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**LAST LAUGH**

**MARTHA STEWART IS DEAD**

*The empress of elegance has abdicated the mantle of the elite and set up shop at Kmart*

by Gary Horn

Come, my brothers and sisters. Let us gather together in a prearranged, hand-stenciled name-tagged circle and mourn the passing of an icon. Let us dim the lights we rewired ourselves and light a home-dipped beeswax candle. Let us fill our crystal goblets with a fine Chardonnay, squeezed from the vineyards so carefully tended in our spare time between appearances on *Good Morning America*. Let us bow our heads for a precise moment of silence in deference to the passing of that paragon of fine living, Martha Stewart.

Of course her body lives and breathes still, but her spirit—her essence of all that is gracious in the home, her irreplaceable talent for perfectness—is dead. Martha Stewart's gracious living has been forever tarnished. By Kmart.

Please, I know it's difficult to believe. We've all salivated surreptitiously over each fashionably printed page of her books and magazines, wanting, needing to display just a fraction of her decorating genius in our own homes. Oh, I know it's difficult for any self-respecting homosexual

back yard. She presided over a new line of "everyday accessories" in the home living department of... (choke)... Kmart.

Oh, granted, Kmart has toiled endlessly to upgrade its image, to join the ranks of retailing respectability. But some things were just never meant to be. Would you sell Dom Perignon from a Pepsi machine? Would you peddle Rolls Royces from a Chrysler-Hyundai dealership? Even Jesus himself said, "Would you cast pearls before swine?" No. There was, and always should be, a distinction between "everyday living" and "gracious living." Martha has abandoned us for the masses.

One cannot blame Kmart for wanting to join the socially acceptable. Dare I speak ill of the dearly departed, I must cast blame on Martha herself. I began to worry months, even years ago, as she expanded her fine living empire, cornering every media segment with furor and carefully crafted homemade steps. Even her business savvy had flair. She conquered television after successfully burying her neighbors in "I'll-tape-where-I-please" mulch. She increased circulation of her magazine, sold books, became a regular colum-



to admit he or she doesn't know everything about fine living, but Martha did, and to her we bowed ceremoniously with each wondrous appearance and helpful tip.

Who among us hasn't dreamed, even attempted, to throw the perfect dinner party, so easily executed in step-by-step fashion from Martha's kitchen? Who hasn't roamed the countryside looking for yard sales to purchase the antiques of a bygone era and restore them to better-than-original glory for display in our sitting room? Who hasn't felt the compulsion to plant gourds in our garden, just so we could make smart and kitschy porch lamps for summer outdoor entertaining? We've all sighed with admiration for Martha's unstoppable energy and style.

Then it all died. How, you ask (still in shock)? She sold out to Kmart. The sight was devastating. I dabbed away the tears with my hanky, fashioned from an heirloom quilt, and searched in vain for the organic aspirin I'd whipped up from Martha's own recipe. Anything to ease the pain of that discovery. For there, on the cover of a recent Sunday Kmart circular, stood Martha, beaming as if she had just discovered an easy way to carve the Italian marble she mined herself from her own

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nist in the newspaper section that only the devoted would read religiously. Where did she find the time to do everything, and so well, too? That was her magic. Her art. Her demeanor. But Martha went too far. Perhaps she didn't get enough sleep.

I should have seen it coming. I should have prepared myself more. Maybe it was denial. Maybe it was a stubborn disbelief that the nonpareil of style would ever make such a heart-wrenching business decision, resulting unexpectedly in her own marketing death. I'll never know.

Will our Martha's passing be the birth of a new decor queen for the have-nots? Will trailer parks all across the fringes of suburban America suddenly display some sense of good living awareness? Will the new "common" Martha indeed elevate Kmart to a minimally passable retailing level, akin to Target or Sears? Perhaps our loss is bulk America's gain. For even the slightest elevation of the masses surely benefits us all.

We will miss you, Martha. We will miss your energy. Your presence. Your ceaseless ability to make it all look so simple, yet so elegant. This moment is yours, Ms. Stewart. Will there be a television special on how to exit fine living graciously?