

SHORT STORY

# Deda and Baba Forever. A Diptych.

by Mark Budman



"Elementals drawing" by Audrey Holmes

*One part of this story, “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Farm,” was originally published in a slightly different version in Moon City Review.*

## I. A Questionable Tale

*Deda*, the old man, is driving. His wife sits in the back seat between their four-year-old twin granddaughters lest they slap each other. For now, their blows land on her.

“Don’t fret, ladies, we’re about to get home,” the old man says. His car is ancient, but he is much older. He likes to say, “I’m older than the cave drawings.”

“Stop, *Deda*,” the younger twin says. “Only girls and women are allowed to talk here.”

*Baba*, the old man’s wife, says nothing. But she used to berate them for the words like before.

Q. What are *Deda* and *Baba* in Russian?

A. Grandpa and Grandma.

Q. If so, should you be nice to your Grandpa and Grandma?

A. Only to Grandma.

*Baba* stops confronting them now. She came to believe that a bad peace is better than a good war.

The man tries to think about something soothing. Maybe about the sea. Like catching a fish, perhaps a marlin, that he can serve for dinner for his family. But today, all the seas drain into supermarkets, so the fish have nowhere else to swim.

*Deda* interrogates himself silently.

Q. On the scale of 1 to 10, when Pragmatic is 1 and Romantic is 10, how romantic is it to buy fish in the supermarket?

A. Pragmatism would kick romanticism’s behind anytime. But romanticism lives longer and happier, and has more kids. Is it concise enough for you, old man?

His inner self talks too much.

In the evening, in the room that *Baba* and *Deda*’s daughter gave them in her house, *Baba* whispers into the old man’s ear.

Q. Maybe we should go home. Our own sweet home, which is paid for and comfortable. The kids don’t need us anymore. The girls are big enough. Their parents can afford a babysitter.

We can visit on weekends, as all the grandparents do. What do you say?

A. I like it here. The kids make us younger. And I believe you like it, too.

*Baba* sighs. She kisses him. She goes to sleep.

But the old man doesn't sleep. He thinks in questions and answers.

Q. Should you be honest with your spouse?

A. Always.

Q. Even if it might hurt you?

A. Didn't you hear me, old man? I said always. Maybe we should buy a hearing aid after all?

Q. Are you angry with me? You sound angry. I mean, you don't sound, but your choice of words...

A. No. I'm not angry, my inquisitive inner self. I'm getting sleepy. Good night.

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The twins are obsessed with watching *My Fair Lady*. They correct Eliza's accent because she says "daance" instead of "dance." They correct *Deda*'s accent, too.

Q. *Deda*, why do you speak funny?

A. I worked as a clown when I was a kid. Bad habits die hard.

Q. *Deda*, what color is Eliza Doolittle's underwear?

The old man has little knowledge of the way the women in Edwardian England protected their privacy and hygiene, but he must come up with an answer. All his life, he replied to any questions instantaneously, and he doesn't want to spoil his record toward the end. And yet the answer must be educational and PG.

A. Eliza wears snow white, but only in Hertford, Hereford, and Hampshire. She wears plain in Spain.

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While *Baba* prepares dinner for the twins and their parents, who are still at work, the old man interrogates the kids.

Q. Ladies, what did you learn in nursery school today?

Sometimes the twins are answering questions, sometimes not. This time, they are generous.

A. We learned about the American flag.

Q. What are the colors of the American flag?

A. Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet.

The flag of his old country was red, the spilled blood of workers and peasants. Red is monochromatic, monotone, much maligned.

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The twins are waiting for an Amazon package with the new tights. When it arrives, they demand that the old man open it. The old man is hesitant. He wants to wait for the twins' mother to open it. The twins are tugging his sleeves. One on the left, one on the right.

*Deda* says, "It's not addressed to me."

They say, "It's not a dress, it's tights."

*Deda* wants to give them a lesson in etiquette.

Q. Should you take something that is not addressed to you?

A. Yes. If we want it.

"Tights is a funny English word," *Baba* tells *Deda* later, when the kids are asleep. "Too snug for comfort if your feet are swollen. Tightness in one's chest could be dangerous."

She knows.

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After his dental appointment, one of the twins looked at him and said, "You lost your baby tooth."

Q. Do tooth fairies have tooth problems?

A. Only with other people's teeth.

That night, the old man dreamed of a tooth fairy. She wore the petticoats of an Edwardian lady. Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet.

"*Deda*," she said. "It's time for you to get an implant. I can recommend a doctor who took care of my own missing tooth."

Q. Does your dentist accept Original Medicare?

A. Original Medicare doesn't cover dentistry.

“It means you're still handsome,” *Baba* says when he tells her his dream.

She's of the opinion that people must interpret their loved ones' dreams favorably.

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One of the twins is philosophizing: “A long time ago, yesterday.”

The old man wasn't born yesterday or even the day before it. He was born a long time ago in the country that is off the map now. He wasn't a *Deda* when he left, but already a *Papa*. He is so Americanized now that he dreams in English. He dreams about living for a long time so he can protect his grandkids. Even if they won't let him speak when not spoken to. Even if he turns into something else, like Gregor Samsa. But he wants to be an armored car and not a bug. Bugs' blood is not red. Bugs are neither workers nor peasants.

Now, *Deda* interrogates himself again.

Q. If it were up to you, would you choose to forever remain an old man who answers his grandkids' questions?

A. Yes. I would choose to stay such an old man forever. Or at least until I can answer any questions instantaneously. Even if his answers are fiction. Especially if they are fiction.

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One of the twins is teaching *Deda* how to become a witch. She straddles a broom, runs around the house, and shouts, “Fly, fly.” Both twins were severely premature and spent the first two months of their lives in the neonatal intensive care unit. That was the land of terror, though the providers were angels.

Now, the twins are wise beyond their age. And beyond *Deda's*.

*Deda* records the girl's flight on his phone. She hits a cup of water on the table with the broom's handle. The other twin joins them, and they wipe the paddle together. They laugh. *Deda* cries.

Q. *Deda*, why are you crying?

A. Sometimes people cry from joy.

Then *Deda* will do the following:

1. Say: “Cooperation, good humor, and civility. That’s how you learn to fly. That’s how you learn what magic is. Everything else is superstition, terror, and dark ages.”
2. Write his words down for posterity and for posting them on X later.
3. Take the broom and fly three times around the moon. Return to Earth. Home is where the twins are.

At least this was what *Baba* suggested he do when they retired to their room.

But *Deda* edits the last sentence. Aloud.

Home is where the twins and *Baba* are. Such a home stands forever.



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## II. An Occurrence at Owl Creek Farm

Fifty years later, another man, also known to his grandkids as *Deda*, stops by the farm stand and kills the car engine. His grandkids in the back chatter with his wife in Russian. That was the language of the country from which *Deda* and *Baba* came.

While he was driving, *Baba* told the kids that every human being has a guardian angel in Heaven. Even kids have one. The angels’ sole job is to protect the people from harm.

She twists in her shotgun seat to see their reaction.

“But why do people get killed sometimes, *Baba*?” the oldest boy asked. He is the smartest ten-year-old in North America.

“Because Heaven is far, and the evil people are too fast sometimes. Or the angel’s weapon misfires. Or the evil people wear flak jackets. Or, sometimes, angels take a nap.”

*Baba* always has the right answer.

*Deda* has been shopping at the Owl Creek Farm for years. He likes its name, perhaps taken from the ancient short story about the First Civil War, except that the story had a bridge instead of a farm, and a young man as the protagonist. If *Deda* remembers correctly, the young man had an illusion of escaping from the gallows, but it turned out the escape was only a daydream, and he died in the end. A quaint but still logical plot.

So far, *Deda's* family has been lucky. No one assaulted, let alone shot them.

*Deda* wants to buy a gun for protection, but *Baba* is against it. She says that *Deda* can't shoot straight. She said he would hurt the family before he hurts the attackers. *Deda* is patient. He tries to emphasize his technology know-how rather than his shooting skills. He can buy the newest, auto-aiming laser gun that never misses the intended target.

"Besides, the laser gun is good for the environment," he keeps arguing with *Baba*. "No lead, copper, or zinc from spent ammunition."

"But imagine if the kids get hold of it and auto-aim at each other. Or at you."

*Deda* sighs. "Maybe we should keep the kids home while we are shopping?"

"We can't leave them alone, can we? Or leave me alone with them?"

"Maybe just a flak jacket, then?"

*Baba* shrugs. He interpreted that as a yes. So, he wears the jacket when he's outside.

Now, *Deda* tells them to lock the doors while he is shopping. The car is mildly plated. They hope it's enough.

There is no line at the store.

*Deda* knows the owner. The owner knows him, so she lowers her machine gun when he walks in.

"How's business?" he asks.

"People are afraid," she answers tersely. She also wears a flak jacket. She's smart.

*It was the wrong question to ask, Deda* thinks.

"Sorry," he says.

She brings the food he asked for and bags it.

"The world is dying," she says. "Everyone is dying."

"No emergency room big enough for them all," he says.

*Deda* returns to the car with two plastic bags full of veggies, fruits, and eggs in his arthritic hands. Halfway through, he faces a man with a pistol pointing at *Deda's* chest. He seems kind of young. Round eyes, thin mustache, pointed ears. At that age, *Deda* had been an engineer, inventor, and a short story writer.

"Give me your wallet, old fart," the man says. He sounds nervous. Maybe this is his first robbery. Maybe he's afraid of death. Not his own death, but of *Deda's*.

Old fart... How quaint. Couldn't he come up with a better pickup line? This new generation has no imagination.

*Deda* puts the bags down carefully. The eggs... Strangely, even to him, he's not afraid. He wears a flak jacket after all. He reaches for his wallet. Credit cards don't work anymore, and inflation is rampant. So, the wallet is full of paper bills. A fat wallet.

The man misinterprets *Deda's* gesture. He fires his gun. He *is* nervous.

The bullet spins in the spiral grooves inside the gun's barrel. The bullet is not evil. It's just doing its job. It's cold and efficient. It's confident in its destructive abilities. It perceives that *Deda* is too slow to react. No auto aiming is needed. And the bullet probably thinks that the flak jacket is a cheap imitation.

Thankfully, *Deda's* guardian angel in Heaven intervenes at that moment, slowing the bullet. It loses its momentum and gets stuck in *Deda's* jacket.

*Deda* falls to the ground just in case. Maybe the man would think *Deda's* dead and leave him alone. And, most importantly, leaves *Deda's* family.

The man turns and runs away. Apparently, he's more scared than *Deda*. A wimp. So many young people are wimps now. And they are too slow.

A few minutes later, *Deda* gets up. He can't see the man anymore. *Deda* feels strangely energetic, even elated. His arthritic pain is gone. Maybe because he won the fight without firing a single shot. He checks the bags. The eggs are intact. He walks back to the car. He feels like walking on the clouds.

*Baba* and the kids run toward him. *Deda* smiles. He puts down the bags and makes a victory sign with both hands.

Yet they bypass him and keep running, screaming, their faces wet with tears.

*Deda* turns around. He sees an old man on the ground, face up. His shirt is torn, and so is the flak jacket underneath it. Blood is soaking the grass under his unmoving body. The man is watching Heaven with unblinking, open eyes, perhaps seeing a guarding angel whispering Sorry with its celestial lips.