

# A Smaller Lump of Clay

Sam Varley

He blamed me for getting us lost, for losing the car.

This accusation seemed unfounded, to me. I didn't decide to take my own bomb of a car instead of my parents'; wasn't the one who decided that we should have a break and pull over and meet-up with the others later. I didn't, then, commence chasing some poor animal with a stick for ten minutes while my friend followed patiently, growing more and more sure that we had gotten lost.

No, that was Steve.

All I did was agree with him, and that was probably the biggest mistake. Sure, I intended to say all this, but Steve managed to speak first.

*"Awesome job, Jack. We're stranded."*

He was a few meters ahead, standing on the bronze leaves that carpeted everything. The road-trip had brought us to a hinterland with thick tree-cover. It was lit well enough, though, so the situation was alarming, but not desperate.

"Steve, you're exaggerating." I said.

Steve turned and, for a moment, a look of rage crossed his face. But, it passed and he just sighed.

I smiled internally. Angry Steve has always been funny to me.

"Let's just look, okay," he said and brushed past me.

It was two weeks ago Steve called me. I was, at that time, planning the end-of-year-road-trip. Things looked perfect: around twelve of us were going (in three cars). We had our route marked, our campsites booked, then...

"I'm not going."

I said: "What's wrong?"

He said: "I have to repeat. I have to repeat and she dumped me."

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Steve explained that his grades weren't good enough for him to graduate this year like the rest of us. And, that his girlfriend had found it necessary to tell him she didn't think their relationship was: "*going anywhere,*" and, she wanted to see someone else. Oh, and he wasn't coming on the road-trip. Aside from needing his (parents' preferably) car, this road-trip was the culmination of weeks of planning and dreaming. It was how we were going to mark the end of a phase in our lives. Steve *had* to come.

I went over that afternoon and every subsequent afternoon for a week in an effort to console my broken-hearted friend.

He lay on the floor of his dark and messy bedroom, listening to *Radiohead*, while I sat and said things like: "*it's not the end of the world,*" and "*It's her loss,*" and finally "*Steve, we need your parents' car.*"

I didn't have any advice for Steve because I didn't really believe him. I was always one of the nerdy kids who saw girlfriends as kind-of-like gateways to sex and salvation, the solutions to all a nerd's dysfunctions. But, *love* at my age looked strange. It didn't seem to fit.

Eventually, he decided to come on the road-trip; choosing, though, to take his own car. And he was still super-moody, so he wasn't much company on the road. Our friends said to leave him at home.

I should've listened, maybe.

He was walking through the trees, still a few meters away and I was following. We hadn't talked for a while, until:

"I feel lost," Steve said.

"Um, we *are* lost," I said

He shook his head. "No, I mean like in a metaphysical sense."

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“Oh,” I said, “how?”

“I thought I loved her.”

“Oh.”

“It was like, when I found out I had to repeat, I didn’t care that much because, well, what’s another year?”

“Don’t you hate it at school? I mean I did.” I said.

“Yeah, but I don’t have Uni or anything like you. You have it all set out.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

He said: “I didn’t care that I had to repeat because I was actually sort of happy. And, I thought I was in love.”

“Yep,” I said as I peered through the trees. I had been waiting for Steve to open up, but now I wanted to find the car before being dragged into a D-&-M. He didn’t notice.

“Now I don’t have anything. No love, no future. I feel lost.”

I piqued at that. “Wait. So, because she dumped you...”

“We broke-up.”

“Right, so because you ‘*broke-up*’ and you have to repeat, you’ve gone all moody and emotional.”

“I haven’t... well yeah, I guess.”

“Well, it sucks and everything, but I don’t see why it’s snowballed into a crisis.”

The day I got my acceptance letter, I had come home from school and grabbed the mail on the way in. I read it as I watched afternoon TV.

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Bold print spelled out that I had been accepted. And, I should have been excited. I was going to a good university to study writing and had a career-path and everything looked great, but I couldn't handle it. I was terrified.

University was the future and the future was so strange and scary and final that I didn't sleep right for days. I formed a list of things I wanted to do before university started. But, many were either impractical or just stupid. So eventually, the only idea that remained was a road-trip after graduation.

I thought that, maybe, this trip would be enough, and that I would be able to move on. But, as we walked through the trees, looking for Steve's old lemon, his words brought all my fears to the surface.

"Dude," I said, "I don't have everything planned out for me. To be honest, I'm terrified of the future."

The leaves kept crunching under our feet as we kept searching.

Steve said: "Why?"

And, I didn't really have an answer. I had never thought about why I was terrified. But, I began to, then.

"I guess it's because, like, Uni starts soon, right?"

"Yeah."

"So, it's inevitable. Uni starts and in four years I'll have a degree, then I'll get a job, start a family, hopefully write a couple of good books and then, well, die."

"Sounds like a plan," Steve said.

"See, that's it!" I said, "It's all planned. That's what scares me. Even though I'm going somewhere and it's all been decided for me... by me, I feel..."

"Lost," he said and stopped walking.

I stopped, too. "Yeah. I guess that makes me a hypocrite, right?"

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“Yep. But, that’s okay.”

“Sorry for making fun of you.”

“That’s okay, too.”

“So...” I said.

“So...” he said, turning towards me.

“How do we get un-lost?”

For a while we just stood there, until:

I said: “I guess, I never really thought you were in love. I didn’t think it was possible at our age. But, that’s probably because I don’t know what love is.”

“Neither,” he said, “I thought I did but, now I don’t know”

I paused and then said: “Different people say different things. Some people think it’s just part of natural selection. And, some think it’s this ethereal thing.”

“What do you think?”

I paused again.

Finally, I said: “I think, maybe, we don’t find out, really. But, as we get older, we find out more things that it isn’t. Like you and your girlfriend. You thought you were in love but...”

“I probably wasn’t,” he said.

“Yeah. We have this idea of love, at first, and then we have these experiences where people hurt us or get hurt by us and our idea of love is slowly carved down. Like, it turns from a lump of clay into a...”

“A smaller lump of clay,” he said.

“I was going to say sculpture.”

“I know.”

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“Anyway, this sculpture, it’s hard to shape. It hurts. But, the final thing is beautiful. And, it looks different to everyone.”

That was the first time Steve had smiled in weeks. It was very poignant, and all, but I had problems, too.

Steve realized as well. “Maybe, you need to accept some things, too,” he said.

“Like what?”

“That you don’t actually have your life planned. That just because you’ve gotten into Uni, doesn’t mean that you’re going to do all that other stuff.”

“But, that is the logical course of events.”

“Dude, it’s the future. It doesn’t matter how much you think about it, how many scenarios you play out in your head, it always turns out different.”

I thought about what he said.

“Well, that’s bleak,” I said, “and, even scarier than knowing how my life will turn out.”

“Maybe,” he said, “But, at least you’ll be surprised.”

I smiled.

Then, Steve shot up. He pointed and said: “Is that the road?”

We stood and ran in the direction Steve had pointed. The tree-cover became thinner and more light came in. I could see the bitumen ahead. When we came to the edge of the trees, we saw the car and it was like seeing it for the first time.

It didn’t even look like it would make it the rest of the trip. A hunk of rust with some car-parts stuck on. It may not have been what I wanted, but it was our way back.