

## The girls at the pub

**Geneviève Brisac**

(Talking about a leaking water main and good hair colour)

There were four of us, sitting at our usual table. I was taking notes. Jean\* was looking over my shoulder. With her usual intransigence. With her usual anxiety. With her novelist's lack of discretion. It comes to the same thing.

'It's not a pub, of course, it's a tearoom,' Jean said, wiping her crumb-covered fingers on her woolly. 'Would you mind correcting that?'

'A tearoom where they serve beer,' I protested, 'so it's all right to say "pub", particularly for a piece about British Woman Novelists, otherwise no bloke's going to read it. "Pub" sounds better,' I said.

She winced. 'I think it sounds terrible,' she said.

Lies, superfluous adjectives, a sentence that lists, heavy-handedness, imprecision, show – all launch her on the warpath or plunge her into despair. I promptly made the correction: 'The girls are at the tearoom,' my notes now read. The girls being: Jean Rhys, Virginia Woolf, Alice Thomas Ellis, and myself, Geneviève Brisac. And I went on: We like this place better than anywhere because of the way it always smells of scones, because of the simplicity of the wooden staircase. The amaryllis by the cash desk. The long green leaves swaying against the window, inches from us, forming a miniature forest.

'Here we are, then,' Virginia\* noted, 'in the worst atmosphere of female edginess that could be imagined (and feared). The only things missing are a teapot and a few flowery frocks. You'll have noticed how, the minute it comes to discussing women, we always have something unpleasant in reserve. Women are hard on women.'

She spilled tea on her dreadful aubergine-coloured woollen skirt. And then, welling up (though this may have been due to an allergy), she said: 'Why does it have to be like this, why can we not acknowledge our need for warmth and affection when there is nothing more important in the world than our common need for intimacy and admiration!'

Whereupon we held a minute's silence.

It was raining, I'm sorry to say.

'What I like best,' said Jean in a small, determined voice, 'what I like more than anything is tittle-tattle, chatting about our failed love affairs, our problems with burst pipes, all those icy rooms where I waited in tears, and not even the money to stand myself a whisky. Literature, surely, is a sublimated form of gossip? Talking about people, poking fun. Talking about a broken heart and immediately afterwards dreaming of a brand-new home, the tiny shifts that our miserable little souls keep making. And too bad if no one takes us seriously,'

Alice\* had said nothing. She was carefully buttering her muffin.

'I know why we go unheard,' she spoke up suddenly. 'It's not for want of talking loudly enough or clearly enough. My husband, who like all yours (what an odd coincidence!) was a publisher, kept telling me. It's because we can't write the things we care most about. The fact is, they aren't necessarily pleasant.'

Jean muttered as if to herself: 'Of course not . . . The inside stories, smutty goings-on behind the scenes, the fact that one can fall in love with the way a man looks up at the sky. Who can stomach those awful women who are always on the lookout for embarrassing things to say? I'm always being told how irritating I am.'

And aloud, this fancy: 'I, for instance, very much like talking about hair. It's an inexhaustible subject, and so annoying. Finding a good hair colour. Finding a hairdresser who'll make you look pretty. Recognising that rediscovering your looks means rediscovering happiness.'

So we drank tea with milk, whisky, and vodka, we snacked on scones and muffins, and we watched the rain fall, peering up through the fogged-up window at the purple sky and the storm.

'And yet,' said Virginia. 'when I think of the service that could be rendered to humanity by a female Strindberg, by a sister of Juvenal, by . . . ' There were so many examples, she relapsed into silence.

At that moment, Sylvia swept in. Her delicate face, like a cheeky vixen, streamed with rain. She laid a large white sheet of paper, printed in black, on the wooden table top. 'I find this list\*\* marvellous,' she said. 'Let me read it to you. It expresses so well the unspoken, indeed unspeakable scorn and humiliation heaped upon women painters, poets, sculptors, and writers, even when their works sell, even when they become tolerably well known. The paradoxical invisibility! The social hatred! The threat hanging over them the whole time! As if we were still living in the days when they burned witches!'

And she drank her tea in one gulp.

‘Less of the hysterics, if you don’t mind,’ Jean said.

‘Calm down,’ said Virginia.

But Sylvia ignored them. She’s a Purcellian musicologist, she takes no notice of anything.

‘ “The advantages of being a woman artist,” she declaimed in English, translating this as “Reasons for feeling proud to be an English-language woman novelist.” ’

‘An elegant if free translation,’ I said, laughing.

She was not put off at all.

‘ “1. Working without the pressure of success.” Of course, goes without saying, we’re so modest.

‘ “2. Not having to be in shows with men.” I don’t quite understand the English here, what does it mean – not inevitably bumping into men at exhibitions? That can’t be right!’

She hesitated. Repeated the English sentence under her breath. Knocked a cup over and went on reading.

‘ “3. Having an escape from the art world in your 4 free-lance jobs.” ’

We burst out laughing as one: jobs to put food on the table, nothing new there. But Jean pointed out that it was not just women who took those. ‘They’re a pitfall,’ she said, rather too earnestly, ‘one that has lurked in the path of all feminist struggles for the last two hundred years – that blindness to the problems of other social groups. But all minorities have the same worry.’

‘What – women are a minority?’ I cried, without realising how absurd my vehemence was.

‘Yes,’ Alice said. ‘Culturally, among other things.’

‘I think not,’ said Virginia. ‘Or rather, the only cultural minority whose first concern is always the other minorities it belongs to at the same time. The only minority that always prefaces its remarks by saying, “It’s not because I’m a woman that I . . . ” or “It’s not because she’s a woman that she . . . ” And this age-old, chronic denial, which can be likened only to that with which Jews meet threats of anti-Semitism, invariably leads, each time we voice it, to the old one step forward, two steps back – throwing into doubt the things that are closest to our hearts, the battles we thought had been won long since.’

Imperturbably, Sylvia resumed reading. Now she was no longer translating; we were all aware of that.

‘ “4. Knowing your career might pick up after you’re eighty.”

‘Eighty. That won’t be long,’ I remarked calmly.

Sylvia touched my arm: ‘You mustn’t think like that. The pace of everything is so slow, don’t forget.’

‘ “5. Being reassured that whatever kind of art you make it will be labeled feminine” – and,’ Sylvia muttered, ‘you’ll be everlastingly and definitively mortified as a result. Mortified in a characteristically feminine way, of course.

‘ “6. Not being stuck in a tenured teaching position,” she intoned in a curious singsong manner. ‘Imprisoned by the worthy status imposed by a professorial chair, more like.

‘ “7. Seeing your ideas live on in the works of others. 8. Having the opportunity to choose between career and motherhood.” I’ll skip 9, it’s too specific. “10. Having more time to work when your mate dumps you for someone younger.” ’

‘I must remember that one,’ I thought to myself, ‘I must say it over and over again: more time to work. What a wonderful prospect!’

Someone came into the tearoom just then. A very good-looking man, drenched from head to foot. The proprietress got up to greet him, served him a hot chocolate and some brioches, and we began playing our favourite game: inventing a past for a stranger, guessing what he did, what fate had in store for him. The fact is, we never tire of taking an interest in men.

Then two women arrived and sat down behind us. Babette brought them little lemon cakes. Their voices were too loud as they discussed their health, talking of gastric refluxes, flatulence due to the menopause, something about a recalcitrant sphincter. Jean went into peals of laughter. Virginia made big eyes at us (‘We’ll never cure ourselves of our spitefulness to women,’ she sighed).

I said: ‘Let’s get back to our discussion. Look how easily we’re distracted, how little it takes to amuse us. The slightest thing diverts us from our preoccupations, causing us to turn our backs on what we hold most dear. That’s not how we’ll persuade them we believe in ourselves!’

‘Who’s talking about persuading anyone?’ Sylvia asked sharply. ‘Who are you talking about, anyway? No one lets themselves be persuaded.’

The man drinking his chocolate smiled at her and she smiled back.

I picked up the piece of paper and read on myself:

‘ “11. Being included in revised versions of art history” – yes, but later, much later. “12. Not having to undergo the embarrassment of being called a genius.” ’

I fell silent. The word ‘genius’ was like a lozenge in my mouth.

‘Says it all,’ said Sylvia, hugging me happily. She did indeed look very happy all of a sudden. I asked her where it came from, this air of serenity.

‘From the list,’ she replied. ‘I’m going to pin it up. It gives me the strangest feeling. I feel avenged.’

Outside on the street, the night was dark.

Never had we felt the sweetness of friendship so intensely.

\* The cast: Virginia Woolf (*A room of one’s own, Diaries*)  
Jean Rhys (*Letters*)  
Alice Thomas Ellis (*Les ivresses . . .*) [WHAT IS THE ENGLISH TITLE?]  
Sylvia Townsend Warner (*Lolly Willowes*)  
Geneviève Brisac (*La marche du cavalier*) [HOW WOULD YOU TRANSLATE THIS?]

\*\* The list: can be consulted at [www.guerillagirls.com/posters](http://www.guerillagirls.com/posters)