

The Housewife Loved a Bandit – Chapter 1
MA GETS INTO A BIG FIGHT - Part 1

FBI. US Marshals. Uniformed Chicago Police. Ma went down swinging that day against men with badges, warrants and handcuffs. It was a violent encounter. They needed five men to force her, still scratching, punching, kicking and screaming, into the back seat of the unmarked car.

Other than that, July 26th, 1954, was a peaceful picture-perfect sun-drenched summer day in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood. The 57th Street beach was teeming with children and their families enjoying the emerald waters of Lake Michigan. The whole city was excited about the arrival of the captured U505 German submarine. It was soon to become a permanent exhibit at the Museum of Science and Industry. I was 4 years old.



My grip was just about exhausted when my sister Nancy *finally* snapped the shutter on her good old Brownie camera.

Personal collection

The air was warm-weather fresh with the thick humid perfume of our trees, flowers and lovely lilac bush. The triple-trunk sumac tree in the front yard was a marvel to me. I could not resist climbing it and my sister Nancy could not resist taking my picture while I hugged my favorite tree trunk.

Our house had recently been treated to a new layer of white stucco. The window and porch trim had a fresh coat of dark green oil based paint. My dad was very proud of his castle, the first home he had ever bought. He systematically made one improvement after another since purchasing that two-story corner house at 5400 S. Ridgewood Court in December, 1950. For him, the house was a constant and a source of great pride. He would do whatever was necessary to improve that 1890's structure anytime he wanted. He was in control. His wife, however, was another story.



My oldest sister Nancy on guard duty with our ever-present Collie dog.
Enter at your own risk – nice dog, dangerous sister!

Personal collection

So, what exactly happened on that fine summer day? That day started last year. Ma abruptly left the family soon after Halloween of 1953. She apparently needed a break from the momma/housewife routine and took full advantage of her time-out. The Housewife arrived home from her “vacation” seven months later just in time for my fourth birthday.

On June 10th, 1954, with a fully refreshed soul and a fully refilled gas tank, she hopped into her 1951 black-over-cream Chevy and sped back to her sweet home in Chicago. My mother’s journey north began in Miami, Florida. Ma stopped along the way and bought a dozen watermelons. She didn’t want to arrive home empty-handed after such a prolonged absence. That juicy sticky summer fruit is always a treat. I suspect she didn’t want to miss my birthday on June 22nd and my sister Loretta’s on July 22nd. Lot’s of special days to share once again. But....hmmm... why was she in Florida?

We had a gloss-white wringer washing machine in the basement. To this four-year-old, it was a beast – big, noisy and scary. Once I came within milliseconds of those rubber-coated wringer rollers gobbling up my left hand. A narrow escape and a lesson learned! With six kids and two adults in the house, the machine was in constant use. On this summer day, old monster-lips decided to malfunction. The local “Woodlawn and 53rd Street Laundromat” was necessary and convenient.

Ma came out to our shady front yard to get her little helper. Since I was the youngest of six, she often included me on her errands around the neighborhood so the others would not have to be bothered watching their whiney pot-bellied, crybaby snot-nosed little brother. I was always excited about going for a ride. It was my chance to get away from those domineering bratty big sisters and their giggling friends always teasing me about one thing or another. Actually, they were usually very nice to me but there were those “moments” where kids will be kids, dominance and submission, etc.

I’d ride shotgun-in-the-Chevy and could recite the make of cars we passed. Ma thought I was smart like that but, who knows, I could have been wrong. Your author was probably just throwing out car names heard before and Ma didn’t know any better. I learned at an early age the value of a well-worn axiom, “*If ya can’t dazzle ‘em with brilliance, ya baffle ‘em with BS.*” That technique came in handy during my teaching career many years hence.

I followed her down the creaky wooden steps into the shadows of the musty basement to help pack pillowcases with dirty towels, clothes and bed sheets. Late afternoon sunlight streaming through a west-facing window, provided light for our task. We trudged back up the basement stairs and out through the front door allowing the screen door to slam shut. After the bags bounced down the newly painted front porch steps,

we dragged them over the sidewalk towards the front gate. I waved to our family friend, Leroy “Skeeter” Boarman who had come by to play with my older brother Freddie.

Ma’s ‘51 Chevy was parked facing east on 54th Street just a few feet west of Ridgewood Court. We set the bulging pillowcases down in the street behind the car and Ma opened the trunk. She busily arranged the laundry bags as I looked on from the sidewalk by the white picket fence. The sun was at my back so I figure it was about 4 o’clock in the afternoon.

Suddenly, a dozen black cars zoomed up and screeched to a halt. We lived on a corner so they came from four different directions. In an instant, there were police everywhere as if they appeared out of the thin air. Three large men in suits ran up and grabbed ma. The word “chaos” pretty much describes the scene.



Loretta and your author share some face time with Spitfire the black cat and our other kitty, good ol’ “what’s-its-name”. On July 26, 1954, ma’s ‘51 Chevy was just about where that car is parked. Damn, I was cute!

Personal collection

My mother's primal instincts kicked into high gear and she was fighting like a wild beast. She screamed something that sounded like "*Get your fluxing hands off me!*" This high-decibel response was a classic demonstration of Ma's spontaneous nature. The best defense is a great offense. On that day, Flo Baran was exceptionally defensively offensive.

Who the hell were these guys? Unbeknownst to the kindly Mrs. Baran, she was wrestling US Marshals executing a fugitive arrest warrant. Within one thin moment, it became abundantly clear that the three US Marshals needed more than three US Marshals to execute *this* fugitive arrest warrant. By all accounts, she was kicking ass. Two uniformed Chicago Police officers jumped in. Finally cuffed and still kicking, our 36-year-old mother disappeared into the back seat of the waiting prowler car.

In the middle of all this, my brother Fred appeared clutching his prized baseball bat. At 9 years old, he had the blind courage and loyalty to attack those big guys who were dragging away his mother. He didn't see men in uniforms with badges, guns and clubs. As far as he knew, strangers were abducting his mom. Before Freddie could launch someone's noggin over the left field fence, an officer wrapped up my brother and pulled him away.

Skeeter Boarman was still there, a stunned witness to the commotion. He asked a neighbor who was standing by, "*Why are they arresting Mrs. Baran?*" Someone overheard a cop say something about armed robberies.

According to the FBI and newspaper accounts, it was a violent encounter. It took five men to corral dear old Ma and slip on the bracelets.

The FBI described her as:

-a woman who liked to fight

-a fighter with a taste for raw garlic

It is a rare occasion when someone's mama is the subject of a dramatic arrest. All this begs the question; "What did she do to get this kind of attention?" Didn't she have a nice home with a white picket fence? Didn't she share this home with a hard-working husband and father? Wasn't this the idyllic 1950's baby boomer days when black-and-white TVs reflected and/or encouraged happy post-war family stability with every daily crisis resolved just in time for dinner right-after-a-word-from-our-sponsors?

What in tarnation just happened here? US Marshals? Chicago Police? Handcuffs and four-letter words? Why did those dirty coppers, in broad daylight, steal away the mother of a confused and sobbing little

boy left clutching that white picket fence? Could all of this policed pandemonium been a tragic case of mistaken identity? Was there a back-story here lurking behind the “Leave-It-To-Beaver” image of domestic normalcy? Did something naughty happen during my ma’s seven-month vacation? Yeah, probably. Otherwise, I would have no story to tell and would just be wasting your time with this dead end chapter one. So, let’s get down to business. At this point, it is incumbent upon me to paraphrase the words of the immortal Ricky Ricardo, “*You got some ‘splainin’ to do, Florence.*”