

# Lustrous Companions: ‘Do we get dick in heaven?’

Mohja Kahf

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*(They will be) on couches inlaid  
Reclining on them, facing each other  
Round about them (serving), eternal boys  
With goblets, beakers, and cups (filled) from  
clear-flowing fountains  
No after-ache will they receive therefrom,  
nor will they suffer intoxication  
And with fruits that they may select  
And the meat of fowls, any that they may desire  
And Companions with beautiful,  
big, and lustrous eyes,  
Like unto pearls, well-guarded.*

—Quran: Al-Waqiah, 15–23<sup>(1)</sup>

“Do we get dick in heaven?”

My best friend’s Aunt Maryam whispers to me during the ladies’ Quran study halaqa at the Jersey City Mosque. We are doing “The Merciful,” the chapter of the Quran where all the sexy virgin babes are promised to men in paradise. “Men get pussy. Do we get dick?” Maryam says. I snort laughing, but turn it into a coughing fit and cover it with the scalloped edge of my headscarf.

“Ecksi-kuse me?” the assistant imam says in his excessively Egyptian accent. “Does zi sister have a question, inshallah?” Dark-skinned and muscular, he’s sitting next to the visiting sheikh and fielding the questions. This session, for ladies exclusively, had been scheduled on the visiting dignitary’s agenda at the insistence of Nany Elhamadany, the matriarch of the sisters’ Quran group.

“Yes, brother,” Maryam says. Oh my God. I can’t believe Maryam is going to ask it out loud. Then again, it shouldn’t surprise me; that’s Maryam for you. “Do women get to have sex in paradise too?”

“Ecksi-kuse me?” The dark-skinned assistant flushes an even darker shade under his manly thick beard. Beards turn me on; it’s a Muslim girl thing, I guess. We are all sitting on the prayer floor after maghreb, with our legs tucked to one side under our caftans, at a safe distance of about three yards away from the two men — but still close enough to smell the sandalwood scent from the stocky body of the assistant imam. He sits semi-kneeling with his ankles tucked up under his butt, his pants straining against the posture. I try not to look at his crotch. Carpet. Carpet. I look at the curlicues in the carpet instead. Maryam, who’d come to the mosque straight from her factory shift and is in black jeans and a long purple turtleneck, sits cross-legged at one end of the

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<sup>(1)</sup> Author’s note: The Quranic epigraph is from a 1985 edition of the Abdulla Yusuf Ali translation, with a few changes. I changed his youths of perpetual (freshness) to eternal boys, following the original more closely; couches encrusted (with gold and precious stones) to couches inlaid because there are no actual stones or gold in the Arabic; his flesh of fowls to meat of fowls because when we sit at table we

horseshoe half-circle we form, a prayer rug laid over her lap where her legs are apart. Her bushy black curls push out from underneath the edges of the purple and black checkered headscarf she's wearing.

When Maryam asks her question, her niece, my best friend Reyann, who's sitting on her rump with her arms circling her bent knees, ducks her face down behind her knees. I'm not sure if she's cringing or hiding a smile. Reyann is like that, half old-school and half hip; I never can tell which way she'll cut on something.

The assistant imam leans toward the visiting scholar from Egypt and whispers something, his eyes downcast, his long eyelashes lying down and surrendering on his cheeks. He is unaware of the grace of his half-turned torso. Glory be to God. Carpet, not crotch, I will my eyes. Sex on the mosque floor, a flash fantasy, to try out tonight in bed with my brand-new husband, the packaging still fresh, yes. I memorize the curlicues in the carpet. Thank you, God.

The sheikh starts visibly. "Any woman who wants such a thing is not likely to make it to paradise," he says drily. The other ladies titter.

"What about the aya that says 'round about, boys of eternal youth shall serve them?' What about that?" Maryam says. But the circle is breaking up.

Maryam lights up just outside, on the stoop of the mosque, and starts to pace at the bottom of the stairs while Reyann goes to get the car from the back lot. "It's just that I follow all the fucking rules," she says to me, inhaling her first draw. "I never had sex before marriage. I don't screw around on my husband. And let me tell you, *habibti*," she says, jabbing her cigarette at me, its end a point of orange light in the night, "it's not because I haven't had ample opportunity. This bod," she says, using her free hand to tap her J-Lo jello rear-end, which the purple turtleneck falls over but does not entirely obscure, "this bod has had some opportunities thrown at it."

Some of the ladies floating down the mosque stoop in their caftans glance at her, standing in the street emphasizing her booty. "Hurry home to your husband, woman," Nany Elhamadany, the Egyptian grandmother of the halaqa, calls out to Maryam, clucking and wagging her head as she walks heavily across the street leaning on her two daughters-in-law, her beige caftan sweeping the ground majestically. But a smile is twitching at the corners of her mouth.

Reyann drives up in her tiny battered Geo. Maryam lifts the front passenger seat forward and waits for me to get in the back. I nestle next to stacks of old *Azizah* magazines and Reyann's smelly sneakers and workout clothes.

"Drive to Hoda's," Maryam orders. She isn't ordering, really; that's just how she talks. What she means is, "After we just got the blow-off like that, don't you girls want to go let off steam at Hoda's Hookah House and Cafe with me? C'mon."

Maryam's only seven years older than Reyann and I, at thirty more like a big sister than an aunt to either of us. She danced at my wedding in Paterson, with a red silk scarf tied across her curvy hips, and pulled a reluctant Reyann out to dance with her.

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eat meat, not flesh.

We're Gaza girls, came over in the 1980s with our parents, old enough to remember Israeli soldiers beating twelve-year-old kids with slingshots to a pulp, young enough to break in the English language for our use like a pair of red high-top Converse.

It's Friday night and Hoda's is hopping. We get an outdoor table so we can do hookah. The Hudson River flows nearby underneath the terraces of the cafe but is not visible at night. It's a young man who comes to light up for us, with pearly skin and heavy eyebrows like Waël Kfoury, the Lebanese hottie. The band is covering one of Waël's old girlfriend's songs, Nawal's hit "Layali." The nargileh is beautiful, old blue glass with faded gilding and a tightly coiled red and purple pipe with fur trim. Our pipe boy has our coals glowing and Maryam picks up the water pipe and draws to get it going.

"Here — have one of these," our gorgeous Waël lookalike says, handing her a mouthpiece. God be thanked for creating him for us to look at.

"Mmm," Maryam says, "thank you." She looks demurely down her purple and black checkered headscarf as she inserts the mouthpiece into the end of the long coiled pipe and draws again. "Him I want," she says when he leaves.

"Ecksi-kuse me?" Reyann says in a mock-Egyptian accent.

"Fuck," Maryam laughs, "I'd fuck him in a Muslim minute." We all cuss in English; somehow it seems less bad than cussing in Arabic. She blows smoke out her nostrils. I love the apple-y tobacco smell; it reminds me of my grandmother, whom I saw for the last time when I was five, back in Gaza. My grandmother loved smoking the shisheh, but life under a military occupation doesn't allow many evenings of unhurried pleasure. "Not for real, I mean. I wouldn't do that to my Hamudy. I am not an adulteress. But just for fun. Fantasy time. I'd do the pipe boy. Wouldn't you?"

"I'm satisfied with what I'm getting, honey," I bluster. I'm still a newlywed, three months and counting. We just got to oral sex a week ago. There's still plenty of territory left to explore. Maryam passes the nargileh to me. I pick up a mouthpiece and draw on the pipe several times in a row. I want to get to the good stuff.

"I'm not like you, Batool," Maryam says. "I got married right out of high school. I been married thirteen years, see. You know how it was for me, with Abi dying of lung cancer and he wanted to find me a nice boy before he went. Your mom helped," she says to Reyann. "And I like my Hamudy. He's good to me." She inhales and exhales with obvious pleasure in the taste, the smoke hanging in the night air like curlicues. "So, it's not that I'm complaining about what I'm getting. But, you know, I just wonder. Like, how many different ways can you do it with just one guy? Is this the only dick I'm ever gonna get? In my life? This is all I'm getting?"

"I'm not getting any!" Reyann moans. "Twenty-three years is long enough to be a virgin, Aunt Maryam." Reyann and I both graduated from Jersey City Community College last year. "Find me a guy to marry, you guys. Palestinian, so my mom and dad will be happy, but like, a cool guy, too."

"You ladies ready?" The waiter is forty-something, broad-shouldered, cleanshaven, crinkly smile, Rajiv Gandhi-esque in face and physique. Maryam kicks me under the table.

"We are so ready, uyooni," Maryam says. Rajiv smiles at her winsomely. She orders a fruit salad with two varieties of melon and three kinds of berries. I'm having mint tea with three sugars, and a piece of knafeh. Reyann orders kibbeh, the kind shaped like fat cigars. "I need meat," she sighs.

"You do, uyooni," I say, taking a very long, satisfying puff. The water is really bubbling now. The music is changing over to Western, Bruce Springsteen, Glory Days. "I hope you get some soon."

"Look at us," Maryam says. "We don't drink. We don't fuck outside marriage. We are Good Fucking Muslim Girls," she pounds the table on each of the last four words. People glance up from their drinks.

"Alls I'm saying is, we better get some damn dick in heaven. Along with all those glasses of tequila we keep passing up." Maryam closes her eyes and draws. She's getting that itty bitty buzz that the nargileh has to offer.

"What about those 'eternal boys?' " Reyann says.

"According to the sheikh, the boys are for the men," I state. I heard him saying it sotto voice to the dark-lashed assistant imam as we picked up our pocketbooks and shuffled out of the prayer hall.

"Come again?" Maryam says. "The girls are for the men, we get that. What the fuck do nice Muslim men need boys for?"

Reyann busts up laughing. She pulls the nargileh toward her, its long snaky pipe, its furry trim. She puts on the sheikh's voice: "Zi good woman who pleases her husband, her reward in paradise is to be married to him forever."

"Damn," I say, "they don't want to have mercy and they don't want to let mercy come from God either."

"Alls I'm saying, girls," Maryam goes, "is I want to do our Pipe Boy in heaven. And that Irish boy I liked in twelfth grade but couldn't date, Paulie Corrigan. And the floor supervisor on the swing shift, who always comes in when I'm punching out."

"The black guy with the dreads, really? You go for that?" Reyann says.

"Mmm." Even though you can't see the river from here, you feel it moving when Maryam is talking, a black curl escaping from her scarf here and there around her animated face. "Then can I have my freshman comp teacher from college, Mr. De-Petrucchio?" I say. "And the waiter. Don't forget the waiter. In a sexy older man sort of way."

"Him too, habibti," Maryam dispenses him for me with a wave of her hand. "And Ricky Martin."

"Ricky Martin's gay," Reyann says.

"I don't fucking care. In heaven he'll be straight for me. And George Michael, you girls are too young to remember, I want him lined up ready to go, gay or not, right there at the door of paradise."

“And George Clooney,” I add, while we’re on Georges.

“And George Wasouf. With his beard.”

Maryam is on a roll. “Yeah but when he looked good — before the drugs. And Jay Z. And oh — the assistant imam. Please.”

“Mmm, dark chocolate. Yummy.”

“And Edward Said.” We’re Palestinian girls, we adore Edward Said. May he rest in peace. “But before he got sick, habibi Edward.”

“Yeah, in his Richard Gere prime, miskeen,” Reyann murmurs. “And I want Yusuf Taguddin from Sunday school at the Paterson mosque when we were fourteen. Remember what a babe he was, Batool?” She’s finally mellowing out on the nargileh. Wisps of hair are coming out from under her scarf. Her meat comes. Maryam tastes fruit of every kind. The knafeh is sweet in my mouth. The pipe boy comes around to make our coals glow orange and purple again and again. He and the eternally handsome waiter orbit, serving us. Beneath us a river flows. George Wasouf croons for us, and Bruce glorifies our days. Thank you, God, for nights of manifold pleasure. Thank you.

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**Mohja Kahf**, born in Damascus in 1967, is a Syrian-American poet and novelist. Her own conception of Islamic feminism influences the themes of her poetry and writing as do other issues facing American Muslims. Her first collection of poetry, *E-mails from Scheherazad*, evokes the mixture of pride and shame involved in being an “other,” with characters balancing on the line between assimilating and maintaining the habits of a good Muslim. She explores both important historical female figures in Islam as well as contemporary Muslim women. Historical figures prominent in Mohja’s poetry include Hagar, the wife of the prophet Abraham, Khadija and Aisha, wives of the Prophet Muhammad, and Fatima, daughter of the Prophet Muhammad. According to *The New York Times*, her writing on contemporary subjects “draws sharp, funny, earthy portraits of the fault line separating Muslim women from their Western counterparts.”

Of the intersection of Islam and art, Mohja says: “One of the primary messages of the Qur’an is that people should recognize the beautiful and do what is beautiful. This is not simply a moral beauty but a visual and auditory beauty as well. Conduct should be beautiful, writing should be beautiful and speaking should be beautiful.” The beauty in Mohja’s writing ranges from the classically reverent in her poems about historical figures to a beautiful humor that simultaneously enlightens. Egyptian-American professor Dina Ibrahim commented on Mohja’s work after attending one of her readings. “It is just so refreshing for someone to put a lighter spin on being a Muslim in America,” she said. “Are we only going to talk about the war, are we only going to talk about how our faith is so misunderstood? It gets really old.”

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