

Exile

Volume 25
Number 3 *Exile Anthology: A Special
Sesquicentennial Issue*

Article 7

1979

The Guest

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Recommended Citation

Trudell, Dennis (1979) "The Guest," *Exile*: Vol. 25 : No. 3 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol25/iss3/7>

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The Guest

By Dennis Trudell

If one day you are walking along and suddenly decide to ring the bell of a lower left flat near the center of the city, and you do, and a woman in a paisley housedress answers, asks what you want and you can't think of anything to say, just stand there until finally she smiles, says you must be Margie's friend and Margie ain't home yet from whatchacallit, beauty school, come inside and wait, and you walk into a coffiny parlor, nod at a chairbound old crone who smells like wet carpets, sit paging Life for May 7, 1963 and listening to the paisley women wondering from the kitchen whether you've ate yet and enjoy sauerkraut--and as you say no you haven't and yes you do, although you hate it, the door opens and a girl in white with improbably-colored hair, gum, and a rather nice figure comes in, says hi and you say hi and start to introduce yourself when you hear the housedress coming, ask instead to use the bathroom, and follow the shrug and forefinger into the dining room (nodding at the paisley on the way), then duck into the kitchen, out the back door, and into the crowded kitchen across the hall--whose door happens to be open and where some sort of family reunion or something is going on and a female NCO-type is urging everyone to come in and be seated, and so you follow into the adjoining room, are seated, and start helping yourself from various bowls handed

round, meanwhile making small talk with those on each side--a fat man with a cold and a woman who suspects her son has not married wisely--and joining in the general laughter at the jokes of a horny-looking man spilling food at the far end--which proves a mistake because as your head is back in mirth, a hard roll smotes you on the shoulder and you can't decide whether it was thrown by the small boy behind the peas or the thirtyish woman with slattern eyes who keeps looking over at you, and who either by design or accident slips into the chair on your right when dessert is over and everybody is herded into an ashtrayed parlor to watch slides of the host's recent trip to Columbus, Ohio: which slides go on and on until you begin losing interest and stick your hand up into the beam of light and start making shadow animal heads while everyone either laughs or whispers "Sssh" and the host says "Okay, let's knock it off", but you don't and he says it a couple of more times and you hear even the horny-looking fellow and the small boy and the woman with slattern eyes join in with "Hey, enough is enough" and so on, but you keep doing it until the host moves cursing to a wall and turns on the overhead light just as you softly click the front door shut and hurry across the hallway to knock upon its twin.