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By Elizabeth Kostova

"When the lamb had been completely devoured and the women were scraping the dishes over a wooden bucket, I noticed that three men had brought out musical instruments and were preparing to play. One of them had the oddest instrument I had ever seen up close--a bag made of cleaned white animal skin with wooden pipes sticking out of it. It was clearly a kind of bagpipe, and Ranov told us that it was an ancient instrument in Bulgaria, the *gaida*, made of the skin of a goat. The old man who cradled it in his arms gradually blew it up like a great balloon; this process took a good ten minutes and he was bright red before he'd finished. He nestled it under his arm and puffed into one of the pipes and everyone cheered and applauded. It had the sound of an animal, too, a loud bleat, a shriek or squawk, and Helen laughed. 'You know,' she told me, 'there is a bagpipe in every herding culture in the world.'

"Then the old man began to play, and after a moment his friends joined him, one on a long wooden flute, whose voice swirled around us in a fluid ribbon, and the other beating a soft skin drum with a padded stick. Some of the women jumped up and formed a line, and a man with a white handkerchief, as we'd seen at Stoichev's, led them around the meadow. The people too old and infirm to dance sat smiling with their terrible teeth and empty gums, or patted the ground beside them, or tapped their canes.

"Baba Yanka and her sister stayed quietly where they were, as if their moment had not come. They waited until the flute player began to call for them, gesturing and smiling, and then until their audience joined the call, and then they feigned some reluctance, and finally they got up and went, hand in hand, to stand next to the musicians. Everyone fell quiet, and the *gaida* played a little introduction. The two old women began to sing, their arms twined around each other's waists now, and the sound they made--a stomach-churning harmony, harsh and beautiful--seemed to come from one body. The sound of the *gaida* grew up around it, and then the three voices, the voices of the two women and the goat, rose together and spread over us like the groaning of the earth itself. Helen's eyes were suddenly suffused with tears, which was so unlike her that I put my arm around her in front of everyone."