

WOMEN

A STORY BY AMNON SHAMOSH

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One of my earliest memories is of a list of beautiful women I compiled for myself. For myself and for them. I ranked them according to their beauty and assigned to each a number exactly as we were ranked at school, in the first grade: the best one in the class, the second best, and so on and on. When word reached the women of our town that a certain boy was compiling a list their curiosity was kindled, as was the rancor between them, both in public and in their hearts. Each aspired to rise above her sisters on the list. Because a child's judgment was deemed to be an honest and impartial judgment my importance in their eyes grew, as did their desire to find favor in mine.

I saw that they esteemed my judgment, and so I began to esteem it myself. Until then it was no more than a game. A list among many. I have always been enamored of beauty, and of all the beautiful things which the Holy One Blessed Be He crowded into His universe I thought women's beauty most alluring and pleasing, and for the eye—always within reach. Since in that year I had entered the first grade of the *Kutaab* [school, where the emphasis is on religious instruction]—where I learned to rank things as well as to write—I began also to make lists. I began with my mother's companions, and when I finished—every woman in town was inscribed. In our town everyone knew everyone.

From the day I first learned to write I was captivated by lists. I wrote a good many lists in my day. But not one of them—save the list of women—stirred much debate or conferred on me the title of unbiased judge. That being the case, I put aside the others,



and let the one list supplant them all. I inscribed the names of the chosen women with curving stylized letters. I took special pains with each capital I drew, because it was French that was at stake, as well as women. I tried to imbue the curlicued first letters of her name with the quality peculiar to each woman: was she tall and slender or short and plump; poised and sober, or all giggles and smiles. More than once I bit my tongue with the effort.

Three things took place once I gained my fame as judge. First, my esteem rose in both men's and women's eyes. (Men, it is well known, worry lest they show poor taste when selecting their mates. And they fret over their daughters' beauty the same as over their sons' wisdom—well, almost.) Second, some women began to pursue me. Third, some even to bite me. Those who tried flattery and kisses achieved the opposite of their intention. That to this day I shun women's kisses may be because of them. Those, on the other hand, who turned to sweets and small gifts found me at-

tentive. Not that I could be persuaded, God forbid, to advance one woman ahead of her more beautiful sister. I if the two occupied the same rung, and I was asked to choose, the generosity of one was the feather that tipped the scale in her favor.

It was in a small notebook that I inscribed my lists, and no one (that is to say, no woman) was allowed to peek. Only after persistent pleading, when a party had reached its zenith, I would bring out my little notebook and, to a chorus of wisecracks and cheers, read the names of the 10 most beautiful women in town. The suspense and the tension that hung in the air—I can still sense them today. Then my heart would go out to the shamed and disappointed ladies not named, and I would expand my list to 20. Beyond 25, however, I could never go, so as not to cheapen beauty, God forbid, by diffusing it too widely.

And the list kept changing—young girls reach maturity and pregnancies leave their mark and new modes of dress can often work wonders.

A fierce battle—sometimes vicious—was fought over the top spots on the list. It was fought, of course, with a smile playing upon the lips, with a studied expression which held both the list and its little authority to be grand and amusing jokes. But under the giggles and the face powder a real contest raged, a contest fed by familial and personal rivalries and passions just as underground waters feed innocent, playful streams.

Things went so far that I was engaged to explain why Olga was preferred to Reina, or why I chose Yvonne and not Sarah. I no longer know why. I can't remember how—they would

