

## Revised version of story Published in Print version Pure Slush anthology 'Friendship'

### Rust settles in

I choose to be alone, because I wish not to be a disappointment.

I choose to be alone, because I will be a disappointment.

I choose to be alone, because I am a disappointment.

To myself.

To others.

To everyone.

Especially to anyone I have tried to be close with.

But.

For a fleeting moment, I choose to believe.

Believing often isn't enough.

*Pack up your friendships in your old rucksack*

*And smile, smile, smile,*

*there's always plenty time to make some more.*

*And tread that solitary mile.*

Old tune, new words humming inside my head.

Friendship. Here yesterday, gone tomorrow. No sadness, just an acceptance of inevitability. I am the original WYSISWG friend. What you see is what you get; nothing more, nothing less.

Lurking in the doorway of the closed-down department store I watch the lights flicker on in the meeting room above the pub. The clan is gathering without me.

The time has come; my time is done.

A more companionable and supportive group of friends you could scarcely hope for, but it is time for me to move on. A simple act - complex repercussions.

McGuane's 'deathbed friends' may be true for most people. It is Greene's school of friendship for me – "friends drop out, like milk teeth." A rat with friendship stems cells in every fibre. As friendships wear down to threadbare, I grow new ones. When mood music becomes repetitive, jaded, or painful to my ears I move on. No long good-byes, no 'sad to see you go', no card full of 'bon voyage'. No-one to cry for me Argentina, please. One of twelve, easily replaced. My self-view.

Moving on along without ever explaining my impulse face to face has always worked for me. The thought of any kind of tearful scene appals me. I wish never to confront the real thing.

Especially with Françoise. That would be excruciating. Amongst the twelve we have come closest on a one-to-one basis. Not lovers. We discussed it once over wine and (thankfully) dismissed it as foolish nonsense. We chose to be close friends in our twilight years, embodying affection, respect, and all the other characteristics which normal people recognise as friendship. As always, she found a shorter, more eloquent way to say it - "*les amis de Baudelaire et Sartre et Hugo*" and "*les fils et les filles des géants littéraires.*" That was certainly true for Françoise. Talent without limit; talent undiscovered until too many years had passed us both by. I believe I may have been the friend she had been searching for – a bit of charm can cover up most of my many flaws. However, I knew long before she may have suspected, that she is another friendship milestone on my restless

perambulations through life. Pick up, put down; pick up, put down. The undeniable selfishness of being.

Now it is time to put down again. Regrets, yes, I have more than a few where Françoise is concerned. Silver haired, magnolia skin with just enough cute wrinkles to signal a life mischievously lived; twinkling eyes and a smile to melt the polar ice cap. She almost managed it with me. Underneath my ice there is only rock, which she could not melt with her smile.

It is time. Like the well-oiled machine that is starting to fail as rust settles in; smooth gears rattle, cogs gradually grate and inevitably the whole machine will fail. While conscious movement is still possible I make it for the good of the machine.

*La fin est la fin* and we have reached the terminus. She has deep taproots here. I am shallow-rooted absorbing quickly, uprooting with ease. Mobile, but tottering improbably towards the undefinable future. I know only my need for constant forward movement.

Footsteps.

The scent of Givenchy Organza; a complexity of top notes, heart notes and base notes. Sap and Honeysuckle, Peony and Gardenia, Macis and Nutmeg.

Nabbed with rucksack on my back. We exchange smiles despite my passive betrayal. She trusted me to keep my word; I dishonestly allowed her to believe. She hands me a book saying, "Baudelaire. A slim volume, not much of a burden, yes?"

I nod wanly. She understands this moment.

We stare, searching for alternative words or even a spark.

"Just do not forget me," she says, "but I will not say my door is always open."

We hug, and I simply walk - away. Looking back is - complex. Mistake, mistake, my heart screams but my DNA deafens me and propels me onward.

As Françoise is consumed by complex shadows, a simple tear comes.

That is new.

I wipe it away.