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ON THE WAY TO SOMEWHERE ELSE

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THERE was a Bank of Southern California branch on one corner, a vacant lot on another, a Do-Nut shop on another and a dark-windowed, square country-store-looking house on another. Their points on the compass were a matter of indifference. Down one street, two doors from the bank, was a new market, with steel doors rolled down to the sidewalk: Moneysworth Market, a neon sign whispered stilly over the bare sidewalk. Through the plate-glass of the bank under the burglarlight you could see the steel vaultwheels, shining, neat and sterile and cold, and the burglaralarm fixtures lying in wait on the walls beside the gasguns. In the window shone another cold impersonal little neon tube bent into Bank of S.C. Outside set into the brick near the corner of the building with a keyhole and Night Deposits in raised letters on it was a brass plate. In the little shallow bankwindow, on which was the gold word Escrows, were some folders about savings accounts, *A Rainy Day*, *Thrift*, *Retire at Fifty*, and two little chromium toy banks.

And you could see the grilles and the windows and the tills and the desks and the adding-machines neatened up and ready for tomorrow's counting — and on one or two desks you could see the names on little steel weights sitting beside a brace of onyx-based Sheaffer's Lifetime sign-here pens. A long look through the window and you could see the man —

maybe with the baldhead — who said: we regret that at this time with things as they are; of course you know conditions; we have examined your collateral and while it is excellent we feel that such an investment is a bad risk . . .

He would be sitting there, his hands folded over his beginning paunch and maybe, it being California, he wouldn't be wearing a blue serge banker's model suit, but maybe a neatgray mixture with golfswing sleeves, but it would smell just as well that he was a little banker who said those things and the other euphemisms such as: sound, satisfactory, stable; and maybe went to church and played golf with a little bigger banker who lived at the fringe of Beverly Hills and who had a lot in Forest Lawn and quite a valuable stamp collection.

In front of the vacant lot there stood an old popcorn and peanut wagon, a large-sized solid-rubber-tired affair — of the kind which used to sit beside the parks and squares of little middlewestern towns on bandconcert nights; perhaps retired from an actual park and town — with gold and silver leaf behind the beveled plateglass panes saying: Fresh Buttered Popcorn, Hot Roasted Peanuts. It had a gasoline flame for popping, but it was not popping — and the little taciturn gray man in white duck was staring down Tivoli Avenue across the heap of cold popcorn.

A man in a white cap and apron was staring out of the window of the Do-Nut shop — maybe not staring out, maybe just staring. Down Tivoli Avenue a little way a liquor store window glittered with bottles of Ten Spot, Old Shaker, Three Roses, California Chianti, Two O'Clock Gin, Everest Ale. A little further down a dim beerjoint with smoky windows, rickety plywood booths along one wall and a linoleum covered bar was open serving drinks to people who were sitting there inert in time: a man or two in blue workshirt open at the collar with a neatgray ten-year-old hardfinish worsted coat over it, a fattish woman nearforty with a hard sentimental goldtoothed face, and maybe a couple in one of the booths, a man of twentyseven in a walkaflight golfswing sports jacket, a pair of Glen Urquhart plaid Hollywood slacks

and a dark brown Hollywood shirt bought at a Nation's Shirt Shop, with a blond girl of twentythree who knew what she was doing and had dark nailpolish and saved on her lunches to buy mesh stockings. Maybe there was a girlie-hostess who played the outof tune piano.

But up and down the four blocks nearest the intersection the streetcars skreeked as they turned and the bells in the two trafficsignals clanged, hard and automatic, to stop an occasional car which stood quiet and tired-out looking like all other cars of the medium-priced field with maybe four people who looked secret and sly in it waiting for the bell and greenlight to go on to someplace where they would do something which was illegal and so monstrously enjoyable that their faces were frozen in grim anticipation of this secret pleasure — or with maybe four people who were waiting impatiently to hear the bell so that they could go home to the 1920 bungalow with the leaky roof and the Argentine ants that came in no matter what you did and the shabby palm tree in the frontyard, waiting at the trafficleight and fretting because they were not at another place scarcely more comfortable or enticing than the empty intersection of a Los Angeles suburb where there was a branchbank and a popcornstand and a Do-Nut shop (the children had learned to spell it Do-Nut before they went to school and maybe the father had forgotten how he used to spell it) and that old frame store building that was made over into an apartment house. Oh, maybe in the bungalow there was a fireplace that didn't draw and a fern that needed watering and maybe they left the hose running or the sprinkler system in the frontyard going. Maybe sitting there at the deserted intersection in the mediumpriced car, which had perhaps been bought from a Used Car Lot or financed at 66 2/3 per cent by a Financing Company — maybe sitting there they felt that the 1920 bungalow and the shaggy palm tree and the album of Kodak pictures (made at Catalina three years ago before Ben went into the navy and caught that awful disease) on the golden-oak library table in the frontroom and the orange seconds in the tin rack on the screened back porch and the dark, quiet,

gnawing loneliness of the street on which the 1920 bungalow stood in a long company front of other 1920 bungalows exactly like it with other shabby palms exactly like theirs in the frontyards — maybe they felt that even that was better than sitting at the intersection where the trafficlebells clanged every forty seconds and the mechanical arms went up, saying: stop, or you'll get killed, but it doesn't make any difference to me.

Maybe the bungalow was paid for, and the man gone: the man who had called himself a Realtor (he was one of the first to call himself that) and kept an office in a dinky little white bungalow, just like the others only with one tiny room, at the corner of the street there with a little potted palm in the little tiny yard and who had told Papa what a fine investment this piece of property was in 1920 and had not told Papa there were no city storm sewers and that the street and what cellar there was under the bungalow would be flooded every fall when the sun didn't shine every day — a fact which Papa and everybody like him kept to himself for the same reason that a man who buys One Hundred Spicy Pictures from an ad in an Art magazine never complains because the women in them have too many clothes on or are too ugly to stimulate a waning imagination and a dull instinct. You could still go back to Webster, Missouri, and say: oh yes; we like it fine here. We live in a bungalow and have a palm tree right in our frontyard — and the sun shines every day. Well, we live quite a way out, but there are markets close and then it isn't noisy and the school really isn't so far away — and, of course, we have a car.

But you could sit there in the car and think about how many times at night you had passed through the intersection beside the blank empty sidewalks and the banklights and the glaring white Do-Nut shop and the popcorn stand and maybe a man with a dinnerbucket waiting for a streetcar, his face an unearthly blue-green in the Bank of S.C. neon light. You could think that something was wrong, that there must be something missing — or else why were you so lonely? Why? Get out of the car and say to your wife: here you drive this thing to that bungalow. I bought it in 1920 and that god-

damn palm tree I thought grew there of its own accord — them goddamn palm trees that grew there of their own accord in a straight row, one to ever' goddamn frontyard for twenty blocks. Why, good God! When I come out here I thought I could reach up and pick a free orange!

Maybe one night somebody did get out of the Finance Company car and take a wrench and throw it through the Bank of S.C. Thriftwindow, through the word Escrows, and then walk off into the dark street while the Do-Nut man and the popcorn man looked up and then ran over to see what had happened to that bankglass.

They was a guy got out of a car, Do-Nut said. Yeh, I seen him, Popcorn said. He couldn'ta done it, Do-Nut said. He jis walked away like he was goin' home. Them people in the car musta give him a lift. Looks like a tar wrench in there on the floor. We'll tell them cops in the prowl car. But that guy couldn'ta done it. Which way'd the car go? Same way as he went. That's what I thought. Well, he mighta been a screwball.

Maybe the man who got out of the car and walked out of the intersection didn't even see the small square brick apartment house in the middle of the halfempty block with the glass door under a naked lightbulb showing the rubber-matted stairway and the number above the door, 3926. The door was at the left as you faced it, and the windows of the second story were all shaded but there was a glow behind them. The first story had a pair of big doubledoors of boards next to the staircase door — perhaps a warehouse, or the empty space where a shop had been. Thirty-nine twenty-six Tivoli Avenue.

The stranger got down from the streetcar at the intersection in front of the Bank of S.C. and stood watching the car and listening to the car skreek on as it turned. It was going fast: maybe the last trip and the motorman and conductor on their way to the bungalows and palm trees. He stood a moment swaying in the carstop nightlights, seeing the conductor's hand go up to the wellworn leather thong and jerk

it down, seeing his head bend over his tripbook, seeing his body sway sailorlike as he balanced it to the trackbumps and the curve, seeing the bluesparks from the trolley as the car, skreeking and clanging and bumping, panted out of the intersection and ground into the dark street for a long stretch of straightaway track, its bright yellow lights and its blue sparking trolley — now that it had got far enough away to lose its humdrum details — seeming some barbarous queen's pleasure gondola on a dark canal, or a strange college barge on the Isis River.

Pausing for a moment in the brooding concentration of the intersection where everything, the light, the buildings, the concrete, the brick of the paving, even the Do-Nut man and the popcorn man, seemed there for no purpose but to be passed on the way to somewhere else and did not even give promise (in the way that certain birds and certain bits of flotsam promise land to a sailor) that there *was* anywhere else at all, the man stared at emptiness entrenched, not as an Alpine chasseur in a lonely pass, cut off from his comrades in battle, stares at the anonymous conformation of the mountain rocks, seeking to remember a way, but as a captive with a cutlass at his back looks down the short length of plank at the cold green sea.

He fumbled in the pockets of his gray flannel trousers and pulled out rumpsquashed letters, cards, scraps of paper. There it was: Palm Apartments, 3926 Tivoli Avenue, Twenty-Four Hour Service. He looked up at the stoplight street marker, and sighting down from the enamelname, Tivoli (for which the employer of the man who had sold the twenty blocks of bungalows with palms in their frontyards was responsible), saw the naked lightbulb on the hollow rod above the doorway of the isolated brick shoebox building. A packing house full of whores, he thought.

A faint humming grind came back to him standing in the stagnant light as the streetcar passed along a street of bungalow and palm toward the carbarn.