

# ‘Mommy is gone’

By R. Marc Kantrowitz  
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On the afternoon of Oct. 24, 1961, Barbara Barker was at home with her 4-year-old son, who was playing with neighbor Lillian Risch, also 4. Shortly before 4 p.m., Barbara walked Lillian back to her own house and dropped her off without stopping in to see or chat with Lillian’s mother, Joan. But young Lillian soon returned, saying, “Mommy is gone and the kitchen is covered in red paint.”



As Barker rushed over to the Risch house, she probably thought of the last time she had seen her neighbor, some 90 or so minutes earlier. Peering out of her window, she had spotted Risch, hunched over, moving quickly and carrying something red as she headed to her car. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary.

It was the last time Joan Risch was seen.

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Joan Carolyn Bard was born on May 12, 1930, in Brooklyn. A decade later, after moving to New Jersey, a fire swept through her family’s house, killing her parents.

The ‘missing person’ poster circulated after Joan Risch disappeared

Adopted by relatives, she took their last name. She graduated from a small Pennsylvania college in 1952 where she had majored in English literature, and moved to New York City to enter the world of publishing.

Four years later, she married Martin Risch, relocated to Connecticut, and started a family. In April 1961, the Risches again moved, this time to Lincoln, Massachusetts. She voiced an interest in teaching and spreading her love of literature as soon as her two young children were older. In the meantime, Joan remained active, joining the League of Women Voters and reading voraciously.

Early on Tuesday, Oct. 24, Martin departed for Logan Airport and flew to New York City for a two-day business trip. Joan fed the children, left one with her neighbor Barbara Barker, and drove off for a dentist appointment with her daughter in tow.

After the appointment, they went shopping. In their absence, the postman delivered mail and the milkman left milk. When Joan returned home, she retrieved her son and gave her husband's suits to the dry cleaner, who had stopped by to pick them up.

The ordinary day continued. Joan fed her children and put her son down for his early afternoon nap. Meanwhile, Barbara Barker brought her son over to play with Lillian in front of the Risch house. After working in her garden, Joan brought the two children back to the Barker house, where they played on swings.

Around 3:30, a dirty two-tone car backed out of the Risch driveway.

Within five minutes of receiving Barbara Barker's frantic call, the police arrived.



A small trash can, normally found under the sink, stood in the middle of the kitchen with the ripped-off home phone receiver and liquor bottles inside. Nearby was a tipped-over table; a roll of paper towels was on the floor. Clothing belonging to Joan's young son apparently had been used to wipe up blood.

The telephone book was on the counter, opened to a page on which emergency numbers could be written, although none were. There was a bloody palm print and fingerprints on the walls, and one on the phone mount.

There were droplets of blood on the stairs, in the master bedroom, in the children's bedroom, and in the driveway leading to Joan's car. More blood was found on the right rear fender, the left side of the hood, and the center of the trunk.



Questions quickly arose. Whose fingerprints were they? Why no bloody footprints? Why no blood in the bathroom? And what of the quantity of the blood; though it was spread out across several areas, the amount did not suggest a fatal injury.

Witnesses came forward saying they saw a woman fitting Joan Risch's description, looking disheveled and disoriented and as if she were in pain. She had been bent over with what appeared to be blood running down her leg, on the road where Route 128 was under construction. Why hadn't anyone stopped to help her? Where did she go?

Some thought she fell unconscious into one of the deep pits and died, her lifeless body mixing with the dirt, stone, concrete and debris of the construction process.

With many unanswered questions and no suspects — her husband and the three deliverymen were all ruled out — the case grew cold. Until a reporter visited the library.

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Sareen Gerson was researching an article on Joan Risch for the local newspaper. She went to the Lincoln library looking for books on mysterious disappearances. In one, she noticed that Joan, just a month prior, had signed out the book.

Intrigued, she continued on, finding another about a woman who disappeared, leaving behind blood evidence. Quickly all of Risch's borrowing habits were scrutinized. The findings jolted the investigation. Over the summer of 1961, Joan had checked out 25 books, nearly all about missing persons and murders.

A new theory emerged: She had staged her murder and disappeared.

Though many accepted the staging theory, her husband and a number of her friends did not. They knew her to be well read and intellectually curious, a woman who loved her family and would never desert her young children.

Others were not so sure, believing her to be so unhappy and dissatisfied with her placid suburban life that she created a plan to escape. With nothing concrete to go on, speculation grew, some thinking she was the victim of an abortion gone tragically wrong.



## Epilogue

Neither the fingerprints nor the two-tone car were ever attributed to anyone. The house in which the Risches lived was moved to Lexington to make way for a park. Martin Risch remained in Lincoln where he raised his two children. He never requested that his wife be declared legally dead, nor did he ever change the family's phone number, in hopes that Joan would one day call.

She never did.

*The above column is based on various internet sources. R. Marc Kantrowitz, a retired Massachusetts judge, can be contacted at [rmarckantrowitz@comcast.net](mailto:rmarckantrowitz@comcast.net).*