

# **Guarding the Oak**

**by Peter G. Pollak**

**Homage to H.P. Lovecraft**

“That tree tried to kill me,” Mrs. Anderson rasped holding onto the porch railing while trying to catch her breath. Indeed, the large branch that had broken loose from the ancient oak that bordered Jen’s property would have inflicted considerable harm on the overweight realtor had Jen not pulled her to safety. As it was, she suffered a small gash on the top of her head.

Mrs. Anderson, who had been going over what needed to be done before Jen could put the family house up for sale, had just remarked about the need for the oak to come down when the unfortunate incident occurred.

“Your neighbor has been spoken to more than once about that tree,” Mrs. Anderson huffed as Jen led her inside to bandage the cut.

“Mr. Phillips? Is he still alive?”

Mrs. Anderson’s arched eyebrow answered Jen’s question.

Later, while sipping the bitter coffee that was her mother’s percolator’s inevitable product, Jen pondered paying Mr. Phillips a visit. Perhaps he’d agreed to have the tree

trimmed if she asked nicely.

Jen had been ten when her family moved to Providence Street. At school, kids asked if she wasn't she afraid living next to a haunted house. "I'm not allowed on that block," one girl told Jen. Another claimed the giant oak on their neighbor's property had killed someone.

Her mother said not to listen to their silly stories, but then came the first day of summer vacation. Jen was playing hopscotch when a delivery truck from Dunsan's grocery pulled up in front of the "haunted" house. She stopped her game and crept up the street, curious to see who would answer the door. At first, no one. Then it opened halfway. She tiptoed closer. In the door's shadow Jen saw an old man with a long face. His stare made her shiver, as if a slice of icy air had wormed its way from the North Pole to Arkham, Massachusetts.

Jen ran home when the man continued to stare at her after the delivery boy left. She feared that the man, whose name she didn't yet know, would call her mother to complain about her being nosey. The phone didn't ring, but she said she was tired when her mother told her to stop hanging onto her apron and go back outside.

Jen had forgotten the school kids' warnings the day she ventured out to sell Girl Scout cookies because she skipped up Mr. Philips' walk thinking he'd be her first customer.

She shuddered now remembering strange sounds that emanated from the oak as she passed under its branches. It's just the wind she thought at the time.

Having ascended to the porch, the front door opened without her knocking and that long face appeared. "I decline to purchase your merchandise, young miss," said a

hollow voice. “A word of warning. Do *not* stop at 194 Angell.” The door closed.

Half an hour later, her pockets jingling with coins earned from her sales, Jen found herself in front of that very address. The house looked worse than Mr. Phillips’—showing various shades of a dingy grey as if the owner never had enough money to buy enough paint to cover the entire building. As she contemplated whether to ignore the old man Phillips’ advice, a cold breeze whipped around her bare legs and knocked two boxes off the pile of cookies neatly arranged on her Radio Flyer.

Now, standing by her kitchen window looking out at Mr. Phillips’ house, she shook her head as she remembered picking up those boxes and fleeing down the street.

The morning after Mrs. Anderson’s near demise, Jen was determined to stop thinking like an eleven year old. It was a cool, windy day, and she put on a sweater and went out her front door. The day reminded her how much she preferred New England Falls to season-less Southern California.

The leaves had been red and orange when she arrived ten days ago having been told her mother had been moved to hospice. The funeral had been a week later. Today, most trees were letting go of their leaves, except for Mr. Phillips’ oak, which hung onto its leaves like she hung on to childhood memories.

As she stood on her front walk a boy, whose indeterminate age reminded her she’d recently ended a child-less marriage, approached. “You Miss Butler?”

Jen nodded, not wanting to confuse him with her married name. He’d come he declared to collect money her mother owed him for mowing the lawn.

“The grass on that side of the house doesn’t look like it’s been cut in a while,” she said pointing in the direction of Mr. Phillips’ house.

“My Ma won’t let me,” the boy answered. “That tree’s dangerous.”

Jen meditated on how myths take hold in small communities like Arkham while she walked to the supermarket that now stood where Dunsan’s Grocery used to be. On the way back she caught herself pretending she had not intended on calling on her neighbor that very day. *Why am I being such a baby? I’m thirty-nine*, she reminded herself. *I ought to be immune to icy breezes and odd admonitions.*

Determined to overcome her hesitancy, she dropped off her groceries and headed up Mr. Phillips’ front walk. A creaking sound from the oak caused her to stop at the bottom of the steps. *Go on. It’s nothing.* She took a deep breath, then tip-toed to the porch, cringing at the moan each step emitted.

As she raised her hand to knock on the front door, it opened slowly. Like she’d done that day so long ago, she wanted to turn and run, but couldn’t move. A cane cupped by an arthritic hand preceded a horribly thin body on the top of which perched as narrow a face as she’d ever seen. His eyes were as she remembered them—black and empty.

A voice emerged from someplace far away, as if it had been years since he’d spoken. “Young miss,” she heard. “You took my advice.”

Taken aback for a moment, she recalled the Girl Scout day warning. “Who lived there back then, at 194 Angell?” she inquired. “Are they still there?”

“Am I still here?” he answered.

Barely, she wanted to reply, but then she recalled her purpose for the visit. “My mother passed,” she began. That was met by the stare. “I’ll be selling the house.” No response. She pointed to the oak. “The realtor, Mrs. Anderson, wonders if you could have someone trim—”

His head moved almost indistinguishably from side to side. “Never.”

Jen wanted to ask what he meant, but the door closed. After retreating to the street, she almost screamed when a nippy gust of wind raised goose bumps on her legs. The breeze wound up her torso and pulled at her hair as if someone behind her had got a hold of it. She hurried home pining for an apron to hang onto.

Mr. Phillips and the overgrown oak were not far from her mind in the days that followed as she undertook Mrs. Anderson’s recommendations for getting the house ready to go on the market. She asked the plumber and electrician whether they would trim the old oak, but each declined—overly strenuously, she thought. Then the man recommended to haul away the trash that had been accumulating from the various repairs arrived. It was as if he knew what she was going to ask. “I’ll do it Saturday. One hundred bucks.”

Jen thought that was very generous of him until that evening. She was sitting at the kitchen table going through her bills when she noticed the address at the top of the junk man’s invoice—194 Angell Street!

She tried to recall what he looked like. He’d come to the back door in a painter’s cap that covered the upper half of his face. “You want this pile hauled away?” he asked in a voice she attributed his being a life-long smoker. His asking price seemed fair. “I’ll need an receipt . . . for taxes,” she told him.

Stirred by the address coincidence, she told herself she was making something out of what was probably a flawed childhood memory. Tomorrow the oak would be trimmed and the next day Mrs. Anderson would arrive with the open house sign.

Saturday morning Jen awoke to sounds of a heavy wind. While waiting for the percolator, she remembered she’d forgotten to bring in the sheets she’d hung on the

clothesline. The heating element of the dryer she and her brother had bought her mother, which she admitted she rarely used, had burned out. Jen hurried out the back door to discover a pillowcase had come loose and was being blown toward the street.

She had almost caught up to it when a gust picked it up and tossed it towards the giant oak.

“Stop,” a scratchy voice hollered at her. It was Mr. Phillips on his back porch.

“Good morning, Mr. Phillips.”

“I’ll get it.”

“Please don’t bother,” she replied wanting to remind him he was more than fifty years her senior. She headed towards him to try to convince him . . . to do what? Let her retrieve a pillowcase. How ridiculous was that!

Mr. Phillips shuffled across the grass towards the wayward linen.

“It’s just a pillowcase,” Jen called, resuming her pursuit.

A vehicle backfire interrupted her progress. She recognized the truck driven by the junkman from 194 Angell. An expandable ladder and a heavy-duty chainsaw were lashed to the truck bed.

Mr. Phillips stopped his pursuit of Jen’s pillowcase. He gave her an angry glance before proceeding towards the junkman. “You’ve been warned, Aza.”

“She permissioned me, Ward,” the junkman replied, opening the tailgate of his truck.

“Not as long as I have a breath,” Mr. Phillips barked.

“What’s going on, gentlemen?” Jen asked, her hands on her hips. Just then the wind picked up the pillowcase and tossed it towards a puddle in the street. Jen ran and

grabbed it just in time.

“Nodens awake, awake.” A voice reverberated against the oaken canopy from the junkman’s direction.

“No you don’t,” she heard someone call out. Was that Mr. Phillips? “Cthulhu, arise.”

The sky became dark. The wind picked up force and there was an odd odor in the air. Sulfur?

As Jen turned to see what was going on, a large branch broke loose, and crashed down on the junkman.

“Oh, my goodness,” she screamed. “What just happened?”

The wind died down as quickly as it had come up and the sky brightened.

“Not on my watch,” she heard Mr. Phillips say as he shuffled back toward his house.

Jen thought the junkman was dead, but as she reached his side, he began to move his limbs. “Stay there. I’ll call an ambulance,” she told him.

She ran into her house and called 911 barely able to give out the address she was breathing so heavily. When she hung up, she heard a vehicle’s backfire. She tore out her front door in time to see the junkman’s truck rumble down the street, the driver seemingly revived.

Weeks passed. Only two people expressed interest in her house. Both insisted the oak be trimmed if not removed before they’d purchase the property. Mrs. Anderson told Jen it was up to her to talk to Mr. Phillips.

She did speak to Mr. Phillips, but not about cutting the tree down. “Who’s going

to guard the oak when you're gone?" she asked.

"The tree has chosen," he replied.

"What do you mean?" Jen was about to ask when she realized she knew the answer. She retreated from Mr. Phillips' porch and instead of adhering to the sidewalk walked across the lawn under the branches of the oak.

She stopped and looked up trying to estimate the tree's age.

"Over five hundred years."

She turned back to see Mr. Phillips standing in his doorway.

The next day Jen called Mrs. Anderson. "I'm taking the house off the market. I'm moving back East."

Then Jen put on her jacket and drove to the local hardware store to buy a new coffee maker.