DINNER GUEST

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Seminar: Strangers and Marginals

[Assignment: All of us have places where we don't feel at home, places where we feel like strangers or unwelcome visitors. The focus of this essay must be some place that is more or less familiar but still makes you feel unwelcome or out of place. Your paper should convey some understanding of why you feel out of place.]

(1) Keeping a smile on my face, I try to look pleasant and relaxed while walking up the drive. Approaching the home of my best friend's parents, I manage a quick scrutiny of my appearance in the glass next to the door. Though impossible, perfection would be ideal. Only halfway satisfied, I take a deep breath and slowly reach a nervous hand up to ring the bell. Three chimes sound, and then for what seems to be an eternity, nothing but silence.

(2) I try to convince myself that this time the house won't seem as threatening, yet there it stands, majestically tall and surrounded by prize rose bushes. It perfectly portrays an idea I often think of when regarding American ideals—one of America's wealth and prosperity. In all of its dignity, however, the doors and curtains are tightly drawn. It's as if they are guarding the house and all of its rights to privacy. I am the intruder.

(3) Inside, it always seems too easy to overlook the beautiful grandfather clock in the corner. It does not attract or receive the attention that it should, for unlike others of its style, it has acquired the unique ability to tick quietly, almost inaudibly. I invariably notice and sympathize with it. I keep my thoughts to myself, and unconsciously my breathing slows itself to match the ticking of the clock. Hopefully, neither of us will disturb the engulfing silence. It seems strange to me that people can live in an atmosphere without telephones ringing, stereos playing, and people talking and laughing. I am very uneasy, aware of every noise I make.

(4) I am also aware of every action I carry out and each word I choose to say, as now, contending with people becomes the situation I have been dreading the most. Not the people themselves, but their manners cause my tension. Strict formality is something I normally see on the television set, or remember trying to perfect at last year's Prom dinner. Faced now with the highest fashion seemingly possible, and being served once again at the table containing more tableware than I know what to do with, I try desperately to behave accordingly. Deli-
cacies are being politely passed, and politics, very confusing to me, discussed. Insignificant surface questions are asked, and then answered with an equally insignificant reply. There is no time or place to express deep personal thoughts or feelings. I try to follow the conversation, constantly fearing that I may be called on to answer a question I know nothing about. I try also to concentrate on properly eating the elegant dish set before me. I am, by now, a nervous wreck.

(5) My thoughts return home once in a while when I glance around at the perfection (I thought it was impossible) and cleanliness of the room adjoining the dining room. As far back as I can remember, nothing in that room has ever changed. The furniture, with all of its accessories, remains permanently positioned. Not one piece of dust is to be seen, and I sometimes wonder if the plants even dare to grow. Home, with the exact opposite appearance, seems the ideal place of comfort.

(6) Leaving in this case is as formal and tense as coming. I still smile, and still weigh my thoughts before I speak. However, now I notice that everyone present does also—as if they, too, are guests in their own home.