

Ordinaryville

By Frances Hoggard

When I get to hell it'll probably be a spitting image of my neighborhood. While I don't live in a bottomless pit of fire somewhere deep under the earth, I do live in your run of the mill, middle class American suburbia.

My neighborhood, rightfully known as River Woods, is filled to the brim with houses that are practically clones of one another. To make it even worse, these clone houses are accompanied by clone wives and clone husbands who coordinate their flowering pots or kitchen tile with their clone neighbors. And while this summer has been hot as hell, it hasn't stopped the clone teenagers from tanning in their backyards with their clone friends.

When I say clones I don't mean that River Woods is some science experiment. I mean that everyone is ordinary. These people think, do and say all the same stuff. The biggest scandal this gated community has ever had to endure was something along the lines of the Robertson's cat biting one of the Jones kids. The real beast in the Robertson's family isn't their rowdy feline, though. It's Mrs. Robertson. Mrs. Robertson, she's the Devil, and she's my next door neighbor.

She's the real reason this neighborhood is hell. She makes me *go the speed limit* when I'm riding my bike as if I have a speedometer programmed into my head, and she's also made me *go back to my house* to put on my helmet. Jeez lady, parent your own kids. But she's not only out to get me. She's not afraid to scold someone for walking on her freshly rooted grass, even the mailman. She always expects to hear "ma'am" when you address her, and if you dare slip up she'll call you out. I swear she's hiding horns under her massive blonde perm. I'm also

pretty sure I saw her laugh when one of the Jones kids fell off their scooter and skinned their knee.

While Mrs. Robertson is the type of woman who most people don't want to cross, the clone mothers still want to be her. They think she has it so much more together than them, as if they aren't fully dressed and made up when they walk outside to get the morning paper. They want to be her because she's the PTA president for St. Jude Primary School, she's involved in the church, she has a pretty flower garden, and she can speed walk four miles without breaking a sweat. All the clone husbands want her too, even though they'd never admit it to themselves. Wow, she really is living the life, huh.

I'm not just some angst ridden teen looking for things to curse at the world. I've lived a happy thirteen years with my friends and my own adventures, and while I still can't grow armpit hair, I've gained some wisdom through the years. I've learned that once you step foot into this subdivision everything gets a little grayer. (Personality wise, of course, because you know all these women have fertilized the heck out of their grass and plants and whatnot.) It's like before moving here all homeowners must sign a form promising not to show a lick of any genuine passions, individuality or personality they had previously. I know for a fact that all adults aren't this boring. I know for a fact this neighborhood sucks.

This isn't all that I think about, despite what it sounds like. I enjoy photography and video games and exploring. But my parents took away my camcorder, they confiscated my PlayStation and I'm being imprisoned in my house until Sunday because of a series of unfortunate events which happened yesterday. My mother caught me red handed checking myself out in the mirror with a cigarette held tightly between my lips. It's pretty embarrassing. It wasn't lit or anything; I don't even own a lighter. I was just minding my own business, admiring

how suave-y I looked, when my mother brought in some socks she bought for me. Socks. Anyway, she almost went into cardiac arrest when she saw me with that white-trash-lung-cancer-causing-I-didn't-raise-you-this-way cigarette hanging out the side of my mouth. Then, when she went to toss my new socks into my closet, she saw that I'd managed to stuff the majority of my clutter in there instead of doing a quality clean up. These damn socks. So that's why I've been confined to this 3,000 square foot jail cell for the weekend. And without my usual distractions, I've been forced to *think* about things. I've thought about 9/11 conspiracy theories (jet fuel can't melt steel beams!). I've thought about cells and atoms and molecules and everything in between. I've thought Communist Vietnam in the 1970's. I've thought about verb conjugations for Spanish. I've thought about how pretty Annie Strickland is. And, right when I thought there was nothing else to think about I started thinking about this damn neighborhood.

I moved here with my parents before I could speak. I probably would've protested if I could've. I've always hung out with the Turner twins, a lanky duo with matching groomed, blonde hair and buck teeth. They are mischievous boys who are both the evil twin, they've had run-ins with the police twice - but they've never gotten in trouble with the law because their dad is a good attorney. I should probably blame this solitary confinement on those two dumbasses. They're the ones who copped me a handful of cigarettes from their older brother's pack and told me to try it out some time. I didn't even ask for the cigarettes, and now here I am with a mother who probably won't even talk to me.

"Thomas, look at the Robertson's tile arrangement on the patio. How beautiful is that. Suzanne Robertson never fails to impress!" my mother raved, with a hint of envy, peering through our kitchen window into the Robertson's yard. My sweet mother is just as ordinary and yearning to be Mrs. Robertson as every other woman on the block.

Mrs. Robertson always gives me this passive aggressive smile which I was first introduced to when I made a comment about how I hated apple pie after she made our family one. It's like her eyes tell me "You'll regret saying that later!" but her lips curl and continue to grin wider and wider as her anger grows. I'd rather stare death straight in the eyes than face Mrs. Robertson's real wrath. I have shivers right now. She's a witch I'm telling you.

What's so deceiving about her is that from an outsider's view, she's this powerful, happy, beautiful woman with a nice family and a nice home and nice patio tiles. But I can tell she's hiding something under that caked on makeup – and it ain't pretty. She's probably some big time drug lord or works at a brothel or is an evil sorcerer. She's not your generic witch, who's ugly, has a broom stick or feeds you a poisoned apple. Instead she feeds people her apple pie. While I've never had it myself, its rave reviews make me think it is concocted by nothing short of witchcraft.

I have a straight shot view of the Robertson's backyard from the back of the roof, and if I heave myself up and grip onto the asphalt and straddle the peak of the roof I can see miles beyond River Woods. It's pretty dangerous up there but I know what I'm doing. When I'm perched on my roof, the rows upon rows of cookie cutter houses look like an optical illusion. Once you focus on the horizon the houses practically blend together. Sometimes I come up here to cloud watch or people watch or see if anything funny is happening a few streets over. But, as expected from this painfully ordinary neighborhood, nothing funny ever happens. Even the squirrels are on their best behavior. Maybe the fact that these people are so bland would be funny, if it wasn't so sad. Every morning, husbands and wives alike go off to work, kiss their spouses and children goodbye, drive off in an organized, mannerly fleet of cars and go on with

their daily routine. Later in the afternoon, they'll come home, kiss their spouses, eat dinner, go to bed, and the endless cycle starts all over. Even with my own ma and pop.

Today I'm on the roof because I am a rebellious teen! A scoundrel! Earlier today I grabbed a match and one of the cigarettes, which was buried in my underwear drawer, with intentions of toking it up. I have two cigarettes left, and if I'm gonna be in trouble for simply having one I might as well do the deed and smoke it.

I barely have a chance to inhale before I hear my mom bellow my name from below, telling me to come off the roof and *sort my socks* from the laundry. Socks are out to get me I swear. I hastily put the light out against one of the asphalt shingles and toss it down the roof, nervously watching it roll until it is caught by the gutter. I promise that in the wee hours of the morning I will climb out on my roof once again, and smoke this final cigarette once and for all.

It's 1:06 in the morning.

Instead of balancing on the peak of the roof and risking plummeting to my death, I'm gonna go towards the back of my house, where there is a flat nook on the roof where I can sit comfortably and smoke, it's also conveniently located on the opposite side of the house as my parents' bedroom. I usually don't hang out here because the view is nothing great. I can see the Robertson's patio tile though, and my mom was right, it is nice. While I hold the cigarette to my lips, light it and get ready to inhale, I notice something different in the Robertson's backyard.

A certain source of light is what catches my attention. I don't know what it is, but it's creating a flickering glow that aluminates the Robertson's entire backyard. As I squint I see a figure which keeps feeding the flame, and while I sit here in silence observing this anomaly, I can hear a soft chant. I can't make out the words. It sounds like it is speaking in tongues.

Like all good things, this scares me a little and excites me a lot.

I'm focusing on whatever is happening in the Robertson's yard so closely that I forget to exhale, I actually swallowed the smoke all together. My lungs fight for air as I try to whisper-cough so as to not disrupt the activity that is happening below. While my lungs beg me to have a big ol' heavy coughing fit, I refuse to disrupt this unusual event.

I squint like my life depends on it, and you're not gonna believe what I see. Mrs. Freakin' Robertson. She isn't tending to her garden, though. She is kneeling on the ground, hands open to the sky – in some kind of black robe. She keeps repeating a phrase and *cackling* in front of this open fire.

She cranks her head the direction of my yard and I don't dare take a breath. A rabbit innocently stares back at her, and within seconds it is blasted into smithereens. Another cackle seeps out of her mouth and she continues to put her attention on this flame. She walks over to grab more firewood and I see it. A boar's head roasting in the fire. This is no BBQ, I can assure you that.

I give up on the cigarette all together, and concentrate on staying still. This is awesome.

All of the sudden she puts out the fire with a dramatic swoop of her robe, dusts herself off and flattens her tousled hair with her hands. I don't see the boar head anymore. She sheds the robe and stuffs it deep under their G160 Composting Machine. A large circle of incinerated grass remains, and as she saunters onto her patio I can see the grass sprouting up until there is no evidence left.

She strolls halfway into the doorway, then stops.

My heart is beating so fast she can probably feel the tempo. Prestissimo is what it would be described as in band class, where the tempo is going as fast as humanly possible. I'm shaking so much I could cause a Grade 7 earthquake. Does she know I'm here?

She walks into her house and closes the door behind her. I let out a sigh of relief.

Half of my roofs shingles crash down full force from the top of the roof toward me and practically knock me to the ground.

Good thing I know what I'm doing on this roof. In a flash, I migrate to the other side of the roof, gripping onto the remaining asphalt shingles. I hop through the window and sprint to my bedroom before I have a chance to look back. Wowza.

The internet says Devil worshipper or witchcraft. The chanting, the fire, the boar's head, the robe - it all resembled satanic rituals which have been practiced for hundreds of years. Maybe the devilish looks she gives people has a deeper root than them not liking apple pie. I'm scared out of my mind but this is too good. The Turner boys are gonna get a kick out of this.

I wake up to the sound of my mom having small talk downstairs. An over enthusiastic cackle causes me to sit up straight. I peek over the stairwell to see none other than Mrs. Robertson grinning maliciously with a platter full of bacon for my family.

I know I won't be eating that.

This woman is a paradox. I don't know whether or not to be terrified of her or think she's totally cool. It's been a full day since my run-in with Satan. I've been praying a lot and cracked open the dusty ol' Bible to earn some brownie points from the Big Man up there. Maybe I can

investigate this more and figure out what's the hell is going on. This is the most entertainment River Woods has provided me since I got here.

Looking out my window, I can see Mr. and Mrs. Robertson, enjoying a glass of wine on that beautiful damn patio tile. She glances up at my window, then raises her glass, grinning bigger than ever before. My knees go weak.

I've decided that my investigation will be cut short. Frankly, I'd rather play a game with some ordinary clone child than the Devil.

Needless to say, I'll be going the speed limit on my bike when I pass her house, I'll overly use "ma'am" when addressing her, and you best bet that when she makes us apple pies I'll eat a whole slice myself and make sure to tell her how delicious it is.