

## Sound of a Duduk

The concert hall was sold out.

There was a low hush that filled the hall as the members of the orchestra began tuning their instruments. The lights dimmed and with it, conversation dwindled. A fascinating array of instruments adorned the performers, as the event was meant to celebrate cultures from around the world.

When the music began, members of the audience were thrown into their own journeys, each experiencing parts of the music unique from one person to the next. One particular family sat in the audience, creating three generations: a teenager, his mother, and her mother. They listened quietly, slight smiles on their faces.

But the atmosphere in the concert hall changed suddenly when one instrument raised its voice mournfully above the rest. The sound carried through the air, a thick and somber sound.

The grandmother found tears streaming down her cheeks. Her grandson, a boy of sixteen, turned to her and took her hand. "What is it?"

"A duduk," she said, naming the instrument instead.

The boy's mother turned to him and explained, "It is a traditional Armenian instrument. Very important in our culture."

"Why is grandmother crying?" he asked her.

She turned to her mother and gave a small smile. "This music takes your grandmother somewhere else." She affectionately patted her shoulder, but her mother only smiled through her tears in response. For her daughter was right. She was not sitting in that stiff chair anymore. Her bones did not ache from age anymore. She did not have to squint to see what was in front of her anymore. She did not hear the song as others heard it, for she heard it echoing instead through her memory.

She was suddenly a young girl of twelve, bounding on nimble feet over muddy splotches. Her curious eyes flicked back and forth rapidly, catching every detail and hungering for more. She saw the other children around her, ages ranging from ten to twenty. There was a hush to the group, some ragged murmuring traveling from mouth to mouth. Sometimes, a little giggle would escape a child or one of the mischievous boys would tease a girl, and the adults would hush them quickly.

The girl accidentally stepped in a splotch of mud and sighed in frustration. She stopped along the path to rub her shoes in a patch of grass, but her friend tugged her arm worriedly. "Please keep up, Ani," she murmured. "They're behind us."

The girls looked over their shoulders apprehensively. Four soldiers marched at the back of the group, their steady eyes scanning the surrounding dark woods and their shotguns ready in their hands. "Ani! Talin! Keep up!" hissed one of the counselors. Ani forgot about her mud-soaked shoe and bounded up with Talin to keep up with the group. "You don't want to get left behind," said the

counselor looking around into the dark woods. A shudder went down Ani's back and she wished more than anything to arrive at their destination safely.

They trudged on, this group of children eager to laugh and play, a rather forlorn group of adults, and soldiers surrounding them. They were making their way toward a campsite that was located in dangerous territory and was surrounded by enemies. The campsite was not always in dangerous territory. It used to be a very peaceful place, but over time, hostile groups moved into the area. Most camps would have relocated, but Armenians are stubborn—they would not easily be swayed to forget their traditions. Thus, the annual camping of Armenian youth continued to take place, at the peril of their lives.

It took about eight hours of walking. The path seemed never-ending and the persistent light drizzle would have been refreshing had it not made the path even muddier than before. At the end of the eighth hour, the path gave way, almost as though the woods gave a sigh of relief. A gray, ugly, wall stood across from their drenched faces, looming high over the trees. It was a sore sight for their eyes, but a welcome one for their tired legs. Soldiers were planted around the wall, guarding the contents. They tensed when they saw the group appear from the depths of the woods but relaxed immediately upon recognizing familiar faces. Pleasant greetings were exchanged.

Still, for the safety of everyone involved, the group needed to be checked one by one. The children were ordered to stand in line, based on their age range (from youngest to oldest). The soldiers at the front looked at their papers, one by one, and over the next hour, the members of the group trickled into the belly of the fort.

Ani was standing toward the front of the line, so she was able to enter the fort not long into the process. Talin walked in with her, and together, they appraised the campsite in awe, as it was their first time in this camp.

“Careful you don't leave these walls!” teased one of the older boys, bounding nearby. “They'll tear you apart outside!”

The girls' eyes widened as they looked up again at those looming walls—the only reason why they would be safe tonight. “Why would he say that?” whined Talin.

“Ignore him,” Ani muttered. “Nothing like that will happen.”

The counselors called everyone to the center of the campsite where a large bonfire had been made. It crackled and sent its black smoke into the sky, casting shadows across everyone's faces. The director of the camp was a kind-looking man who stood on a log to better address the crowd. His facial expression seemed to change rapidly along with the shadows from the fire. “Welcome!” he called out in a booming voice. A hush fell over the crowd. “For the next week, you will have the unique experience of being at this traditional camp. You will learn our people's history, our stories, we will dance, sing, and eat!” There was some excited chattering from the crowd. “You all must be extremely tired and night is falling, so I will let you go soon. But first...” he pointed up at the walls. “Stay inside these walls.” He let his words become ominous. “Our people have been persecuted by them for centuries. And they know we are in here. This is not a joke. I know kids like to mess around and breach the boundaries. I can tell you...you *will* die if you leave these walls at night.”

There was a heavy silence. Ani and Talin exchanged a look. Maybe that boy wasn't making it up. A smile crawled over the director's face. "Now, go get situated within your cabins, and we will meet in thirty minutes for supper and singing around the bonfire!"

Upon dismissal, the children split up into age groups, as instructed. Each cabin was categorized by age. Ani and Talin found their cabin and excitedly looked at the inscription on the rickety door:  
*Sevan.*

One of the counselors, a young woman, walked into the cabin and smiled sweetly at the girls as they were deciding which bunks to settle into. "I am going to be your cabin leader! Most of you have met me already. I'm Lana. We are in my favorite cabin, named after the most beautiful place in Armenia, Sevan. Who has been there?"

Several girls raised their hands. Ani had never been there, but all of a sudden, she had a strong inkling to go to Sevan. Talin raised her hand. As conversation continued, Ani turned to Talin and whispered, "What is Sevan like?"

"It is called the pearl of Armenia, but it is more beautiful than that. Lake Sevan glitters like a million diamonds."

Ani smiled dreamily, thinking about Sevan. She felt proud to be in this cabin, the pearl of Armenia. The girls spoke together about their experiences until the time came to grab dinner. And thus, the camp officially began.

After an evening of dancing, eating, and singing, Ani lay in her top bunk bed quietly. She could hear her friends breathing peacefully around her in the darkness but she was looking out the open window into the darkness. She could see the dark shadows of the soldiers pacing around and she couldn't help but feel a tingling of panic. Fear pumped through her heart until it had filled her entire body and her breathing grew labored. What if they attacked tonight? What if they found a way over the wall? She was so panicked that she almost saw the enemies charging toward her cabin, and she sat up in delusional horror. But instead, another sound rose up over the terrified roar in her mind.

The sound of a duduk.

The sound carried over the campsite, a beautiful mournful melody.

Ani looked around quickly, but no one had woken from the sound. She gingerly crawled down from her bunkbed and walked outside into the cool night. The soldiers did not seem nervous, just calmly looked out toward the source of the music. Ani looked around but could not find the person playing this beautiful Armenian instrument. She walked in between the cabins but there was no one that she saw. And still, the sound of the duduk drifted all around her, settling down like the lightest layer of snow and bringing peace to everything it touched.

A heavy hand suddenly landed on her shoulder and she turned and gasped in fear. A soldier stood there, his brows furrowed. "What are you doing out of your cabin?"

"The music!" she said breathlessly. "Who is playing the duduk?"

“We don’t know. Which cabin are you in?”

“Sevan,” she replied. He began guiding her back towards her cabin, but she was so curious. “What do you mean you don’t know? He’s not playing from inside the walls?”

“No. He is somewhere outside in those mountains. He plays every year when he knows Armenians are at the campsite. We do not know who he is.”

“Is he safe out there?”

“Probably not. But he brings us music and helps many children sleep while they are afraid.”

They had reached her cabin and he made sure she went inside before resuming his post. But she lay on her bed, wide-eyed, as she looked out the window and thought of the mysterious duduk player who risked his life to bring them comfort.

He played for them every night that week, aiding in her dissipating fears. The beautiful sound seemed to envelop her in its embrace, rocking her to sleep in its comforting presence.

Ani was never able to go back to that camp, because a fierce revolution tore through the country and her people were forced to relocate. But she never forgot that sound, and hearing the duduk being played in this orchestra brought back those comforting memories.

When the concert was over, her family stood, stretching their legs. Ani wiped the tears from her eyes and her grandson smiled up at her. “It was beautiful, wasn’t it?” She looked down at his bright eyes.

He had a fierce appreciation for music and she hoped he had gotten it from her. “Yes, my child, it was incredible.”

Her daughter looked back at them. “Are you alright, mom? Shall we grab some dinner before heading home?”

“That would be lovely, Sevan.”