Dear UNSW,

Welcome to the inaugural Feminist Edition of Tharunka. There really is a giant vagina in the centrefold but that isn’t the main reason why we did this. Rather, we felt that women’s experiences are pretty damn well worth exploring and that feminism, for all its hugeness and divisions, is the best means by which to explore them.

This edition is packed with fantastic stuff. Liz Stern and Salima Yeung describe the lives of women in different geographies in ‘A Country Feminist’ and ‘Women of PNG’. In ‘Girls on Stage’, Jess Bellamy wonders why the history of theatre is such a “sausage-fest” while Su-Min Lim lets fly at sexual hypocrisy in ‘An Open Letter to Men Against Abortion’. Female Nobel laureates are celebrated in ‘Go Girls!’ and female musicians in ‘Riot Grrrl vs World’. And that’s just the start of it...

The Feminist Edition is also an experiment. Traditionally each year the Women’s Collective curates an all-female edition with minimal involvement by the usual editorial team. (The Collective will release an autonomous Womyn’s Issue later this year.) We felt, however, that that the breadth and urgency of feminist concerns was too great to be confined to a single magazine. We also believed it was important for the Tharunka editors, who have presided over a largely male team this year, to actively seek and curate contributions by women.

Finally we think that a feminist magazine is a cool thing to read. The best feminist writing is thoughtful, incisive, revelatory, dirty, provocative, exhilarating and fun. And then there’s the giant vagina. It’s reading a book for some reason so why don’t you sit right down and join it.

All the best,

Tharunka Editorial ‘10
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INSIDE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**PLACES**  
A Country Feminist  
Women's Rights in PNG  

**RIGHTS**  
Brothels in the Bible Belt  
An Open Letter to Men Against Abortion  

**CULTURE**  
Girl On Girl Action  
Riot Grrrl vs World  
Girls on Stage  

**CELEBRATIONS**  
Go Girls!  

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Tharunka acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land on which the University now stands.

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"That is how I see it. Thirty million is my rough guesstimate of how many desirable single women there are. A man needs a woman for confidence. He gets a boost on the job, career, with other men, and everywhere else when he knows inside he has someone to spend the night with and who is also a friend. This type of life I see is a closed world with me specifically and totally excluded. Every other guy does this successfully to a degree. Flying solo for many years is a destroyer. Yet many people say I am easy to get along with, etc. Looking back, I owe nothing to desirable females who ask for anything, except for basic courtesy – usually."

Extract from blog of George Sodini, who murdered three women at an all-female Los Angeles fitness centre. The attack was apparently in retaliation for the failure of desirable women to date him.

"Put them in prison," they said, "that will stop it." But it didn't stop it. They put women in prison for long terms of imprisonment, for making a nuisance of themselves – that was the expression when they took petitions in their hands to the door of the House of Commons, and they thought that by sending them to prison, giving them a day's imprisonment, would cause them to all settle down again and there would be no further trouble. But it didn't happen so at all: instead of the women giving it up, more women did it ... We women see so clearly the fact that the only way to deal with this thing is to raise the status of women; first the political status, then the industrial and the social status of women. You must make women count as much as men; you must have an equal standard of morals... Ten years ago it would have been impossible for any woman or any man to speak openly upon that question on any platform, because women had been taught that they must keep their eyes closed to all these things...All that is now at an end."

Extract from speech delivered by British suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst in Hartford, Connecticut on November 13 1913

"Gift him with a coloring book featuring you naked...Emblazon a close-up of your bra-covered boobs and his boxer-clad package on mugs... Buy him some lucky underwear for the big work meeting he's stressing over... Without asking, swap his empty beer for a fresh one when he's watching the game... A scrunchie can be used on a man's member to help him maintain an erection... Start by stacking six scrunchies on top of each other over his package... Use the ice cube to trace a chilly path along his naked body and then follow it with your tongue... Place the ice cube between your breasts and then guide your man's penis between them for a hands-free massage... Post-sex, slowly move the ice cube across your guy's back for a frisky cooldown."

Sex and relationship tips from the American edition of Cosmopolitan magazine, as quoted on Jezebel.com

"Talk about work, the weather, movies - interesting things... He must visit you at least three times before you visit him... When a relationship doesn't work out, you brush away a tear so that it doesn't smudge your makeup and you move on... Get a manicure... Take a bubble bath... Rules girls are not stupid!"

Dating advice from Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider, authors of The Rules
“I’m often tempted to whip out my brassiere, set it alight, twist tampons into my hair and leap around the lingerie ashes.”
“So, you’re a feminist eh? I mean, you’re all about sheila’s rights?”

Sure am! It’s the attitude I’ve grown up with. My parents wanted to make sure I got a fair shot at life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness [OK, perhaps not quite in those words]. They wanted to me to live with equality and integrity. So they taught me to stand up for myself, and to remember that my gender should never hold me back from what I want to do. Yes, I’m a feminist. Some might call it egalitarianism – the idea that people are equal and should be valued according to their capabilities.

“...So what, you’re a lesbian? Or like, a, bra-burner or some shit?”

“I dunno love, sounds a bit stupid to me. Aren’t you happy in front of the sink eh?”

“Hey, did you ever hear the one ‘bout why the bride wears white to a wedding? Well, she’s gotta match the fridge and the dishwasher! Guffaw, guffaw, guffaw!”

City kids, feast your eyes on a different perspective. You are in the home of all things flannelette, car-related, and many a beautifully-cooked rump steak dinner, with ubiquitous three veg and enough beer to refloat the Titanic. Unfortunately, you will find that it’s not the home of all things politically correct, open-minded and egalitarian. And it’s right in your own backyard. Welcome to Country NSW, my home.

Now I will admit that the above conversations are not transcribed word-for-word. [Except for the last joke. That one is pretty much quoted verbatim from the 492 times I’ve heard it...this year]. However, it’s a common attitude in my area that feminism is a dirty word for a young lady to use, especially one who intends to keep her dignity and her teeth intact. The friendly jibes, the not-so-friendly slurs, and the downright telling-offs are many and varied.

The best thing about saying you’re a feminist to a country bloke is watching the reactions. The looks of fear, the slightly hunted scowl, and the unconscious crossing of the legs are some classic examples. I’m often tempted to whip out my brassiere, set it alight, twist tampons into my hair and leap around the lingerie ashes, chanting ‘Want chocolate now! Me break your testicles! Women’s rights! Ooga-booga-booga!’ and similar phrases, just to bring their mental picture into reality. [You’ll be happy to know that I usually restrain myself].

The other classic countryman reaction to the feminist attitude is to go on the offensive. Crossed arms, a critical squint and phrases such as ‘But women already have it pretty bloody good; I’m sick of you lot banging on about your lib.’ The squint in particular makes it feel like they’re checking if the words ‘Lesbian’ or ‘PMS’ are printed on your forehead as an easily comprehensible explanation for your discontent.

And then there’s my favourite – dismissal followed by humour. ‘Fair enough that you want your rights, you want to work for getting the vote – oh no wait, that was a hundred years ago!’ (How short some memories are). ‘Now go make me a sandwich. Guffaw, guffaw, guffaw.’

These reactions are, and I hate to say this, the norm. I do have many liberal-minded male mates from back home who happily accept the ideas of feminism – but they’re not so keen on challenging the attitude of the majority. One of my best friends, Mitch, is a big, strong slab of Aussie testosterone. He takes a keen interest in alcohol, guns and chasing skirts, and I’ve kicked him in the shins so often for his hilarious ‘lady driver’ jokes I’m surprised he still can walk. But here’s the kicker (pardon the pun) – he does actually care about what I think and say, with respect for me as a person, not just a woman.

Yet he deliberately continues to say stupid sexist things to provoke a reaction from me or laughter from the boys. I don’t think I’m too sensitive about it - I’ve developed a pretty thick skin over the years - but the casual nature of it irks me.

And who colludes in this attitude? Often, it’s the country woman. Now, fair’s fair, some women get on with their lives as housewives and mothers, happy and helpful, and are indeed the backbone of social, cultural and family operations in small towns. But it’s the passive attitude that frustrates me. Not feeling any drive to do more than get married and start popping out kids, no inclination to step further than their own backyards. A friend told me recently about a girl he studies with at our local uni, who happens to work at Super Cheap Auto. She’s studying a degree in Business Management – so she can go back and manage said branch of Super Cheap Auto.

Then again, maybe I’m being too harsh. On a recent trip home I visited the hairdressers. Seriously, it’s cheaper than the city, Justine does a great job with my colour and I get to catch up on local gossip over my Bushell’s cuppa. Now, the hairdressers’ is a bastion of the female world in the country – everyone drops by to pass on
news, talk about their holidays and compare their kid’s latest disaster stories. But, by golly, it was so extremely and comfortingly NICE to be part of it. These ladies knew what they were doing, where they were going and what they were working towards – something better for them and theirs. They didn’t care if it was in a stereotypical ‘woman’s’ job; they love what they do and I’m pretty sure they weren’t feeling repressed or demeaned for it. But how they get judged by society is, I guess, another matter.

So as much as I call the Australian countryside my home, and it’s taught me to be a more compassionate, helpful and light-hearted person, it can get stuck in these kind of social ruts and prejudices. I see another exhausted and angry young mum in town, pushing a pram alongside her bogan hubby, and yet I’m the one that gets attacked for pushing the boundaries, rocking the boat. Feminism isn’t a picnic anywhere you live, just like any attitude that challenges conventions. But I guess sometimes it takes longer than you’d like to affect social change, especially when you’re outside of the big smoke. Patience is a virtue. Luckily, on the Central-Western Slopes and Plains calendar, we’ve got time by the ute-load.

Nevertheless I love where I’m from. I love the big country streets, the history, being close to nature and the bush, and all the bluff, loving and generally very accepting people that live there.

One final note: sometimes when I’m walking in Sydney, I get the tits stared off me by a lecherous random, who then conspiratorially avoids my eye. When I’m down-town at home, I get smiled at, greeted with a cheery G’day, and then MAYBE get my butt checked out. At least your average country boy has a little respect; and damned if it isn’t appreciated by little ol’ feminist me. Guffaw, guffaw, guffaw.
It's entirely legal to open a brothel in Australia. It's legal to be a prostitute or sex worker – indeed New South Wales has among the most tolerant prostitution laws in the country. Recently, however, the Hills Shire Council has sought to crack down on all this liberality by trying to prevent brothels from being established anywhere in their area besides light industrial zones. They’re also preparing to ask the NSW Premier, Kristina Keneally, to change the law so they can ban brothels entirely.

It isn’t necessary to rehash old, old arguments about whether or not prostitution should be legal. I’ll even avoid cheap cracks about the decidedly un-Christian notions of charity on display in the home of Hillsong. What I would like to ask is whether one council, whatever its delusions of grandeur, should be able to force a legal change for the entire state of New South Wales. After that we’ll consider the amusing hypocrisy of the situation.

Currently, the legislation of New South Wales stipulates that prostitution (including street prostitution) and brothels are permitted, and that brothels can be situated in any location where commercial premises are allowed. Case law refers specifically to the fact that this use of land benefits some sections of the community while offending others, and that there is no evidence brothels in general are associated with crime or drug use. In terms of specific location, brothels should not adjoin or be clearly visible from areas that are zoned as residential. They also should not adjoin, or be clearly visible from, schools, educational institutions for young people or places where children and adolescents regularly gather. However, the law does not insist that brothels should be excluded from every street on which children may walk.

The Hills District is already covered by these regulations. That isn’t enough for the council, which wants to further limit the zones so as to “assist with minimising adverse social and community impact from development applications for the establishment of brothels and sex services premises.” In the words of councillor Mike Thomas, “The Hills Shire is free of legal brothels. We don’t have them at this time and we’d like for it to stay that way.” Just for your reference, the plan would limit the operation of brothels to the Loyalty Road industrial area at North Rocks, the Castle Hill industrial area and the Annangrove Road industrial area at Rouse Hill.

Is there any substance to the claim brothels will disrupt the “family-oriented community” of the Hills District? There are a number of reasons why communities might object to the presence of sex workers in their midst. I’m going to generalise here and suggest that most sex workers are women, and most of their clients are men. So shoot me. One thing that makes women nervous is the thought that their men might be availing themselves of said services. This situation could be truly devastating for a relationship. However, you cannot solve the emotional fear and harm by moving the brothels to another part of the same district.

I also find myself sceptical of the wholesome family image the councillors are trying to present. Mayor Peter Dimbrowsky said recently: “We are a family-oriented area. It’s not in keeping with the core values...[If a council] thinks this type of
It’s hard to believe that a brothel would exist in a particular area unless the work was profitable. If the customers are coming, sex work would seem to be in keeping with the core, or at least fiscal, values of some of the tax-contributing adults of the Hills District. If the councillors are right the amendment is simply unnecessary as its family-oriented demographic neither requests nor utilises the services of sex workers. Otherwise, the sex industry has a legitimate place in the Hills District and should be allowed to continue, regulated as appropriate by existing rules.

Also with respect to families - well, prostitutes are people just like everyone else, as a recent demonstration at the Sydney Opera House was keen to point out. Sex workers from South Africa to England to Sydney have been reported as saying their job allows them to support children and dependants, and keeps the family together. Note that they don’t all say they love it – but then, few professions can claim universal adoration. If doing a job, and doing it well, in order to sustain a family does not have a place in a ‘family values’ community then I don’t know what does.

Obviously there are a whole range of attitudes to prostitution, both inside and outside the sex industry. Still, it is woefully unclear what the ‘negative impacts’ cited by the council actually are.

There are real doubts as to whether forcing brothels to operate in light industrial zones is a positive contribution to the safety and security of prostitutes. Janelle Fawkes, CEO of the Scarlet Alliance, has said that such a move puts sex workers at greater risk of robbery or violence. “That means we are leaving our workplaces in industrial areas in the early hours of the morning and late at night.”

It’s true that whenever a brothel opens the property values in the area tend to decrease. And in this respect there has been some interesting opposition to the proposed changes. Beaumont Strata Management, which represents more than 400 strata owners in the Castle Hill, North Rocks and Rouse Hill industrial areas, suggests it is particularly damaging for business when brothels open in industrial zones because of the attention they attract. Owner Mr Beaumont says it is better for them to be in areas where they attract less attention, such as commercial districts. “They are better hidden in shopping centres rather than an industrial area where everyone can see them,” he commented.

Recent events in Bradford, UK, should make us think twice about policies like this. In May this year a man was arrested for the murders of three sex workers. Apparently in court he gave his name as “the crossbow cannibal”. Cari Mitchell of the English Collective of Prostitutes says that in Britain, where prostitution is still criminalised, there are numerous cases of women failing to report violence and abuse because they feel that their profession is stigmatised and they cannot seek help. It’s in no-one’s best interest to further marginalise women in one of the world’s most demeaned professions. The prospect of legislating systematic discrimination against vulnerable members of the community should be utterly antithetical to a family-friendly council.

As commentator Rocktivity of democraticunderground.com puts it: “The way Bible Belt neighbourhoods can get rid of brothels...is by stopping their patronage of them.” Perhaps the concerned citizens of the Hills District should practise what they preach. Until then, sex workers shouldn’t be made marginalised and unsafe in order to appease their hypocrisy.

"It's in no-one's best interest to further marginalise women in one of the world's most demeaned professions."
Between 1901 and 2008, 754 men and 35 women received a Nobel prize. It was generally hoped that women would win more recognition when those who began work during the first stages of gender equality reached the pinnacle of their careers. However, there have been alternative explanations which cast doubt as to whether women would ever achieve on the same level as men. In 2005, Lawrence Summers of Harvard suggested that women may always be underrepresented in science and engineering due to small differences in the standard deviation of aptitude which become very significant at extremes. That is, he suggested that in terms of talent for maths and science, more idiots and more geniuses are men.

Last year five of the 13 Nobel laureates were women (although you’d be forgiven for thinking the only laureate was Barack Obama). These women have made extraordinary achievements in four completely different fields. All five women have shown that exceptional combination of dedication and inspiration that characterises Nobel laureates.

Elizabeth H. Blackburn and Carol W. Greider, along with Jack W. Szostak, were awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for their discovery of the enzyme responsible for the elongation of telomeres at chromosome ends. Telomere shortening is linked to ageing and senescence, and the enzyme telomerase has since emerged as a very important factor in human tumours. Based on the work of Blackburn and Greider, scientists are currently trialling a cancer therapy based on a mutant version of the telomerase RNA template which kills cancer cells by causing ‘genetic disaster’. Exciting stuff!
In her Nobel lecture Elizabeth Blackburn covered some of the work she has been involved in since this discovery. She wanted to investigate the correlation between factors that we associate with premature ageing, such as stress, and the shortening of telomeres. She worked with a psychiatrist to study a cohort of mothers caring for chronically ill children, a group likely to suffer ongoing psychological pressure. They compared the telomerase activity and telomere length of this ‘stressed’ cohort to the mothers of healthy children. The stressed cohort had 50% less telomerase activity and their telomeres were shorter to an extent equivalent to 9–17 years of additional ageing. In a separate study published last year, they showed that shorter telomere length in post-menopausal women correlates with pessimism.

Interestingly, Blackburn’s research team has shown that telomeres can get longer as well as shorter by sampling telomere length in the same individuals 2.5 years apart. She suggests that telomere trajectory has strong predictive value about an individual’s future health - the trajectory over those 2.5 years proved to be a good indication of the survival of patients with cardiovascular disease over the next 12 years. There is no doubt Elizabeth Blackburn is an inspiration by her continued passion and leadership in her field.

The 2009 Nobel Prize in Chemistry was awarded to Ada E. Yonath, along with Thomas A. Steitz and Venkatraman Ramakrishnan, “for studies of the structure and function of the ribosome”. Ribosomes read template RNA and produce all of the proteins needed by cells. Dr Yonath spent years trying to grow crystals of ribosome crystals so as to investigate their structure using X-ray crystallography. In her Nobel lecture, she described how the inspiration for her crystallization efforts came from an article she read in the National Geographic that described how ribosomes are packed tightly within the cells of hibernating polar bears. Eventually and through great persistence she managed to grow crystals big enough to reveal the ribosome structure. Interestingly, she started crystallizing ribosomes in complex forms with antibiotics. Around 70% of antibiotics currently used target small differences between human and bacterial ribosomes. “The models are now
used by scientists in order to develop new antibiotics, directly assisting the saving of lives and decreasing humanity’s suffering,” the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences said of its decision to recognise this work.

The German Romanian author Herta Müller “who, with the concentration of poetry and the frankness of prose, depicts the landscape of the dispossessed” was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. Müller has written many short stories, novels and essays that portray the reality of being an ethnic minority in a totalitarian regime. She also makes collage-poems by cutting out words or syllables from Romanian magazines and gluing them onto paper. She says that these collages appeal to her because once stuck down, you cannot change the words. A collage is like the past: you cannot wipe it away. It is part of who you are and who you will be.

Last but not least, Elinor Ostrom won the 2009 Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel “for her analysis of economic governance, especially the commons”. Ostrom studies common pool resources such as forests, fisheries, oil fields, grazing lands and irrigation systems. Her work investigated the management of pasture by locals in Africa, and irrigation systems management by villages of western Nepal. Ostrom’s work has provided important guidance for the development of stable management systems for common pool resources, stressing the important of tailored, appropriate and consultative local arrangements rather than a singular ‘pre-fabricated’ management structure.

The achievements of these five women have clearly advanced their chosen fields. Another of Lawrence Summers suggestions to explain the dearth of women in tenured engineering and science positions was that women choose family over career. But significantly, these five women have not sacrificed family life. Blackburn, Greider and Yonath all have children, and all besides Yonath are married. While there is still a way to go before women are represented equally among Nobel laureates, I hope that these individuals have sounded the death knell for some of the more ridiculous attempts by the patriarchy to blame discrimination against women on women themselves!

HERTA MULLER
Excerpt from a collage poem translated into English by Roger Woodhouse

“Maybe it’s my turn now. I have a tale to tell I shall also ring the bell When you start believing When you start hearing Maybe it’s my turn now.”

13
GIRL ON GIRL ACTION

ANH TRAN-NAM
A few months ago, I was catching up with one of my best friends in close proximity to two other women who were having their own conversation. It was one of those half-awkward, half-amusing situations: my friend and I were sharing private thoughts with each other, but also with two complete strangers, and they with us. They laughed when the topic of ‘Viagra Guy’ came up, and I frowned when one of them started complaining about her female colleagues, saying she preferred working with men to women.

It wasn’t particularly worrying to me that this woman had made a sweeping statement about women. Generalisations are a form of pattern-picking, and many of them hold some truth. (Lots of Asian kids actually do study hard.) Her statement that females have a unique way of being unpleasant is probably true: female bullying is typically different from male bullying, involving things like passive aggression, rumour-mongering and social denigration rather than physical harassment.

What irks me is when people use a simple generalization as the end point for lazy analysis. There was a time, around when *Mean Girls* came out, that the media was pumping out news pieces and specials about female teen bullying. Extreme and high profile cases, such as Megan Meier’s ‘Myspace’ suicide, helped fan the flames. On one episode of Oprah, a teenage boy was asked how males deal with such conflict. The boy turned to the camera and claimed, straight-faced, that boys don’t use words in cruel ways.

Frankly, I find this hard to believe. Boys and men aren’t unpleasant in the exact same ways girls and women are, but it’s silly to infer anything else from that. The attributes that make a person a bully or a nightmare to work with, such as unfriendliness, spitefulness, competitiveness, dishonesty and treachery, are far from gender-specific and it’s disappointing to hear people speak as if they are. It’s even more disappointing when the people speaking are young, liberated, university-educated women in 2010, as opposed to old male businessmen who grew up watching *I Dream of Jeanie*. At least they’d have an excuse.

A casual remark like the one described may seem harmless enough, but hidden behind the idea that women make bitchy and difficult colleagues compared to men is the idea that women are emotional and nasty rather than logical and neutral, rendering them less suitable to professional environments. It’s the kind of thinking that partially informs why women, to this day, are underrepresented in senior executive and scientific research positions, Parliament and so on. Far from accusing the woman in the welfare room of engaging in this sinister thinking, I would guess that she would disagree with such an idea. Yet probably because of complacency, that statement came out of her mouth anyway.

Similarly, it’s disturbing how often sexually liberated women use words like ‘slut’, ‘ho’ and ‘whore’, or talk disparagingly of women who dress in revealing clothes or who have had sex with many partners. It’s understandable if this kind of talk corresponds to an individual’s beliefs about sexual activity being morally reprehensible if not undertaken in a specific manner (say, after marriage, or after X number of dates) and also corresponds to her own behaviour of only engaging in sex in that specific manner.

What does not follow is how many liberal-minded women who do not buy into traditional sexual mores, who have divorced casual sex from amorality and who have engaged in a fair amount of sexual activity themselves still use the language of female sexual stigmatization. Sometimes a word like ‘slut’ is used to describe a woman who cheats on her partner, or who cheats with someone who is already involved. It’s quite an inappropriate word to use since it conflates things like disloyalty and lack of empathy with female sexual activity, as opposed to male sexual activity. ‘Slut’ still is overwhelming used to describe a woman.

Sexist, oppressive ideas and language have been around for a long time. They are the ideas and language of many of our older relatives and bosses and still pervade the movies, TV and music, making them easy and convenient to use. They are embedded in casual, benign-seeming language, used even by some liberal-minded women who oppose sexism. To these women I would say: speak deliberately, just like you would act or vote deliberately. Speech is an act with consequences. Don’t let one of those consequences be the denigration of women.
THE HISTORY OF SEX

MICHEL FOUCAULT
I freely admit to being a bit of a throwback. Two of my all-time favourite singers are Joni Mitchell and Patti Smith, although I also hold a special fondness for Pat Benatar. The main reason I was excited about coming to University was because I had recently discovered bands like Bikini Kill, Bratmobile and Team Dresch. I was convinced that being on campus would be like being part of the Riot Grrrl movement – full of zines, music, art and ideals.

And then I arrived. To discover that “Candy Shop” (‘I’ll take you to the candy shop/I’ll let you lick the lollipop...’) was played almost continually during O-Week, and that the end-of-session parties were caught in an endless loop of Kanye West’s “Gold Digger” and Chris Brown’s “Run It”. (‘I do big boy things/I make big boy noise ’cause/I know what girls want...” Uh huh. I’m being somewhat uncharitable though - there were a number of other artists that year who had breakthrough performances. Including the Pussycat Dolls with ‘Dontcha’ (‘wish your girlfriend was hot like me...’)

Whether you actually like Riot Grrrl, or any of the bands or artists I’ve referred to, they are important as an emblem of their time. The popularity of bands is representative of broader social sentiments: they are part of the phenomena they reflect, in this case the phenomenon of women’s liberation. Riot Grrrl bands became a focal point for a movement. They generated excitement, drew on and reinforced a sense of commonality and discussed critical issues ranging from female empowerment to domestic violence and sexual abuse.

Riot Grrrl was possible because of the women’s movement of the 1960s. Much of its language and message grew out of an era which embodied the promise of change. The 1960s were a fantastic time for women in rock. Influential women were just beginning to shape the culture - Annie Lebowitz was gaining prominence as a photographer, Ellen Willis was a hugely successful music critic for the New Yorker Magazine and Lillian Roxon wrote the Rock Encyclopaedia. These women, pioneers themselves, helped shape the public view of up-and-coming female artists.

They met resistance, of course. That resistance extended into the 1990s and was expressed through the huge amount of public loathing for Riot Grrrl generally and Bikini Kill in particular. The fact that the band had a male member, Billy Karen, didn’t seem to dissuade many from labelling them as ‘man-haters’. They would
perform for audiences who would alternately adore them and yell that they should ‘take it off’, among other derogatory names. Charming.

The critics weren’t much better. There was a real rejection of Riot Grrrl in both the mainstream press and some of the more established punk magazines. This backlash in particular seems surprising given that Riot Grrrl embodies so much of what punk was originally supposed to be about, including DIY production values, anti-establishment lyrics and raw, pared down songs. Despite the depth of their themes the bands were dismissed as little more than girls parading around in their underwear. Ultimately the promise embodied in Riot Grrrl wasn’t fulfilled the way one might have hoped. It’s harder to find women in Rock now, and when I look at female popstars I don’t know that I perceive them or their music as being connected to the broader community in the way Riot Grrrl was. Clearly not all music has to be political to be empowering, but surely we could produce a few more examples than Pink adding “Dear Mr President” to her album? Surely the sexual liberation of “I don’t need a man” from the Pussycat Dolls does not counterbalance “Dontcha”, or even “Buttons”.

There is an argument that female independence in music has migrated to different genres: to country (Dixie Chicks, The McClymonts, Shelby Lynne, Allison Moorer), to the amorphous label ‘alternative’ (Paloma Faith, Martina McBride, Tracy Chapman, Dido) and to the equally ambiguous ‘singer/songwriter’ category (Sarah McLachlan, Missy Higgins, Little Birdy, Sheryl Crow, Tracy Chapman). But why couldn’t it survive in rock?

As the Riot Grrrl movement has subsided, so too has much of the women’s movement. There isn’t the same level of public support or mobilisation. We don’t march publicly a cause now – and white part of that is because the ‘causes’ have become more fractured, it is also because public sentiment has changed. Now that there is a higher degree of equality, there are more voices calling for ‘moderation’, and strong feminist opinions are dismissed as too ‘extreme’ or out of place in our ‘modern’ society. This perspective undermines the impetus to act on critically important issues.

There are also the restraining influences of our concept of femininity. Still there is a latent belief that part of being feminine means not being outspoken or argumentative. Consider the fact that an assertive girl is more likely to be considered strident or angry before an assertive male is. While the gender notions are becoming less blatant, they are still very present. This restrictive ‘moderation’ and lingering outdated notions of femininity means that in public debate, the issues are stifled before being properly discussed. The general public is put off by the stereotype of the strident, argumentative woman with an agenda. ‘Angry’ has become code for someone who is irrational, therefore their perspective is invalid. ‘Angry protesters’, ‘angry women’s groups’.

And this goes for pop culture and rock, as well as political issues and discussion. ‘Angry girl music’ is the derogatory label resulting of feminine stereotypes and the complacency of the public.

Women in the Riot Grrrl movement were loud. They were entering new territory, and Joan Jett wasn’t the only one who didn’t give a damn about her reputation. Video really did kill the radio star: the images of these artists, combined with their subversive attitudes, made them too jarring for a public who wanted escapism and something pretty to look at.

This is a frighteningly messy issue - and I doubt anyone still reading this holds the same opinions as me across all (or any...) of these questions. It’s a place where media, self-expression, politics and culture meet; where individual choices become political actions to be debated and contested – even when all you thought you were doing was enjoying the music.
When I told a theatre director friend that I was writing an article about the roles of women in theatre, he responded nonchalantly "Well, I mean, no one likes a tranny-fest".

Took me a while to nut that one out, but of course it makes sense. Early Western theatre operated under the premise that if women characters were allowed on stage, they had to, obviously, be played by a man. Women had other stuff to do – cook, have sex, have babies – and would be a terribly unnecessary distraction for the other actors. And so women were played by men, and they were written by men, because generally the same rule applied to writers. Theatre was a boy’s club – and in many ways still is.

Maybe in this very exciting Feminist Issue of Tharunka we can think about some of this. I don’t presume to have nearly enough knowledge to denounce all of the Western canon as an exclusive dickhead boys club, nor do I think that’s helpful. But my point will be as follows: it is important for us to think about the role of women in theatre. It is important to think about who is writing our major plays, what sort of roles they are writing, and in what way those roles contribute to our understanding of the complexities of gender in a modern society. I believe passionately in the importance of theatre in mapping out the social and political trajectory of a nation, and even of humanity more generally. So if we want women to be equal in society, we need to think about them in art.

The facts. The huge names in the Western theatrical canon are male: Sophocles, Euripides, Seneca, Shakespeare, Jonson, Racine, Moliere, de Vega, Wycherley, Congreve, Farquhar, Sheridan, Chekhov, Ibsen, Strindberg, Shaw, Yeats, Wilde, Pirandello, Lorca, Artaud, Brecht, Boal, Fo, Ionesco, Grofowski, Genet, Synge, Beckett, Pinter, Stoppard, Williams, Miller, Mamet, do you want me to keep going?

Don’t get me wrong – there are certainly notable female voices within this history. Take for example, English Restoration playwright, Aphra Benn, a lone female voice in what was otherwise a theatrical sausage factory. The noted critic Harold Bloom calls Aphra Behn a "fourth-rate playwright" and notes her current popularity in university courses as a case of "dumbing down". His article is spellbindingly fascinating for its utter sanctimony, its intellectual snobbery. I really recommend a read of it just to make your blood boil. Published in the Boston Globe in 2003, it reads salaciously in part:

"I began as a scholar of the romantic poets. In the 1950s and early 1960s, it was understood that the great English romantic poets were Percy Bysshe Shelley, William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, John Keats, William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. But today they are Felicia Hemans, Charlotte Smith, Mary Tighe,
Laetitia Landon, and others who just can’t write. A fourth-rate playwright like Aphra Behn is being taught instead of Shakespeare in many curriculums across the country."

Firstly, fuck you, Harold Bloom, you lecherous old crank. Yes, Aphra Benn is no Shakespeare, but then a whole lot of theatre during the Restoration was a crock of shit. William Wycherley’s A Country Wife was one of the worst plays I’ve ever read, full of awfully unfunny jokes about rape and wife-bashing, yet it is still taught today because it is the portrait of a specific age and theatrical period, essential for all theatre writers to read. Aphra Benn is part of that period, despite how fourth-rate her theatre might be.

But my real problem with Bloom here is the extremely obvious gender distinction he’s creating. Firstly, who is he definitively citing when it comes to these courses and the content? Perhaps these female writers are just one part of a larger university course on Romanticism, a course that looks at all writers of relevance, not just the canonical ones. We can learn a lot from the writers who “just can’t write”, even if it’s a historical lesson (for example, why there were so few emerging women writers of quality in this period) rather than a lesson in super-amazing-poem-writing-for-newbs. After all, as Wycherley’s archaically offensive play showed me, even the morally ambiguous plays from an era are important to study, because they sure teach us a lot about said era.

Times are changing, I guess. We have writers like Caryl Churchill who have consistently pressed the envelope when it came to staging plays about and starring women. The late Sarah Kane displayed how women writers didn’t just write about ‘women’s issues’, but could express the deep yearning, grief and tragedy that is part of modern life, a despair shared by all humanity at various times and stages. And now the onus rests on us, new writers, to forge a space and a stage for our work.

I’m talking plays that crack open the world a bit more to explore issues that are important to us, a world where a woman character isn’t just the prozzie or mother, but a fully-functioning and reacting human being. If we don’t start writing these plays about women, by women, for women, we won’t get anywhere.

It’s time to think about a women’s theatre. Let me emphasise: I don’t mean theatre that talks about periods and ex-boyfriends. I mean theatre that explores our individual artistic understanding of lives – our unique perspective, as females in a society, on issues like love, loss, family, grief, whatever the hell it is that good drama is about. It’s not a “women’s view”. It’s not “that feminist theatre”. It’s just theatre. Because we have fucking good stories to share, dagnabbit. And it’s about time the world was forced to hear them.
Quick responses to questions posed on the 'Sam in the City' blog by Samantha Brett, published on the Sydney Morning Herald website.

“Are all men really bastards?”
No.

“Is a good girl hard to find?”
No.

“Can making him wait for sex change a bad boy into a nice guy?”
No.

“What ever happened to sisterhood?”
Nothing. It’s right there.

“Are we all better off coupled up?”
No.

“Are all the nice guys taken?”
No.

“Is monogamy dead?”
No.

“Let’s talk about sex.”
No thanks.
Dear Dudes,

I hope it doesn’t sound too creepy when I say I know exactly who you are. There’s lots of you, and you come in different sizes: left-wingers and right-wingers, hipsters and nerds, God-botherers and dedicated heathens. But you have this one thing in common. You don’t like abortion. You’re just ordinary guys, living ordinary lives, not given to preaching generally, but you feel, well, you don’t want to moralise, but, killing a baby is just – well - wrong.

And you know what? That’s a perfectly valid moral position. I happen to disagree with you. I happen to believe that the value of life arises from consciousness, the ability to feel pleasure and pain, to have desires, form relationships, be aware of one’s existence over time. All attributes held, incidentally, by the women who seek abortions. But hey, that’s just my opinion. All morality is subjective - have you ever tried to define the word ‘good’ in a non-truistic way? If you want to say ‘it’s a life because it is’, then that’s perfectly up to you. Just as it’s up to all of us to define a coherent ethical system, and to abide by the rules we set for ourselves.

I also understand the logical conclusion of that premise: that a woman with an unwanted pregnancy should keep the baby. She should go ahead and put up with nine months of vomiting, nausea, back pain, constipation, seeing her belly swell like the end stages of liver disease. She should man up [sorry] to the risk of kidney infection, gestational diabetes and pre-eclampsia, and finally she should just deal with the agony of childbirth, the pain which will make her scream as the shit is forced from her body in front of strangers. Maybe her vagina will tear as the baby comes out and maybe she’ll haemorrhage on the table. Not for nothing was the phrase ‘maternal mortality’ coined. These risks remain an inherent part of pregnancy, even in the wealthy and developed West. So what, you say. The baby matters more.
Ell, that’s fair enough. The sanctity of the foetus is a consistent moral position. Pardon the pun, but it’s the rest of your ‘positions’ I have trouble comprehending. You dudes think that abortion is wrong - a terrible wrong, in fact, so bad that it is right and just for women to bear children irrespective of choice.

And yet you won’t stop fucking.

You fuck your girlfriends, your hookups, your hookers, your wives. You fuck in beds and in cars, in hotels and in youth hostels, you fuck after work and in the holidays, in different cities, countries. You fuck and you fuck again and again, and in most cases you fuck without intent to have a child, because you and your partner don’t want one, or not together, or not right now.

Well, here’s a suggestion. If you think abortion is bad, stop fucking.

Am I too obscure? Let me clarify. Having sex when you do not intend to create a child is the prime cause of abortion. And yet most people have sex in these circumstances, including most men, including most men who disapprove of abortion. If you are one of these men, if you think abortion is bad enough to warrant forcing a woman through an unwanted pregnancy, then you yourself should be willing to undergo a comparably onerous experience if it will reduce the likelihood of an abortion. Namely, not having sex except in situations where you and your partner intend the seed of your loins to - bear fruit, as it were.

Abstinence isn’t so difficult, you know. Unlike childbirth, thousands of men have managed it – singles, asexuals, priests. Also unlike childbirth, there’s no chance of your genitals getting ripped open. I knew you’d be pleased about that. Isn’t it lovely to join the fight against abortion with so little effort, so little personal sacrifice?

But wait! I can sense your objections already. You’re not the same as those feckless, irresponsible women, going out and getting pregnant willy-nilly. Why, you use – (and here your voice takes on a solemn, reverent tone) – contraception!

Well, let’s talk about contraception. We all know that it’s imperfect, and I happen to know from personal experience that the most reliable forms are the hardest to get access to. But let’s take a look at two of the most widely used methods, the pill and the condom. Let’s imagine that everyone uses these perfectly, every time. The failure rates are, respectively, 0.3% per year for the pill and 2% for condoms. That means that if a hundred couples use condoms for a year there will be two pregnancies. Not bad, right?

Now consider that a typical woman will be fertile and sexually active for around 25 years. Let’s make a generous estimate, and say that five of those years will be taken up with wanted pregnancies, the post-childbearing sex-free phase, etc. That’s still 20 years. If you took random samples of a hundred couples you would get an average of six unwanted pregnancies among the pill users, and a staggering forty for those using condoms.

And that’s with perfect use. Do you like taking pills? Good. I want you to imagine you have to take one each and every day, at the same time for the next twenty five years of your life. Oh, and you must never vomit, suffer food poisoning, get diarrhoea or go on antibiotics. You must never be late, never miss a single day - that’s what makes you a ‘perfect user’.

Do you think you can do it? Have you never forgotten your keys?

Maybe you guys think this comparison is unfair. Preventing pregnancy before the fact is one thing, terminating an existing pregnancy another.
If you were the woman, you say, you’d keep the child regardless. And maybe some of you would, although it’s hard to tell. There are lots of women out there who swore they’d always be pro-life - until it happened to them. Doctors have plenty of anecdotes to share about patients they recognise as vocal anti-abortion activists. Frankly, I doubt you guys would be much different. Following through with a pregnancy is all about physical forbearance, self-control. What hope if you couldn’t even keep it in your pants?

One thing I don’t know whether to be pleased or cry about is the way many of you dudes will make an exception for women who’ve been raped. Presumably the value and rights of the foetus are the same regardless of how it was conceived. We don’t, after all, go around murdering the adult progeny of rape victims. Your attitude seems to be based on the idea of ‘fairness’ – it wasn’t her fault, she couldn’t help it, why should she be punished for someone else’s crime, etc.

Well, here’s the flipside. If you think that it’s unfair to punish people for getting raped, you must also think it’s fair to punish women for consensual sex by forcing them to keep the baby. We know that it’s possible to get accidentally pregnant no matter how diligent you are. But let say she’s been careless. She forgot a pill – two pills. She took a chance on a condom. Maybe she did this twice, three times, thinking she’d get lucky.

So, she was irresponsible. Therefore she should scream and shit out her bowels on a hospital table. Right?

Maybe someone should cut your penis every time you leave your wallet at home. That’d teach you. Or, more directly: every time you take a chance, every time you bareback because you left it up to her to go on the pill, and plus it’s more fun that way. Every time the search for a male contraceptive falters for lack of demand on the market, because in spite of all of this talk about ‘responsibility’ you guys aren’t exactly banging on the door to take your share.

I asked you a while ago if you were going to stop having sex. I don’t really expect that to happen. You’re only human, after all. It’s only human to want, to feel desire, to seek the erotic, the ecstatic, the sensual. Some people forego it (I think I mentioned priests before) but that hasn’t been working out too well lately, has it?

Still, let me take a leaf out of your book. You make it clear what you think of women who have had abortions, and of women and men like me who defend them. Well, let me make it clear what I think of you. You’re a hypocrite and I judge you for it. I am judging your recklessness, your smugness, your doublethink. I am judging your self-absorption, your egoism, your belief that pleasure is for you and consequences are for others. I am judging your endless and eternal hypocrisy.

And I want you to know this. Every time from now on that you have sex I want you to know that I am watching. Every orgasm, every cry of pleasure, every explosive release, every lazy postcoital afternoon. Every sigh, every moan, every fuck and fuck and fuck. I am watching you and I am judging you. I am judging you with the force and weight you judge those aborting women, those irresponsible, life-denying whores. What they’ve done, you’ve done, and it’s time you knew the consequences.

You thought that abortion had nothing to do with you. Guess what? It does.

This is not someone else’s problem.

**THIS IS YOUR PROBLEM.**
"Here am I asking why women did not write poetry in the Elizabethan age, and I am not sure how they were educated; whether they were taught to write; whether they had sitting-rooms to themselves; how many women had children before they were twenty-one; what, in short, they did from eight in the morning till eight at night. They had no money evidently; according to Professor Trevelyan they were married whether they liked it or not before they were out of the nursery, at fifteen or sixteen very likely. It would have been extremely odd, even upon this showing, had one of them suddenly written the plays of Shakespeare, I concluded, and I thought of that old gentleman, who is dead now, but was a bishop, I think, who declared that it was impossible for any woman, past, present, or to come, to have the genius of Shakespeare. He wrote to the papers about it. He also told a lady who applied to him for information that cats do not as a matter of fact go to heaven, though they have, he added, souls of a sort. How much thinking those old gentlemen used to save one! How the borders of ignorance shrank back at their approach! Cats do not go to heaven. Women cannot write the plays of Shakespeare."

Extract from 'A Room of One's Own' by Virginia Woolf
Women’s Rights in PNG

SALIMA YEUNG
A few years back I witnessed my neighbour selling his wife to another man. They had three children together. When it comes to my country, Papua New Guinea, the international community only seems to have negative things to say. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch both highlight horrifying cases of gender based violence, sexual abuse, murder and police ill-treatment.

It is undeniable that many women in PNG experience unacceptable acts of injustice. However, gender inequality in PNG is not universal and I believe that there is hope. To find that hope, we need to look at the causes of inequality and the ways in which these causes may be changed.

Some background first. PNG has undergone rapid change lately – it was one of the last places on earth to see foreigners, and has undergone colonisation, independence and war. Increasingly now it is influenced by the forces of globalisation and capitalism. To give you an idea about how great the upheaval has been, there are a handful of people alive who remember times when the outside world was not known to exist. Now they are seeing people running around with mobile phones.

PNG is far from a homogenous society these days, with lifestyles ranging from traditional subsistence to modern consumerism. There are over 800 ethnic groups, each with their own language, traditions and customs. Still, traditional PNG culture is unique to say the least. It is always fun to see people’s reactions when I tell them that I come from a country which used to be cannibalistic, where witches are still killed for performing black magic, and where men are able sell their daughters or wives to other men.

Sexual discrimination is closely related to culture and commercialisation in PNG. Opportunities in terms of education and work outside the home tend to be equal for both genders. However, women who live under traditional attitudes tend to have limited independence and less say in the decision making process of the family, village, community and country. In general, men are expected to make all the decisions while women look after the children and gardens and comply with the men’s wishes.

In many cases, women in PNG undergo severe oppression. Violence and sexual abuse are critical issues, and it is not uncommon for female neighbours or customers to come into our family shop in Rabaul with bruises, black eyes and cuts. Public domestics are not unusual, with some fights even posted on YouTube. Sexual abuse is common, and puts women and girls at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS. I am told that in some areas it is permissible for men to hit their wives if they do not submit. However, I have to emphasise that this is not universal.

The bridal price is an example of the power of men have over women, and how this may be exacerbated by the introduction of commerce. In many ethnic groups, it is the father who ultimately decides whom his daughter will marry, and her future husband must ‘pay’ for her. Traditionally the bridal price played a ceremonial role and was mainly in the form of pigs, shell money and food. Today, money is increasingly being demanded as well. Sadly there have been cases where daughters, sometimes only of high school age, have been sold off to rich and often much older men. I have never lived a traditional lifestyle but I believe that the introduction of cash has increased the injustice faced by these girls.

Modernisation has had other unwanted side effects, including the introduction of alcohol and a rise in prostitution. Almost all of the domestic violence and sexual abuse cases I have seen were under the influence of alcohol. It is common for men to spend a significant amount of their (often low) wages on drinking, instead of their family. Selling sex provides an easy way to make money but leaves women vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases, assault, unwanted pregnancies and exploitation. Over the past year or so I have heard stories of expatriate men recruiting young high school girls to make pornographic films, which they then sell overseas.

You would think that as traditional attitudes in PNG grow weaker, women will become more empowered. In my opinion, this is not always the case. Women in urban centres generally rely on their husbands’ income to support themselves and their children, don’t have enough money for legal action and receive little support from the
she goes through areas notorious for crime and theft. However, she has never been attacked once. If she gets injured, people are quick to help, sometimes even driving her back home. If there is danger in an area (such as a drunk), people warn her not to go there. When I join my Grandma everybody wishes us good morning with genuine and friendly smiles. My grandma is 80, and most people could easily overpower me. The fact that both of us can walk around the community in the dark, unharmed, illustrates that PNG really isn’t the violent and brutal place it is often depicted to be.

I must also point out that it is not always the case that men have complete control over women. Husband or boyfriend bashing is a phenomenon that does occur back at home. This is no surprise if you see some of the women in PNG. They can be quite big and masculine. Believe it or not, some even have beards and moustaches. I always know I’m home when I see women walking around with beards proudly shaved into interesting shapes.

I want to wrap up on a positive note by talking about something PNG is often associated with: cannibalism. Back in the not-so-distant past people would be afraid to travel between villages (sometimes only a few hundred metres away) because of the possibility they would be eaten. Exposure to the outside world drove cannibalism into extinction. The missionaries did quite well in convincing the tribes that eating people was not a good idea. This was not without casualties. Some of early missionaries in my province did end up getting eaten by the local tribes. However, thanks to their efforts, people are free to walk around without the fear of becoming someone’s lunch. Just as foreign ideas eradicated cannibalism, the global woman’s rights movement has great potential to eradicate the current gap between men and women.

For all its faults, I am still very fond of PNG and care deeply about its future. There is a real sense of community, caring and warmth that cannot be found in a place like Sydney. It is one of the reasons why I always love going back home and will continue to do so.
The Sea Belies

The stars are massing an armada off shore, they nudge the dark open to the slit of their keels.

I lay my body against the smooth jawbone of the evening pressing my corners to the pulse of wood and salt.

The weight of this night pregnant in my hands.
The sea belies you sleeping there, your breath slow, treads the water like raked silk.

Where will our cupped horizon break tomorrow?

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Now that that nice girl Julia is PM there are lots of things I’d like to ask.

She does have a lovely head of red hair, a real stylish cut for a lady her age. Her boyfriend’s a hairdresser. I bet he takes a bit of extra effort with her cut. Maybe she gets it done somewhere else, but I think that would hurt his feelings. Men have their pride, you see. Don’t like being passed over for their work, they think it’s an insult.

I wonder what the two of them will do now? Maybe they’ll move into the Lodge soon. Do you think that’s a bit wrong, seeing as they’re not married yet? I guess they probably live together already so it wouldn’t make a difference. A lot of young couples do that these days, you know. Julia says she doesn’t want to get married but I don’t believe a word of it.

Reckon he just hasn’t popped the question yet, or maybe he’s just not the One. Takes time to find the right guy, doesn’t it? But if I had my chance to talk to her I’d say, don’t worry, love, it all comes right in the end. I only met my hubby when I was 29. He’ll walk in the door one of these days, you’ll see. They don’t have any kiddies either didn’t you know? Must have left it too late although maybe they could still try with that IVF they’ve been using lately. I’m not sure what I think of that though. If nature doesn’t want you to have a baby there’s probably a reason for it, that’s what I say. Don’t want to go messing with nature. Poor thing could end up with three eyes.

Actually, my friend Narelle says she heard Julia say on the TV or something that she didn’t want any kiddies. Not wanting kiddies - imagine that! I do my bit to be open minded, but some things - well, a woman like that, there’s something wrong about it, isn’t there? Unnatural I say. It’s the mother’s instinct, we all have one. Gets buried down deep sometimes, but it’s still there. Just takes the right bloke to bring it out. Still, these women these days - I don’t know how to talk to them sometimes. Them and their pantsuits, wearing jackets and things just like the men. They think they’re men. That’s the trouble. Think they can go around swearing and things not that I’ve ever heard that Julia swear. No, she’s not one of those types. She’s a lady, that Julia, a real lady. That’s my advice to all of you girls out there, be a lady. Don’t miss out on the kiddies though. It’s the biggest thing in a gal’s life. And find the right bloke while you’re young, otherwise you’ll end up on the shelf like Julia.

A nice girl, that Julia, what a pity she left it so late...