

press me, and I would explain. They would take in my words and say no more, while I would stuff my mouth with sweets.

As I look back today, it seems to me that this affair went on for years. Perhaps only months went by, which in my memory stretched on for years. I could ask, of course, the ladies themselves, those who took part in the game. But many have already gone to rest in the world beyond, and those who still inhabit our earth are scattered on all five continents. Even with those who have settled in Israel I no longer have ties. I don't know their dwelling places, let alone their names. Women—their names always change, all the more so in the land of Israel.

And one other thing remains a mystery: How did the town learn of my little book? Was it my mother who spoke of it, as mothers are wont to boast of their sons' great feats; was it my sister who, jealous over some trifle, blabbered out my secret; or—and this, too, is known to happen—was it simply by chance?

I only know that the game had left its mark on me, and who am I to fathom why. It left an even greater mark on its unwitting participants, the women. No doubt it is difficult to be a beauty. But it is far more difficult to be a beauty once removed.

Curiously, not one of them had dared to ask: And who appointed you judge? What woman would be fool enough to resist standing trial before a child's innocent eyes? Although as I recall it now, my eyes were not so innocent. They gauged each woman according to the standards of men. More than one man in town secretly relied on my judgment, as later they disclosed to me with a wink or a pat on my back. And I, resplendent in my blue sailor suit, felt myself every inch a judge.

Forty-four years passed since that time, when I chanced to be at a wedding in Brooklyn. The parents of both bride and groom were natives of Halab (Aleppo), my old home town. The guests in the room all knew one an-

other, while I entered a stranger. Questioning eyes encountered more questioning eyes, until my hosts appeared and explained: "He is one of us." And suddenly every face wore a smile. A commotion erupted over my seating when several shrewd ladies could spot no ring on my fingers—an occasion for one to win herself a *mitzvah*. I saw a look of matchmaking flash in one pair of eyes, and I mused loudly about my wife and my children, left behind, far away. My hosts spoke up again and explained: "*Hada min el kibbus*," meaning, that fellow came to us from his kibbutz. Everything became clear. My name traveled from table to table, whispered softly between one swallow and the next.

When it reached a certain table, a woman sprang to her feet as if stung. Agitated, she stretched out her arms to me. She mentioned her name. I remembered nothing. I tried to sweep away the mists shrouding my memory. She winked and said, "I was on your list; *la quatrieme*, in other words, the fourth." I peered at her with a look I preserved from those days, and I saw a faded, dimmed beauty. Layers of make-up covered eyes of smoldering coals. Lines etched by sorrow descended from her nostrils to the tips of her lips, branching out and converging again in a withered chin.

"And I thought they prospered in this Brooklyn of theirs," I wondered in silence.

"I still bear a grudge against you," she said, clearing space for a chair brought for me. "I had no quarrel with your choice for first and second place, but the third should have gone to me. That Lulu, her beauty was cheap. Several years after your family left town everyone saw she was no more than a *sharshuha*."

Forty years and more I have not heard this word *sharshuha*, which in our town was used to depict a coarse woman, cheap and common. The sound of the word and the woman's Arabic inflection were sullied by niether Brooklyn nor America. A growing curiosity began to crowd out my thoughts, and a wild guessing,

which the woman's story—when it finally came—confirmed.

"We came from Halab the day before yesterday, my husband and I. I put him in the hospital as soon as we arrived. I said to the doctors: 'Perhaps after the wedding?' They said: 'No, immediately.' What was one to do . . . ?"

"May God grant him full recovery." "Amen. To see you here—who would have expected it? Not even in my dreams. . . . Don't think me an old woman. I could not keep my age from you in any case. But I am not old. Here women my age look as young as my daughters. You never knew my daughters. Of course not. They were born after your family left for Jerusalem. Three girls—a jewel each, a precious stone. Consigned to live in a God-forsaken tomb. *Moti, ana*. [Would that God took me instead.]"

She brought out an embroidered handkerchief and blotted the tears which streamed, unrestrained, from her eyes.

"They are held hostage, until we return. We were permitted to seek medical treatment for my husband, provided we deposited a large sum of money and left our daughters behind us. If we do not return, they are lost." And a moment later: "As if they are not lost in any case."

I saw that her grief overcame her. I gave her my arm and escorted her out of the tumultuous ballroom. In an ornate waiting room, far from the band which now wove together *hora* and "rock," we found an armchair and a sofa standing side by side.

"Three daughters. The eldest—a widow (may it never happen to you), and the younger two spinsters, spinsters forever, shut-in virgins. With not a chance to marry and to raise families. Never. Do you understand?"

I raised my hand to call a passing waiter and asked for a glass of water off his tray. No, not whisky, thank you. No-no-no, not champagne. Just water. Two glasses. He saw the tears, and understood. OK. Right away, sir.

"The middle one and I—two drops of water. You remember how I looked