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Phantom Light

by Kim Magowan

I could always get sick. A sudden virus: it's worth considering.

Bad enough getting dragooned into dinner with my friend-slash-ex-girlfriend Julie and her fiance Porter, who is as handsome, plastic, and affectless as a Ken doll; now I must shop for the damn thing. "Please, I'm desperate," Beth said on the phone an hour ago, and when I capitulated, "Awesome! Do you have a pen?" She dictated a list of ingredients for what she calls "that Cuban meat thing." As I copy down "ground beef, 10% fat," I flash on how Beth ensnared me in this evening in the first place. "Are you free for dinner on March twentieth? Julie will be there," and only after I agreed: "By the way, Porter is coming too." It's easy to picture professional Beth employing the same bait-and-switch on a hapless underling: "Want a crack at this non-fiction submission? Excellent! Reader report due Monday." Beth and I have been friends since we were kids, but it's hard not to resent being so smoothly played.

In the real world outside, dirty snow clings to curbs in lumpy piles. Inside Fairway, there are no seasons. Mangos stack in rosy-green heaps. A woman next to me pokes a melon with one curved talon. From under her arm peers a hideous dog. Its black eyes blink, recalling me to item #5 on my list: olives.

I remember coming here last summer with Violet, an architect I briefly dated. She fed me cheese cubes from sample platters before we picked out wine and bread for a picnic in Central Park. I remember the salty bite of the cheese, the curly-topped toothpicks, Violet's neat, black bangs. Summer, not yet disgusting. The wire grocery baskets seemed like ornate scrollwork. Now they remind me less of French Quarter balconies than cages.

Shake it off.

I tick down Beth's list. I feel embarrassed ordering ground beef to her specifications. "Banal" we called Beth in high school, pronounced to rhyme with "anal": come exam time, it was always Beth's notes on Bismarck and the English civil wars that everyone borrowed. She's detailed and meticulous, and when the crap we gave her passed her tipping point, she'd remind us, "I can't afford not to be." The scholarship girl needed to earn her scholarships.

I take longer once I've completed Beth's list, first over flowers, then wine. Seasonally defiant, the flower section explodes. The guys ride me about remembering all the girls' favorite flowers, but it's such an easy way of earning hugs and "You're so thoughtful!"s on birthdays. It reminds me of how "May I please?" functioned in grade school as a magic spell, unlocking special privileges; I could never understand why other kids didn't say it. Julie: parrot tulips. Heather: dahlias. Beth: anemones. Meriwether: sunflowers. Joy: pink peonies, balled into what

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Julie calls "flower fists." Ginny: doesn't like flowers, get her a plant. I choose purple anemones.

Then to wine. Here I go by price: thirty dollars for a cabernet. Compared to Julie, I know jack-all about wine. That didn't stop her, back when we were dating, from handing me the wine list. Valentine's Day, eight years ago: she wore make-up, I a tie, we did our best masquerade of twenty-one. I doubt we fooled the waiter, but he never asked to see my fake ID. Probably we struck him as sweet. I remember feeling both proud and flummoxed, and picking a wine as blindly as poking a spinning globe.

Not until much later, when Julie took me out to dinner for my eighteenth birthday and commandeered, unhesitatingly, the wine list-- "Sancerre okay with you, Ian?"-- did I realize what it meant to have me order. Another play-act, like the lipstick. There's something conventional about Julie. No doubt when she marries Porter she will take his last name. Since that scene years ago, watching Julie crisply order wine, how many times have I seen her deferentially pass the carte to her boyfriend of the moment? As if ordering herself is castrating. The night I met Porter, last December, she pulled the same stunt: "Honey, will you?" He knows even less about wine than I do.

I pass the flowers again on my way to check-out, and exchange the anemones for parrot tulips. The serrated petals look like they could bite.

Beth lives at the top of a five floor walk-up, and by the time I slog two packed grocery bags up the stairs I'm out of breath. On the fourth floor landing the neighbors' folding stroller and Big Wheel block, police barricade fashion, the final flight. "Fuck," I say, vaulting them, and punch Beth's doorbell.

She answers immediately, and I unload into her extended arms the heavier bag.

"Thank you, Ian! You are absolutely saving my ass."

"Careful, that one's about to break."

I'm still gasping for air. We carry the bags into her kitchen, tiny even by New York standards. It could fit on a boat.

On a counter the size of an ironing board, Beth unpacks ground beef, golden raisins, light rum, a bag of tomatoes, white rice, onions, garlic, cilantro, cumin, olives, arugula, two loaves of bread, the tulips, the wine.

"What do I owe you?" she asks, squinting at the receipt.

"Well, subtract the flowers and that bottle of cab, that's my contribution."

“You are an angel. Oh, damn, black olives. I need green.”

“You just said olives.”

“Did I? No sweat. I can send Heather and Julie out for them.”

I hear Julie’s name first, because, let’s face it, I am wired to, but a second later I say, “Wait. Heather’s back?”

“Yeah, she got in a few hours ago. That’s why I’m in such desperate need, because suddenly this dinner party has expanded to nine, and I don’t have enough food. Jeez, where will I fit all this?” We contemplate her fridge, the size of the one I rented for my dorm room at Columbia to store beer.

“So Heather’s here?”

“She’s staying in a hotel tonight, tomorrow she gets the keys to her uncle’s place in the Village. Remember that squinty uncle, you called him Igor? She checked in and then came straight to Finch. I was planning on bailing early anyway, since you and Julie and Porter were coming over, but not three hours early. And my luck, Goldstein was lurking right outside my office, breathing on everyone. But what could I do? Heather was falling asleep at my desk. So I sent Heather down the elevator ahead of me, told Goldstein I was sick, and scuttled out.” She shakes her head. “Shit, I may have said ‘cramps.’ Not very professional.”

Twenty-five, Beth is the youngest editor at Prescott-Finch; her assistant Nancy is thirty. Consequently Beth is obsessed with being adequately professional. It’s a standard she applies to her haircuts and bagged lunches. We could tailspin for the next ten minutes, analyzing what phony illnesses sound most or least professional on some arbitrary Beth spectrum, so I divert her quickly.

“Where is Heather now?”

“Julie called when we got back. As soon as I told her Heather was here she hopped on the subway. It was lucky timing: Heather had no idea Julie was in town tonight. I’m not even sure she knew Julie had moved to Boston. Anyway, they’re getting wine—”

The doorbell bleats. It sounds like a stepped-on cat. “That’s them. Will you get it, Ian?”

“Ian!” says Julie, when I open the door. “I wasn’t expecting you yet.”

“Yeah, Beth called in the cavalry.”

I hug her, inhale the coconut smell of her hair. I haven’t seen Julie for a month, since the night we went out for French-Vietnamese and she told me she was engaged. I remember the Chinese water torture of dainty course after course, trying to look cheerful, knowing Julie was

observing my every twitch.

“Hey, Saltonstall,” says Heather, behind her, and I let go of Julie to hug Heather. She’s wearing a potato sack of a dress; underneath she’s all angles. It’s like embracing a cookie-cutter.

“Welcome back,” I say. “You look tired.”

“Nine hour flight from Barcelona. I don’t think I slept one minute.”

“Take a nap,” says Beth. “People won’t be coming until eight.”

“If I lie down I’m never getting up,” says Heather. “I’ll be like the old lady in the LifeCall ad. No, what I need is something to drink.”

Julie laughs. “I thought you were going to say, ‘coffee!’ Beth, can I open wine?”

“Sure. Pour us each a glass, will you? Wine glasses and opener under the sink.”

“This is the strangest kitchen,” says Julie. She pours full glasses, hands them out.

Beth drops the empty bottle into her recycling bag with a flourish. “Well, cheers, kids! Hey: this is the first time we’ve been together since the engagement. How about toasting Julie?”

We clink glasses. “Woo hoo,” says Heather, in her flattest voice.

“I can’t believe you’re back,” Julie says, squeezing Heather’s waist. “No disappearing for ten months again! That is way too long!”

“Clearly,” says Heather. “You get up to all kinds of tricks when I’m not around.”

Julie laughs. “You call getting engaged a ‘trick’?”

Heather pretends to reflect. “Hmm. What do I call getting married at age twenty-four? I think I’ll go with, ‘bonkers.’”

“Man, right out of the gate,” Beth says.

No one avoids conflict as assiduously as Julie Howe. At eighteen, she was an All-State lacrosse player, and Julie has a jock’s meet-trouble-if-it-comes fortitude when required. But she will go a long way to circumnavigate an argument if she spots exit routes. After we broke up, early spring of junior year, I barely saw Julie for months. Sometimes I would catch a glimpse of her back; once I saw her literally perform an about-face. It was nearly summer vacation when I walked towards her and she didn’t retreat. I remember the two of us advancing at the same measured pace, stopping outside of the Dining Hall, and

saying, at the same time, "Hey." "So you're finally talking to me," I said, and Julie responded, "Well, you stopped looking like you wanted to bite me."

Ever since I've taken that line to heart. When I'm with her and feel the least bit upset or angry, I gauge myself for "bite." It's nearly an out-of-body experience, such disciplined self-scrutiny. In the French-Vietnamese restaurant last month, I felt like a C.I.A. agent.

Heather, and this has always bugged me, has never been on the same leash.

"First of all," says Julie, "I'll be twenty-five in three weeks. Second, I know what I'm doing." She looks around, speaking to all of us, not just Heather. "I always wanted to be a young mother. And this isn't my first proposal. I happen to have found the right person." She turns coaxing. "Heather, you need to meet Porter, and see us together."

"I have met him," says Heather, just as evenly. "I have seen you together."

This is news; Beth and I exchange a look. Heather has been out of the country since May. Julie started dating Porter last September. I only met him myself in early December.

Julie blinks. "I mean really meet him, Heather. You'll see."

"Well, explain it to me. Because frankly I can't imagine why Porter is the right guy."

"He values me. He understands me. He takes care of me." Julie is speaking fast, tick tick tick. "I trust him."

Heather turns to me and Beth. "Guys? Do 'understanding' and 'trustworthy' sound like Porter to either of you?"

"Not getting involved," says Beth.

"You don't know him, Heather! Can't you hold off judgment and be supportive for once?"

"You want me to be supportive or honest?"

"Supportive," Julie says, immediately.

"I just don't think Porter's all that," says Heather.

And the State All-Star is out, eyes blazing: "Damn it, Heather! What doesn't translate about, 'supportive'?"

She's grabbing her coat before we can move. "Hey Julie," I say.

“I need to book anyway. I have to pick up Porter.” Her tone is modulated again. but she won’t look any of us in the eye. “I’ll see you all at eight.” She points at Heather. “And you: I mean it, be nice.”

After the door closes, Beth shakes a spatula at Heather. “Can’t you be back for twenty-four hours without picking on her?”

“She’s been provoking me. Ever since she got here, it’s been Porter this, rehearsal dinner that. I have this wedding bullshit coming out of my ears! Let her marry him, I don’t fucking care, let her turn into boring Bridal Barbie, but don’t make me listen to more of it.”

“You are always so harsh about her boyfriends,” Beth says..

“Not true.”

That elicits my most sarcastic laugh, and Beth says, “See?”

Heather folds her arms. “Not true! I liked Henri.”

“Only because he was French,” says Beth.

“No, because he was witty and interesting. And, come on, Ian, you and I have always been buddies.”

“*Au contraire*, you know perfectly well you were a pain in the ass when Julie and I were together.”

“That’s not fair.” She looks back and forth. “Do I really have to do this all by myself? You both know Porter isn’t right for her. I mean, cute and all, but so fucking what. I could not believe it when she wrote she was marrying him.”

“Julie wrote you? How?” I ask.

“I pick up mail at American Express offices. She always writes. I got a letter from her last week, in Tunisia. Come on Ian: don’t tell me you think it’s a good idea for her to marry him.”

“And that’s another thing,” says Beth. “What’s this about you meeting Porter? They only started dating in September.”

“Oh, I met him years ago,” Heather says dismissively. “Before junior year of high school. I was visiting Julie in Newport, and we ran into him and some friend at the Beach Club. We went on a double date.”

“That’s weird,” says Beth.

I say, “Why haven’t I heard about that?”

“Probably because it wasn’t the least bit newsworthy. Look, I know

exactly what kind of guy Porter is, and so do you. Good-looking and shallow and impressed with himself. You can't honestly believe Julie is making a smart choice."

There's a pause. Beth and I meet eyes again. Beth says, "Whatever. It's her life, Heather."

"Beth! Stop being so frigging neutral." Heather turns to me. "Ian, I know you agree. I can't always be the only one kicking up dust. He's a tool, and you know it. You're just as bummed about this as I am."

Of course it's true I don't like Porter. While I don't entirely trust my response to him, he has never tried to win me over. He's possessive and patronizing. I can't deny that part of me welcomes the prospect of Heather as an ally. No one exerts her kind of sway over Julie. If anyone can stop Julie's forward march, it's Heather.

That said, I have a complicated friendship with Heather. Before Julie and I started dating, Heather was Julie's right-hand friend, I was the left-hand friend. We had a good cop-bad cop shtick, when it came to Julie's revolving door of boyfriends. I would settle for damning with faint praise, but Heather let loose. Chad, with his ever-present lacrosse stick, drew "He's okay" from me; "Club-wielding caveman" from Heather.

All that should have prepared me for the Mr. Hyde Heather I experienced during my own tenure as Julie's boyfriend. Heather became the cruel goddess, the stone wall, every mythic icon to thwart lovers. She complained that I spent too much time in their room, that I prevented her from studying. Yet the needle, needle way she dealt with me stung. After all, we were in the same circle. She must have slept with half my friends. And I was likewise unprepared for Julie's blithe capitulation: "Oh, that's just Heather, you know Heather." When Julie broke up with me, I half-blamed Heather. Even recognizing the irrational scapegoating at work, it was a while before I could forgive her. If, frankly, I ever have.

So I say, "He's okay."

Heather snorts. As tenderly as if she's speaking an endearment, she says, "Saltonstall, you are so entirely full of shit."

An unbidden memory pops in my head: graduation night, a party at Julie's parents' house. Julie was in her bedroom with Fred Eshelman, the last of her high school boyfriends. A decent guy, I suppose, Fred was always masticating some cud of chaw (Heather's nickname for Fred was "Bessie") or spitting, grotesquely, into a soda can.

I had adjusted to Julie going out with Fred, but I knew that bedroom too well. Julie had not redecorated since she left for boarding school; it was preserved in time. I can still name everything inside it: the Tinkerbell night-light, the *Charlie's Angels* poster on the wall, the dressing table with the checked skirt, the makeup mirror with miniature light bulbs. That room was full of memories for me, but the one I loved most belonged to Julie. When she was eleven she had sat in front of

that mirror and plucked out both her eyebrows, hair by hair. I made love to Julie in that double bed with its *Wizard of Oz* pillow case and tippy canopy. But it is this image of Julie at eleven, staring at the pink ridges where her eyebrows had been, that Fred Eshelman contaminated. I fled.

I sat on the beach, so drunk that the stars seemed to revolve like powdery sparkles in a snow globe. I did not hear Heather come up behind me, did not know she was there until I felt her fingers on my shoulders.

“Heather— what—” I said.

She kissed me. She said, “Just pretend...”

I never told anyone about that night. But here is the other thing I remember: despite the gritty sand and the way-too-much bourbon, that was possibly the best sex I’ve ever had.

I shake my head like it’s an Etch A Sketch, trying to physically clear the picture of Heather on all fours, her ass leeching of color by the moonlight.

“Oh, dial it down Heather,” says Beth. “You planning to go *Jane Eyre* on Julie? Madly wave your hand when the minister asks if there are any objectors? Seriously: what do you expect us to do?”

“Jesus I’m tired of being the only one who ever speaks up,” Heather says, and glares. “Fine, Cowardly Ian, Tinman. I’m going to my hotel to freshen up.”

“You can shower here,” says Beth, more gently.

“I feel like this dress is covered in fleas. I’ll see you in an hour and fifteen, okay?”

She’s rigid when I hug her. Beth kisses Heather on the cheek and says, “I really am glad you’re back, Scarecrow.”

“Sure, sure,” Heather says, and walks to the door.

“Oh, will you get a jar of green olives?” The door closes. “Shoot, I hope she heard me.”

We start cooking. Beth puts a pot of water on to boil, plugs in her rice cooker, and hands me a cutting board. I chop on the floor because there’s no space in the hobbit kitchen. Beth’s apartment does not yet reflect her obsession with professionalism. It still looks like a dorm: a futon draped with an Indian tapestry, wobbly towers of CDs, crystals that bounce pellets of color onto the walls. The grown-up exception is the dining table, inherited from her grandmother, that fills half the room.

“Those two,” Beth shakes her head. “When I’m away from them I forget how sparky they are. Remember the fights they had in high school?”

I wipe the papery garlic skin from my hands. “She’s not entirely wrong.”

“Heather, you mean? Yeah. I need the garlic thinly slivered.”

I correct and start slivering.

“It’s not like Porter is a bad guy. So we don’t click with him; imagine his perspective. We’ve known each other since we were kids. We’re not the easiest crowd to please. He’s always been nice enough to me.”

“Really?” I say. “Not to me.”

“You’re trickier, the ex and all. That garlic’s perfect, hand it over.”

When the water comes to a boil, she drops in the tomatoes one at a time. They make a sound like stones. After a minute, she drains them. “As soon as these cool, can you peel and chop them? Do you need a bowl?”

“Sure.”

I tear cilantro until Beth hands me a tomato. “These need a coarse chop.”

While I’m cutting, she says, “It’s always surprised me that someone as sharp as Julie is so unimaginative when it comes to boyfriends. Present company excepted, of course.”

“Thanks.”

“Sure I wouldn’t marry Porter, but I wouldn’t date any of those dudes: Chad or Fred or Simon or Nils or Peter or the French guy. Her taste has always felt opaque. Tomatoes done? You up for doing onions?”

Julie isn’t close to anyone on that list except me. She has a policy against it, though in the next breath she reassures me that I was “grandfathered” into a different system. Our friendship is staked on my willingness to slough being an ex. “Just pretend,” Heather whispered to me on that Newport beach. I sometimes feel like Julie and I are locked into a similar gambit: pretend I never saw you naked, never shed tears over you. That’s our contract. I promised to not “let things get weird” before she first let me take off her shirt.

“Boring guy after boring guy. You are definitely the cream of that crop.”

I rinse the cutting board. The water runs over my fingers. “Thanks Bethie,” I say. “Even if it is a fucking low bar.”

Beth sighs. I say, "What's wrong?"

"I'm just worried."

"About me?"

"Among other things. About Heather, who looks like skin and bones, right? She obviously has not been taking care of herself. About Julie. Heather won't persuade her by being so confrontational, but she's probably right. It seems speedy, this dash to the altar."

I remember showing Heather a necklace I bought for Julie. Julie and I had first kissed on my sixteenth birthday, and so for our six-month anniversary, I got her an emerald on a thin gold chain. I was pretty proud of it, the first expensive present I had ever bought. Heather said somberly, "It's beautiful, Saltonstall. But don't give it to her." And when I protested: "Trust me. Don't go so over-the-top. Save it for later." St. Patrick's Day, Julie broke up with me. Afterwards, I could never figure out if Heather discouraged me because she knew what Julie intended and wanted to spare me humiliation, or if she thwarted me somehow. Whether I believed the one narrative or the other depended on how charitably, at that moment, I felt towards Heather. The necklace sat in my drawer for years. Even when I began college I held onto it, and it seemed slimy in any case to give it to some other girl. I finally gave it to my mother one Christmas.

"And sure, I worry about you. I want you to be happy."

I look at her, and Beth gasps. "Ian! Don't you know how to cut onions? You're going to cut off your damn fingers! Switch with me. You stir this beef, I'll chop. I don't have time to take you to the hospital, or have you bleed all over dinner."

She hands me the wooden spoon and takes my place on the floor. "This is how you hold an onion. See how my fingers angle away from the knife?"

"Got it, Julia Child." I stir for a bit, then say, "Listen, Bethie, I appreciate the concern about my fingers. And the rest of me."

"Nothing really knocks you on your ass like first love, huh? It's like some self-protection mechanism kicks in that warns you, Not going down that road again. You build scar tissue. Add these onions. They need to be translucent."

I stir them in. "I think I still love her," I say. "Isn't that pathetic?"

"You loved Julie when she was sixteen and the prettiest girl at school. You're in the habit of loving her. No, listen," she says. "Do you remember Michael? I brought him to that concert we went to in the Park? Well, I just about went crazy over that guy."

“Crazy in love or crazy insane?”

“Both. First one, then the other. You know me, I’m not Julie or Heather. I never had a queue of guys at my door. Michael could be very sweet. He made me potatoes once when I was taking a bath. He brought a plate of salty potatoes for me. Downside, he was a cheat. When I found out, I broke up with him right away. I felt good about that: at least I wasn’t a doormat. For a few months, I thought I was doing well. Add those raisins soaking in rum.”

I comply.

“Then I went to a party and saw him. He was with a woman, more a girl, she looked eighteen or nineteen. I had to leave because I thought I was going to vomit. So I concluded, I must be in love with him. There was no way I could feel so bad otherwise. Then I thought I was going nuts. I cried constantly. Strangers would stare at me. I had no social poise at all, or whatever you call the thing that keeps you from crying in cafes. I hid in my apartment like a mole...

“Until I met another guy. No one significant. We only went out a couple of times. But I forgot about Michael right away. It just did not hurt anymore. I thought, where did all that misery go? Am I really so shallow? Then it hit me. You know how sunlight is eight minutes old?”

“What are you talking about?” I say.

“At the speed of light, it takes eight minutes for sunlight to travel to earth. And when you look at the stars, it’s taken the light so long to travel that many of those stars aren’t there anymore. Some have been gone for thousands of years. So, it had taken so long to get through my censors, my intricate system of self-denials, that by the time I admitted to myself I was still in love with Michael, it was not true anymore. I was looking at phantom light. I think that’s your situation with Julie, precisely. Her getting married has made you finally process delayed information. You’re dazzled by something that isn’t there anymore.”

“Interesting theory, Beth, but kind of impossible to prove. I see what I see: how can I tell if it’s real illumination or phantom light? Is there any way of knowing which stars are extinct?”

“Well, that’s my point. You know when you meet someone else. You will know when you realize that it doesn’t hurt to look at Julie.”

“That scenario sounds like the opposite of the boiling frog.” When she looks blank, I say, “Haven’t you heard of that experiment? Put a frog in a pot of water and incrementally raise the temperature. Supposedly if you increase it very gradually, the frog keeps adapting and never jumps out. It will literally boil to death in the pot of water. It’s an analogy for the levels of pain you get used to tolerating, through immersion.”

Beth smiles. “Whereas I’m telling you that you’ll meet some sweet

young thing, blink your eyes, and realize, hey, what nice, warm water. You only think you're suffering."

"Maybe." I don't hide my doubt, but I put an arm around her sharp shoulder. "You're a good friend, Bethie."

"Ditto. Now please wash the arugula for me."

I'm cranking the salad spinner when the doorbell bleats again. Beth opens it.

"I come bearing olives."

"Great," Beth says. "And wow. You sure clean up well, Heather."

She's wearing a matted white coat over all black: a sheer black blouse, a black bra, a short black skirt, black tights, black boots with heels so stacked that when Heather jimmies into the kitchen to hug me, she's my height.

"Hey, Saltonstall. Sorry for being obnoxious earlier," she says.

"Earlier today, or in life generally?" I ask.

She smirks and sniffs the pan. "What are you making? Smells funny."

Beth pokes her. "That apology didn't last very long." She strains the olives and adds them to the pan.

I take in Heather: the red lipstick, the eyeliner, the clothes. Something about the way she is dressed reminds me of those long passages in *The Iliad* about warriors garbing for battle Hector strapping on his breast-plate, his crested helmet, to set out against Achilles and the well-greaved Achaeans.

"You look amazing, Heather. What is that coat? Abominable Snowman?"

She laughs, and Beth says, "I was thinking, polar bear. But Heather, you need to eat tonight. You're too skinny."

"First, more wine," Heather says, and I pour her a glass.

The doorbell rings again. "Shit, it's eight," Beth says, and walks over to open it. I hear her greet Julie and Porter. I hear our friend Sam say, "Is Katchadourian really back?"

Heather chucks me on the chin. For a second she and I lock eyes. "Game face," she says.

Kim Magowan lives in San Francisco and teaches in the English Department at Mills College. Her fiction has appeared in *Arroyo Literary Review*, *Bird's Thumb*, *Breakwater Review*, *Corium Magazine*, *Fiction Southeast*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *Indiana Review*, *JMWW*, *Parcel Magazine*, *River City*, *Squalorly*, *Valparaiso Fiction Review*, and *Word Riot*. She is presently working on a novel and a short story collection.

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