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THE GIRLS OF PRINCETON

It is something of a tradition at Princeton, as elsewhere, for men to make lists of women. In "This Side of Paradise," Amory Blaine is asked by a roommate about the girls who send him letters, and Amory, as Fitzgerald put it, "named them off": "There's Marylyn DeWitt—she's pretty, got a car of her own and that's damn convenient; there's Sally Weatherby—she's getting too fat; there's Myra St. Claire, she's an old flame, easy to kiss if you like it." These were Minnesota flax. There were no women at Princeton when Amory was there, just before the First World War, but the advent of coeducation, in 1969, insured a vigorous samizdat of unrequited enthusiasm: names upon names of girls—written on bathroom walls or the fringes of lecture notes, uttered in ball sessions and bong sessions—across from whom the men of Princeton would like to sit in class.

But two weeks ago the Nassau Weekly, a student paper that plays the foil to the Princetonian, the school's draft daily, converted those yearnings into journalism, of a kind, with its final edition of the school year—the self-proclaimed "Super-Controversial Top Ten Issue." From an anonymous survey of about a hundred male undergraduates, two of the paper's three editors-in-chief, Adam Nemett and Alex Rosenfeld, derived a list and an article: "The Girls of Princeton: Our Ten Most Beautiful Girls." The four-page spread featured photo portraits, ardent appreciations, and brief Q. & A.s (all ten most beautiful girls cooperated, though three other most beautiful girls had declined). "There are a lot of guys on this campus who you'll find endlessly complaining about the dearth of attractive Princeton girls," Nemett and Rosenfeld wrote. "These guys are idiots, and here's proof."

The women are certainly handsome. The poses are demure. The profiles are delivered without irony, with nods to inner beauty and the perils of under-eating, and recollections of lame pickup lines ("Do you want to go home and have sex?"). Some of the names are startling:

"a person beautiful? VB: Passion. I would say that's the key quality. And uniqueness," a Penelope Tang ("My life is kind of my art"), and a Coco Stuf ("It's just like a natural reaction, like a second grade kind of mentality, you know, to go back and be like making a list"). The lone freshman, Mariana Fraga ("I love the grad students"), is pictured perched on Henry Moore's outdoor sculpture "Oval with Points." Milano Miodini, a senior, who is moving to California after graduation to be a Hollywood agent, cites as the most romantic spot on campus a nook "by the refrigerators" in the Tiger Inn, a beer eating club. Her roommate, Jacqui Neiss, talks about using her looks to get what she wants: "Like last night I'm desperately out of cigarettes, running around, and I'm like, 'Hi, random guy, can you give me a cigarette?'"

Needless to say, this package did not reach print without controversy. Princeton may be conservative, compared with say, Swarthmore, but it is college. In the weeks before publication, word of the "Top Ten" piece got around, in large part because the staff of the Nass, as it is known, was divided. Several editors, male and female, objected strongly to the idea, maintaining that it was demeaning to women, that it would exacerbate the eating-disorder epidemic, and, above all, that it would compromise the integrity, such as it is, of the Nass. (The Nass was founded in 1974, and is delivered free to dormitories and eating clubs. Generally, it is thin but keen gruel.) The editors embarked on a long and spirited e-mail debate. Various suggestions for accompanying pieces that would mitigate the article's offensiveness—"Top Ten Male Sluts"—were shot down.

"I don't necessarily agree that it's misogynist," Rosenfeld wrote in one e-mail, "but I'll certainly admit to it being puerile."

"I have always held you to be a professional, sensitive, receptive human being in person. I am sorry if I have been wrong," the publisher, Kristina Witt, wrote back later.

Before long, the Princetonian caught wind of the controversy. On April 26th, it reported, "NASSAU WEEKLY FUTURE IN DOUBT AS EDITORIAL STAFF RESIGNS EN MASSE," citing mutiny over the proposed "Top Ten." Sadly for the Prince, the Nass wasn't closing. Its editors, who couldn't agree on whether or not to do the "Top Ten," had banded together to put one over on their rival. Three days later, the Princetonian reported, "NASS' OBSCURED STAFF TURMOIL WITH DECENCY."

By the time the "Super-Controversial Top Ten Issue" came out, on May 9th, everyone was ready for it. The "Top Ten" spread was padded by the editors' e-mail debate, a half-page statement from the Organization of Women Leaders, and a quick list, sans photos, of "Talented Senior Women: A Different Top Ten."

"My objections remain," Witt said the other day.

Not so the honorees. "I was flattered," Jacqui Neiss said. Milano Miodini said she'd been getting pats on the back: "Hey hey, Top Ten." As for Mariana Fraga, the freshman, she's been out with Adam Nemett, the co-author, a couple of times.

Informing of this, Witt said, "I asked Adam and Alex at the beginning whether this was a ploy to meet beautiful women. And I thought I was joking."

—Nick Paumgarten