In The Female Eunuch, Germaine Greer suggests that the reader take a moment to taste her menstrual blood. "If you haven’t tasted it yet, you’ve got a long way to go, baby," she says.

Well, I cannot help but agree. You have to try everything once—even eating sweet-and-sour prawns from a dodgy-looking takeaway van in Leicester, or wearing a pull-over skirt. I have, of course, tasted my own menstrual blood. By and large, I’d prefer a bag of Doritos, but it was all right. Better than most stuff you can buy on an Amtrak snack car, and certainly an atheologically sound produce. My welfare of me has been exemplary. I always have clean, deep hay to sleep on.

Personally, however, I will not be urging you to taste your menstrual blood right now, as I’m very aware you might be on a bus or sitting on a bench in a playground, making desultory small talk with a woman called Bet. As with so many “empowering” things—devotional incense, learning belly dancing, getting a tattoo—tasting your menstrual blood would be, let’s face it, just another thing to add to the “to do” list. Along with getting that curtain refitted, de-flaking the cats, and sewing the button back on your coat that, now you come to think of it, fell off in 2003.
No, ladies, rest easy. You will not have to taste your menses today. Not on my watch.

What I AM going to urge you to do, however, is say “I am a feminist.” For preference, I would like you to stand on a chair and shout “I AM A FEMINIST!”—but this is simply because I believe everything is more exciting if you stand on a chair to do it.

It really is important you say these words out loud. “I AM A FEMINIST!” If you feel you cannot say it—not even standing on the ground—I would be alarmed. It’s probably one of the most important things a woman will ever say: the equal of “I love you,” “Is it a boy or a girl?” or “No! I’ve changed my mind! I don’t want bangs!”

Say it. SAY IT! SAY IT NOW! Because if you can’t, you’re basically bending over, saying, “Kick my arse and take my vote, please, patriarchy.”

And do not think you shouldn’t be standing on that chair, shouting, “I AM A FEMINIST!” if you are a boy. A male feminist is one of the most glorious end-products of evolution. A male feminist should ABSOLUTELY be on the chair—so we ladies may all toast you, in champagne, before coveting your body wildly. And maybe get you to change that lightbulb, while you’re up there. We cannot do it ourselves. There is a big spiderweb on the socket.

I was 15 when I first said, “I am a feminist.” Here I am in my bedroom, saying it. I am looking in the mirror, watching myself say it: “I am a feminist. I am a feminist.”

It is now nearly three years since I wrote my “By the Time I’m 18” list, and I am slowly piecing together a vague plan of who I should be. I still haven’t gotten my ears pierced, lost any weight, or trained the dog, and all my clothes are still awful. My second-best top is a T-shirt with a cartoon of an alligator holding a beer, with HAVE FUN IN THE FLORIDA SUN! written underneath it in neon pink. It looks wholly incongruous on a depressed, fat, hippy girl

with waist-length hair, walking around Wolverhampton in the rain. It looks, to be frank, like an ongoing act of immense sarcasm.

I still don’t have any friends, either. Not one—unless you count family, which obviously you don’t, because they just come free with your life, wanted or not, like the six-page Curry’s brochure that falls out of the local paper, advertising Spectrum 128k home computers and “ghetto blasters.” No. Family doesn’t count at all.

But on the plus side, I am not alone because—as with a million lonely girls and boys before—books, TV, and music are looking after me now. I am being raised by witches, wolves, and unexpected guest stars on late-night chat shows. All art is someone trying to tell you something. I realize. There’re thousands of people who want to talk to me, so long as I open their book or turn on their show. There are a trillion telegrams with important information and tips. It may be bad information or a misconstrued tip—but at least you are getting some data on what it’s like out there. Your CNN ticker tape is running full blast. You are getting input.

Books seem the most potent source: each one is the sum total of a life that can be inhaled in a single day. I read fast, so I’m hoovering up lives at a ferocious pace, six or seven or eight in a week. I particularly love autobiographies: I can eat a whole person by sundown. I’m reading about Welsh hill farmers and round-the-world yachtswomen, World War Two soldiers and housekeepers in prewar Shropshire mansions, journalists and movie stars, screenwriters, Tudor princes, and 17th-century prime ministers.

And every book, you find, has its own social group—friends of its own it wants to introduce you to, like a party in the library that need never, ever end. When I first meet David Niven’s The Moon’s a Balloon, it keeps on mentioning Harpo Marx, until—when I finally bump into him, on the “Autobiographies: M” shelf—we get on like a house on fire. I’m soon up to speed with how Marx
spends his afternoons: at the Algonquin Round Table in New York, which is by way of a prewar Valhalla for cocktail-drinking dandies with typewriters. Robert Benchley and Robert E. Sherwood and Alexander Woollcott—who stirs in me a lifelong affection for camp, waspy men who show their love with increasingly vile insults ("Hello, Repulsive").

Finally, through Woollcott, I come face-to-face with the holy Dorothy Parker, who I feel has been waiting for me forever, in 1923, with her lipstick and her cigarettes and her glorious, whip-lash despair. Dorothy Parker is monumentally important because, it seems to me at the time, she is the first woman who has ever been capable of being funny: an evolutionary step for women as major as the development of the opposable thumb or the invention of the wheel. Parker is funny in the 1920s and then—I am led to believe—no other women are funny until the eighties. Parker is the Eve of female humor.

Robert Johnson invented the blues, at midnight, at a crossroads, after selling his soul to the devil. Dorothy Parker invented amusing women, at 2 p.m., in New York's best cocktail bar, after tipping a busboy 50 cents for a martini. It's hard not to draw conclusions as to which is the brighter sex.

But Parker also worries me, because half the funny stuff she writes is about killing herself: funny doesn't seem to be working out as well for her as it does for, say, Ricky Gervais. And it cannot be ignored that it takes nearly 60 years for any women to be funny again after her. The trail she blazed stayed notably unrodded. I start to worry that women are, as the rumor has it, not as good as men after all.

In the same month I read Parker's "Résumé"—"Razors pain you/Rivers are damp/Acids stain you/And drugs cause cramp/Guns aren't lawful/Nooses give/Gas smells awful/You might as well live"—I start reading Sylvia Plath, who everyone agrees is one of the few women who can write as well as a man, but who also keeps trying to kill herself: always crashing in the same car, or overdosing. This is worrying. I'm in the middle of being obsessed with Bessie Smith, whose life is riddled with heroin. I adore Janis Joplin, who sixties herself to death. And, increasingly, people are being horrible about the Duchess of York, just because she's ginger.

I can't help but note that most of the women who hold their own with the men seem unhappy and apt to die young. Lazy, popular opinion has it that this is because women are fundamentally unsuited to putting their head over the parapet and competing on the same terms as men. They just can't handle the big-boy stuff. They simply need to stop trying.

But when I look at their undoing—despair, self-loathing, low self-esteem, exhaustion, frustration at repeated lack of opportunity, space, understanding, support, or context—to me it seems as if they are all dying of the same thing: being stuck in the wrong century. All these earlier ages are poisonous to women, I begin to think. I knew it before—but just as quiet, accepted fact. I know it again now—but this time as loud, outraged fact.

They are surrounded by men, without a team or a den mother to cheer them on. They are the sole pair of high heels clacking through a room of brogues. They are loaded with all the wearinessomeness of being a novelty. They are furious and exhausted from having to explain to the men what the women have known all along. They are astronauts in the Mir Space Station, or hearts sewn into early transplant patients. They can pioneer, yes, but it's not sustainable. Eventually, the body rejects them. The atmosphere proves too thin. It doesn't work.

And so, finally, just when I need her, I find Germaine Greer. I know roughly what she's about, of course—whenever my mother hazards a guess at what might be wrong with the car, my father
replies, sighing, "All right, Germaine Greer. Give it a rest"—but I've never actually encountered Greer. I've never read anything she's written or seen her speak. I presume she is a stern, shouting thing, always pointing out the "right" thing to do: like a nun, but angry.

Then I see her on TV. I don't know what program it is—my diary doesn't say—but it notes the day with a garland of exclamation marks, "I've just seen Germaine Greer on TV—she's NICE!!!!!!!! I write, "FUNNEEEE!!!!!"

Greer uses the words "liberation" and "feminism" and I realize—at the age of 15—that she is the first person I've ever seen who doesn't say them sarcastically or tempered with invisible quote marks. She doesn't say them like they are words that are both slightly distasteful and slightly dangerous, and should be handled only at the end of tongs, like night soil, or typhus.

Instead, Greer says, "I am a feminist" in a perfectly calm, logical, and entitled way. It sounds like the solution to a puzzle that's been going on for years. Greer says it with entitlement and pride: the word is a prize that billions of women, for the span of human history, fought to win. This is the vaccine against the earlier pioneers' failure. This is the atmosphere that would sustain us all in space: the piece of equipment we've all been missing. This is what will keep us alive.

A week later, and I, too, am saying, "I am a feminist," into the mirror. I am smoking a pretend cigarette made of rolled-up toilet paper. I blow imaginary smoke away, like Lauren Bacall, and say, "I'm a feminist, Humphrey Bogart."

The word feels even more exciting than swearing. It is intoxicating. It makes my head swim.

I know I am a feminist now, because—after seeing Greer on TV and liking her—I have just read The Female Eunuch. I haven't been drawn to it solely for its promise of emancipation—I must admit, I am also looking for sex scenes. I know it is—as Eulalie McKeenks Shinn refers to the poetry of Balzac in The Music Man—"a SMUTTY book." Look: the cover has tits on. There should definitely be shagging inside.

However, while there are rude bits, what is most notable, for someone raised on rock music, is that Greer writes about being a woman the way men sing about being men. When Bowie describes Ziggy in "Ziggy Stardust"—"He was the nazz/with God-given ass/He took it all too far/But boy could he play guitar"—it might as well have been Greer talking about herself. She is the nazz, with God-given ass. She writes paragraphs like piano solos, and her rendering of feminism is simple: everyone should just be a bit more like her. Scornful of any useless inherited bullshit. New; fast; free. Laughing, and fucking, and unafraid to call anyone out—from a boyfriend to the government—if they are stupid or wrong. And LOUDLY LIKE ROCK MUSIC.

Subsequently, The Female Eunuch is like someone running into the room—my room—shouting, "Oh, my God!" and triggering a gold-glitter cannonade. Greer has the unstoppable velocity of someone working at the top of her game. And she has the heart-in-mouth glee of knowing she is saying stuff no one's said before. She knows she is the new weather front; the coming storm.

I don't understand half of what she is on about. At the age of 15, I have yet to come across anything I could call sexism in the workplace, men's loathing for women, or, indeed, what had driven me to the book in the first place: a penis looking to be stimulated and caressed. Half of it confuses the hell out of me: the combination of her anger toward men and her belief in women letting themselves down, and being weak, is pretty alien to my way of thinking. By and large, I just think we're all "the guys," trying to get on as best we can.
I don't really get massive generalizations—and I bet the rest of the world doesn't, either, I think.

But there is no doubt that this book—the world in this book—is a total thrill. Germaine makes being a woman—the sex wholly sidelined, reviled, silenced, and crushed—suddenly seem like an amazing thing to be. In the 20th century—an age in thrall to the new—women turn out to be the newest thing of all; still packed up in cellophane, still folded up in the box, having played dead for the length of history. But now we are the new species! The new craze! We are the tulip—America—the Hula Hoop—the moon shot—cocaine! Everything we do is going to be, implicitly, amazing.

I feel fandom—that slightly lazy, wholly thrilled decision to simply believe everything your hero says and does; to follow in their fluorescing slipstream without question. This is a hero who would not hurt me—who will not, suddenly and shockingly, reveal that they probably hate me—like Led Zeppelin's roadies handing out laminates to underage groupies decorated with an eye, a bird, and a sailor: "I swallow semen."

As a soft teenage girl, this is a rare hero who will be good for my soul.

In later years, of course, I would grow Greer-ish enough to disagree with Greer on things that she said; she went off sex in the eighties, opposed the election of a transsexual lecturer at Newham Ladies College, got a bee in her bonnet about transgender males-to-females, and, most important, had a go at Guardian columnist Suzanne Moore's back-combed hair ("bird's nest hair and fuck-me shoes"), which saddened me: I love a bouff.

But at 18, by the time I have finished reading The Female Eunuch, I am so excited about being a woman that, had I been a boy, I think I would have switched sides.

But, of course, you might be asking yourself, "Am I a feminist? I might not be. I don't know! I still don't know what it is! I'm too knackered and confused to work it out. That curtain rod really still isn't up! I don't have time to work out if I am a woman's libber! There seems to be a lot to it. WHAT DOES IT MEAN?"

I understand.

So here is the quick way of working out if you're a feminist.

Put your hand in your underpants.

a. Do you have a vagina? and
b. Do you want to be in charge of it?

If you said "yes" to both, then congratulations! You're a feminist.

Because we need to reclaim the word "feminism." We need the word "feminism" back real bad. When statistics come in saying that only 29 percent of American women would describe themselves as feminist—and only 42 percent of British women—I used to think, What do you think feminism is, ladies? What part of "liberation for women" is not for you? Is it freedom to vote? The right not to be owned by the man you marry? The campaign for equal pay? "Vogue," by Madonna? Jeans? Did all that good shit GET ON YOUR NERVES? Or were you just DRUNK AT THE TIME OF SURVEY?

These days, however, I am much calmer—since I realized that it's technically impossible for a woman to argue against feminism. Without feminism, you wouldn't be allowed to have a debate on a woman's place in society. You'd be too busy giving birth on the kitchen floor—biting down on a wooden spoon, so as not to disturb the men's card game—before going back to hoeing the rutabaga field. This is why those female columnists in the Daily
Mail—giving daily wail against feminism—amuse me. They paid you £1,600 for that, dear, I think. And I bet it’s going into your bank account, and not your husband’s. The more women argue, loudly, against feminism, the more they both prove it exists and that they enjoy its hard-won privileges.

Because for all that people have tried to abuse it and disown it, “feminism” is still the word we need. No other word will do. And let’s face it, there has been no other word, save “Girl Power”—which makes you sound like you’re into some branch of Scientology owned by Geri Halliwell. That “Girl Power” has been the sole rival to the word “feminism” in the last 50 years is a cause for much sorrow on behalf of the women. After all, P. Diddy has had four different names, and he’s just one man.

Personally, I don’t think the word “feminist” on its own is enough. I want to go all the way. I want to bring it back in conjunction with the word “strident.” It looks hotter like that. It’s been so wrong for so long that it’s got to be right again. They have used it to abuse us! Let’s use it right back at them! I want to reclaim the phrase “strident feminist” in the same way the hip-hop community has reclaimed the word “nigger.”

“Go, my strident feminist! You work that male/female dialectic dichotomy,” I will shout at my friends in bars, while everyone nods at how edgy and real we are—the word thrilling us as much as champagne, handbrake turns, and Helter Shelter.

The fact that it’s currently underused and reviled makes it all the hotter—like deciding to be the person who single-handedly revives the popular use of the top hat. Once people see how hot you look in it, they’re all going to want to get one.

We need the only word we have ever had to describe “making the world equal for men and women.” Women’s reluctance to use it sends out a really bad signal. Imagine if, in the 1960s, it had become fashionable for black people to say they “weren’t into” civil rights.

“No! I’m not into civil rights! That Martin Luther King is too shouty. He just needs to chill out, to be honest.”

But then, I do understand why women started to reject the word “feminism.” It ended up being invoked in so many bafflingly inappropriate contexts that—if you weren’t actually aware of the core aims of feminism and were trying to work it out simply from the surrounding conversation—you’d presume it was some spectacularly unappealing combination of misandry, misery, and hypocrisy, which stood for ugly clothes, constant anger, and, let’s face it, no fucking.

Take, for instance, the “What I’m Really Thinking” column from the Guardian, which in 2010, ran the secret thoughts of a cleaner:

Sometimes . . . I ponder the ironies of the job; for example, that all the ironing consists of men’s clothing. In a bid to escape domesticity, women are refusing to iron their husband’s shirts. Congratulations: your act of feminism means that the job is shunted onto a different woman, assigning her to a different rank.

I’ve seen this idea put forward a hundred times—that a proper feminist would do her own hoovering. Germaine Greer cleans her own lavvy, and Emily Wilding Davison threw herself under that horse, hands still piney fresh from Mr. Muscle oven cleaner. On this basis alone, how many women have had to conclude, sighing as they hire a cleaner, that they can’t, then, be feminists?

But, of course, the hiring of domestic help isn’t a case of women oppressing other women, because WOMEN DID NOT
INVENT DUST. THE STICKY RESIDUE THAT COLLECTS ON THE KETTLE DOES NOT COME OUT OF WOMEN'S VAGINAS. IT IS NOT ESTROGEN THAT COVERS THE DINNER PLATES IN TOMATO SAUCE, FISH-STICK CRUMBS, AND BITS OF MASHED POTATOES. MY UTERUS DID NOT RUN UPSTAIRS AND THROW ALL OF THE KIDS' CLOTHES ON THE FLOOR AND PUT JAM ON THE BANISTER. AND IT IS NOT MY TITS THAT HAVE SKewed THE GLOBAL ECONOMY TOWARD DOMESTIC WORK FOR WOMEN.

Mess is a problem of humanity. Domestica is the concern of all. A man hiring a male cleaner would be seen as a simple act of employment. Quite how a heterosexual couple hiring a female cleaner ends up as a betrayal of feminism isn't terribly clear—unless you believe that running a household is, in some way:

a. an inarguable duty of womenkind—that, in addition, can

b. only ever be done out of love, and never for cash, because that somehow "spoils" the magic of the household. As if the dishes know they've been washed by hired help, instead of the woman of the house, and will feel all sad.

This is, clearly—to use the technical term—total bullshit. Everything else in this world you can pay someone to do for you. There are places that will bleach your anus for you—lest you consider the skin tone too dark. That's right. For cash, someone will apply peroxide to your bumhole and make it look like Marilyn Monroe. If you have mines in your field, you can pay someone to risk their life removing them. If you want to watch people pound each other's nasal cartilage to a pulp with their fists, you can go to see cage fighting. There are people out there carting night soil, working as mercenaries, and masturbating pigs into jars.

And yet, somehow, in the midst of all this—and of all the jobs we get chippy about—it's still wrong for a woman in North London to employ someone to clean the house.

When I was 16, I was a cleaner. I cleaned the house of a woman with an enormous amount of wooden paneling on Penn Road, Wolverhampton, and I was thrilled that someone with my qualifications (nil) could earn money chucking Comet around someone's faucets and chipping lime scale off a kettle with a fork. Twenty years later, I now have a cleaner myself.

And having a cleaner is nothing to do with feminism. If a middle-class woman is engaging in antifeminist activity by hiring a woman to do the cleaning, then surely a middle-class man is engaging in class oppression when he hires a male plumber?

Feminism has had exactly the same problem that "political correctness" has had: people keep using the phrase without really knowing what it means.

My friend Alexis recently came across a "gentleman of the road" sitting in a shop doorway and drinking from a can of Kestrel at 9:07 a.m.

"Ha-ha-ha! I'm not being very politically correct!" the hobo said, brandishing his can by way of a toast.

Of course, getting pissed at 9 o'clock in the morning outside the Primark on Western Road, Brighton, has absolutely nothing to do with political correctness. With the best will in the world—dude, you're a tramp, getting wanked. You are not cocking a snook at Gloria Steinem, Barack Obama, and the BBC. Yet a huge number of people would agree with the tramp's definition of "political correctness," i.e., all vaguely risky fun being "banned" by the "politically correct brigade," rather than the actual definition of political correctness: formalizing polite-ness. Codifying courtesy in
areas where, previously, really awful things—like using epithets such as “Paki,” and me being called “Tits McGee” by a builder when I was 15—used to happen.

There’s a whole generation of people who’ve confused “feminism” with “anything to do with women.” “Feminism” is seen as absolutely interchangeable with “modern women”—on one hand, a cheering reminder of what feminism has done, but on the other, a political, lexical, and grammatical mess.

Over the last few years, I’ve seen feminism—to remind ourselves: the liberation of women—blamed for the following: eating disorders, female depression, rising divorce rates, childhood obesity, male depression, women leaving it too late to conceive, the rise in abortion, female binge drinking, and rises in female crime. But these are all things that have simply INVOLVED WOMEN and have nothing to do with the political movement “feminism.”

In the most ironic twist of all, feminism is often used as the stick—actually, a stick is inappropriately phallocentric, maybe a “furry cup”—to stop women behaving as freely, normally, and unself-consciously as men. Even—in some extreme cases—suggesting that acting as freely, normally, and unself-consciously as men is destroying other women.

Like with bitching. There is currently this idea that feminists aren’t supposed to bitch about each other.

“That’s not very feminist of you,” people will say if I slag off another woman. “What about the sisterhood?” people cry when Julie Burchill lays into Camille Paglia, or Germaine Greer has a pop at Suzanne Moore.

Well, personally, I believe that feminism will get you so far—and then you have to start bitching. When did feminism become confused with Buddhism? Why on earth have I, because I’m a woman, got to be nice to everyone? And why have women—on top of everything else—got to be particularly careful to be “lovely” and “supportive” to each other at all times? This idea of the “sisterhood” I find, frankly, illogical, I don’t build in a 20 percent “Genital Similarity Regard Bonus” if I meet someone else wearing a bra. If someone’s an arsehole, someone’s an arsehole—regardless of whether we’re both standing in the longer bathroom queue at concerts or not.

When people suggest that what, all along, has been holding women back is other women bitching about each other, I think they’re severely overestimating the power of a catty zinger during a cigarette break. We have to remember that snidely saying, “Her hair’s a bit limp on top” isn’t what’s keeping womankind from closing the 30 percent pay gap and a place on the board of directors. I think that’s more likely to be down to tens of thousands of years of ingrained social, political, and economic misogyny and the patriarchy, tbh. That’s just got slightly more leverage than a gag about someone’s bad trousers.

I have a rule of thumb that allows me to judge—when time is pressing and one needs to make a snap judgment—whether some sexist bullshit is afoot. Obviously it’s not 100 percent infallible but, by and large, it definitely points you in the right direction.

And it’s asking this question: “Are the men doing it? Are the men worrying about this as well? Is this taking up the men’s time? Are the men told not to do this, as it’s “letting our side down”? Are the men having to write bloody books about this exasperating, retarded, time-wasting bullshit? Is this making Jon Stewart feel insecure?”

Almost always, the answer is: “No. The boys are not being told they have to be a certain way. They’re just getting on with stuff.”

Men are not being informed that they are oppressing other men with their comments. It is presumed that men can handle
perfectly well the idea of other men bitching about them. I think, on this basis, we can presume women can cope with other women being bitchy about them, too. BECAUSE WE ARE ESSENTIALLY THE SAME AS MEN WHEN IT COMES TO BEING VILE ABOUT EACH OTHER.

This isn’t to say we should all start behaving like bitches toward each other and turn every day into a 24-hour roasting session, in which people’s lives, wardrobes, and psyches are destroyed before our eyes. All along, we must recall the most important Humanity Guideline of all: BE POLITE. Being polite is possibly the greatest daily contribution everyone can make to life on earth.

But at the same time, “Are the boys doing it?” is a good way to detect spores of misogyny in the soil, which might otherwise seem a perfectly fertile and safe place to grow a philosophy.

It was the “Are the boys doing it?” basis on which I finally decided I was against women wearing burkas. Yes, the idea is that it protects your modesty and ensures that people regard you as a human being, rather than just a sexual object. Fair enough. But who are you being protected from? Men. And who—so long as you play by the rules and wear the correct clothes—is protecting you from the men? Men. And who is it that is regarding you as just a sexual object, instead of another human being, in the first place? Men.

Well. This all seems like quite a man-based problem, really. I would definitely put this under the heading “100 percent stuff that the men need to sort out.” I don’t know why we’re suddenly having to put things on our heads to make it better. Unless you really, genuinely like all the gear and would wear it even if you were alone watching EastEnders, in which case carry on. My politeness accepts your choice. You can be whatever you want—so long as you’re sure it’s what you actually want, rather than one of two equally dodgy choices foisted onto you.

Because the purpose of feminism isn’t to make a particular type of woman. The idea that there are inherently wrong and inherently right “types” of women is what’s screwed feminism for so long—this belief that “we” wouldn’t accept slaggy birds, dim birds, birds that bitch, birds that hire cleaners, birds that stay at home with their kids, birds that have pink Mini Metros with powered by fairy dust! bumper stickers, birds in burkas, or birds that like to pretend, in their heads, that they’re married to Zach Braff from Scrubs and that you sometimes have sex in an ambulance while the rest of the cast watch and, latterly, clap. You know what? Feminism will have all of you.

What is feminism? Simply the belief that women should be as free as men, however nuts, dim, deluded, badly dressed, fat, receding, lazy, and smug they might be.

Are you a feminist? Hahaha. Of course you are.