

SHRUNK

Christopher Hogart

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The dead raccoon outside the door of their house stirred in Henry and Helena Avalon feelings of repulsion and dismay. A dead animal at the door will disturb the staunchest heart. It jarred Helena's hopes and fantasies for the future. She was expecting, and Henry had set up his psychiatric office in the charming old house they had bought on Adams Street.

Had the creature that lay dead on their porch got there by his own locomotion and by coincidence lay down there to die? Had someone given to sinister gestures come onto their property at night and placed it there? The latter was unlikely, but still plausible. Wild animals, even those that crawl off somewhere when they know it's time to die, don't normally place themselves with care and precision in front of the door to a house. It was equally plausible, and implausible, that someone had deliberately placed the corpse there. If that had happened, the person responsible would presumably know them; but the Avalons were new to the neighborhood; scarcely anyone knew them, much less anyone who had had time to develop the sort of grudge that would inspire a person to leave a rotting carcass at their doorstep.

"You ought to visit the fortune-teller," said Helena,

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who wanted to recapture her previously unclouded picture of the future. When she was anxious she did not like waiting and feeling helpless while nothing was said or done.

“Several of my friends swear by her. She looks the part, with her kerchief and a crystal on a round table. She takes herself seriously.”

“Their livelihood depends on it. We have enough to do now with the house and other things,” said Henry Avalon. A psychiatrist with an appointment at a prestigious teaching hospital, he had slight regard for soothsayers and the supernatural.

“I would think now is precisely when you want to see her, when so much that’s new is going on.”

They looked across the tree-lined street to the small park with its dark, green corners. It was a pleasant neighborhood, close to the city’s center. One part of the picture did not conform with the satisfaction Henry felt and he lacked the power to eliminate it.

“Our neighbor’s house looks sinister.” They stood on the sidewalk in front of the two houses. “I don’t like it being so close.”

“I’ve scarcely seen him.”

“It’s hard to catch sight of him with so many trees and bushes growing up against the windows.”

They looked at the dense evergreens and plants that covered the windows facing the street. Pieces of wood belonging to the fence that ran along the sidewalk had rotted and fallen out. Through the gaps one glimpsed a small over-grown area strewn with fallen pieces of wood and cracked concrete statuary – a derelict space, as much scrap yard as garden.

“Speaking of the devil . . .”

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Their neighbor, Dr. Albert Prendergast, also a psychiatrist, walked up the street towards them on the way to his house.

“It’s hard to feel comfortable around him – those eyes, and beard.”

Prendergast’s deep-set eyes lurked barely visible in the shadows beneath his brow.

“The Ayatollah of Adams Street.”

Prendergast’s tweed jacket and twill trousers, together with the beard, might have presented a picture of mature and benevolent middle age, an impression dispelled when he looked at you.

His arms hung still at his side and his head remained motionless atop his square frame as he advanced towards the Avalons, his eyes fixed on some point just to the side of them.

“We’re thinking of extending the back of our house into the garden,” said Avalon when Prendergast had come up to them. “Would you care to look at the drawings?”

Prendergast nodded and beckoned for them to follow him into his house. The three of them stood around drawings that Henry spread out on a cramped table in Prendergast’s living room. The room was crowded with Victorian bric-a-brac and furnishings chosen according to the two aesthetic principles that they were old and made of dark wood. Old, regardless of color and design, was evidently sacred. A lamp shaded by stained glass shed a dim light. A stained glass panel hung in the window, conspiring with the bushes outside to limit the daylight that got in, and making it hard to see through the window even when the shades were up.

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“I understand we’re colleagues,” said Avalon in an effort at conversation.

“Are you building an office?” said Prendergast.

“That’s the plan.”

“You could see your patients in your living room, as I do here.”

“I hadn’t thought of that.”

“But you will?”

“I can certainly think of it.”

“I suppose you ought to have what you want. It’s nice to have an office in one’s home. It’s a good neighborhood, one of the last that hasn’t been yuppified.”

“It is a good neighborhood,” said Avalon, glad to agree about something after having caught a whiff of struggle in the previous exchange.

“The former owner of your house and I thought of cutting down that big tree that grows across the property line, but we were both romantics. In the summer it provides shade for both houses.”

“Romantics?”

“*She* was. The owner before her was something else. He would hover behind a window and, when anyone parked close to his driveway, run outside and make him move his car.”

Avalon laughed. It was tempting to become an ally, to belong, together with his neighbor, to the small fraternity of those who, for the moment, laughed at the same thing, though he would not have laughed had he been alone. Prendergast’s former neighbor did sound like a crank, and it is hard never to be gullible, to be suspicious of every piece of gossip. Avalon was new to the neighborhood, and there was no unifying principle

like a shared scapegoat; harmless enough when the goat was long since gone.

“I gather you never saw *him* in your office here,” said Avalon in an attempt to carry the conversation further.

“I wish I had.”

“It is a peculiar profession, isn’t it?”

Prendergast’s eyes receded deeper into the shadows under his brow. “How do you mean?”

“It’s not altogether different from something one would pay to do in an exclusive brothel,” Avalon said, unable to resist a lame joke, “we take whoever comes to the door; people bring in their fantasies, except that with us they only talk about them; the client sets the agenda; and we’re paid for it. It’s not for nothing that it’s called the second oldest profession.”

“How did you acquire your practice?” asked Dr. Prendergast, sullen eyes looking down.

“Gradually, over time.”

“Do your patients come in this weather?”

The remains of a late snowfall had made it difficult to get around that day.

“The weather is so often unpleasant. I’m looking forward to global warming. It’s the only hope for New England. Even if it forced up the price of vegetables, it would be worth every penny.”

“I don’t think he enjoyed your joke,” said Helena when she and Henry were in their house.

“I had the same impression.”

“Don’t you think there was something odd about the way he talked?”

“He may only have been trying to be tactful with someone he didn’t know.”

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“Judging by the way he looked at you, I suspect that tact for him is nothing more than a syllable of tactic.”

“He was quick to ask about my practice – pretty intrusive for someone we don’t know.”

“He may have his own peculiar sense of what’s intrusive; he sees his patients in his living room. You may have said too much. You don’t know what he’s like yet.”

“Should I be suspicious from the start?”

“No, but you joked with him and spoke with him as if he were an old friend. For all you know he has no sense of humor, and you don’t know yet if he’ll turn out to be a friend.”

“I was made uncomfortable when he said that we ought to have what we want, as if it were up to him to allow it.”

“I don’t like his voice . . . it was oily and hard at the same time.”

“Don’t get me worried. We’re going to have to live with him.”

“Instead of wondering what it all means, darling, go and see the fortune teller. Her office is just a few blocks away,” she added, when Henry appeared to dismiss the idea with a shake of his head.

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A small red neon sign – *FORTUNES TOLD* – hung in the window of a one room street-level studio in one of the old, ramshackle houses on Arrow Street, directly across from the church. Avalon paused at the door and looked each way before going in, hoping that no one he knew had seen him.

He was uneasy in the fortune-teller's apartment and wanted to leave.

Along the wall a narrow single bed did service as a couch. The sparse furnishings and plate glass window looking directly onto the street made him think of prostitutes' rooms he had seen clustered in the vicinity of an ancient church in Amsterdam. Here too there was a church across the way. And here too the fortune-teller would deal with whoever came through the door. He had come to a corner of the city people visited when driven to deal with problems that were not readily solved in customary ways. At Avalon's request, the fortune-teller drew the curtain so that passers-by outside could not see in. She wore a long dress of brightly colored Indian cotton with a kerchief over her dyed hair. A crystal ball on an ebony stand rested in the center of a round table in the middle of the room.

“Seventy-five dollars.”

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She saw that Avalon paid reluctantly, as if he doubted that her services were worth it. When they sat down across the table from each other the fortune-teller took hold of his palm and leaned forward to examine it, then gazed into the crystal ball. Avalon held back until curiosity got the better of him. Then he too leaned forward and stared into the crystal. The fortune-teller took his palm again, not without noticing a fleeting moment when Avalon wrinkled his nose with contempt.

He was on the point of asking what she was thinking when she said:

“Nothing will ever happen to you.”

“That’s it?”

“You’re lucky. If you’re dissatisfied, you can always go across the street and pray.”

No doubt some of her customers had done that, or come to her after they had been to church.

“No predictions?”

The fortune-teller shrugged.

“For seventy-five dollars – it’s taken very little time, the hourly rate is considerable – I would like at least one prediction.”

“If you insist: you will have difficulties at home.”

“That’s a safe bet, so many do. You don’t take many chances. Do you have any advice?”

“Advice is less reliable.”

“I’ll have some anyways, thank you.”

Her smile expressed venom and amusement in equal measure. “Love your neighbor.”