

Poison ivy had wrapped itself around the trunk of the large oak, covering the light gray bark beneath its tendrils and bright green notched leaves. The tree stood next to the white picket fence in Marge's front yard and its branches were weighed down with heavy clusters of leaves that stretched out over the sidewalk and street and over Marge's well manicured lawn. The tree's age wasn't known, but it was believed that the tree predated Mecklenberg becoming incorporated in the early 1800s. Because of its visually pleasing shape, magnificent size and the brilliant red and purple colors of its leaves each autumn, it was considered the prettiest tree on Standover Street, if not in the entire town of Mecklenberg.

Wearing a pair of yellow rubber gloves and a long sleeve green gardening smock, Marge snipped the leaves and vines of the poison ivy with a pair of hedge trimmers, forming a mound around the base of the tree. Although the temperature was in the low eighties, the shade of the tree kept her cool, but the hours of exertion it took to completely remove the ivy was taxing. At age sixty-four she was still in good health, but even though she didn't admit it to anyone, she felt as if she were slowing down, like an old clock in need of winding.

With the trunk of the tree freed from the vines she scooped up the plant debris and put it in large plastic bags and placed the bags next to the garbage cans to be set out on the curb when the garbage would be collected. Using the hose attached to the side of the house, she rinsed off her shoes and the trimmers, then removed her smock. She poured laundry detergent on her gloves and worked up a good lather, then rinsed them off. She lifted the smock with the end of a stick and carried it into her laundry room and dropped it into the open wash machine. She started the wash cycle, then made her way to the gardening shed in her back yard. She put the clippers, gloves, and shoes she only wore for gardening in their usual places, then went barefoot across the cool grass to her back door and went inside. She was glad to have the job done at last.

After slipping on her favorite pair of fuzzy slippers and putting water in the tea kettle and sitting it on a glowing electric stove burner, she sat down at the kitchen table and flipped through the pages of the town's newspaper, The Mecklenberg Sentinel. She saw no pictures of anyone she knew or any news articles that interested her. In the obituaries, only the announcement of Tyler McGovern's funeral to be held on the upcoming Saturday drew her attention. She had no intention of attending the funeral because she didn't like his wife, Janet, but she liked to keep up on who was being laid to rest in Mecklenberg's cemetery.

When the tea kettle began to whistle she put a tea bag in a cup and poured the steaming water into the cup. She turned off the stove and carried the cup of tea into the living room and sat down in her favorite floral patterned overstuffed chair and picked up the remote and turned on the television. A moment later there was a knock on her front door.

"Who could that be?" she mumbled with annoyance. She got up, carrying the cup of tea, and went to answer the door.

Peering over a large brown paper bag full of groceries she held in her arms, Lisa Trumbull stared at Marge through the thick lenses of her eyeglasses that gave her the look of an inquisitive insect. Her cheeks were flush with color and beads of sweat clung to her forehead and above her upper lip like tiny glued-on transparent rhinestones. She said nothing.

"Well, what is it, Lisa?" Marge said.

Lisa cleared her throat, loudly, as if she had been drinking dust, and said, "Do you really think it's appropriate to have that on your tree?"

Marge tried to think what it was that was on her tree, and unable to fathom what Lisa was talking about, Marge said, "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"The face of the devil," Lisa said.

Not willing to believe she had heard Lisa correctly, Marge took a sip of tea, then said, "Who's face?"

"The devil," Lisa said. "I never knew you had those kinds of leanings."

"I have no leanings at all," Marge said. "Will you please tell me what you're talking about?"

Lisa placed the bag on the floor of the porch and grasped Marge's free hand and pulled her across the porch, down the stairs, up the walkway, out onto the sidewalk and down to the tree. Pointing at a

naturally formed oval in the bark, Lisa said, "See, there. His face."

Marge squinted at the oval, and with great effort she could make out what might be considered to look like the details of a face. She had never noticed it before, and wondered if the ivy had altered the bark. Willing to concede it looked like a face, she said, "It doesn't look like the devil at all."

Lisa reached over the fence and put her fingers on two pointy protuberances rising out of the skull. "See, there, that's the devil's horns."

"You're seeing things," Marge said.

"No I'm not," Lisa said as she stomped once on the concrete with her left foot, sending up a small cloud of dust. "You need to cut that out of the tree right now before someone is really offended." Starting back toward her house with Lisa following, Marge said, "I won't be told what to do with my tree by you or anyone else." Reaching her porch a full minute ahead of Lisa, whose abundance of weight limited her speed, Marge picked up the bag with one hand and held it out.

As she wrapped her arms around it, Lisa said, "I just hope you come to your senses." She turned and went down the stairs and out of Marge's yard.

Marge went into her house, closed the door behind her and took a sip of tea. "Damn, it's cold," she said, heading back to the kitchen.

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While the fading glow of daylight streamed through the tree's branches, Marge sat in her porch swing and gently rocked back and forth. A steady warm breeze passed through the leaves and played with the loose curls in her snow white hair. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine Charlie, sitting next to her with his hand lovingly on her leg. But that actually happened very few times while they were married, and he was alive. So she opened her eyes and listened to the singing robins that had nested in the tree.

She heard footsteps on her walkway before she saw who was walking up it.

"We hope we're not disturbing you," Tom Curly, Mecklenberg's mayor, said from the bottom of the porch steps. Lisa was standing behind him and stepping from foot to foot as if the concrete beneath her feet was hot.

Marge got out of the swing and walked slowly to the top of the stairs. "I wasn't expecting company," she said. Looking at Lisa, she said, "Is this about what's on my tree?"

Tom rubbed his bright red beard and said, "As a matter of fact, it is. I just took a look at it and I agree with Mrs. Trumbull. That's definitely the devil's face."

"It doesn't look like the devil to me," Marge said. She crossed her arms across her breasts. "It's just something that happened to the bark. It wasn't put there on purpose."

Tom kicked the concrete with the brown wing-tip of his shoe. "No one is suggesting it was," he said, "but it may save you trouble if you got rid of it."

"Trouble from who?" Marge said.

"This is a small town and even the suggestion of satanism could cause a great deal of trouble," Tom said.

Marge said, "So few people see the tree that I can't imagine what's on it causing me any trouble."

Lisa stepped from behind Tom and brushed back a wisp of brown hair from her forehead. "Word will get around fast that you have the devil's face on the tree," she said. "I contacted the mayor to hopefully prevent that."

Marge looked up at the tree blanketed in the reds and yellows of twilight. "What do you suggest I do? Cut the tree down?"

"You could sand the devil's face off," Tom said. "With your permission, since the tree is on your property, I have the authority to have it done for you."

Marge glanced at Lisa then back to Tom. "You see the devil's face on my tree and I don't. I'm not going to have it sanded."

"You've always been stubborn and difficult to get along with," Lisa said. "The devil's face will be removed from that tree one way or another." She turned and stomped down the walkway.

Tom rubbed his beard again. "I'll have to talk with the city council and see what we can do about

changing your mind." He turned and followed Lisa.

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The moist, warm breeze blowing in through the open bedroom window made the sheer white curtains dance on the air currents. Marge lay in her bed and stared out the window at the tree shrouded by the blackness of night. She worried about it almost in the same way she worried about her three children who she hadn't talked to in weeks. She sat up and swung her legs around to the edge of the mattress, then stepped on the cool hardwood floor with her bare feet. At the window she looked down at the base of the tree and gasped as a glowing light suddenly appeared from the side facing the street. It took her a moment to realize she was looking at a beam of light from a flashlight. Without hesitation she ran out of the bedroom, down the stairs, and out the front door. She was in the grass halfway to the tree before she realized she had forgotten to put on slippers and a robe. Going around the tree she stepped into the flashlight beam that was aimed at the face on the tree. "What are you doing here?" Marge said.

"We heard you have the devil's face on your tree," the woman holding the flashlight said. She had a blue bandana around her head and was wearing a sweatshirt and jeans.

Two other women stood at each of the flashlight holder's sides.

"Are you a devil worshiper?" one of the other women who was wearing a ball cap with an American flag above the bill, said.

"Of course not," Marge said. "Who told you about the face on my tree?"

The one with the flashlight shined it up and down Marge's pale blue knee length gauzy nightgown. "You know how quickly word spreads in Mecklenberg. How long did you plan to keep it a secret?" she said.

"I wasn't keeping anything a secret," Marge said. "It's just a marking on my tree that looks like a face."

"The devil's face," the woman wearing the ball cap said. "If you aren't a devil worshiper, why don't you get his face off of the tree?"

With the light from the flashlight shining in her eyes, Marge said, "Because it's ridiculous to be offended by something you think you see on a tree, and it's my tree on my property." She turned and started to walk back to her house. Over her shoulder, she said, "If you touch my tree I'll have you arrested."

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The next morning, carrying her collapsible grocery cart, Marge stepped out her front door and stopped abruptly, and muttered, "Oh, for God's sakes."

Standing on the sidewalk facing the tree was seven people. They were chattering excitedly and pointing at the face.

Marge walked down the porch steps and placed the cart's wheels on the walkway and pulled it out onto the sidewalk. Four of those who were now in front of her by a few yards were neighbors she had known for years, including Lisa, and Willie Monroe who lived across the street.

Willie put his hands in his pants pockets and walked up to her. He walked with a limp from an injury in Vietnam. "Good morning, Marge," he said. "You going grocery shopping?"

"That's where I'm headed," Marge said.

Lisa stepped up behind Willie. "We live next to someone and think we know her, then wake up and find out she worships Satan."

"I told you before, Lisa, I'm not a devil worshiper. If you thought the face was Elvis Presley's, would you expect me to sing?" Marge said.

Willie leaned forward and spoke almost in a whisper. "What do you think Charlie would say about the devil's face being on your tree?"

Marge said, trying to hold back her anger, "He's been dead for ten years, but if he was here now he'd run you all off with his shotgun."

Willie stepped back as if avoiding a punch and collided with Lisa. "To keep the peace, just get rid of the face on the tree," he stammered.

"My tree isn't disturbing the peace," Marge said. "No one is making you look at it." She pushed past him and Lisa and then pulled her cart between the other four people who scowled at her as she passed.

Once past the knot of people, she casually strolled down the sidewalk and tried to enjoy the same sight she had seen for years; well-kept lawns, flower gardens, and modest but well maintained homes. American flags stuck out from many of the porches and a large wood cross stood on a mound in one of the yards. The pastel yellow late morning sunlight made everything glow. At the end of the street she turned onto Main Street. Pedestrians busily went in and out of the stores and shops that lined both sides of the street. Do they know they have a suspected satanist walking among them? she thought with a laugh.

Just as she was about to go into the grocery store, Tom Curly came out. He immediately reached for his beard and tugged on it. "I've gotten a few calls and emails about your tree," he said.

"What has my tree done?" she said with a giggle.

"It's not a laughing matter," he said. "No one wants satanism promoted in Mecklenberg. The devil's face must be removed from your tree. There'll be an emergency meeting of the city council this afternoon to determine what should be done."

"Stop telling me what to do with my tree," Maggie said. "If you'll excuse me, I have shopping to do." She pushed past him and went into the store.

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Standing at the large plate glass window of her living room and looking out at the street, Marge watched the two dozen people who were milling about, shouting, and carrying signs with the words "Kill the tree" on them. Tom Curly and two others that Marge recognized as city council members were sitting on the hood of a car parked at the curb across the street. She left the window and picked up her telephone to call the sheriff's office, but got a busy signal.

In the kitchen, she put the tea kettle filled with water on the stove's glowing burner then went back to the living room window and watched as Lisa and others hurled eggs at the tree. With every egg that smashed against the tree, the small crowd cheered. She shook her head in dismay and returned to the kitchen when the kettle began to whistle. She turned off the stove, poured water from the kettle into a cup with a tea bag, and returned to the living room window.

While she sipped the tea the sun began to set. The last of the sunlight filtered through pink clouds cast a pink glow on the branches and leaves of the tree. She didn't move from where she was standing until Tom Curly got out of the car and carried a gasoline can across the street. As soon as he began splashing liquid onto the tree, Marge dropped the cup of tea onto the floor and ran out the front door.

"Stop what you're doing!" she screamed from the porch.

Others joined the crowd and they all cheered as Tom splashed more fuel on the tree.

Marge ran down the porch steps and across her lawn and stood in front of the tree, shielding the egg-splattered face. "You have no right to do what you're doing," she yelled at the increasingly boisterous crowd.

"Kill the devil," they began to chant.

"Move out of the way, Marge," Tom said. "You didn't want to take care of the problem, so this is the only solution."

"This is insanity!" Marge said. "It's just a tree."

Before Tom could answer, a lit match was thrown over the fence by Lisa and landed at the base of the tree. Flames immediately exploded around the base of the trunk, then quickly swirled around the tree, igniting the bark. Marge jumped out of the way and watched as the flames spread upward to the branches and the leaves.

The crowd clapped and shouted gleefully as the tree was consumed in fire.

Above the tree the smoke formed into a cloud in the shape of the devil's face, and then dissipated.

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