

When Evil Came to Good Hart

Mardi Link

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Raking over the ashes of a cold case is tantalizing for many detectives and journalists, even though that single, overlooked detail is rarely found. Yet Mardi Link's look at a 1968 case is a stellar example of how a mystery, when well presented, can be even more compelling than one that's been solved.

When she was just seven years old, Link and her family heard the news over their car radio that a couple and their four children had been found murdered in a summer cottage in Good Hart, Michigan. The youngest child, and only girl, was also seven, creating a connection for Link that lasted through four decades.

The Robison family drove up every summer to Blisswood, a private development of summer homes along Lake Michigan. During a typical hot stretch in July, neighbors close to the Robison's cabin broke in after a foul stench had begun emanating from inside. The crime scene was dizzying—the whole family, killed as they'd sat at their dining room table playing a game of double solitaire.

The details were enough to befuddle the most experienced investigators: Mrs. Robison's clothing was ripped away, suggesting sexual assault, but the scene looked more like an ambush. Expensive camera equipment was left behind, implying that it wasn't a robbery, and the way the front door was locked from the inside was also curious.

The ensuing investigation resulted in hundreds of tips and leads, including business associates, a prisoner who claimed to know who did it, and possible hitmen. Even after the cabin was torn down, a gun was found under a rock not far from the property, and locals still have theories about where other guns might be located, including inside a grave.

A Michigan native, Link started her career as a journalist, and here, she has honed those instincts to a keen edge. Yet, in digging through evidence, reading numerous newspaper accounts from that time, and talking to a score of Good Hart residents, Link doesn't come up with any answers about whodunit. What makes this book more than the sum of its parts is Link's exploration of the nature of evil and her comments on loss of innocence—her own, the town's, the era's. Her descriptions vary from melodic and wistful to hard hitting, a combination that keeps the pages turning fast. For the Robisons, she writes, it was to be their first full summer in Good Hart, a result of business success: "It was a simple but enduring dream, shared by thousands of Michigan families, but one that for the Robisons this summer in 1968, lasted just eight days."

ELIZABETH MILLARD (June 16, 2008)

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