The Puff Ball

By Lisa Lanier

The offending puff ball waved cheerfully with every stir of the slight summer breeze. Bob was not amused. Saturdays were for gardening, and Bob was a meticulous gardener. He approached his Saturday yardwork the way a General might survey a battlefield from atop a hill. Only Bob's hill was the three-rung step ladder purchased by his wife to decorate the Christmas tree and commandeered by Bob for his Saturday inspections. When teased by family and neighbors alike, Bob simply explained that he was proud to live in Rossmoor and felt duty-bound to provide his beloved neighborhood with a pleasant landscape. In Bob's opinion, he lived on the best street in Rossmoor and felt his carefully manicured battlefield of hyacinths, carpet roses, and fuchsias surrounding a sea of Kentucky bluegrass lawn contributed to this unofficial honor. The puff ball, meanwhile, continued to wave.

As Bob arranged his foam kneeling pad, "A Gardener's Best Friend!" shouted the ad on tv, something across the street caught Bob's eye. A tree, tall and expansive, stood firmly in the yard – an English Oak, if Bob's nighttime studies of western European trees proved correct. Bob stood up and shielded his eyes to get a better look. Yes, this was definitely an English Oak, and it was definitely in that yard.

Bob stood, concentrating on the tree, puff ball all but forgotten, when a familiar voice jarred him out of his reverie, *"Hey Bob, what'cha looking at? Bob? BOB!"*

Bob, startled, turned to see his next door neighbor Frank with a newspaper in hand wearing his usual weekend uniform of college track shorts and sweatshirt, never mind the fact that Frank graduated from college the same year Bruce Springsteen's tour told everyone he was Born in the USA.

"Hi Frank. I'm looking at that tree over there."

"Why? It's just a tree," noted Frank dismissively.

"Because it shouldn't be there."

"It's a tree and that's a yard, of course it's supposed to be there. We've got trees everywhere in Rossmoor," yawned Frank, clearly regretting his decision to talk to Bob*, "I've got 'em, you've got 'em, we've all got trees."*

"But we don't have THAT tree, Frank. That's an English Oak, they don't live around here," Bob explained*, "and, more importantly…,"* Bob turned with deliberateness so he was squarely facing his bored neighbor*, "THAT tree wasn't in THAT yard yesterday."*

Frank's laughter broke the spell of seriousness Bob had endeavored unsuccessfully to cast upon his neighbor. *"That's crazy talk, Bob! I don't care what kind of tree it is, how's a tree that big going to show up overnight?!?"*

Bob stood quietly wondering the same thing as Frank turned to stroll back up his driveway, newspaper in hand with a full day of idle puttering in the garage ahead. "*You'd better take care of that puff ball, Bob. Those things can take over a man's yard!*" shouted Frank over his shoulder as he went.

Across the street, inside the quaint house with a yard of overflowing rose bushes and lavender by the garden gate, someone stood at a window silently observing the scene between the two neighbors when a movement behind her interrupted her thoughts.

"*I told you the tree was too big*," said the woman who entered the room.

"*It's a splendid tree, Ophelia. Yesterday, you said a shade tree would be just the thing for the front yard. It came in quite nicely, I think*," said the woman serenely, still gazing out the window.

"*You can't keep doing things like this*, *Agatha,*" warned Ophelia, "*The neighbors will start to talk*."

Turning from the window to address her sister, Agatha sat down in the window seat and smiled, "*You mean like the time you changed the color of the house one afternoon because you wanted it to compliment the new roses? Or the time you made fog in the front yard for Halloween? Ophelia, dear, we are witches. Stop acting like we aren't.*"

Ophelia, affronted by this accurate recitation of her recent spells, sat down huffily on a pillow-laden divan and crossed her arms. "*I am well aware we're witches. I'm only pointing out that your spell with the tree is a lot more obvious than mine. My spells don't produce a giant tree in the front yard overnight. It takes years for a tree to grow that big! Do you really think no one will notice?!?*"

"*Oh, the neighbor across the street definitely did*," said Agatha nonchalantly as Hecate jumped in her lap and began to purr for attention. "*But that's okay. I like him. He cares about things*."

Ophelia opened her mouth to object when a squirrel scurrying up the tree caught her eye. Walking to the window seat where her sister sat with Hecate, Ophelia had her first full view of the majestic oak tree now taking up residence in their front yard. "*It is a beautiful tree, sister. You did a very good job*. *What spell did you use?*"

"*Something old from the grimoire. There's not much call for bewitching trees these days; I had to hunt around. I think the spell was last used by Grandmother for the Queen*," answered Agatha.

"*The Queen?!?,"* gasped Ophelia loudly, "*Which one??*"

"Why should that matter?," laughed Agatha, "*The tree doesn't care*."

Sensing she had lost the argument, Ophelia tugged on her sister's arm to bring her to standing. "*Well, it's here now, so we should enjoy it,*" sighed Ophelia as the sisters stood side-by-side gazing out the window. "*A lovely tree like this needs a swing*," Agatha mused as the sisters turned to follow Hecate out of the room. And as the man across the street blinked wildly, a wooden swing built for two began swaying gently from a strong branch, all the while failing to notice the offending puff ball, which had brought him too this very spot in the first place, had suddenly disappeared – as if by magic.

The End