

The First Two Pages: “Scrapping”

By Patricia Abbott

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“Scrapping” is the story of an elderly woman's dilemma after her home, left only for a few days, was scrapped. I’m not sure when scrapping became an epidemic in Detroit. At some point, during the exodus of a million citizens from the city, their deserted houses became valuable. The homeless began to survive by stripping vacant houses of every piece of metal they could remove. Then entrepreneurs got into the business. Deserted auto plants, businesses, and train stations were gutted as often as houses. Only an armed guard could keep scrappers out. Eventually scrapping included items you’d never consider as having any worth. Items seemingly too big to easily carry off—furnaces, stoves, water heaters. A crackdown was instituted following years of this practice, but my story was written earlier. I wish I could say Aunt Marge’s story was unique, but it was ubiquitous in Detroit as well as in other rust-belt cities. Scrapping was an underground economy, except of course, it wasn’t. Scrap yards hired helicopters with banners to advertise their interest in the product.

I originally planned to have my story told from the point of view of Aunt Marge.

“Aunt Marge. That you up on the porch?”

But Aunt Marge was at an age when she couldn't quite make sense out of what was happening in her once-respectable neighborhood. That could have been an effective means of telling the story, but it was also risky. I was treading close to the edges of cultural appropriation, ageism, racism. So I decided to have the story told by her niece, Jerzy, the character who was trying to help her aunt negotiate this problem.

“Who else?” Marge said, her voice muffled by the Happy Meals binocular held up to her face... Seated on a balding raffia chair, Aunt Marge wore an elbow-less lilac sweater and a faded Tigers hat.

Hopefully, this tells you where the two women are situated and establishes that Aunt Marge is old, poor, and possibly suffering a bit from dementia. She is keeping herself warm with an electric heater, the frayed cord pulled from inside through an open window.

“What you doin’ planted on the porch on a cold day like this?” Jerzy said.

“Watching for those boys,” Marge answered, training her binocular eyes on the street again. “Saw them cruisin’ by before I was half-done with my sugar pops.”

A few words describe the porch. A baseball bat rests near Aunt Marge, signaling the danger in her location. We also learn a few paragraphs later that the street was only home to six houses where it has once boasted twenty. Detroit is being depopulated block by block.

Jerzy's interest is awakened and she too wonders what the boys are up to.

Someone must be selling crack. She'd seen some skanky girls 'round the corner on John R. Looked like a ho stroll in progress with their getups of high heels, short skirts, bare midriffs and dirty fur jackets. Men like this? Nope, only want what's under it.

We will come to learn that Aunt Marge worked in the Detroit auto plants for years, earning a decent living as an upholsterer. She never married. She was an independent woman, not depending on a man or the government to take care of her. The street she lived on was tidy, desirable.

Next we learn something about our point of view character.

Jerzy was abruptly overcome by the craving to have both a cigarette and a drink. It came over her lightning quick sometimes. She'd sworn off both a few years back, but the old lady sitting in front of her in her broken-down house on this God-forsaken street brought back that craving.

Jerzy will be called on to negotiate the bureaucracy in getting her aunt some justice, her husband's antipathy to having her involved in Aunt Marge's plight, and in helping her Aunt decide what is best for her over the course of the rest of the story.

So the first two pages introduce the two main characters, the setting of the story, the situation Detroit finds itself in, and how this filters down to its citizens. The difficulty in telling this story was in giving the reader a sense of who these two women were without being patronizing or exploitative.

Patricia Abbott is the author of the Edgar, Anthony and Macavity-nominated novels *Concrete Angel* and *Shot In Detroit*. Her story "My Hero" won a Derringer award. Her new collection *I Bring Sorrow And Other Stories Of Transgression* debuted on March 7th. More than 150 of her stories have appeared in various venues.