

On “The Battle of Evermore” by Led Zeppelin

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“The whole idea of music, from the beginning of time, was for people to be happy.”
—Robert Plant

The last time I was with my dad—before he was hospitalized and passed—was at his place in Peter Cooper Village in the spring of 2013. I stood there, waiting for him outside in a quad of buildings on a sunny afternoon. A cool breeze blew through the trees as adults accompanied children on paths. My father was always good around kids, especially to me and my sister Nancy when we were little. It made me happy to know that he was somewhere peaceful, where he could remember happy times with his own family. That distracted me from my own nervousness at reuniting with him after a period of estrangement.

It wasn't hard to tell from my father's walk that it was him passing through the entrance archway into his community. He always had a familiar gait, and I was happy to see it again. In our recent chats, he sounded like the good man that was my father, not the person he had been all those years.

He walked around with an oxygen tank, which I had heard about from my mom and sister, who were both on speaking terms with him by then. He didn't look all bad though. His hair still looked wavy and silvery. Mostly, I was glad to see him and break bread. I was ready to let lambs rest with lions.

We were both smiling as we hugged it out. His strength had not diminished, and his embrace was still as powerful as ever. I felt secure, like everything was going to be okay.

We made small talk and exchanged other pleasantries as we entered my father's apartment building to drop off his bag. He had just arrived from a doctor's appointment, a ritual I had become accustomed to since I was a kid. As a child, I remember my father taking a cocktail of drugs day after day without knowing why.

I brought *Led Zeppelin IV* with me to his place, because in my teenage and college years we had bonded over music and gone to shows together. My first rock n' roll concert was seeing Bob Dylan and Willie Nelson with him, and we went to many shows together after that. I also remember Dad telling me about a guy he knew in college who listened to Led Zeppelin on big headphones.

I started getting into Led Zeppelin in the summer of 2012, and I think what did it for me was their passion. Whenever Zeppelin played, on record or live, whether delivering loud and hard blues or elements of world music, they rocked hard with such bliss and ease. I felt it and was inspired to give into my creative and romantic passions. I grew my hair and beard out, started wearing colorful and floral cloths, listened to Zeppelin, talked about Zeppelin, and let their music be my master. My passion for them translated in their other influencers as well, including Norse Mythology, the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, poems of William Blake, and esoteric texts of Alistair Crowley. I also started going out more in New York City and connected with cool people in my personal life. All the while, I spread my love for Robert Plant, Jimmy Page, John Paul Jones, and John Bonham.

Led Zeppelin

“The Battle of Evermore”

Untitled / Runes / ZoSo / IV

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Atlantic

Dad showed me around his well-lit place overlooking the village. Early on in his tour, he directed me to a fabric tapestry on his wall. I forget the quote, but I know that it was something he picked up in AA. My father was not really a drinker, though he claimed to be an alcoholic in his decision-making process. He had joined AA after his marriage to his second wife (following my mom) collapsed, and by the time I saw him, he had sobered up, gotten a sponsor, and attended meetings.

They say to accept the apologies you never receive, but I didn't expect to receive the one I did get from my dad in the way that I did. He said, "I tell people I go to AA meetings because I'm a recovering asshole."

After everything he had put me and my family through, I should have wept, but instead of lashing out at him over his attempt to make a joke about all those years of pain, I laughed. It breaks my heart now, because his passing did affect me to the point of aridity in my creative, dating, and professional life, but back then, it felt good to remember laughter and leave the past behind.

It was around then that I took out *Led Zeppelin IV* and asked Dad if he wanted to "Let the Led Out." He said yes, and we went to his living room near his speakers.

I told him, "I remember your story about that guy you went to college with who listened to Led Zeppelin on big headphones."

Dad said, "I think he was on acid."

We laughed about that. It still cracks me up to think about that.

To the sound of Robert Plant belting and Jimmy Page laying down riff after riff of blow your mind jams, all to the rhythm of John Paul Jones and John Bonham, he leaned into his knees in a hunched over position. My father had light hair, large cheekbones, and a Roman nose, and in that moment, he reminded me of Robert Plant. Yes, it was because I was Zeppossessed, but he did look like Robert Plant. In his youth, he'd had very long blond hair. He was a good-looking guy, and after he passed, I dreamed of what he would have looked like if he had been healthy, fit, and unimpeded by the confines of his virus.

"I think you and Robert Plant might be cousins," I said.

"You think we might be related?" he asked, not entirely incredulous, as if he was entertaining the notion that he might be distant blood relatives with Robert Plant.

"You two look alike," I said, "with your long blonde hair."

"I heard your hair was long too," Dad said and seemed to smile. "Really long."

I still valued his approval. Before I shaved my beard and trimmed my hair, ridding myself of Samson strength, I did have really long hair, and it was then that I swore to bring it back.

Bring it back...

"Battle of Evermore" is the third track on *Led Zeppelin IV*. Inspired by *Lord of the Rings*, Zeppelin bring about a fully realized adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien through sound. Written by Jimmy Page, the song was composed at Headley Grange, a house in the country where Led Zeppelin wrote and recorded their songs. "Battle of Evermore" has elements of the country, with mandolins, acoustic guitars, and vocal harmonies. The song is a

collaborative effort with Sandy Denny, and Denny herself lays down haunting, frightening, and ethereal singing alongside Robert Plant.

*Queen of Light took her bow
And then she turned to go,
The Prince of Peace embraced the gloom
And walked the night alone.*

I had seen *The Lord of the Rings* films with my dad, and there we were, listening to a song inspired by it. I don't recall us doing a lot of reminiscing. That day was about leaving the past behind and creating a new memory, because we were running out of time. I knew it, and so did he. I didn't realize then, and I wouldn't, not for a long time, that after his passing, it would feel like I walked a long night alone. I walked a lonely road. Processing his passing, for a long time, despite possessing the will otherwise, I wasn't effective at dating, writing, and being young and following my dreams. I was alive, and yet it felt like I watched the world move on from me.

*The pain of war cannot exceed
The woe of aftermath,
The drums will shake the castle wall,
The ring wraiths ride in black.*

We listened to "Battle of Evermore" and the rest of *Led Zeppelin IV*, and while I don't remember everything we talked about, I do know that we chatted comfortably throughout the time we shared. I probably told him everything I knew about Zeppelin, how Robert Plant had a dog named Strider, and Jimmy Page dabbled in ritualist magic. I did tell him I was into Norse Mythology, and how these stories and characters led to my growth and transformation. I told him about Fólkvangr, the realm controlled by the goddess Freyja, where those who don't go to Valhalla go upon death.

*At last the sun is shining,
the clouds of blue roll by.
With flames from the dragon of darkness,
The sunlight blinds his eyes.*

After Letting the Led Out, Dad asked me if I wanted to get lunch. Never one to turn down free food, I accepted, and we went to an Italian restaurant in the neighborhood. I gathered he was a regular at the place, because he was friendly with the people there. I forget what I ordered for myself, but he got pasta with lobster. I asked him if he would like to split calamari, and he chuckled as he said, "absolutely."

I enjoyed how delicious the calamari was, its crispy, fried exterior, its juicy meat, and savory marinara sauce. I ate several pieces, giving myself a generous helping of the sauce. At some point, I found myself staring at my father dipping the calamari in the sauce, bloody tomato gravy spilling on his fingers as if from an open wound. That's when my heart raced and my breathing became out of sorts. I had gone to the dentist recently, and my mouth still felt raw. I excused myself and went to the bathroom.

In the cramped bathroom in that Italian restaurant, I was afraid and overcome with panic. I thought then, like I do from time to time, about the day my mom first told me and my sister about my father's health. I was about twenty. We were sitting in the kitchen in our Manhattan apartment after my father had moved out during their divorce. I had been

estranged from him, and all of us were telling secrets that we knew. That was when my mom told my sister and me about our father's health, and I was shocked.

Our dad was HIV+, and he wanted it to be a secret. He felt like there was some taboo in being HIV+ in the 80s and 90s. He didn't tell my mom about his health until the 90s, when the doctors said my dad didn't have long to live. My mom was fine. My sister and I were fine. My dad beat the odds. But all the same, learning this, and reliving the memory there with my dad in the next room, was devastating. I felt an existential panic and crisis which terrified me to the depths of my being. It would take time before I realized how glad I was to be here at all, like my mom, and sister, and for a while, my dad.

I returned to my father, but didn't eat any more calamari. I felt shaken from the panic I had experienced. "I'm not going to get anything, will I?"

"No," he said quietly.

"Do you know what I mean?" I asked.

He nodded, and said no more.

It was a bit hyperbolic and dramatic to jump to the conclusion I had caught something from my dad by sharing food. But it gave me the chance to broach the subject of Dad's diagnosis with him.

We ate our meal, and I got over myself as I walked him back to his apartment. One of his friends was there, and I was ready to be on my way. I felt very tired from how the moment in the restaurant had affected me. I left the CD, because I wanted him to have the gift of Led Zeppelin. As we said goodbye, he took off his oxygen tank and breathed on his own as he walked out of the door.

"I don't need this after seeing you," he said. "It's easier to breathe."

I was too touched than I cared to admit to say anything other than "that's good," or "happy to hear." I also felt intimidated, after everything that had happened, to trust him again, but I was trying. He insisted on getting together again, and I probably said something casual like, "Yeah, sure, we'll hang." We wouldn't see each other again at his place, but we spent time together again when he was hospitalized.

Robert Plant said, "The whole idea of music, from the beginning of time, was for people to be happy." Hearing the early Zeppelin records now that I'm no longer Zeppossessed, but especially after going through my own loss, it's hard to divorce the feeling of hope and optimism throughout their early music from the inevitable outcome of pain and loss. Led Zeppelin endured their own tragedies, with Robert Plant losing his child, and the eventual death of John Bonham. I do not blame myself for feeling pathological optimism as a result of their music, even if it overlooked the reality of loss so close to me, because Led Zeppelin showed me a better way to live life. It was not easy for me to put aside my differences with my father, but Led Zeppelin helped show me the way by giving me hope. I am forever changed because of Led Zeppelin, and I will never forget how much I cared about them and what they meant to me.

I went to visit my dad in the hospital not that long after we had listened to *Led Zeppelin IV*. I went with my mom, and it had to have been the first time that the three of us were all together since they'd separated. My parents seemed happy to see each other. Without divorce hanging over them, they found common ground to be friends.

I'm not sure how they got into the subject of Led Zeppelin, but my mom asked my dad, "Do you remember Led Zeppelin back in the day?"

He nodded his head and said, "Yes."

I couldn't believe it, but someone else was talking about Zeppelin besides me. Hearing my mom and dad bond over music, I remember feeling touched, witnessing music connect adults with history, and fill within them a desire to still see and know one another like it was the first time. That is how I remember Led Zeppelin, and my parents, best.