

Djeridoo's and Don'ts

Jana had received the instrument for Christmas, or maybe, perhaps, her birthday. She couldn't really remember, since the two were always so close together. December 19th or December 25th... it was all the same thing, near as her parents could figure, so it was seldom she was given gifts for each holiday. This was frustrating to her, since her younger brother had a birthday really *really* close to Thanksgiving, yet the family had a ridiculously big dinner every year to celebrate it anyway. Why should he get special treatment? Jana always suspected her brother picked his favorite dish (*turkey!?*) out of spite and thought it especially unfair that her parents would honor his request. She didn't get double presents, so why should he get double turkey?

So the instrument was received in a December (at least that much was certain), and Jana had let it build a thick coating of dust with each anniversary it sat in the corner of her bedroom. Excuse after excuse had lent to her not picking the strange tube up, and now Jana lay on her bed, staring at it gloomily and recalling each birthday that had gone by since:

Ninth Birthday: She received many gifts that year, and it was one of those rare times where everyone paid attention to her. Dolls, that toy oven that's *supposed* to cook stuff, weird international jams (*jams!?*), a dog-leash puppet-thing that didn't really have a dog in it, but you'd pretend it did, coloring books... The instrument, though pretty, was just another gift in a sea of gifts, overshadowed by her parents' overcompensation for ignoring her most of the time. Jana remembered asking her mom what the long, strangely-painted tube was.

"It's a djeridoo, honey."

"A diggery-what?"

"It's a musical instrument from Australia. You play it."

“Really? How?”

“Here, Jana. Eat some cake.” Pffft. That ended that.

Tenth Birthday: There were less presents that year because she spent part of the holidays at her aunt’s house. Jana could never get it straight whose side of the family Aunt Sonya was actually on. Were her parents even there? Jana had no idea. They probably just dropped her off for the long weekend.

Eleventh Birthday: Dad took her and her brother all around New York City. It was one of the better birthdays she could remember, despite her brother constantly hogging the spotlight with every little sniffle, foot-cramp, or “potty-break.” He was such a drama queen. No wonder everyone always noticed him first.

Twelfth Birthday: Her birthday dinner, if it could be called that, was Chinese takeout - not the raviolis she had asked for. It wasn’t even good takeout. Her cookie fortune was simple: “You have a wonderful way with people.” What kind of dumb fortune was that!? Not a good sign for the rest of the year.

But through it all, was that instrument. It occasionally beckoned to her from the corner. It was a symbol; A symbol for her parents ignoring her like she ignored it. Yet she had never really accepted the thing for what it basically was. An instrument. Something to be played. “*What kind of dork would play that?*” Jana thought to herself, “*How could anyone make music out of it?*”

For some reason, Jana wanted to play it now. Maybe because she thought it was lonely, like her. She cleaned off the thick dust. The surface of the tube, long hidden by dirt and gunk, brightened with rediscovered color. She had forgotten what it really looked like. Across the long, dark-red tube were tiny little details, finally freed from their dusty tomb. Birds no bigger than her fingernail flocked about the cylinder, caressed by red sunsets and orange skies.

Jana had no idea how such a device was to be played; If only she had actually paid more attention to those National Geographic specials or that guy with the crazy hair who came to talk to her music class. Peering down through the hollow tube, she couldn’t figure out how any sort of note came from it. Unlike her dusty violin, the instrument appeared to have no means for changing notes. It was pretty but seemed no more special than a big hunk of white plastic pipe.

Jana turned it upside-down, around and over, looking into each end and tracing her fingers along the painted designs. She assumed the right side up was the one with a coating of wax surrounding the hole at the top end. Taking a deep breath, she placed her lips around the outside of the hole and blew.

Nothing happened.

Shaking the instrument slightly, perhaps to see if there was something that maybe should have been loose inside, Jana placed her lips inside the wax ring and blew still harder.

Nothing happened.

With no one to help but herself, Jana continued to blow, breathe, and wheeze into the cylinder until she was light-headed. Finally, her lips dry and irritated from the wax, Jana tossed the instrument back in the corner and wandered downstairs.

“Whatcha making for dinner, mom?”

“Leftovers.”

“Leftover what?”

“Turkey.”

Silence.

“How’s it that we still have leftover turkey? Michael’s birthday was three months ago!”

“Here, Jana. Eat some cake.”

* * *

Her stomach full of leftovers (but *no more* turkey!), and her Saturday coming to a close, Jana was soon back in her bedroom. It was the end of February, and the sun had long since vanished from the sky. Stupid sun. Jana never liked the winter. Though it was only eight or nine o’clock, the lack of daylight only made her sleepy.

Slipping into bed, she pulled the covers over her head and peaked out of her blanket cave. Jana gazed at the posters of various celebrities lining her walls. They seemed so fake and meaningless now. She tossed

and turned, rocking back and forth on her bed like a metronome. Eventually, accepting her restless fate, she gazed out again from her cave at the instrument, though this time under sleepier eyelids.

The painted birds were gone! Had they had migrated to the other side of the tube? What had replaced them were heavier clouds and a glowing reddish sunset. Her eyes closed, if only for a second, and when they reopened the cylinder's sun had completely set. But though the sun was gone from the instrument, the light was not. The instrument itself seemed to glow, bathing both its own cylindrical world and Jana's bedroom in a bright reddish brilliance.

Jana stepped forward into the cylinder's world and stood beneath the heavy clouds. The red light surrounding her was almost blinding. Her eyes had not adjusted from the darkness of her bedroom, and she stared at the ground while she walked ahead. Dried mud caked beneath her feet, cracked with age and desperately waiting for the water of a distant rain.

Jana grew used to the bright light. The dried ground stretched out before her, dotted occasionally with a pathetic bush or clump of grass. In the distance lay a cave. This reminded her of the blanket cave of her bed, only built instead by mother nature out of earth and stone.

It was merely an instant before she found herself at the foot of the cave itself. Though she had walked a long time, it seemed hardly a moment to cross the cracked plain. Jana was not afraid. Though she was the kind of girl that pulled the covers over her head, there was nothing about this cave to fear.

She stepped inside, greeted by all sorts of pictures painted on the walls. These pictures reminded her of the ones on the outside of the instrument itself: crude, but captivating to look at. Some of them represented animals, others plants and men, but all had a tribal sort of look to them. The pictures welcomed her. She didn't know how, but the painted animals appreciated her company and happily told her to keep walking ahead.

Jana did so, and it wasn't long before she saw a shadow projected on the back of the cave wall. The man this shadow belonged to was calmly waiting for her, and it was clear he was the one the painted animals had directed her to. He was an aborigine. From Australia. Jana had seen men like him on TV. His complexion was far darker than her own. His crazy hair was braided in a peculiar pattern, and though he was sitting, Jana

could see, in fact, that he was very tall. He said nothing, though stared at her with a welcoming smile in his eyes. Jana sat next to her host, noticing the long, painted tube resting on the stone floor beneath him.

Picking up the tube, the strange man cracked a strange smile, his face well-worn like the ground of the dried plain. Putting the instrument to his mouth, he inhaled sharply and blew into its depths. Air rushed through the cylinder, his cheeks puffed, and he made weird sounds to accompany the wind. He did not stop. He did not come up for air. The eerie, yet comforting, ghostly sound echoed throughout the cave as Jana sat, fascinated.

Finally, he stopped, though not to give her her own attempt. Instead, he motioned to the wall, and one of the painted animals came over with a glass. This glass was filled with water, and an oddly out-of-place plastic straw poked over the top. Jana reached for the straw to take a sip, but was stopped by the old man. Taking the water, he put the straw to his mouth and proceeded to blow bubbles. Though the bubbles were strong and the amount of air going into the straw was considerable, he did not stop. Jana watched his wrinkled face as his cheeks made the same puffing motion as when he blew into the instrument.

Eventually, Jana understood. The man was not blowing new air constantly from his lungs, but was instead using his cheeks to store and push the air as he drew a new breath, like a chipmunk. Jana took the glass, and after a considerable amount of work and a considerable amount of patience, she found herself able to do the same thing. When the bubbles formed a constant stream from her straw, the old man laughed and passed the instrument to her.

Like a big straw, Jana blew into the tube, this time making the weird lip movements and vocalizations the old man had made earlier. As the eerily soothing sounds filled the air, Jana continued to breathe, store air, and push. She continued to make deep sounds from the tube, like a playful ghost trying to be heard above the wind. Ooooowah! Ooooowah! Here I am! Soon, she found herself riding the waves of sound from inside the cave, to the plain, and then ultimately back to the blanket cave of her bed.

Jana awoke. Gazing out from under the covers, she saw the Djeridoo propped against the dresser in the dusty corner. The birds had returned and the sunset was again properly in place on its painted finish. The February sun bathed the bedroom in a soft morning glow, and Jana threw back the sheets of her bed. Grabbing the Djeridoo eagerly with both hands, she kissed the wax seal and echoed deeply into its depths.

A pleasant, ghostly sound radiated all around her. It had been three years since her parents had given it to her, and finally she had conquered its secret. The music had been waiting for her all this time. The music was there for her. She had only needed to discover it.

Through its wave of sound came a small rapping at her bedroom door. “Jana?” Her mother yelled weakly, “Jana it’s 6:30 in the morning!”

Jana smiled to herself, puffing her cheeks once more. Ooooowah! Ooooowah! Here I am!