

Penelope's Weed Tree

By Jenna Shoosmith

Miss Penelope was made of light. Incandescent golden hair rolled and tumbled onto her shoulders and illuminated her sunny, round face. She carried herself with radiant confidence and gracefully floated about as if walking on air. A smile from her had the same effect as the sun breaking through the clouds.

Perhaps it was her sunny disposition that made her garden so beautiful – the plants were never without their sunshine. Lush ivy scaled the fence surrounding her backyard and a kaleidoscope of colors erupted from within. The air was fresh and smelled of perfume and freshly turned dirt. There was no doubt that Penelope's garden was the most beautiful in the neighborhood.

One day, as Penelope pruned her azaleas, she noticed a small sprout peeking out of the dark soil. Surely, she thought, this was a weed. Penelope instinctively reached over to pluck the pesky plant from the ground. However, just as her fingers were wrapping around the base of the plant, she hesitated – the sprout began to unfold in her palm! It twisted out of the soil at a fantastic speed, disregarding all rules of science and relativity and becoming much less a sprout with every passing second. Startled, Penelope pulled her hand back. The gardener watched in disbelief as the plant grew past her ankle, her knee, and then her hip. Thick branches spread like fingers towards the sky and small, star-shaped leaves spilled out in every direction. The tree was nearly as tall as the house! Miss Penelope ran inside and grabbed the phone, her fingers fumbling to punch in the number of her next door neighbor to call for help.

She watched from her kitchen window as the tree unfurled like an umbrella and blanketed her entire yard in darkness. Horrified, the phone slipped from Penelope's fingers and clattered onto the linoleum.

What would happen to her poor plants? There was no doubt in Penelope's mind that this *thing* would gobble up all the sunshine and cause the rest of her garden to die in the darkness. No amount of water or love or rock-hard stubbornness could keep her plants alive in this condition. With this thought, the light that typically filled the young gardener drained from her being and puddled onto the floor around her feet. Her sunny disposition clouded over and tears as sorrowful as the morning rain tumbled down her cheeks.

The confused, shrill voice of her next door neighbor echoed off the linoleum and brought Miss Penelope back to reality. The gardener leaned over to pick the telephone receiver off the floor and assured the person on the other end that she was fine. Penelope took in a deep breath, uttered an apology for worrying her neighbor, and then explained her calling. She described the weed tree in her yard, and expressed her panic upon first seeing the plant spring from the ground. The other end was silent as Penelope spoke, and when the gardener finished telling her incredible tale, the line went dead.

Within seconds of the phone call coming to its sudden end, Penelope's doorbell rang. The sound, as cheerful as a bouquet of yellow daisies, filled poor Penelope with dread. She had endured enough for one morning, she wasn't in the mood to entertain visitors. Penelope rumbled over to her front door and snapped it open. There, standing on the front porch step, was Penelope's neighbor with a crowd of people behind her, all curious to see the peculiar weed tree in the backyard. They pushed past the gloomy gardener in a flurry of scuffling feet, excited murmurs, and abominable intrusiveness.

The mob filed into Penelope's garden and circled around her weed tree with open mouths and raised eyebrows. Some scratched their heads, swore, and spat on the ground. Others dared to step forward and place their hands on the trunk of the weed tree, just to make sure it was real. Word quickly spread throughout town and people came from all over to observe the plant in Penelope's garden. The front door was left open as visitors streamed in and out of the house until nightfall.

Throughout that afternoon, Penelope remained seated in a metal folding chair overlooking her garden. She kept her arms crossed and her head lowered, and she silently glowered at the curious townspeople who gaped at her miraculous and invasive tree. It was a beautiful plant, to be sure. The trunk seemed to be cast from silver and the leaves, which were pointed and perfectly shaped, were black as night. In any other circumstance, Penelope would be thrilled to have such a fantastic and unique plant in her backyard; however, because the weed tree cast an impenetrable shadow over her beloved garden, she feared deeply for the wellbeing of her other plants. Thus, Penelope could not admire the stunning beauty of the tree as her neighbors and friends did.

Hours slipped by, and soon everyone went home for dinner or to watch their favorite nighttime shows. At long last, Penelope had her garden to herself, and she was grateful for the solitude. She rose from her metal folding chair and stretched, arms spread toward the dark leaves of

the weed tree above. She sighed, folded the chair, and turned to go back indoors. It was getting late, and she really needed a cup of tea and some rest.

Beyond the walls of Penelope's shadowed garden, the last rays of sunshine slipped silently behind the horizon, and the night sky filled with a million-and-one stars. It was then, just as the last of the golden light fizzled into darkness, that something truly phantasmagoric took place in Penelope's backyard. It happened instantaneously and without warning, but the effect it had on the garden was stunning.

You see, the night before, as the gardener lay fast asleep in her bed, a star fell from the cosmos and landed – *plop!* – right into her yard. It burrowed itself between the azaleas and the rose bushes and waited until the following morning to spring from the ground. The sprout didn't need water, or fertilizer, or sunshine to grow. It just needed a little space. With time, the fallen star grew towards the impenetrable heavens and blanketed Penelope's garden in shadow.

Because of the unusual origin of this tree, the qualities so commonly associated with normal trees – such as the rough texture of their barks or their ability to drop their leaves in the fall – didn't necessarily apply. There was no doubt that Penelope's weed tree had branches and roots and several other characteristics that made it *appear* to be an average plant; however, you should be wise enough to know that appearances are often deceiving. And so, with the coming night, several delicate flowers unraveled from the knots of the tree and bloomed in the darkness.

Penelope noticed this subtle change in her peculiar plant, and she watched in amazement as the flowers developed a soft, golden glow which soon illuminated the entirety of her garden. The flowers hung like lanterns from the branches of the tree, and their light chased any trace of darkness out of the yard.

What had once been all shadows became flower petals, garden gnomes, and blades of grass. Penelope marveled at the beauty that radiated from the weed tree and she thanked her lucky stars – her plants would survive! Surely, the glow emitted from this miraculous weed tree would be enough to supply her garden with the light required for plants to grow.

Penelope felt sunny once again. Her cloudy disposition lifted, and the young gardener seemed to emit a light of her very own. There was hope for her beautiful garden after all.

As time passed and seasons changed, Penelope grew accustomed to staying up a little late each night to take care of her garden. Because the weed tree only bloomed when the sun went down, the gardener waited until nightfall before she ventured outside to prune her lovely azaleas.

You must understand, stars don't often fall from the heavens. You may encounter only a few stars in your entire life and a thousand weeds in a fraction of that time. So I hope, with all my being, that you will be able to distinguish one from the other. But don't worry, stars aren't all that difficult to identify. Just wait for the darkest moment and they will begin to shine.