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Missy: A Postscript to The 1001 Nights

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Missy: A Postscript to The 1001 Nights

Good evening. My thanks to Professor Khan for his kind introduction; likewise to the university's Department of Near Eastern Studies for sponsoring this lecture series and inviting me to participate in it, and finally to all of you for braving this inclement weather to hear a bit of my story. I wish that this were a peaceful, crescent-mooned evening, but "It was a dark and stormy night" is probably a good way to begin my tale. Shall we?

Okay: as you will have noted in your program, my name is Jamilah-Melissa, which sounds like a hyphenated first name: "Jamilah-Melissa What?" one might ask. But as you may also have noticed, we characters in the *Kitab Alf Laylah Wah Laylah*, or *Book of A Thousand Nights and a Night*, or *The Arabian Nights*, while we may have titles—like Shah Zaman or Sultan Somebody or Caliph Whatshisname—usually go by one name only: my mother Scheherazade, for instance; my Aunt Dunyazade (of whom more to come), et cetera. One of my brothers had two names (Ali Shar); the other didn't (Gharib). Don't ask me.

But now that we've got all hands on deck, so to speak, let me remind you how Mom's story begins and ends. Shahryar, the "King of the Islands of India and China" (whatever *that* means), is so outraged at the discovery of his wife's infidelity, as well as that of his brother Shah Zaman's wife, that he quote "marries" (anyhow, deflowers) a virgin every night and has her killed in the morning, lest she cuckold him. Soon enough, all families with maiden daughters are getting the hell out of there, until the country is on the verge of collapse and the Shah's Grand Vizier—whose job it is to come up with a new maidenhead for his boss every night Or Else—has run out of victims.

Whereupon, as you all know, the Vizier's daughter Scheherazade (my mom-to-be) volunteers herself, over Grandpa's protests (the Shah had been sparing her as a political courtesy to his second-in-command), asking only that the Shah please let her kid sister Dunyazade (my Aunt Doony) come sit by the bed to comfort her through her defloration and presumably the final night of her life—not telling him, of course, that their plan is for Kid Sis to then ask whether they mightn't hear a little *story* before all hands fall asleep. The Shah reluctantly agrees to her proposal, groom and bride go to it, Aunt Doony asks her post-coital question per program, Shahryar gives his OK, and Mom launches into

the first of what will be a series of tales-within-tales, timing it to break off in the middle-of-the-middle-of-the-middle-one, more or less and so to speak—right at the crack of dawn, when “the first rooster crows in the east”—and the Shah decides not to kill her until he’s heard the end of her story.

Which is to say, her *stories*, since Mom sees to it that whenever one story ends, she immediately begins another, to be broken off when the going’s good—the narrative equivalent of *coitus interruptus*—on and on for a thousand and one nights. Then, on the thousand-and-second morning, she asks Aunt Doony to fetch the nursemaids in with her and Shahryar’s three children, and in they come—“one walking, one crawling, one suckling,” so the story goes—and she begs for her life on their behalf, a request that the Shah immediately grants, having long since realized that he loves not only Mom’s stories but their teller as well. So he marries Scheherazade, his murderous brother Shah Zaman marries my Aunt Dunyazade, and all hands live more or less happily—not “ever after,” but until the Destroyer of Delights rings down the curtain on them and their story.

Now then, those three kids, of whose serial births and prefatory pregnancies there’d been no mention at all in the course of the thousand and one nights of Mom’s ordeal, and of whose gender there is no mention even at the end—the “walker” was my brother Ali Shar, now sixty and living all over the map with his wives and concubines; the “crawler” was brother Gharib, now a late-fiftyish bachelor, always Mom’s favorite because Ali Shar was Dad’s; and the “suckler” was Yours Truly—Aunt Doony’s favorite, perhaps in part because I was nobody else’s until my late, not-especially-lamented husband came along.

Ah, life! And ah, marriages—anyhow, the prearranged sort. I was still in my teens when they hooked me up with Never-Mind-Whom. Not a *bad* guy, actually; we never really clicked (Hubby was more interested in his work and his assorted concubines than in me), but we got along okay, I suppose, and then *poof!*—the D-of-D saw fit to sink his ship on what was supposed to be a reenactment of Sindbad’s First Voyage. “No sweat,” Aunt Doony said, “your mom and I will find you another one.” But the fact was, I just didn’t feel like marrying again, perhaps because of my no-better-than-C-plus first marriage, perhaps because I simply felt no need for it. I experimented briefly with a lesbian connection—not unpleasant, but not my thing. Since then I’ve been content to be more or less celibate—“Call me *Nunyazade*,” maybe?—satisfied with friendships male and female. I don’t much miss sex, I guess (well, maybe a little, now and then), but I do miss intimate companionship: a genuine *bond*

with somebody, beyond mere friendship and sibblingship. Know what I mean?

And that's enough about that. As you may recall, when that shmen-drik Shahryar (excuse my French) came off his crazy entertain-me-or-die thing and made a proper wife of my mother at the story's end, he then said, "Oh, one more thing, dear: please *retell* all those thousand-and-one-night stories to my scribes, so they can write them down for our kids and grandkids and the world in general. Okay?" Can you imagine? But Mom, being Mom, said, "Sure, hon, just give me a year or three." (Do the math: 1001 divided by 365 equals 2.7424657 or thereabouts.) And by Allah, she *did* it, one way or another: came up with 267 stories (including the tales-within-tales and tales-within-tales-within-tales), plus about ten thousand lines of verse for good measure. Who knows (or cares?) whether the ones that she recited for the scribes are the same ones that she spun out over the years, or new ones that she cooked up as she went along, or some mash-up from the repertory? Mom herself probably didn't know (or care): just get the job done, on with the stories, et cet.! I remember asking her for my usual bedtime story one night when I was a little girl—imagine Mom having to spin out bedtime stories for us kids before going in for sex-and-storytelling, copulation-and-fabulation, with Dad! But she did it, one way or another. That particular night, e.g., when she couldn't come up with a story for me, she said, "Once upon a time, Missy, there was a story that began, quote *Once upon a time there was a story that began* double-quote *Once upon a time there was a story that began* triple-quote *Once upon a time there was a story that began*—et cetera, ad infinitum, okay? Or ad nauseam, sweet-heart—whichever."

To which I probably replied, "Add *what*, Ma?"

Such a yarn-spinner!

Well. We kids grew up; our parents grew old. Shahryar and Shah Zaman died—*au revoir*, though they were certainly sweeter guys in their old age than they were in their prime—and Mom and Aunt Doony spent their last years together in a nice mid-rise continuing-care condo that we set them up in, on one of the not-yet-overdeveloped "Islands of India and China." More accurately, that *I* set them up in, though my brothers were of considerable help with the moving-in chores after I'd done the searching and finding with Aunt Doony's help.

Dear, dear Aunt Doony—what would I have done without her? She was the mother that Mom never managed to be, at least to me; *she* was the one that I could really talk to, and who would really listen. Mom was too busy cooking up her entertain-me-or-die concoctions, and

then repeating them for the scribes per Dad's orders, and then supervising their publication, dealing with agents and publishers and booksellers, not to mention seeing her kids—read: “her sons”—through adolescence and college, which I would never have managed without Aunt Doony's help.

Oyoyoy. On with the story?

I mentioned college—somewhere in my undergraduate adventures I took a course in something like Yarn Spinning 101, where we actually read Mom's *Thousand and One Nights* and other such tale-cycles, and I learned that a Story involves what's called a Ground Situation (or, more technically, a dramaturgically-charged “unstable homeostatic system,” like the state of affairs in Shahryar's kingdom before Mom came to the rescue) and a Dramatic Vehicle (enter Scheherazade), which then Complicates some Conflict through the story's Rising Action to its Climax and Denouement—much like the course of intercourse from titillation through copulation to orgasm and *Ah!* Applying that pattern to my own story-thus-far, it seems to me that what we have on our hands here tonight—or I on mine, anyhow—is a Ground Situation: the late legendary storyteller Scheherazade's middle-aged daughter, now husbandless as well as childless, manages to get by on the lecture circuit but is looking for a handle on her life's Next Stage, dot dot dot.

Questions? Vehicle, anybody, now that we've established my Ground Situation?

No Vehicle? Okay, then, I'll catch a cab—and someday, with Allah's help, maybe find my own vehicle and put myself in the driver's seat. Thank you and good night.