



Photo: Mikołaj Długosz

Each chapter in *A Pocket Book of Women* ('From the Marketplace,' 'Liaison Officers,' 'Rip-Offs,' 'Princesses') begins with a panoramic take, portraying nameless female types and sketches of the conditions in which they live. Next the author zooms in and focuses exclusively on the chosen representative of the 'species' she has carved out. The four main characters, representing different generations—one of them an effeminate man—are connected by the fact that they all live in the same building. So their separate worlds come together into a single reality. If we treat this as the reality of Opaczewska Street in Warsaw, then to use the biologically inspired determiners of Sylwia Chutnik, we may speak of it as an ecosystem and of its residents as representatives of an indigenous species that determines relationships within the system.

If we connect the author's two angles, they remind us of a nature documentary. And yet the chosen types are not representative, they do not reflect any particular model of life, but instead are psychologically intriguing. Chutnik does not approach them as a behaviorist, opting rather for a look into the souls of the people she depicts. Or rather she creates souls for them. She tries to get at why Maryśka has gone mad, why Maria decides to die, why Marian is incapable of having a relationship with a woman, and why the teenage Marysia changes into a terrorist at night-time. Thus she investigates not the social, but rather the individual conditions for each of their life choices. All of the fortunes presented in the book are moving, although Chutnik describes them in a tragi-comic tone. The distance with which she relates to her characters and which is required of a filmmaker focusing on nature do not detract from her enormous sensitivity. It is this sensitivity, alongside the carefully considered conception of this collection of stories and her ability to construct a narrative

as well as some credible portraits of a social group and some individuals that set this young author apart. She has not quite come into her own yet, as she is only just beginning to find her voice, but Chutnik is extremely promising and certainly the most fascinating of the twenty-somethings debuting this year.

Marta Mizuro

Sylwia Chutnik (born 1979) graduated in culture and gender studies. She is a social worker and president of the MaMa Foundation, as well as a Warsaw city tour guide.

The Housekeeper

is born a housekeeper and will die a housekeeper. Engaged in the non-stop campaign called 'Cleaning up the World.'

Her life is like the successive segments of a never-ending tapeworm. Thousands of senseless, boring tasks. Having dissolved into jobs that repeat themselves, gestures that repeat themselves, she accepts life exactly as it is. Without irritating spurts of disobedience, existential grudges or distasteful rebellions. DayLaundryCleaningDayNight...

The housekeeper understands that putting up with tasks that keep repeating is what organizes our existence. She can find the throbbing tension in a scrap of reality and perpetuate it. Thanks to this she saves all those ungrateful dalliers who don't make their beds in the mornings, who don't use a separate knife for the butter and never-absolutely never-clean the floor behind the oven.

The housekeeper organizes events and guides them toward a happy ending. Then, without resting, without any laurels to rest on, she moves seamlessly into the next scene. The set is squeezed into several dozen square meters. It features primarily the washing machine, the refrigerator, windows, furniture, and the floor. The housekeeper is also the manager of the family, the famous Food Mother. This domestic matriarchy, tied primarily to the provision of sustenance, is a gag in the mouths of women at large. What do you mean, you don't have any power? it says. Here you go, you're real Queens of the Hearth and Home, don't you see?

Real power is that rank-and-file, concealed power, veiled by a pile of plates and the leftovers of fried duck. The woman can plan the meal, the time and the way to serve it. Nobody need offer her any help, she will not reveal the recipe. She toils in the steamy kitchen and gives herself varicose veins from keeping a constant eye on the gas stove. Her reward is eating the leftovers from lunch, licking the plates and chewing the bones. When everyone has gone to sleep, the Food Mother creeps into the tidied kitchen and gently strokes the domestic appliances. Shh, sleep, little ones, your next task awaits you tomorrow. The world is not bad, the housekeeper

is not unhappy. Everything in the house has its place, and everyone in the family has his role. Without unnecessary casting calls, the housekeeper gathers up the script from the desk and begins to act it out. Somebody has to do it. It is, of course, true that housekeeping has become industrialized to a large extent, while the mistress of the house is irreplaceable. And the children? They follow in the footsteps of the Kitchen Queen or revolt and move out.

And so our Maria, apart from her household tasks, begins to earn money.

'Some spell's gotten her, take a look at her pupils,' and right away you could see that the girl wasn't suited for the market. Maria gazed into the distance and dreamt of beautiful royal chambers. Meanwhile like that silly hussy Cinderella she was everyone's hired girl. Strands of market conversations fluttered around her head. Spiced up by the salespeople:

'You prick, you've wasted my life.'

'Me? Come on, give me a break.'

And then: 'And I was at that morning mass, I tell you, honey, the priest told such nice stories about the dead and those, you know, politicians.'

Maria tried not to hear the hubbub and the conversations muttered all around her, drawled, yelled and spat out. What she wanted was quiet, a closed convent, Vipassana meditation and for the electricity for the whole market to be shut off. Her mom, matryoshka of the DIY back alley, always spoke in resounding ultimatums to her only daughter. She held the power, and she was capable of being caustic. Like cleaning fluid. She'd say her father didn't beat her often enough, that he'd spoiled her. That she was a lazybones and a hunchback. Her slicked up, unbraided, straggly little bit of hair. If she would just reveal her body a little bit at their stall, because when the boys came up they moved on even faster.

Actually Maria had little to do with the opposite sex. No broken hearts, just old geezers kissing her hand and staring down at her chest. But did actual love actually exist? Wasn't it over there, way far away, back behind the glass on the TV and only in America or in Brazil? A lady comes up

to their stall and says, 'Ma'am, ma'am, give me that teakettle there cause my guy burned the old one up again, damn it all. Looking at them football games, put some water on for some tay and forgot about it. 'Damn him, what a loser. I keep him around the house to scratch my back when it itches. Forty years of marriage and there you got it!' And then Maria's mother responds with a laugh: 'Yeah and he doesn't scratch any other itch besides your back?'

And Maria lowers her gaze, because she has learned about life at the market. She now knows what a streetwalker is as well as a G Spot. They have *Bravo Girl* lying around at the kiosks with advice columns inside. Strange secret wisdom from the domain of parents' beds: 'Dear Bravo, I'm thirteen years old and have been doing it with my boyfriend for two years now. I'm writing because I don't know if when we kiss with tongues for too long we might have babies later? Your faithful reader.' And the editors reply that you should talk to your mom, your teachers, or your priest about problems related to growing up, and that besides boys like to bite girls' nipples. And then full-color photographs of a couple in a loving embrace and a state of undress.

Maria's imagination is working, but she is incapable of getting excited over loving embraces and the like. Even if something whirls around in her stomach for a moment. Then there is just torpor. She dreams about love, but she doesn't know what she would be supposed to do with it. Arch like an actress? Close her eyes and open her mouth a little ways?

In the evening she asks herself if everybody is actually even cut out for love. Words flutter through Maria's head, and if someone were to accidentally ask her what she was thinking about, she would answer, Am I thinking? Surprised that someone would be suspicious of her and would be wondering. Being social with people, with her friend from school, has always been on impulse and "because you have to". Greet the neighbor lady, answer the customer. Maria can't even fill in the 'Interests' section of the quizzes in the magazine. She's such a grey-haired nobody. With dreams about *The Bold and the Beautiful* or the Polish soap, *The Parsonage*.

Meanwhile Ochota, Maria's neighborhood in Warsaw, is

no glistening television show. Here reality is enclosed inside day-to-day tasks that are piously acted out. Being hypnotized in a familiar and safe environment, in comfortable monotony guaranteed that life could be endured, or at least waited out. *The Woman with no Sense* can always take up cleaning, right?

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