

COLLINS CRIME

MARIAN BABSON

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FINANCIAL TIMES

A TRAIL OF ASHES

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A TRAIL OF ASHES

MARIAN BABSON was born in New England, but has lived in London since 1960. She is the author of a number of crime novels including a complementary story to *A Trail of Ashes*, *Death Swap*.

by the same author

The Cruise of a Deathtime
A Fool for Murder
Death Beside the Seaside
Death Warmed Up
Bejewelled Death
Queue Here for Murder
Dangerous to Know
The Twelve Deaths of Christmas
So Soon Done For
Tightrope for Three
Murder, Murder, Little Star
The Lord Mayor of Death
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There Must Be Some Mistake
Murder Sails at Midnight
Unfair Exchange
The Stalking Lamb
Pretty Lady
Murder on Show
Cover-up Story
Death Swap
Death in Fashion
Weekend for Murder
Reel Murder
Fatal Fortune

MARIAN BABSON

A Trail of Ashes

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One

After the first death, there is no other. . .

There's truth in that. Perhaps that was the reason we – the children and I – managed to survive that terrible summer. The strangeness, the overpowering heat, the odd unfamiliar accents, the menace hanging over the alien house, were all part of the unreality that had enveloped us from the first unbelievable moments of that long unending nightmare . . .

It didn't matter if dinner was late, a steak-and-kidney pudding was on the stove and could go on simmering away indefinitely. The new potatoes were scraped and ready to go on the stove as soon as John returned from his dubious errand of mercy. The greens were also ready. We could have a leisurely drink while everything cooked. By the end of the second drink, dinner would be ready.

The children were in the garden playing on the swings. I glanced through the kitchen window in time to see them lifting Esmond on to a swing for the umpteenth time and patiently explaining to him just what was required of him.

The cat had ideas of his own. None of those ideas included auditioning to be "The Cat on the Flying

Trapeze' for the Sideshow at next Saturday's Gymkhana.

As soon as Timothy, with a few final soothing pats, released his grasp and moved behind the swing for a good hearty push, Esmond was off.

He fled across the garden and into the shrubbery with Timothy and Tessa in hysterical pursuit, calling upon him to come back and play the game – for Queen and Country.

I was still laughing when the doorbell rang and I went to answer it.

To this day, that bothers me. How could I have been laughing? Why didn't I know?

The policeman at the door was shocked. He obviously felt I should have known. He frowned down on me with bleak disapproval.

I stopped laughing then. Even before he spoke, I began to know.

'I'm sorry.' Hazel Davies approached me after the funeral. 'I'm so terribly sorry. If it hadn't been for me –'

'Yes,' I said. She had put it into words. It was the truth and I could not bring myself to utter any of the platitudes.

What could I say: *It's all right?* It was not all right. John was dead and it was all wrong. *It wasn't your fault?* She had enough people assuring her of that. And it *was* her fault – although not directly.

She was there – and her husband wasn't. And my husband had always been too obliging for his own good – fatally obliging. He'd see to that little problem with

the fuse wire – no trouble at all. A simple job for a do-it-yourselfer. Hadn't he built another room on to our house – electric wiring and all?

No problem. It was the least he could do for a new neighbour whose husband was travelling overseas helping with Britain's constant Export Drive.

The least he could do – the last thing he did. Driving home, he was sideswiped by another driver, forced off the road on the crest of the hill – and killed.

It wasn't directly Hazel's fault – but she was right. If it hadn't been for her, he'd have been at home with me and the children when that other driver – drunk, the police assumed, or well over the limit – had gone careering over the hilltop. The driver would have hit-and-run from some other car, killed someone else's husband. Or perhaps there'd have been no other car there at all. He'd have negotiated the high curve safely and gone home without a crash – a killing – on his conscience. If he had a conscience.

But John had been there at the wrong moment – just one of those things. Except that it was the end of the world for us and I couldn't dismiss it with a philosophical shrug.

'I'm sorry,' Hazel said again. Her eyes filled with tears as she turned away.

I watched her go, unable to answer. The children pressed against me, staring after her with hostile eyes.

She was not without her comforters. I tried not to hold it against those who spoke soothingly to her. Intellectually, I could understand their reaction. Viewed objectively, it was a terrible thing to have happened to a newcomer to the town, to be responsible

– even indirectly – for the death of one of its leading young citizens.

People were sorry for her; they were sorry for me. Torn in their loyalties, friends were trying to be fair to both of us. I must not condemn them for it.

‘Are you all right?’ Someone touched my arm.

Are you all right? Someone or other had been asking me that stupid question ever since it happened. How all right could I be – ever again?

‘Are you all right?’ My sister had telephoned from the States, but had realized the imbecility of the question, even as she asked it. ‘Financially, I mean,’ she amended swiftly.

‘Oh, that – yes. John has – had – the kind of insurance policy that took care of paying off the mortgage if anything –’

‘Shall I come over for the funeral?’ Celia had cut in quickly, before the tears had time to flow again. ‘It would be awkward, with Patrick not at all well, but I could manage –’ She stopped. ‘I didn’t mean that the way it sounded,’ she apologized. ‘I’ll come, of course, if you want me.’

‘No, don’t bother,’ I said. I didn’t want anyone but John. He was gone and no one else mattered.

‘Are you all right?’ The voice beside me was insistent, trying to be kind.

‘Yes . . .’ Yes. *What do you expect me to say: I’m walking on air? I’m dancing on the ceiling?*

‘Yes . . .’ I turned to face Lania and Piers. I looked at them bleakly, thinking that Lania had never been renowned for her tact. When a woman has just buried her man, it isn’t especially thoughtful to remind her

that some women have two. At least, Lania might have come to the funeral with her own husband.

'Richard had to stay in town overnight,' she said, as though reading my mind. 'He asked me to apologize. He had to entertain customers until quite late and then stay over at his club. He had a business conference this morning and didn't know when he'd be able to get away. Otherwise, he would have been here. He wouldn't have missed it -'

She broke off, realizing that she was exaggerating her husband's enthusiasm for seeing my husband off on his final journey. That was the trouble with occasions like this. There was almost nothing anyone could say that didn't sound wrong.

'Yes,' I said. Tessa was beginning to shiver; Timothy was dead white and swallowing hard. I couldn't worry about the insensitivity of the adults surrounding me. The children were my business - they were all I had left of John; all I could do for him. They had to come first.

'Excuse me -' I bared my teeth mechanically at Lania and her lover; perhaps it looked like a smile, perhaps it didn't; it was a barely-remembered social gesture, nothing more. 'I must get the children home. They've had a . . . difficult morning.'

'We'll give you a lift,' Lania said quickly. 'Unless the undertaker is going to. I know you haven't a car any longer -' She broke off abruptly. She had said the wrong thing again.

'You go along,' I said. 'He'll take care of us - it's all part of the service.'

* * *

Celia rang again that night. 'What are you going to do now?' she demanded, in her elder-sister-setting-the-world-to-rights way.

'I'm going to bed,' I answered literally. 'I tucked the children in a couple of hours ago. I'm glad the phone didn't wake them.' We all ought to be asleep by now; it was a good day to have over.

'Not *now* . . .' She sighed with exasperation. 'I mean, tomorrow, next week, from now on . . .?'

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow . . . I hadn't thought that far ahead yet.

'Listen,' she said, correctly interpreting my silence. 'I've had a marvellous idea. Why don't you come over here? Just for the summer . . . just till you get your feet under you again.'

'No!' I couldn't face the thought of leaving the place where we had been happy. 'I'm sorry, Celia,' I tried to soften the outright refusal. 'We couldn't afford it. You don't have enough room to put us up . . .'

'That's the beauty of it,' she said, 'I wouldn't have to. Now, just listen - ' She was talking quickly to override my arguments. 'Patrick's cousin, Nancy, is married to a schoolteacher who wants to do some research in England for his Ph.D. thesis. Something dreary about Victorian politics - but that doesn't matter. The point is, they have a summer break from mid-June to the beginning of September when school starts again here, which would be ideal for doing research. They have twins, a boy and a girl, just about the same age as your Timothy and, in the ordinary way, they couldn't afford to go over to England for that length of time - '

'Celia,' I broke in, 'this is all very interesting, but -'
'And they have a lovely old house in Cranberry Lane, right by the lake!' she finished triumphantly. 'It's absolutely perfect - you can do a house swap and solve both sets of problems!'

'That won't solve my problem, Celia,' I reminded her. I felt tears begin to gather. Esmond leaped on the desk and rubbed his warm furry body against my face and arm, sensing that comfort was needed, willing to do all he could. Unfortunately his all wasn't much better than Celia's.

'It won't make it any worse,' Celia said shrewdly. Nothing could make it any worse. 'You needn't worry about Nancy and Arnold being careless with your things, they're very conscientious. And house swapping does work out beautifully - everyone is doing it these days. Remember a couple of years ago, Patrick and I swapped with that nice French-Canadian couple and had a lovely cottage in the Laurencians for three weeks? It couldn't have been better!'

'I'm glad it worked out well for you, Celia,' I said. 'However, I really don't feel I could face any more upheaval. I'm too exhausted -'

'Oh, it wouldn't be right away,' Celia said. 'I'll have to work on - I mean, it couldn't happen until after school gets out here in June. And I haven't even mentioned it to Nancy and Arnold yet.'

'That's another thing,' I said. 'What about the children? If you say schools are closed there all summer, they'll miss out a term.'

'There's a marvellous Summer Camp here at Edgemark Lake. It's a boarding camp, but they take a few

locals as day pupils. It's almost like a school. They have swimming lessons, woodcraft, painting, windsurfing – all sorts of arts and crafts. It would do them good. Luke loves it – he could show them the ropes.'

Just for a moment, I wavered. The children undoubtedly would love it – and it might be as good for them as a regular term, and they could make up any work they missed easily enough. But . . .

'I can't, Celia. Honestly I can't. It's all too much. The packing, the chaos, the upheaval – ' Esmond chirruped sympathetically and buttered my chin with his head. 'The cat?' I clutched at him gratefully. 'We couldn't take Esmond with us and – '

'There's no problem, they've got a cat, too. Don't you see how perfect it is? You'll be walking into houses completely equipped, even down to the cat. It would make the children feel right at home. The Harpers can take care of Esmond and you can take care of Errol. Why not? You know you always planned to come over for a nice long holiday some day – ' She broke off, conscious that she had gone too far.

'But not like this – ' John and I had talked about it, planning it for some distant time when the children were older and we could have more time together.

'I'm sorry. You know what I meant – '

'I know – ' I fought to keep the tears out of my voice. 'Thank you, Celia. It was kind of you to think of it. Perhaps some other year . . . '

'I shouldn't have mentioned it so soon.' She was contrite. 'You need time to get used to the idea. I won't take this as final. Just think it over . . . '

'Yes,' I said, with no intention of doing anything of the sort. 'I'll think it over. Goodbye, Celia.'

The days dragged past; somehow we got through them. Our thoughts circled in the endless loop: *this time last week . . . this time last month . . .* I began to understand why tradition decreed a year of mourning. As the sad anniversaries slipped by, perhaps some of the poignancy would begin to fade. Perhaps twelve months would alleviate the immediacy of the pain. And perhaps not. Meanwhile I felt as though I were swimming underwater through the days.

Everyone was very kind. Lania kept popping round with baked or, being Lania, half-baked offerings. Her cooking was never as good as her intentions. For the time being, she was tactful enough to keep quiet about her own complicated love-life.

There was a letter from Celia, restating all her arguments in favour of a summer in America. I threw the letter away.

Friends included the children on outings, whenever they could be persuaded to go. They accepted few of the invitations they received and the anxious way they rushed back into the house at the end of the day told me the reason why. Insecure and frightened by the sudden loss of one parent, they were terrified that something might have happened to me in their absence, that they might return some evening to find that I, too, had slipped away and they were left alone.

Deep down, I felt the same about them. Although I encouraged them to go out with their friends, I was relieved and thankful when they returned safely from

their infrequent expeditions. We clung to each other like shipwrecked castaways, trying to pretend we weren't as bereft as we were, secretly waiting for the next blow to fall.

On several occasions I saw Hazel Davies when we were both out shopping. I couldn't help my reaction, I always crossed the street to avoid speaking to her.

The days marched past, slowly and inexorably. The legal formalities were sorted out. The pain remained. It was nearly the end of the term and the children would soon be home all day. I both welcomed it and dreaded it. I tried not to think about it.

Then, the week before the term ended, there was a telephone call from the school. As soon as the teacher announced herself, my knees began to tremble and there was a rushing sound in my ears. I sank down on a chair, knowing the next blow had fallen.

'They weren't unsupervised - ' The teacher was both apologetic and on the defensive. 'She just fell awkwardly. It could have happened to anyone - '

But it had happened to Tessa.

I met them at the doctor's surgery. Tessa was already inside having the plaster cast put on her arm. I went into the office and, reverting to an earlier age, she climbed into my lap as soon as the doctor had finished.

'Not serious at all,' the doctor assured me. 'A nice clean break. Fortunately she's left-handed, so it won't be too difficult for her.'

Tessa hid her face against my shoulder and didn't say a word.

Timothy, white-faced and shaken, looked up as we

came out of the office. One of the teachers was with him, not the one who had telephoned, I think.

'I'll drive you home,' she said quickly.

'Thank you,' I said. 'That's very kind.'

All the way home, Tessa didn't speak. Neither did Timothy. They huddled close to me. The teacher talked compulsively and I got all the details – several times. Tessa had simply slipped on the stairs. She had fallen awkwardly. It was unfortunate, but it was not the school's fault. It could have happened to anyone.

'Yes,' I said.

'She was very good,' the teacher said in parting. 'She didn't cry at all.'

In the house, I put the kettle on for tea. When I sat down for a moment, Tessa climbed into my lap again, awkwardly, the cast and sling hampering her.

'Poor baby.' I cuddled her. 'It was a rotten thing to happen, but it will heal. Does it hurt very much?'

'It doesn't matter.' She signed from a pain too deep for tears and looked up at me. 'Nothing good is ever going to happen to us again, is it, Mummy?'

That night I rang Celia and made the arrangements.

Two

We stepped out of the terminal at Logan Airport into a heat so incredible it was like a slap in the face.

'Like walking into an oven, isn't it?' one of my fellow passengers asked cheerfully.

I agreed. I had never realized before how apt the expression was. Squinting against the blazing sun, we hurried towards the car park.

Celia had been waiting for us just beyond the Customs barrier. I was surprised to see that she was alone, then remembered that, of course, Patrick must be at work. Somehow, I had had the impression that they were both going to meet us.

'Hurry up - ' Celia wasted little time on preliminaries. She looked and sounded more Americanized than she had on the telephone. 'If we hurry, we can get out of the city before we get caught up in the rush hour.'

The automobile was another oven; we opened the doors and rolled down the windows to try to let it cool a bit while we loaded our luggage into it. Not until we began to move did the rush of air give an impression of coolness.

'You're looking very well.' We told each other the obligatory social lies. Celia looked awful; she was