

SAVAGE GRACE

Natalie Robins
&
Steven M. L. Aronson

William Morrow and Company, Inc.
New York

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**SAVAGE
GRACE**

For Christopher, Rachel, Noah—
“My strength and song.”

N.R.

For Katharine Johnson & Jesse Kornbluth,
Deborah Young & Charles Maclean—
in fond friendship.

S.M.L.A.

They were *the* perfect happy-American family: the one one hears about, and sees so often in the ad photos in the *New Yorker* and in all the commercial magazines, but which one so rarely meets in life. Certainly there was absolutely nothing to indicate there might be deeper darker strains to their lives they might be hiding.

James Jones, *The Merry Month of May*, 1971

I sometimes think that there is a malign force loose in the universe that is the social equivalent of cancer, and it's plastic. It infiltrates everything. It's metastasis. It gets into every single pore. . . .

Norman Mailer, *Harvard Magazine*, 1983

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PART I

LONDON

1

THE CRIME OF CRIMES

Friday, November 17, 1972, dawned hazy and cloudy, but by four o'clock the sun was shining with unaccustomed benevolence for London. The leaves in Cadogan Square had turned and were dropping in the gardens. All her life—and she was only fifty when she died, a little later that afternoon—Barbara Baekeland was partial to fall colors. Even in summer, when everyone would be wearing white, she persisted in dressing like an autumn leaf. The rust-colored skirts and bronze shoes she favored suited her beauty—the bonfire of red hair, the milkmaid skin. A friend had once said of her that she had the quality of intelligent flamboyance.

Whether in Boston, where she was born to a family of modest means called Daly; or Hollywood, where once upon a time she was given a screen test; or New York and Paris, where she created salons for herself; or such resorts as Long Island's East Hampton, Ansedonia on Italy's Argentario, and Cadaqués on Spain's Costa Brava, where she was forever taking houses in season and out; or, finally, in London, where she had acquired a penthouse duplex in Chelsea, Barbara Baekeland could be counted on to turn heads.

"London ends by giving one absolutely everything one asks," Henry James wrote in his preface to *The Golden Bowl*; the city was, in his opinion, "the most possible form of life."

"London with its six-times-breathed-over air seems such a dream," Barbara Baekeland wrote to a friend in New York that November Friday. "Had *Le Tout* London here last night. My *oeuvre* has had a great success—everybody loved what I've done to the flat."

The very first thing one saw on entering the apartment was the portrait of a beautiful boy. The subject was Barbara Baekeland's son, Antony, who had sat for the drawing one summer in Ansedonia, years before. Tony was twenty-six now, and something of a painter himself.

He also liked to write. In Paris, the novelist James Jones had taken an interest in his work, and now he was being encouraged by the poet Robert Graves. Graves was a neighbor on the island of Mallorca, from which Tony had come back to London with his mother in September.

The Baekelands had always had the freedom to travel at will. Tony's great-grandfather, Leo Hendrik Baekeland, had invented the first totally successful plastic, Bakelite—"the material of a thousand uses." Tony's father, Brooks Baekeland, liked to say, "Thanks to my grandfather, I have what James Clavell has called 'fuck-you money.' Therefore I need not please or seek to please—astonish, astound, dazzle, or be approved of by—anyone."

Brooks Baekeland had movie-star good looks. He also possessed what many of his peers considered to be one of the finest minds of his generation. A brilliant amateur land analyst, in the early 1960s he had conceived, planned, and executed a parachute jump into the Vilcabamba mountain fastness of Peru in search of a lost Inca city. He never found the city but his exploits filled most of an issue of *National Geographic*. Somebody had once described him as an intellectual Errol Flynn.

Tony's father was now living in France—with, everyone said, Tony's girlfriend.

At one o'clock on Friday, November 17—"Fridays are always suspect, don't you think?" she had once said—Barbara Baekeland called out goodbye to Tony, leaned down to stroke her Siamese cat, Worcester, affectionately called Mr. Wuss, and set out to keep a lunch date she had made at her party the night before with an old friend from Spain; Missy Harnden was also now living in London, in a rented house on nearby Chapel Street.

Barbara Baekeland arrived in a particularly extravagant mood and launched at once into a postmortem of her party. Missy Harnden's seventeen-year-old son Michael, whom everyone had always called Mishka, cooked the lunch—filet mignon wrapped in bacon, green beans, and a tossed salad—which he served with a Spanish red wine. They ate in the big kitchen-dining room, whose walls were covered with the organic black, blue, and green abstract paintings of Arshile Gorky, to whom the house's owner had once been married.

"Barbara's theme that day was Tony," Mishka Harnden recalls. "Her theme was persistently Tony—how marvelous he was, how talented. Everything was always absolutely rosy and happy—'Tony adores London, Tony's mad about the flat.'"

At three-thirty, Barbara Baekeland got up to leave, thanking the Harndens for the "marvelous lunch" and mentioning that Tony was cooking dinner for her that evening.

At approximately seven o'clock the telephone rang in the house on Chapel Street. Missy Harnden answered. It was the Chelsea Police Station inquiring as to the time of Barbara Baekeland's arrival and departure that afternoon. They would not say why they wanted this information; all they would say was that something had happened. But a few seconds later Missy Harnden heard herself being asked: "How well did you know the deceased?" She was too shocked to answer, and handed the phone to Mishka, who had just come into the room.

At the end of the conversation the police requested that they both come down to the station to answer a few additional questions. Missy Harnden could not bring herself to go, so Mishka went alone. "It was very clean, very sterile," he remembers. "A quite natty English police station."

Once there, he would find out what had happened.

DETECTIVE SUPERINTENDENT KENNETH BRETT, RETIRED*

I was called to the address of Antony Baekeland and his mother, but cannot remember how the call was made—by the ambulance service or other agency. On arrival I was told that a maid, believed to be Spanish, had run from the house because of a quarrel between Antony Baekeland and his mother. The flat was not disordered. I saw in the kitchen the body of Mrs. Baekeland. She was dressed in normal cloth-

* Brief biographical notes can be found on pages 456–466.

ing—I seem to remember it was a dress. She was on her back. Very little blood was seen. There was a knife on an adjoining worktop or draining board. This was a kitchen knife and showed signs of blood.

There was a small wound visible in the victim's clothing in the region of the heart. I recollect that death was caused by a severed main artery. A doctor certified she was dead, and arrangements were made for the body to be removed to a mortuary after examination by a forensic officer. The only other sign of violence—which was discovered at the postmortem—was a bruise above the right ear, but this did not have any real significance as it could have been caused by the victim's fall to the ground.

Antony Baekeland was, on my arrival, in a bedroom, sitting on the bed, using the telephone to phone, I believe, a Chinese restaurant to order a meal. I cannot remember the exact conversation I had with him, but Antony Baekeland was intimating that he was not responsible for the crime. I have a vague recollection that he may have mentioned that his grandmother was responsible. He was completely unconcerned.

You know, he considered himself an artist, and we did find a rather large painting, said to have been done by him. It was the weirdest thing imaginable—we just couldn't make out what it was.

I seem to remember that his father was not called immediately as we had to discover his whereabouts. Mr. Baekeland came either the next day or even later—from France.

Antony Baekeland was taken to the Chelsea Police Station. He was interviewed, and much of what he said was incoherent, rambling. I cannot remember what his statement contained, except the opening sentence was so unusual that it has stuck in my mind. He said it all started when he was aged either three or five and he fell off his pogo stick.

PAMELA TURNER

I was the service tenant at 81 Cadogan Square, but I was not on the premises when he stabbed her. When I got home I saw the ambulance outside and I wondered what was going on. Then the ambulance men came down from the top floor and asked me if I knew Tony and I said I did. I used to pass the time of day with him or have a chat, although his mother was always very protective of him. And they said would I talk to him on the telephone while they got the police. And I rang him from my phone and had a long conversation with him and he told me

how he had been out for lunch with his grandmother. Well, I knew *she* was in New York. He was quite calm, quite lucid, and chatted to me—he was always polite and nice, I never thought of him as a violent person—and in the meantime the ambulance men on their phone in the ambulance got the police. Tony had called for the ambulance himself. And then the police came and that was that.

Tony told me his grandmother had stabbed Barbara. I loved Barbara's mother, Mrs. Daly. I remember her as a dear little old lady quite happily going up all those six flights of stairs! She used to come here and take over, like the head of the family.

Whenever Barbara rang me from the States, she'd say, "Hello, this is Barbara of MGM." She told me that she worked in public relations for MGM, but I don't know whether she really did or not. She would ring occasionally, mainly to tell me she was coming to England and would I get milk, etc., in for her. I also looked after all her plants, merely because I am extremely fond of house plants, and in fact I still have a weeping fig of hers.

She was a very beautiful, flamboyant woman. I particularly remember a black gown she wore, a very low-necked black gown. She wore it with a huge diamond crucifix dangling from a chain. She was magnificent, and she went out a lot. I suppose the most terrible memory I have is of the plain wooden box being brought down the stairs by the policemen, and opening the main doors for them to pass through. I understand that the next day was her wedding anniversary.

The night of the stabbing, I got concerned about the cat—you know, Mr. Wuss. There was a policeman guarding the flat and I asked him if he had seen a cat. He told me, "There's no cat." But I knew Mr. Wuss had to be somewhere, so I went in and looked under the bed, and there he was! After the stabbing, Mr. Baekeland came to see about the belongings. I found him very businesslike and hard. He put all the contents of the flat into auction with Sotheby's. And I asked him, I said, "Well, what should we do about the cat?" And he said, "Oh, destroy it." Well, I gulped, and I asked if I could take the cat if I could find a home for it. And Mr. Wuss is still alive. When last I heard, he was leading a good life. Of course, Barbara was very wrong to bring him into the country as she did, ignoring quarantine rules.

ELIZABETH WEICKER FONDARAS

Poor Barbara. The last time I saw her was at an art opening in New York and she had a look of old furs and feathers—like a Jean Rhys character.

Letter from Barbara Baekeland to Sam Green, May 4, 1970

Read Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight*, which profoundly depressed me. She is so much of my skin that I am alarmed—like suddenly seeing oneself in a harsh unlovely light—all those many flaws and her despair honed by that extraordinary sensibility—I hope I am saved—

DR. W. LINDSAY JACOBS

I saw Antony Baekeland for the first time on October 30, 1972—eighteen days before the crime—and afterwards I told his mother, "Your son is going to kill you." She replied, "He's been murdering me since he was born—whether for him or his father, I don't know. I'm used to murder." "This isn't a metaphor," I told her. "This isn't an analyst's game. I think you're at grave risk." And she said, "I don't."

DAVID MEAD

When I heard Tony had killed his mother, I felt like I'd been *at* the murder. The year before, out in East Hampton, Barbara all of a sudden raised her voice at me—you know, just over nothing—and Tony came flying in. He was absolutely furious, I couldn't believe how mad he was. And then instantly it was between the two of *them*, and I no longer mattered. And they started getting madder and madder at each other, and it got uglier and uglier, and finally the knife point came. He got a knife. I managed to wrestle it out of his hand, but you know what I'm saying—this was the dress rehearsal.

From a Psychiatric Report on Antony Baekeland Ordered by the British Courts, January 5, 1973

He is a well-built, physically healthy young man with an occasional marked stammer. He appeared normally anxious and depressed for a man in his situation but denied feeling depressed or ever having contemplated suicide. He gave his account with some natural confusion about times and places. On the day of the offence he had a conversation on the telephone in which he heard some reference to his having fallen down a lift shaft; and