





noun

1 a person or animal with whom one spends a lot of time or with whom one travels: her travelling companion

2 each of a pair of things intended to complement or match each other

#### ORIGIN

Middle English: from Old French *compaignon*, literally 'one who breaks bread with another', based on Latin *com-* 'together with' + *panis* 'bread'.

It looks like every person is from this land. I am noticeable because I do not look like one of them. But I am not bothered, nor are they.

I want to tell you how these things look to me. I'm not sure if this is a culture shock. I recognize that things are different, but I'm just a viewer, I'm not a participant. Maybe, also, since being away from my culture for so long, I don't feel these new environments as a "shock".

The words you've taught me are useful. I'm not sure how well I'm being understood, but I prefer saying these words rather than using english. This makes me foreign and harder to place. I wonder how many Canadians come here. I wonder how many of my Canadian friends know this place exists. I didn't until I met you.





In Cathedral Alexander Nevsky. A father (a priest, holy man) sits alongside a younger man. They speak to one another hushed, but occasionally, the holy man stands up to yell “photo is 10 leva” at tourists with phones. Fresco paintings are cracking and deteriorating. The further out of reach the frescoes are, the worse they look. Harder to reach, harder to keep restored. The ceiling has cracks along the inside of the domes. The age is visible. It makes me feel as if it all could collapse. Churches normally make me feel uncomfortable. (a woman kisses the glass of a display, then notions her hand to the father the son and the holy spirit. Nearby, an old woman walking in circles, her back in the shape of a question mark, praying aloud while holding a candle. She sits on the bench, still holding the burning candle, praying quieter. Her back is hunched, similar to mine, but I can straighten out. She cannot.) A broom and a plastic dustpan lean against the marble wall.

I visited an antique market before coming to the church. I spoke with a man named Danny who was selling pins. He told me the past customers were rude, he doesn't like rude Bulgarians. We spoke about Bulgaria and the countries he has traveled to. He struggled to count my change so he suggested I take more pins. I knew I was being scammed, but the price was cheap to me regardless and I liked his stories. I asked him about the woman nearby selling nazi memorabilia. He told me they were fakes. “They're new, they get them from a production place and sell them for a lot of money because tourists think they're real.” He told me a story about a woman who used to sell many of them. “Her husband was a smoker, and one night he falls asleep with one still lit. Whoosh. The whole house burns down.” She survived but with bad burns. “God makes things right. He's watching” he motioned upward with his finger.

(A young man gives a priest a picture of a saint. The priest puts on another robe, longer than the last one, and blesses the picture of the saint.)



So I was taking a walk the other day, thinking of ways to describe the place I come from. We relocated often but one of my most vivid memories is the “Vasil Levski” neighbourhood - a middle-class area situated northbound from Varna’s city centre. It’s funny, after all this moving my mother lives back there again. You turn around and all you see are concrete blocks and stray dogs.

On our neighbours’ balcony lived a monkey in a cage. Under that same balcony I got married to a skinny boy named Gosho Vutov. This was when Lelia Martche (Aunty Martche translated from Bulgarian), the kindergarten Lelia, would force mackerel in tomato sauce on me, as a result of which I got fish bones stuck in my throat.

After lunch followed bed time.

Our bed chamber was sectioned in three parts, each of which included four beds. My bed was right next to Kaloyan’s – a blond boy with a bowl haircut. He promised to marry me under the condition of showing him what I have “down-there”. Genitalia and marriage seemed to be topics frequently explored.

In the evening, as my mother was preparing dinner, the doorbell rang. It was my father’s absence - a woman and a man dressed in trench coats – exchanging bones for money.





There was a short period in which my mother and I lived in a one bedroom apartment. The living room served the purpose of a kitchen and a bedroom. The other one was mostly used for storage and occasionally as my bedroom. The apartment building remained almost empty for quite some time. The only inhabitants were us, the lady next door and a young couple living on the ground floor. During the winter the apartment would get so terribly cold that my mother and I had to spend the nights at my grandmother's house.

The sun was always shining there and lunch seemed to be a crucial part of the day. Although my grandfather was not allowed to drink or smoke, he would secretly drink wine in the basement and come back rather cheerful. Alcohol made him act adolescent and we would often compete for the last piece of cucumber in the salad bowl. Like most of the men in my family, my grandfather was a sailor by profession. However, he had a much stronger bond to the earth. Recently I found a letter he wrote to my grandmother during one of his sailing journeys. In the letter, he explains he no longer wants to sail but to plant trees and build a new life.

After he passed away, he left a villa in a vineyard, two cherry trees and an apricot garden to his daughters (my mother and aunt). None of them could maintain the land. The trees no longer bear fruit. The villa got demolished by gypsies who robbed the furniture, the doors, the windows and the metal railings of the building.







