

THE TWO BABAS

By Alain Elkann

Baba Emma and Baba Marcella had been bosom friends since the days when, still young and thin, they had lived in Treviso. Now they were old, they had lived in New York for more than 20 years, but they were still bosom friends. They had always lived in the same cities and worked at the same job – private nurse or, as they put it in their part of Italy, a *baba*, which was more like a wet nurse but also was a word used to describe an old gossip. They knew almost nobody in New York, save for a few friends from their home town in Italy, whom in fact they rarely saw, and they always met every Wednesday, their day off, and spent the whole day together.

Their meeting place was a run-down, old-looking Coffee Shop on the corner of Levington Avenue and 83rd Street. In the winter they would sit there all afternoon, wolfing down plates of ice cream, pastries and other titbits. They had always been gluttonous for sweets, and as they grew older they had become quite fat, and now the two of them put together must have weighed close to half a ton.

Besides their common passion for sweets, they also shared the pleasure of talking solely and incessantly about the people and families for whom they worked, and they would tell each other in enormous detail everything that had happened to their employers and everything they had said during the past week. For some years now Baba Emma always talked about Arthur and Baba Marcella always talked about Mr Souvlaki. What was equally fascinating to both of them were the slight differences which marked their work. Baba Emma specialised in somewhat abnormal children, while Baba Marcella took care of old men whose health was not good. Two worlds which seemingly stood at opposite poles but were in fact quite similar. Arthur was an eight-year-old boy whom Baba Emma had cared for since he was a year-and-a-half old. What gave him a slight abnormality was his excessive weight which, despite his growth, he still had not gotten rid of. He was extremely fat and although doctors of all kinds had been consulted, all of whom had unanimously diagnosed him as very healthy, and although he had gone on very rigorous diets, he was still disproportionately fat, unlike his parents and his brothers and sisters. With the passing of the years this fatness had become not only a physical burden but also a moral one, for not only did he have great difficulty in moving about but also in communicating with the other children who continuously and maliciously poked fun at him and derided him.

All this had given him a terrible inferiority complex and a truly unusual timidity for a child of his age. The fact is that the situation had embittered him to such a point that his placid nature was at times transformed and he was then capable of really dreadful behaviour. Recently he had become quite withdrawn and was surly to anyone who spoke to him, even his parents and his brothers and sisters. The only person with whom he had a relaxed and decidedly affectionate relationship was Baba Emma. It could be supposed that this privileged relationship was owed to two reasons: first of all, because Emma had been his nurse since his early infancy and so he had a sincere and real feeling of love for her, and, secondly, because she too was corpulent and so he felt physically similar to her and therefore could be at ease with her and affectionate too.

Baba Marcella had for several years now been working for Mr Souvlaki and obtained real pleasure from her work, which she found to be creative, interesting, and rich in demands upon her imagination. But with Mr Souvlaki she had undertaken something a bit different. It was work of assistance and care of a person well on in years, but the new, and thus especially pleasurable aspect of the work, was the fact that the person in question was blind and this tragic physical condition accentuated his physical sensitivity, giving him a sweet disposition and a truly singular ingeniousness. Their relationship was exquisite in that he would let Baba Marcella tell him all sorts of things and seemed always to welcome these accounts with delight and interest. She took good advantage of this and would paint the world as she imagined it, very different from the reality and quite splendid. A world composed of beautiful and pleasing things, which led her to spend exhilarating days with Mr Souvlaki, who thus lived a happy old age, above and beyond the many uglinesses of this world.

The chief reason for which Arthur adored Baba Emma was that she, feeling a deep pity for this obese and unhappy child, had gotten him to believe that being so fat was a gift of God and not a curse. It was the evident sign of the love and faith which God had in him and therefore a rare privilege. The derision of the others was understandable and could be discounted; it was the natural envy of the mediocre. She had also gotten him to believe that he was still too young to enter into contact with the world of the fat, wise and unusual men destined by God to provide an example to small, thin men, most of whom were impious and sinful. Besides, the fact that she was his nurse and also belonged to the world of the fat was an obvious sign of providence. Baba Emma, feeling a bit guilty about this lie, even though told for a good purpose, had warned Arthur never to talk to anyone about the privileges of fat men. The others were not supposed to know this secret, which for centuries had been handed down orally by fat men. So Arthur lived an existence of privilege beside Baba Emma. Yet now and then, chiefly when she was not there, he would forget his privileged position as a fat child and could not help but give rein to his nastiness, so long repressed. And then he would behave very badly towards the normal people who surrounded him. Baba Emma knew that Arthur's rages almost always took place when she was absent, and though she felt obliged to scold him her heart overflowed with happiness and she felt herself to be indispensable in her role as guardian of his serenity.

Yet from time to time she would be bitten by remorse, telling herself that perhaps one day Arthur would become grown up and discover the truth, might suffer from it and accuse her of having misled him, but in the meantime he was a little boy, things might change, and so it was much better to make him believe that he was one of God's favourites.

Baba Marcella was always interested to hear all the stories Baba Emma told about Arthur. It was her profound desire to be able one day to meet him, and so the two nurses had often planned to meet during the week in some public place and then Arthur and Mr Souvlaki could meet too. Unfortunately, this was not possible for the moment. Due to his invalid condition, Mr Souvlaki had never married and as a result had never had children. He had suffered because of this for years, until Baba Marcella, filled with pity by her employer's sad fate, in order to soothe him had told him repeatedly that providence had been kind to him by keeping him at a distance from the world of children. She had defined children as miniscule creatures, generally perfidious, who were just waiting around to become adults. She would often say: "The child is a potential adult; a hybrid in formation." Baba Marcella had thus explained to Mr Souvlaki why she took care of adults.

For the old are in reality what many mistakenly think children are: innocent, sincere, and far from the wretchedness of those insecure little bodies who try to develop and just for this reason live in a selfish microcosm, convincing themselves and others of their importance as children and future continuators of the human race. "In the child there is something bestial and primitive which is lacking in the old, who, close to death, is already almost reattached to infinite and universal matter...." Marcella would continually express these opinions in Mr Souvlaki's presence and had persuaded him that children were detestable creatures and that the only truly magical and sublime moment of life was actually old age, the time when one is finally wise and detached. For even greater reason, the blind man was fortunate, since, not knowing the forms and therefore the aesthetics of things, being solely concentrated on a world of imagination, music and other profound and recondite emotions, he is able to make a marvellous poetry of human life. Baba Marcella would often tell him: "Better not to see what is ugly and to imagine what is beautiful." Or: "Now, tell me Mr Souvlaki, you who are so sensitive, what do you feel inside of you? Tell me, you who can see into the depths of the darkness, you who have so rich an inner life, what do you see?"

Then Souvlaki, inflamed and trusting, would speak to her of the profound things and fantastic visions which were the fruit of his imagination. And since Baba Marcella was firmly convinced of Mr Souvlaki's exceptionality, she had no feeling of remorse over her ingenious lies, which had the merit of relieving his hardships.

On the days when Baba Marcella had a day off, Mr Souvlaki would become rather grim and sad and often would ask himself why sight and the extraordinary joys that accompanied it had been denied him. Then Baba Marcella would return and console him, explaining to him that each life has its precise significance in the occult order of nature. Each life is different from the next, all are complete and incomplete in the same degree. His was a life in the darkness, which often must be much more luminous than the light most people were destined to know.

By dint of spending their Wednesday afternoons together and talking almost exclusively of Arthur and Mr Souvlaki, the two Babas had become convinced that just as there were undeniable affinities between themselves, so probably the same thing could be said of the two solitary creatures who were in their care. But still it was a daring idea, to think of bringing them together. Arthur did not even know that blind people existed and since with strangers his actions were unpredictable but presumably disagreeable, he could very well react badly to Mr Souvlaki's presence, who would then have touched with his hand, so to speak, the fact that children are indeed dangerous creatures.

By now the two Babas had so set their hearts on a possible encounter of their two charges that they went to work with a will to prepare the ground for this event, which of course would have to take place under pleasant and not hostile circumstances. As a result, Baba Emma spent a lot of time revealing to Arthur the existence of the blind and so teaching him a love for those "who, together with the obese, share a particular love on the part of our Lord." At first Arthur reacted very badly, for he was offended by the idea that there might be other creatures especially favoured by God and could not agree to share that love with the blind. Astutely, Baba Emma, who did not want to compromise the future meeting, took a few steps backward and explained that the privileges enjoyed by the blind were different and certainly less important. Moreover, in view of their disability, which did not allow them a real freedom of action, it was one of the tasks of the obese to protect them. Arthur, reassured by the complete possession of his privileges and rendered curious

by these revelations, began to insist that he wanted to meet a blind person. He even began to nag her about it. Baba Emma continued to keep his curiosity alive by talking about them, but at the same time telling him that he was still perhaps too young for such a responsibility. So she asked Arthur to be patient, yet now and then he could not control himself and would begin crying desperately and threatened Baba Emma with savage reprisals if she did not immediately let him meet a blind person.

On her side, Baba Marcella set about persuading Mr Souvlaki, by now ferocious in his hatred of children, that in the world of childhood there was a happy exception; as always in nature. It was furthermore not quite right to ignore completely such an important aspect of human life as childhood. The exception was constituted of course by obese children – wholly special beings, extraordinary creatures who lived on the margins of the common world and were completely alien to the rash vulgarity of their neighbours. They are withdrawn children who feel different and grow up with profound inner qualities. Knowing themselves to be obese and therefore different makes them shy, analytical, wild dreamers who are in great need of affection.

One Wednesday in April, Baba Emma and Baba Marcella, eating with enormous sensual delight a chocolate cake and a raspberry soda, both admitted with joy that they were ready for the great encounter which had been so patiently prepared. They made an appointment in a corner of the park, a remote and quiet corner not far from the museum. They parted in a state of great excitement, positively bubbling with happiness.

Baba Marcella had no difficulty in convincing Mr Souvlaki that it would be interesting for him to make the acquaintance of an obese child, for by chance her colleague, a friend and native of Treviso like herself, worked in New York and actually took care of an obese little boy. If he had no objection to taking a walk in the park, she had made an appointment with her colleague, Baba Emma, for the next day, after lunch, in a secluded section of the park.

Baba Emma announced in solemn tones to Arthur that in recent times she had noticed a quite obvious maturation of his personality and as a consequence intended finally to give him the chance that very next day to make the acquaintance of an old blind man, Mr Souvlaki. Arthur chortled with delight and happiness and Baba Emma advised him to be polite and helpful, as was prescribed by his mission.

The first meeting was brief, at first a bit strained and awkward but all in all cordial. The two Babas were anxious and tense with emotion, and their two charges were both shy and curious about each other, Arthur above all. After the meeting Arthur bombarded Baba Emma with questions about Mr Souvlaki and Mr Souvlaki spoke a great deal about Arthur with Baba Marcella. The Babas, when they met on Wednesday as was their habit, were very excited and after much discussion back and forth came to the conclusion that the meeting was a success and decided to repeat it.

Thus there followed numerous meetings which, as time wore on, jumped from once to twice a week and finally became a daily occurrence. Under the alert and proud eyes of the two Babas, one might even say that the two formed some sort of friendship. And after a while they seemed to be bound by a bizarre affection. Arthur listened with avidity and intense curiosity to Mr Souvlaki who would tell certain long anecdotes, and in turn the old gentleman found in Arthur the son he had not had and a young friend whom he could not see but whom he seemed to know inside out. They shared a particular discretion which was in reality a complicitous silence in regard to their physical

failings, of which they never spoke. They were two human beings who seemed to enjoy each other's company and so experienced truly extraordinary moments with each other. Moments of intense calm and intimacy. Both of them would see the arrival of Wednesday as a real nightmare, a hateful day when they were compelled to undergo an enforced separation. They did not know that the two Babas met regularly in their Coffee Shop. Their friendship quickly went far beyond what the two Babas had envisaged. At the start, the Babas were pleased by this, but slowly they realised that the intimacy attained by their charges had slightly separated them from that intensity of relation to which they were accustomed and they began to be upset about it. They felt that certain shadowy areas were coming into existence, small secrets, and so they began to think that their very indispensability could be put in doubt. It was thus that the two Babas began to be attacked by a very decided form of jealousy. Spontaneously, instead of spending their Wednesday pontificating on the talents of Arthur and Mr Souvlaki, they started to find faults in them, weaknesses, and even to make malicious remarks about them from time to time. Baba Marcella worked to darken the image of Arthur in Mr Souvlaki's eyes, and Baba Emma did the same with Mr Souvlaki in Arthur's.

The two charges soon noticed the jealousy of the two Babas and since they considered it rather silly, they decided from then on to behave in such a way as to confirm the women's suspicions. So they pretended to have mysterious secrets between them, which they refused to discuss with the two Babas. If by chance the Babas would question them, they ran for cover and gave evasive replies. In reality, when in the park they would go off a bit to talk by themselves, they did nothing but talk about the reactions of the two Babas.

Unfortunately, the Babas, who had not the slightest sense of humour and in the most absolute sense did not understand the very idea of a joke, ended up by being really insulted and jealous and full of suspicion and decided to put a definitive end to the relationship by using their absolute power over their charges.

So, by common accord, they gave up the daily meeting in the park and decided to go back to meeting only outside their work, as always on Wednesday afternoon.

It was quite simple. Baba Emma told Arthur that Mr Souvlaki had left town and Baba Marcella told Mr Souvlaki that Arthur had gone away. Neither of them were satisfied with these superficial and improbable explanations and there followed long days of interminable grouches and frightful caprices on the part of Arthur, while Mr Souvlaki closed himself up in a dignified silence of disapproval. Then there were days when in order to annoy the Babas, Arthur spoke with great affection of Mr Souvlaki, and Mr Souvlaki told Baba Marcella how delightful little Arthur was.

Then, with the passage of time, their memories of each other began to fade and slowly everything went back to the way it used to be. Two small diverse but similar worlds, well-guarded and jealously watched over by the two Babas, who, once again aware of their positions of unchallenged indispensability returned with renewed pleasure to their meetings and conversations of old. Baba Emma told with sincere affection what her little Arthur had done during the week and Baba Marcella did the same, describing her serene existence in the company of Mr Souvlaki.