

## The end of a beautiful friendship

He was in a very deep, dark hole. No light seemed to penetrate into his mind and give him back his insouciance, or his love of life. He had become an automaton, acting out the part he had played so successfully for so many years. No-one seemed to notice, so it worked for a while.

His partner appeared to be unaware of his state of mind. Even from his pit of despair, he briefly wondered if he too had been damaged by that last affair, and was suffering in the same way. He dared not ask for fear of being judged for his sudden weakness, even by the one person he knew he could trust. But before his eyes, every moment of the day, and in his nightmares, was the sight of that execution squad. It wasn't as if it hadn't happened before. They had been rescued at the last minute many times, but this time even his partner had run out of useful tactics – he had stood apparently unmoved, not reacting to anything; numb. It had been sheer chance that it had been called off. They might have died. It wasn't the dying, though. It was the nightmare helplessness. In a way, he had died.

His partner was sitting there, reading. He looked up and said something, and looked baffled to get no response from the man opposite who was staring at him, looking through him.

“Sorry, what was that?”

“An article on new developments in computing. It looks interesting: in future, everyone might be able to have their own personal one. We could have them in the office; there'd be no need to ask people to look things up for us in paper files.”

“Oh.”

His partner sighed. It wasn't his thing either, but it was still interesting. Think of the possibilities!

“There's quite an interesting article on using them in fashion design, too.”

“Not my thing, tovarisch. Sorry.”

He opened a file on his own desk, and his partner returned to his journal, mildly shaking his head.

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They went their separate ways for lunch, and he returned to the office alone. His partner had been sent off on some local mission or other. He couldn't remember.

He saw the journal lying on his partner's desk and reached for it. Might as well have a look. Actually, it *was* quite interesting. He got to the back pages and found there were adverts for jobs in the field, and became engrossed. For the first time in weeks, the darkness lifted and with it his depression. Had he found a way out?

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When the offer came through, he was jubilant. He almost bounced into headquarters. Their shared office was empty, so he went straight to see the Old Man. He emerged slightly crushed, but not enough to dampen his mood. On his return to the office, he found his partner sitting at his desk, reading as usual.

“I'm going now,” he announced. Something in the finality of his tone got through. His partner stood up, his brow wrinkling.

“What do you mean? Where? We haven’t been assigned to anything.”

“I quit. I’m off – leaving – for good. This is Goodbye, old friend.”

Suddenly realising the import of what he had said, his partner’s face went white. “But – what – where?” he stammered, his eyes wide and hurt.

“Got a new job – I’m sorry, tovarisch. I’ll be in touch sometime. Look after yourself.” He patted his pale cheek, shook his helpless hand, and bounced out, leaving the small figure standing alone, stunned. He heard his name called as he marched down the corridor, but he didn’t turn round, and no-one followed him.