her hair off her shoulder with a casual gesture. As he gets closer, he can almost smell her perfume. Right about now she should acknowledge him, that small turn in his direction, the slight raise of her eyebrows, the secret smile that they'd shared from the first instant they'd met.

But she doesn't turn. She doesn't see him. Instead, she's discussing the importance of heroes with a man who has no idea what heroism truly is.

Her fingers tap nervously against the table, a sign—a week before she throws Frank Dannen out of her life—that she doesn't like him at all. It always took time for Leta's brain to acknowledge her emotions. Too bad she hadn't realized before he hit her that Frank wasn't the man for her.

Mac stops next to the table, glances once at Frank. This is the first time Mac has seen the man outside of photographs. Curly black hair, a strong jaw, the thick neck of a former football player which, of course, he was. Frank died long before the first June Sixteenth at Anna's appeared, in a bar fight fifteen years

after this meal.

Mac remembers because Leta showed him the story in the Daily News, and said with no pity in her voice, I always knew he would come to a bad end.

But here, in this timeless place, Frank is alive and handsome in a way that glosses over the details: the way his lower lip sets in a hard line, the bruised knuckles on his right hand, which he keeps carefully hidden from Leta, the two bottles of beer that have disappeared in the short forty-five minutes they've been at the table. Frank is barely listening to Leta; instead he checks out the other women in the room, short glances that are imperceptible to anyone who isn't paying attention.

Mac is, but he has wasted enough time on this man. Instead Mac stares at the woman who would become his wife. She stops speaking mid-thought, and leans back in her chair. Mac smiles, recognizing this ploy.

He can predict her next words: Do you want me to continue talking to myself or would you prefer the radio for background noise?

But she says nothing, merely watches Frank with a quizzical expression on her face, one that looks—to someone who doesn't know her—like affection, but is really a test to see when Frank will notice that she's done.

He doesn't, at least not while Mac is watching. Leta sighs, picks at the green salad before her, then glances out the window. Mac glances too, but sees nothing. Whoever recorded this scene, whoever touched it up, hadn't bothered with the outdoors, only with the restaurant and the small dramas occurring inside it.

Dramas whose endings were already known.

Because he can't help himself, Mac touches her shoulder. The flesh is warm and soft to the touch, but it is not Leta's flesh. It feels like someone else's. Leta's skin had a satiny quality that remained with her during her whole life. First, the expense of new satin, and later, the comforting patina of old satin, showing how much it was loved.

She does not look at him, and he pulls his hand away. Leta always looked at him when he touched her, always acknowledged their connection, their bond—sometimes with annoyance, when she was too busy to focus on it, yet always with love.

This isn't his Leta. This is a mannequin in a wax works, animated to go through its small part for someone else's amusement.

Mac can't take any more. He stands up, says, "Voice command: stop."

And the restaurant fades to blackness a piece at a time—the tables and patrons first, then the ambient noise, and finally the voices, fading, fading, until their words are nothing but a memory of whispers in the dark.

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June Sixteenth at Anna's should not be a famous conversation piece. The fact that it is says more about our generation's search for meaning than it does about June 16, 2001.

We believe that our grandparents lived fuller lives because they endured so much more. Yet all that June Sixteenth at Anna's shows us is that each life is filled with countless moments, memorable and

unmemorable—and the only meaning that these moments have are the meanings with which we imbue them at various points in our lives.

—From

June Sixteenth at Anna's Revisited,

Mia Opper,

Harvard University Press, 2071.

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Mac ended up standing beside the bed, only a foot from the player. The 'cording whirred as it wound down, the sound aggressive, as if resenting being shut off mid-program, before all the conversations had been played.

The scent of Leta lingered, and Mac realized that it had been the only real thing in his entire trip. The scent and the temperature of his bedroom had accompanied him into Anna's, bringing even more of the present into his glimpse of the past.

He took the 'cording out of the player, and carried it to the living room, placing the silver disk in its expensive case. Then he returned to the bedroom, put the player away, and lay down on the bed for the first time since Leta had left it, almost a week ago.

If he closed his eyes, he could imagine her warmth, the way he used to roll into it mornings after she had gotten up. It was like being cradled in her arms, and often he would fall back to sleep until she would wake him in exasperation, reminding him that he had a job just like everyone else on the planet and it was time he went off to do it.

But the bed wasn't really warm, and if he fell asleep, she wasn't going to wake him, not now, not ever. The 'cording had left him feeling hollow, almost as if he'd done something dirty, forbidden, seeking out his wife where he knew she couldn't have been.

He had no idea why she watched all of the June Sixteenths. Read the commentary, yes, he understood that. And he understood the interviews, the way she accepted a fan's fawning over something she never got paid for, never even got acknowledged for. Some of the June Sixteenth participants sued for their percentage of the profits—and lost, since 'cordings were as much about packaging as the historical moment—but Leta had never joined them.

Instead, she went back to that single day in her life over and over again, watching her younger self from the outside, seeing—what? Looking for—what?

It certainly wasn't Frank. Mac knew her well enough for that. Had she been looking for a kind of perspective on herself, on her life? Or trying to figure out, perhaps, what her world would have been like if she had made different choices, tried other things?

He didn't know. And now, he would never know. He had teased her, listened to her talk about the ancillary materials, even bought her the latest copies of June Sixteenth, but he had never once heard her speak about the experience of walking around as an outsider in her own past.

A mystery of Leta—like all the other mysteries of Leta, including but not limited to why she had loved him—would remain forever unsolved.

He couldn't find the answers in June Sixteenth, just as he couldn't find Leta there. All that remained of Leta were bits and pieces—a scent, slowly fading; a voice, half remembered; the brush of her skin against his own.

Leta's life had an ending now, her existence as finite as June Sixteenth at Anna's, her essence as impossible to reproduce.

Mac hugged her favorite pillow to himself. Leta would never reappear again—not whole, breathing, surprising him with her depth.

The realization had finally come home to him, and settled in his heart: She was gone, and all he had left of her were her ghosts.