

HOW TO PACK SMALL AND LIGHT FOR A JOURNEY WITHOUT FORGETTING SOMETHING IMPORTANT

by Maria Doneva

translated from the Bulgarian by Christopher Buxton

Always before setting out I imagine with horror what it's like to be an ant who has carelessly found its way onto an intercity bus. A little black ant, glistening and brave or even more insignificant – brown. It crawls in the dust, avoids the spots of spilt oil, smells the higgledy parcels with interest. It creeps over some bag and then, in a second, it's there inside the bus – at 110 kilometres an hour and doesn't understand a thing. I don't feel sorry for flies and other winged pests big or small – perhaps because I don't know their social customs. But the fate of the small homeless ant fills me with fear and terror. What will happen to her, will she find new friends, a home? Inappropriate fantasies. A husband?

When I travel in a bus, I avoid reading, because it makes me ill. Only I don't feel sick when I peep over at the magazine of my neighbour sitting diagonally across the aisle or at the exceptionally stupid newspaper of the passenger next to me. If the newspaper were mine – not that I would have bought it, never ever! – but if it were mine, I wouldn't have read any of its articles. And anyway, furtively, I don't manage to read even one, and I'll never find out what happens to the woman who has married one and the same man for the fourth time, or even whether Marek FC will qualify for.... I don't know, I couldn't see – he turned the page.

I don't like getting to know my fellow travellers. Unless they are young, attractive and clean all in one go, but usually they aren't. So I don't introduce myself. I like to be on my own on a double seat, especially in the summer – to slip off my sandals and to lift my feet up. I'm not afraid of anything, not ashamed, not worried. Like I said earlier, I don't know anyone. If some familiar face appears, I prefer to hide behind the curtain or to bury myself in the newspaper (the

Grandad's with Marek FC). Of course, I'd hardly have the courage to make out that I'm a completely different person and I've never seen my one time colleague or classmate.

And in the winter I listen to the roar of the engine and I'm always afraid about what will happen if it gradually gets dark and the engine stops and the snow slowly covers the bus up to its windows. Then over the roof.... Maybe that wouldn't be so bad, especially if it silenced the radio with its awful stations which someone transmits especially for the driver and are unlistenable for anyone else.

I like to see animals through the window. Storks inspire me. Donkeys make me bray in excitement. Birds of prey on the pylons transfix me. The lakes, which we pass, make me imagine moments that will never come to pass. Their chill blows on me, I'll never feel it. I'm always impressed by the beauty of the sky, of the rivers, of every view – I never get tired to this.

I like to sleep on the bus. We pass towns, keep on the road, while I sleep. I dream very quickly. Sometimes I remember what I dream.

I like travelling alone. I don't need entertainment, neither answering questions nor holding conversations. The inevitable inconveniences of travel free me from the guilt that I've left a child at home and I delight in solitude. Just that I don't have anybody's salty snacks to munch.

As far as luggage is concerned, I don't have any idea how to pack little, light and not to forget anything important. Usually I take lots of unnecessary stuff.

I welcome advice on this question.