

APARTMENT OF THE HOLY

NEL HERCHE

‘The Song Remains the Same — Remaster’ by Led Zeppelin

The apartment Mandy shared with the bassist was off La Cienega in West Hollywood. I remembered this through a beer-induced haze as we followed her band from their show to the bars on Sunset. We tumbled into the car with the others. I felt detached from the action, like an observer watching the film blur past.

After strapping ourselves in for the ride to her apartment, the car settled into a murky silence. I could hear my partner Tony breathing as amber shadows filled the space, the inadequate light barely revealing him in the backseat of the car with each passing street lamp. On the other side, my leg pressed into the bassist’s nubbed and worn corduroy pants despite an effort to lean away from the unfamiliarity of his body. I reached for and failed to grasp Tony’s hand somewhere in the shadows between us.

It must have been Mandy driving. I squinted at the sudden piercing fluorescent light as we pulled into the long, low carport. I regretted not making more of a fuss when

Tony blurted out, he wanted to tag along to the afterparty. I mouthed *I want to go home* in his direction, but he had already turned his face towards the car door and gripped the handle. The back of his hair was a mussed crop circle and his dark blue blazer wrinkled. He slid from the seat without a backward glance, while I hastily dragged myself across the resistant pleather.

Mandy was up ahead of us, walking past the arched stucco doorways lining the outside hallway. She should have been stumbling from the drinks and the weed, but her boots tramped solidly forward. Despite the chill air, she seemed oblivious to the breeze whipping the ivory silk of a slip masquerading as a dress. I stepped silently to the rhythm of her stomping feet, tiptoeing politely past the darkened windows. Theirs was the last door, and she dug with both hands into the satchel draped over her arm. We could all hear the rattle of keys, but it took a while for her to fish them out. The key made a complicated sound as she inserted it into the lock, an old-fashioned sort of clicking so different from my alarm company's multi-digit code entry. The door swung open as a portal in a fantasy land, except this one only revealed an under-furnished living room.

Mandy called over her shoulder, "Well y'all, come on in," too loudly, as if her words still needed to bite through the roar of voices from earlier that night. The tinny sound echoed around the empty room. A large standing lamp projected a bright triangle above it in one corner. The only other light came from the branches of a thinly foliated pink aluminium tree wrapped with tiny white bulbs. It flashed haphazardly — its too-long cord stretching across to reach the receptacle. It was all reminiscent of rooms I had outgrown ages ago, having already paid our dues with Salvation Army chairs and particle board bookshelves from

Craigslist. I inspected a familiar-looking hanging tapestry by the doorway en route to the only available place to sit.

Tony and I lowered ourselves onto the futon. We slid towards the angled back, propelled by the extreme slope of the cushion. Knees at eye level, we sat like children, hands folded neatly in our laps, mere inches from the ground and fighting the urge to stand. I scanned the room for the way to the kitchen, trusting Roy would be reentering with beverages.

But there he was, chatting up the bassist in the corner. As my eyes adjusted to the uneven light, it became clear that their faces were closer than would be comfortable in a normal conversation. As I zeroed in on their upper bodies, I could discern Roy's long fingers gripping the bass player's jacket. Both of them were about the same height and they were leaning into one another. I couldn't bring into focus the outline of their individual shapes and instead blurred the edges of where one ended and the other began. I was hypnotised by the puzzle of their bodies interlocking in such an intricate pattern that I could not untangle them. It was not until the bassist opened his eyes that I became aware of the fact that I was gawking at the two of them with the focus of my entire being.

Before I looked away in shame at my blatant voyeurism, I saw the back of Roy's head furiously rotating with the effort of what I could now guess was a kiss. The bassist let his eyes fall closed and pulled them both into the shadowed corridor. A door softly clicked shut.

Tony and I looked at our knees. I squeezed my hands together more prayerfully and wished that I could be transported to my bed.

"Y'all can crash here if you want," Mandy had taken off

her boots and threw herself onto a cushion across the coffee table from us.

No less desirable words have ever been uttered. I pasted a smile on my face.

"Thanks, Amanda," twisting my arm to look at an imaginary watch. "We should really look into getting an Uber."

"Call me Mandy." It wasn't a suggestion.

"Okay." I had started to dig around in my own purse to find my phone. "Mandy."

"Music!" In one fluid movement, Mandy popped up from the cushion and skipped over to a small console table. She flipped through the shelf of vinyls, pausing every few to consider and then continuing to flick them aside, her fingers moving across the covers like they would plucking the strings of an instrument. I continued to stammer something about it being late and so much to do tomorrow when Mandy found the album she had been looking for. I looked over to Tony for support, but he was now leaning away from me and had apparently dozed off.

"I wanna see if you can guess," she insisted, the lilt of her southern twang drawing out the vowels in a melodic, if not slightly annoying, way. It made me wonder if her accent was really this strong, or if the booze and pot, or believing it to be some complimentary affectation, increased its strength. She hugged the album dramatically to her chest.

I steeled myself for the now lengthened visit. A couple of songs, we could request the Uber, and then, *look at that—where did the time go?*

"Come on, guess," Mandy pressed me.

I glanced at the familiar red sunset peeking out from under her armpit and up to her eager face. She looked at me like a little kid trying to impress the friend of her older

sibling. With a feigned uncertainty I tossed out, “Zeppelin's Houses of the Holy?”

Her mouth dropped open.

I shrugged, leaning back into the cushions. Mandy turned, abruptly pulling the vinyl from the sleeve. I hadn't listened to the album for a while, maybe since college, probably not since I had my own crappy futon. But I *did* want to listen to it at Mandy's. Instead of sensibly surrendering to sleep that night, I let myself drift between the chords and float off into a real crazy dream.

The End