



Excerpt: Say Goodbye to Her by Shereen Tadros

Baba was full of stories. Stories that he told and retold until they were woven deep into Dalia; until every word and every pause was as much a part of her as the sinews which wound around her body, tying her together.

But there was one story he told Dalia only once. Walking home after a night at the Sultan Hussein, his veins overfull with Turkish coffee, badinage and just one or two thimblefuls of whisky, Baba told her the story of the curse.

Mama was brought up a good Protestant girl; the daughter of a minister. Protestants, of course, were sensible people. Their churches were not full of extravagant icons and thick incense. Their saints did not wrestle with devils in the desert, tie their hair to the ceiling or have spiritual ecstasies. No. They had nice, quiet services that finished on time. Of course, Mama, good Protestant that she was, said she preferred the plainness of the small Anglican church in El Mansheya. But there were certain things she cherry-picked from Baba's Coptic Orthodox faith. She liked the smell of incense, for example. She crossed herself when she was scared. And during the business with the curse, it was Father Polycarpus, the Coptic Priest, she had consulted.

The curse had afflicted Mama suddenly. One day, she was perfectly well, and the next, she started bleeding. The bleeding was constant, unremitting, exhausting. She took to her bed for weeks, maybe months. (Dalia thought she remembered that. She was only allowed in to see her for short moments at a time. A hug, a weak smile, and she would be ushered away).

Baba paid for the best doctors, but they all left perplexed and defeated. Eventually, Baba, *her* Baba, the man of reason and logic, of degrees and doctorates, called upon one of the Seers from the villages.

"It's a curse," she said simply. "Medicine won't cure it. It's more powerful than that." She paused before adding, "She hates you, you know, your mother-in-law. This is strong magic."

It was then that the priest was called for. What could it mean? He stroked his long black beard and looked at Mama as though he were debating how much to say. He'd seen this kind of thing before, he said. The idea of a curse, unsavoury as it was, should certainly not be discounted. However, the solution was more difficult. But they would find it, he assured her.

And so, they prayed. They fasted. They beat their breasts. They lit candles. They visited sacred shrouds and they used anointed oil. They did all the usual things.

Nothing worked.

The priest read and re-read the ancient texts. He pored over the writings of the Desert Fathers and pondered the wisdom of the Synaxarium. He asked other priests' advice when he met them at bishopric occasions. And finally, after weeks of research, he had a suggestion.