

**TOMÁS GRAVES**

*A Bakelite tragedy*

**Tony was heir to the fortune** of his great-grandfather Leo Hendryk Baekeland, the inventor of Bakelite and known as the Father of Plastics. After his parents separated, Tony lived with his mother Barbara, a large, expansive woman who administered his generous allowance until he could look after himself. It was in her interest to make him totally dependent upon her, which she ensured by administrating not only his money but also his medication; she also tried to “cure” his homosexual leanings by bedding him, which turned an already very tense situation into an incestuous love-hate relationship. Tony, who had an air of John Malkovich, was in his mid twenties; while staying at my brother’s Pension Can Quiet he was admonished for “flashing” in Sóller’s main square.

My girlfriend Wendy and I got to know Tony through our mutual enthusiasm for the Incredible String Band. Wendy was putting her Salvadorean genes to work by making hammocks to pay for her summer holiday. When Barbara ordered one for the house they were renting, s’Estaca, we promised to deliver it the following Saturday; “Fine, then you can both come and stay for supper.”

S’Estaca is the estate which the Austrian Archduke Ludwig Salvator built for his Majorcan lover, Catalina Homar, and where she had created a vineyard producing a prize-winning *malvasía* (malmsey) wine in the 1890s. This whitewashed Sicilian-style palace with a North African vaulted roof stands surrounded by palm trees 100 feet above the open sea; to the right lies La Foradada, a rocky peninsula in whose lee the Archduke would moor his yacht. Sheer cliffs tower above the house which Tony Richardson had chosen to shoot his film *Laughter in the Dark*, based on Nabokov’s novel of obsession, starring Nicol

Williamson and Sian Phillips. The house is now owned on a time-share basis by Michael Douglas and his ex-wife Diandra.

As we drove first down the narrow hairpin bends to the Port of Valldemossa and then along the two miles of the coastal track to s'Estaca, Wendy and I passed another large farmhouse, Sa Font FFiguera. Suddenly, a wild, haggard red-haired woman leapt into the track in front of my VW van, and walked ahead of us, blocking the road and shouting invectives over her shoulder before vanishing as suddenly as she had appeared. We were still feeling shaken as we approached S'Estaca, its crenellations and palm trees silhouetted against the red sky giving the impression that we had crossed over to North Africa.

Nobody was about, but the heavy doors opened onto the vaulted entrance hall where tall candles burned in the candelabra, dripping their wax over the huge antique chests. On the wall was a blurred photograph of the Empress Sissi on her visit to the house; in the centre of the room, a wide staircase descended into the dark wine cellar. At the far end, another set of heavy doors. These suddenly burst open and in strode Barbara in a flowing white robe; behind her, in the dusk beyond the terrace, a sliver of new moon was being engulfed by the blood-orange horizon. "The trouble with this house is that the stairs to the upstairs rooms are outside, so we're always going in and out. Let's have a glass of champagne on the terrace." In the distance, a dog began to howl. "That dratted dog, his master died last week when he fell out of his fishing boat. Imagine, a fisherman and he couldn't swim! He was the *amo* of the farm next door, and the mutt won't stop howling for him all night. His widow hasn't been the same since, either; she shouts at us every time we drive by. It seems he brought her back from Algeria or somewhere, and she's reverted to speaking Berber." At this, a long black Mercedes bearing the pennant of the five-star Hotel Formentor drove up and Barbara introduced us to the other supper guest, a distinguished Latin American gentleman: the Mexican Ambassador to the United Nations.

The candle-lit supper was a nightmare. The table was set in the vaulted chamber where Catalina Homar had died of syphilis – this last detail wasn't mentioned on the bas-relief on the wall, dedicated to her memory. The dialogue between Tony and his mother was straight out of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in the distance, the drowned fisherman's dog could still be heard howling. Mrs Baekeland was

flirting with the Mexican ambassador, so to spite her, Tony turned on me.

“Tomás, what would *you* do if you ruled the world?” he breathed in my ear as I edged closer to Wendy.

“Tony, stop that!” snapped his mother.

“I will, Mother, when you do.” He disappeared and returned a few minutes later, dragging the young Majorcan chauffeur by the arm and sitting him at the table.

“He looked so lonely, mother...” said Tony, putting his arms around the confused boy. “I invited him in for desert.”

His mother spluttered indignantly, the Ambassador flushed and Wendy and I beat a hasty retreat, forgetting even to ask to be paid for the hammock or reclaiming my Incredible String Band cassettes.

Three weeks later, as the September rains began, the Baekelands returned to their London flat. It later transpired that the Mexican was no ambassador at all but a fortune hunter who was doing the rounds of rich widows and heiresses on the island, and who left the Hotel Formentor without paying. Less than a month had gone by when we read the news in the airmail edition of the London Times: “*American Heir Stabs Mother to Death with Kitchen Knife in Cadogan Square.*” Tony was 26.

After some time in Broadmoor prison, from where he sent us a letter ending “I do miss my mother”, Tony was released in response to a plea from several well-placed family friends, and sent back to the US to live with Barbara’s mother in New York. He became so exasperated at her habit of repeating herself that he flung a telephone at her and stabbed her. She survived, and he was sent to Rikers prison. He committed suicide in 1981, but his story was taken up in the 1992 book *Savage Grace* by Natalie Robins and Steven Aronson, which was recently filmed by Tom Kalin with Julianne Moore as Barbara. I haven’t yet plucked up the courage to see it.

**TOMÁS GRAVES**, born in Palma, Mallorca in 1953, is a writer, translator, musician and painter. The son of the poet Robert Graves, he grew up in the village of Deià. He has written two novels in Spanish which he then translated into English, *A Home in Majorca* (1998) and *Bread and Oil: Majorcan Culture’s Last Stand* (2003). His latest book, *Turning up at Dawn: A Memoir of Music and Majorca*, was published by Fourth Estate in 2004.