



# Compass Rose

## Literature and Art Journal

### The Problem with Dead People

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**B**arbara knew better than to call. She knew that if she dialed any of her friends first, she'd be talked out of it. So she played with the phone cord and sipped from her lipstick-stained mug and looked at the pictures on her bulletin board – of her niece, her sister, and Peter in Africa, the only white face, his golden curls escaping his Red Sox cap, his cargo shorts bulging with film, smiling into the camera and mouthing, I miss you and yes, she missed him too, but she didn't dream of him. She dreamed of Ted; they were on a ferry, trying to light a Marlboro, she was leaning into his chest, he was sheltering her from the wind, but each time the match flickered out. Now Ted's number danced before her eyes. 5 25 24 27. Like the time in Reno with her husband Alex, when she had put down a dollar and won 750. Just like that. The numbers had floated by, a tickertape message from beyond. Alex had wanted to play again, win more, but Barbara had gathered her winnings and dragged him out of the casino, half expecting someone to stop them on the way out. Later, she sprung for a bottle of champagne and a gram of coke, and still had enough left over to pay their rent. A long time ago now, obviously.

Her fingers tripped across the keys, 5 25 24 27, a good number as numbers go, easy to remember, so many ways to wrap your mind around it. Five rings. Ted's raspy voice. "I dreamed about you last night," she said into his answering machine. "We were smoking again." Ted had gone

to the Russian healer to quit; she had stopped years before, after watching Alex die. One life I could save, she had thought.

Unfortunately Ted was home, screening. “Barbara? Barbara, is that you?”

“Yeah,” she said.

“I thought you hated me.”

“I did,” she said.

“But you don’t anymore?”

“No,” she said, “I’m over it.” And she was, sort of, now that she had Peter. Who had never smoked a cigarette in his life, oh maybe a bidi in India, or a Rothman’s in an English pub or a hash-laced spliff in Turkey, *Midnight Run* be damned, the Bosphorus glowing in the moonlight. But no, he had never woken in the morning and sifted through the ashtrays for a good long juicy snipe.

“Whew,” Ted said. “I was prepared to beg your forgiveness.”

“Really?” she asked. “When?”

“Whenever,” he said. A Pause. “Tonight?”

Barbara felt a tightness in her chest, not quite pain, more the memory of it. She could stop this now. “Tomorrow?”

“I could wait outside your work,” he said.

“How about that bar in your neighborhood. Is it still there?”

“Of course it’s still there. Where would all the drunks go if it closed?”

They would die, thought Barbara, like the drunks from her father’s bar, who had tried to adjust to the new owners, the upscale menu, the imported beers, but one by one they had risen from their bar stools and died.

Ted had put on weight, lost more hair. And he no longer wore an earring or glasses. “They weren’t helping that much and who can keep track of them anyway?” he said. “It’ll be better when I get that cataract surgery. Can you imagine, 50 and I have cataracts! What’s next? Diapers?”

They were sitting in the back booth, near the men’s room; they caught a whiff of the urinal deodorizer cake each time one of the drunks lurched in to pee. Barbara had made the mistake of ordering wine. “I can’t believe you like this place,” Ted said, sipping his diet coke.

“Reminds me of home.” (An exaggeration – she had not really grown up in the bar, though her father thought nothing of pulling them out of school to kill cockroaches before a Board of Health inspection.)

“No wonder I liked you,” Ted said. “You like bars as much as I do.” *Liked*, a funny word to use, for someone who had once declared his undying love. “You look good,” he said. “Very good.”

Barbara smiled. “Thanks. So do you.”

“I do not,” he said. “I’m getting fat and what’s left of my hair is going gray. And did I tell you? I have another tooth going condo? 3500 bucks. I hate middle age.”

“Tell me about it,” Barbara said. “The hair color, the gum surgery, the gym. It takes so much work not to fall apart!”

“You’re still beautiful,” Ted said and touched her hand. She felt a tingle travel up her arm to her neck, to the top of her head. She squeezed his hand back. “We were pretty good together, no?”

Barbara nodded. She was uncomfortable talking about it.

“God, it’s so rare when you just click. I haven’t clicked with anyone like that since.”

“Me neither,” Barbara said.

“How about whatshisfuck? The documentary guy?”

“I don’t want to talk about him.”

“Not great, huh?”

Barbara looked away. Ted smiled and leaned across the table to push a strand of hair out her eyes. “What are we doing here then? Looking a gift horse in the mouth?” he said. “Let’s go back to my place.”

“I thought you were going to beg my forgiveness,” she said.

“I will,” he said. “I will.”

They cancelled their onion rings and paid their tab, and walked the two blocks to his apartment, where they took off their clothes and stood by his bed. “Now,” he said, taking over, the way she liked it. “You just lie down there and I am going to beg.”

Later, she showered and dressed and went home to catch Peter’s good night call from Haiti. “What have you been doing?” he asked. “Have you had a productive day?”

“Yeah,” she said, her pelvis still thrumming. “I had a good day.”

“Me too. This place is so intense! You wouldn’t believe the shots we got today.”

“Are you still coming home this weekend?” Barbara held her breath.

“Of course. I’m looking forward to it. When’s the wedding anyway?”

“Saturday.”

“Good, we’ll have all day Sunday. Hey, did you remember to cancel Franco?”

“Shit!”

Peter sighed. “You could go alone,” he said. “He’s going to charge us anyway.”

Barbara looked at their bed, a cherry sleigh bed they had purchased from a craftsman in Vermont, and thought about laying down on it, but changed her mind and walked into the living room. “That’s ok,” she said. “I’ll pay.”

“That’s not the point,” Peter said.

“What is the point?”

“Let’s not fight long distance.”

“Peter, it’s only money,” she said.

“Yeah, it’s only money because you have money. Tell that to these people down here.”

“Alright,” Barbara said. “I’ll think about it.”

After they hung up, Barbara walked into the bathroom and stood before the mirror and massaged her face. Upward strokes, lifting her cheeks and jowls, at one point holding them there, so that she managed to look like a slightly startled version of her younger self. “How much longer do I have?” she wondered, applying pea-sized dots of Retin A to her cheeks and forehead.

She had met Peter at a party at her boss’s house in Wellfleet. A friend from Yale. He came highly recommended, a good guy for a change -- he got up in the morning, went to bed at night, took his vitamins, called his mother, went home for the holidays, gave to the alumni capital appreciation fund. Much to Barbara’s dismay. “It’s fucking Yale,” she told him. “Why give your hard earned cash to Yale? Give it to AIDS research or a homeless shelter.”

“But I do,” he said. “I give to all of them.”

Barbara would never give money to State; some bureaucrat would funnel it into a parking garage, or a booze cruise. She had met Alex at State, in a figure drawing class; he was the best draftsman and everyone resented him for it, though it supposedly didn’t matter anymore how well you drew. “You want reality, take a picture!” their teacher said, but all the same he would stand by Alex’s easel and smile.

“So,” Franco said, as he ushered Barbara into his disheveled office. He was a lean, athletic man in his late 50’s, dressed in corduroys, a flannel shirt, and Birkenstocks with socks, a look he managed to

make more yogic than nerdy. “We finally get to meet alone!” He rubbed his hands together and smiled and motioned for Barbara to sit.

Barbara sat down in her usual seat, then reconsidered it and moved to the one Peter usually took, the better one, by the window. Franco sat down in his chair and rolled his head from side to side. His neck cracked on cue. “How are you?”

“Fine,” Barbara said and crossed her legs and inspected her fingernails and looked at the wall, at his diploma, though she could no longer make out the words. Her eyes were changing; soon she’d need bifocals just to drive. “Well I’m lying,” she said. “I’m not fine. I slept with an old lover last night and I am probably going to sleep with him tonight.”

Franco sat up straight. “Really.”

“I had this intense dream about him and I couldn’t help myself. I had to call.”

“And what about Peter?”

“I know, I know. I shouldn’t have. But I was so in love with this guy. For a while, I actually thought he was the one. And we really get on together. Sexually.”

“How’s that?”

“It’s all very natural. He tells me what to do. I do it.”

Franco leaned towards her. “You like to get knocked around?”

“No, I didn’t say that. I just like to be passive.”

“Does Peter know that?”

“No.”

“Then why don’t you tell him?”

“God no! If you have to tell someone, it’s hopeless.”

“Were you passive with your husband? Alex?”

“No,” Barbara said. “We were just kids when we got married. It was more like the blind leading the blind. And then we moved to San Francisco, and he got sick.”

“That must have been hard.”

“You can’t imagine.” *The masks, the gloves, the fevers, the Pentamidine drip.*

“But you never got sick?”

“No, coke’s not very good for sex. Lucky for me.”

“Not lucky at all.” Franco leaned back in his chair and folded his hands behind his head and looked at her without blinking. Shrink trick to get you to talk.

“What I like about Ted,” Barbara said, “and what I liked about Alex, is that there are consequences for what they do. Life doesn’t always work out for them. But for people like Peter and his friends, it’s all just material that they’ll use in a film or a book and go on to win some fucking prize, given out by all these people they went to school with. Like Haiti. He thinks he’s so compassionate, but he hasn’t gotten a fucking clue what those people are going through.”

“And how about you?”

“Do I get what people in Haiti are going through? Yeah, I think so.”

“No, are there consequences for what you do?”

“Me? Definitely.”

When the session was over, Franco asked if Peter would be back the next week.

“No,” Barbara said, rummaging in her bag for her checkbook. “He’s just coming for the weekend, for my niece’s wedding. Alex’s niece actually. We were her godparents.” She tried to fill out the check without her glasses on, then gave up and rooted around in her bag again.

“Is that going to be hard for you?”

“It’s always hard,” Barbara said. “But it’s been a long time.” She put on her glasses and wrote out the check. As she handed it to him, she glanced up at the wall and the words on his diploma came into focus. *Yale*. Of course. Probably how Peter found him, some secret handshake, some alumni circle jerk.

Franco put the check in his pocket and stood up. “Good luck then, this weekend.”

“Thanks.” Barbara got up to leave, then paused in the doorway and turned around. “Aren’t you going to tell me what I’m doing is wrong?”

“If that’s what you want, sure. It’s wrong. You’re hurting Peter. And you’re probably hurting yourself. And who knows, you might even be hurting this guy Ted. There, how does that feel?”

“Better,” Barbara said and shut the door behind her.

That night she went directly to Ted’s apartment. He was standing in the hallway waiting for her as she got out of the elevator. “Hungry?” he asked, as he unlocked his door.

“A little.” She glanced into the kitchenette. No signs of food there.

“Me too,” he said. “Let’s hurry up and make love. Then we’ll go out. Would you like me to take off your clothes?” he asked.

“Sure,” she said and flung her purse onto the bed.

He knelt down and took off her shoes and socks. Then he undid her belt and eased her jeans and underwear over her hips. He put his hand on her belly. She was still fully dressed on top.

“Could you be a little more subtle?” she asked.

“You women! So demanding. That’s why men can’t get it up anymore, you know.”

“I thought it was just middle age.”

“No, it’s middle-aged women. We’re fine with young girls.”

“You are such a jerk.” She laughed.

“You are such an easy target,” he said and leaned in to kiss her thighs. She looked down and saw that his bald spot had grown to reveal freckles and an angry looking red-brown mole.

“Do you put sun block on your head?” She brushed her fingers over the mole.

“No,” he said and stood up and started unbuttoning her sweater.

“Why not?” she asked.

“Low self esteem?” he said.

She laughed.

“I knew you’d like that one.” His hand paused in the hollow between her breasts. “My favorite spot,” he said.

“Really, no joking, you should get that mole checked out.” She pulled away from him and took off her sweater, camisole and bra and lay down on his bed.

“I will,” he said, “I will,” and got into bed next to her, his hard cold belt buckle grazing her slender hip.

Barbara came from the type of family who picked people up at the airport. No matter how late or how early they got in. She had once lost a friendship by assuming that everyone did the same. Peter’s flight arrived at 5:15 pm, the worst possible time in Boston, but she drove the Subaru to work and left early and inched her way to Logan Airport, watching 5:15 come and go on the digital read out. She saw him as she drove up to the pick up area, seated on a khaki duffel bag, amid a sea of belted battered Haitian luggage. Head down, eyes focused, fingers racing across the keyboard of his ultra slim laptop. She tooted the horn and began to smile and wave, but he did not look up. So she stopped the car and got out and called his name loudly. “Peter! Peter!” His ability to become so

engrossed in his work irritated her, like he was so important and the rest of the world didn't matter. He looked up and smiled when he saw her.

"Hey, Barb." He stood up and gave her a peck on the cheek. He was not one for public displays of affection. He put his laptop back in its case and handed it to her. Then he heaved the duffel bag over his shoulder. "God, it's good to be home," he said.

She glanced at him while they were driving through the tunnel. His face was tanned, his eyes clear; his hair curled down the back of his neck. "You look rested," she said.

"I do? I have been working really hard." Another thing that bothered her. Always bragging about how hard he worked. They must teach that at Yale.

"Admit it, you've been lying in the sun, drinking Mojitos," she teased.

"That's Cuba, not Haiti," he said. "And God knows if they really drink them in Cuba. Maybe just in the South End." He really did look good, could he be having an affair? Who was down there with him? The new PA, Brooke?

"You look good too," he said. "Did you lose weight or something?"

"Yeah," she said. "I've been eating yogurt for dinner." The night before she and Ted had called in for Chinese food, her favorites, sesame noodles and Peking ravioli and family style tofu and his, hot and sour soup, ginger beef and pork fried rice. She had put her clothes on to run out for beer and diet coke. When she came back she took off her clothes again and they ate and watched TV in bed and fell asleep, the fragrant leftovers on the bedside table. Which hadn't been that nice a thing to wake up to, and she hadn't even brushed her teeth and neither had Ted, but it didn't matter to him, he rolled over and kissed her on the mouth the minute she awoke, too late for Peter's nightly call.

As they came out of the tunnel onto Storrow Drive, Peter said, "Oh the boathouses. The Charles River. I'm not supposed to say it, but it's nice to be back in civilization."

“Why not say it? It’s the truth, right?”

“Yeah. It’s the truth. Haiti is just so ‘Heart of Darkness.’”

“The movie?”

“No, the book. Conrad! I lent it to you. I can’t believe you never read Conrad.”

“Right, right. I couldn’t get through it.”

“It’s wild and overgrown and nature feels so threatening there. Like it’s your enemy. At times, I had to look up at the sky just to calm myself down. The sky always looks the same. Have you ever noticed that? No matter where you go? And I couldn’t understand their French. It’s not like Parisian French at all.”

“Then don’t go back,” Barbara said, on impulse.

“I have to.”

“Why?”

“The grant.”

“Fuck the grant. I’m sure you wouldn’t be the first to blow off a grant.”

“You really want me to?” he asked and turned towards her.

“Yes, I do.” She looked him in the eye. She reached out to touch his shoulder and he yelled, “Watch it, Barb!” She swerved back into her lane.

“Sorry about that,” she said. “Sorry.”

He reached over and took her hand in his and then held it until they pulled into their driveway. “Well, at least the wedding won’t take up the whole weekend,” he said, looking up at the stately gray Victorian he had bought when his documentary about the African guinea worm had been such a surprising success.

Bethany's wedding was at St. Theresa's, the church where Barbara and Alex had gotten married, and where, after much haggling, they had had his funeral, the Monsignor casting sideways glances at the box of ashes Barbara had carried on the plane from San Francisco.

Alex's sister Marie was standing outside the church, stubbing out a cigarette with the toe of her black strappy sandals. Her toenails were painted fuchsia. "You didn't see me do that," she said as Barbara leaned down to kiss her cheek. "I quit." She smelled of smoke, tasted like sun block and salt.

"Marie," Barbara said. "I want you to meet my boyfriend, Peter." *Boyfriend*, a silly word to use, at their age. but what was the alternative? *Lover*? Surely not. *Partner*? Even worse.

Marie smiled up at Peter. "Nice to meet you, Peter. Barbara tells me you make movies?"

"Yeah," he said. "Documentaries."

"Really? What are they about?"

"Well, I did one on neo-Nazi's, one on the African guinea worm. Right now I'm filming in Haiti, about the aftermath of the flood."

Marie's eyes scanned the crowd. "Really?" she said. "Bethany's fiancé Matt is a great movie buff. Won't watch the little TV at my house at all anymore. They have one of those flat screens in their great room. It takes up the whole wall. Wait until you see their house, Barbara. My God, it's so beautiful. It's got a three-car garage and a pool in the back. Oh look, here come the limo!" She excused herself and rushed to it.

They found a seat in the middle of the church, on the bride's side. Barbara looked up at the vaulted ceilings, the stained glass windows. She had always loved stained glass. "Catholic churches are so ornate," Peter whispered. "Where do they get all the money?"

“The collections,” Barbara said. “Did you bring any cash, by the way? I completely forgot.” She had changed purses at the last minute, transferring wallet, lipstick and sunglasses into a small black bag that sort of matched her shoes.

“Do they take Visa?”

“Who knows?” Barbara said. “But they do take checks. Did I ever tell you about my Uncle Ronnie? He stole his boss’s checkbook and then used it to write these huge checks that he put in the collection box!”

“Your family’s insane,” Peter said. “I don’t know where you came from.” He looked tired, from the plane ride she supposed, or their mutually restless night, or perhaps this abrupt plunge into suburbia. “How long is this going to take?”

“Forever,” Barbara said. “They always squeeze a Mass in.”

The wedding march started to play. Barbara and Peter stood and craned their necks to see the procession. A phalanx of groomsmen and bridesmaids approached in lock step. The bridesmaids wore pink lamé. “Jesus!” Peter said, shielding his eyes.

“I didn’t know lamé came in pink.” Barbara felt guilty; Bethany was such a nice kid.

“I can’t believe they made you and Alex her godparents. Didn’t they know he was a junkie?”

“He wasn’t a junkie! He was into coke.”

Peter shrugged.

Now Bethany herself was approaching. Her normally straight blonde hair was curled and piled on top of her head, her tall lean body swathed in satin and lace. She was a head taller than her father, a retired detective, who strutted beside her, smiling and winking at his buddies in the pews. His face was tanned, his body sculpted -- all those free hours at the gym and the golf course. My God, thought Barbara. He’s my age! Bethany blew her a kiss as she went by.

St. Theresa's had a new priest, Father Duval, a square looking man with wiry black hair and the misshapen face of a boxer. He performed the wedding while the Monsignor sat off to the side of the altar with two altar boys. He spoke in plain language, but there was something solid and wise about him that Barbara was drawn to. She could almost imagine returning to this church, if only to hear him speak more. He made the familiar Bible passages seem new, penned for the occasion. His Jesus seemed human -- he loved his friends, rejoiced at their weddings, wept at their deaths, suffered as all humans do. How nice it would be to come back here, she thought, to return to where it all began. She leaned over to Peter and whispered, "I think I'll go to communion." He raised his eyebrows as he got up to let her out of the pew. She teetered in her unaccustomed heels to the altar, knelt down and bowed her head and folded her hands. She felt more at peace than she had in ages. Perhaps this was a sign, she thought. I should give up Ted and marry Peter and get on with the serious business of growing old.

Father Duval was giving out communion on the left. The Monsignor was covering the right. Barbara had veered to the Monsignor's side. A mistake. She watched as he got closer, noticed that he no longer placed the wafer on your tongue, but placed it in your outstretched hands instead. How long had this been going on? The nuns had lectured them about not chewing the host. She remembered struggling to pry it from the roof of her mouth, guiltily jabbing at it with her tongue. Now you could hold it in your hands?

The altar boy took a step sideways, held the gold plate in front of her, and the Monsignor handed her the wafer and said, "Body of Christ." Barbara panicked. What was it she was supposed to say back? *Peace be with you? Go in peace. And with your spirit?* She looked up and smiled and said, "Thank you?"

The monsignor glared. "Amen!" he said.

“Amen,” she said and bowed her head. Fuck you, she said, under her breath. For a minute there, you almost had me.

They had to park two blocks away from the reception and walk through the newly constructed Wentworth Estates, six Tara-sized mansions plunked down like Monopoly pieces on the old pastures of the Wentworth dairy farm, where there used to be an ice cream stand. Barbara remembered going there with Alex on hot summer nights, bug zappers crackling, while mosquitoes feasted on their exposed skin and rivulets of cream and sugar ran down their forearms.

No sign of the farm now, amid the circular drives and sunken garages, the spindly cherries and Japanese Maples, the mounds of dirt and mulch, the occasional Johnny-on-the-Spot. Bethany’s house was one of the few that were finished and inhabited. Curtains covered the floor-to-ceiling windows; the banisters were wrapped in white ribbons and greenery. The walkway was long and wide and made of blue stone “This cost a bundle,” Peter said as they approached the front door.

“They’re both in finance,” Barbara whispered.

Marie was waiting at the door. “Didn’t I tell you it was fabulous?” She ushered them in the door. “Drinks are in the family room. Food’s out back. Did you remember to bring a suit?”

Barbara nodded. She had stashed one in the trunk. “I left my bathing suit in Haiti,” Peter said.

“Well, I’m sure you could borrow one from Matt,” Marie said.

They made their way to the bar and ordered wine for Barbara, beer for Peter. “Do you know everybody here?” Peter asked.

“Not really.” Barbara surveyed the room. “That’s Sarah, the baby.” She had changed out of her pink lamé gown and into a backless sundress. She was knocking back a beer and laughing with a

group of friends. “And I think that might be Aunt Madelyn, the opera singer. Remember I told you about her? She sang at our wedding. God, she used to be so fat!”

“A real opera singer?”

“She sounded real to me.”

They wandered out onto a patio that wrapped around the back of the house, with steps leading down to the pool, which was long enough to swim laps in. A caterer had set up an industrial-sized meat smoker by the fence; the smell of barbecue mingled with the chlorine. The terrace around the pool was dotted with tables and umbrellas. In one corner was a grotto containing a hot tub, in the other a pool house with buoys and lifesavers tacked to the sides. “I’ll stake out a good table,” Peter said, taking her glass of chardonnay and her purse. “And some lounge chairs.”

“We can pretend we’re at Club Med,” Barbara said and walked to the pool house to change into her bathing suit. A swim always cleared her mind. Nothing she liked better than to plunge into the cold water, leave gravity behind. She emerged from the pool house and tugged at the bottoms of her bathing suit. Peter was stretched out on a lounge chair, dozing, his mouth slightly open, his baseball cap pulled low on his forehead. She walked down the steps to the pool and dove in, and swam underwater for as long as she could hold her breath. Then she swam the breast stroke to the end of the pool, flipped and started doing the crawl. Back and forth. Back and forth. It was good of Peter to come here with her. Most men wouldn’t. She couldn’t picture Ted making small talk, keeping a straight face during the sermon, donning shirt and tie and showing the fuck up. His face came to her. His wide grin. His long body. The night before last he had emerged from the bathroom in a tiny black thong. What in the world? she thought. “This is for you,” he said as he climbed into bed. Barbara buried her face in the crook of his arm to keep from laughing at the sight of his belly, the narrow slip of material running up his skinny flat ass.

She pulled herself out of the pool and lay down on the lounge chair next to Peter's, to dry off in the sun. Peter woke up and looked at her. "What's that?" he asked and ran his hand over her inner thigh, where a half moon of tiny bruises was beginning to form.

"I don't know." She sat up, his hand still on her thigh.

"Looks like bruises," Peter said.

"I bruise so easily," Barbara said.

"Me too," Peter said.

"I must have run into something," Barbara said.

"Or someone." Peter blinked, his curly eyelashes fluttering on his cheeks. He pressed his fingers into her thigh.

"Or someone," Barbara said.

Peter pulled his hand away from her thigh and rolled over in his lounge chair, his back straight and stiff. Barbara put on her sunglasses and lay back down on her lounge chair. She squeezed her eyes shut and watched the sunlight play on the inside of her eyelids. She could hear Peter breathing beside her, slow measured breaths, the exhale a little more forceful than the inhale. She could feel the last drops of pool water evaporating from her skin. Soon she would start to burn. She should sit up and cover herself or put on some sunblock, but she was afraid to move. Suddenly cold water splashed onto her legs and her stomach. She sat straight up. Peter sat up too; his dress pants were soaked at the bottom. Some kids were doing cannonballs into the pool. She smiled and he started to smile back but caught himself and lay down and turned his back to her again.

She watched the kids run and jump into the pool, shrieking with joy each time they landed. Whose kids were they, anyway? Barbara's generation was way past the little children phase. None of Alex's nieces and nephews were old enough. Must be friends of Bethany's and Matt's. They'd have their own soon, she thought; women didn't wait as long now, and they didn't necessarily stop at two,

like her generation, some unspoken edict from above, or perhaps some instinctive baby boomer impulse, enough is enough! Their kids would take this house and pool for granted and go to private schools (the schools in these newly colonized suburbs were never good enough), where they'd read Conrad and Doctor Johnson and ski in the winters and travel in the summers and learn to be embarrassed by their parents, these barbarians who had wide screen televisions in every room, but not a single book. If only Alex had lived to see this: Bethany in a mansion. Would he sneak off to one of the six full baths and smoke a joint or snort a line and wander through the reception laughing, sunglasses on to conceal his red-rimmed eyes, or sink into one of the buttery leather sectionals and melt before the high definition TV? No, he'd be 50 now, like her, not some hungry young kid out looking for a buzz. That's the problem with dead people. They never grow old.