

# Fidgeting at the Wheel

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## Scene 1

*In the darkness, the sound of a car engine.*

*Lights up on a father, Richard Adkission, and daughter, Sarah. Sarah is about twelve. The father is driving; she is in the passenger seat. It is summer.*

*Sarah and her father have their own little reparté, and they find it just as amusing as we do. In general, their exasperation is feigned; it is only rarely that one is actually frustrated by the other.*

DAD

Sarah, would you please stop fidgeting?

SARAH

I'm not fidgeting.

DAD

It's perfectly normal to be a bit scared.

SARAH

I'm not fidgeting.

DAD

Everything will be just fine.

SARAH

I'm not fidgeting, and I'm not scared of spending a weekend away from home.

DAD

Just --

*I'm not fidgeting!*

SARAH

DAD  
(Beat.)

Indeed.

SARAH  
(Playfully punches Dad.)

You do that just to make me mad.

DAD  
And because you were fidgeting.

SARAH  
I was not!

DAD  
And don't punch me when I'm driving. It'd be poor form to get into an accident on the way to a friend's house.

SARAH  
You are impossible!

DAD  
That's exactly what I told your mother when she asked me to drive you. "She'll fidget all the way," I said, but did she listen to me? Nooo...

*Sarah playfully punches him again; he swerves the car a bit to the left, intentionally, and she lets out a small scream. The car stabilizes.*

SARAH  
Dad!

DAD  
I told you not to punch me.

SARAH  
You did that on purpose.

DAD

I did not. I was just... fidgeting with the wheel.

SARAH

You're really awful, you know that?

DAD

Oh, of that I have no doubt.

(Pause.)

SARAH

Why are you taking me to Stacy's house?

DAD

Didn't she invite you over for the weekend?

SARAH

Yes.

DAD

There you go.

SARAH

Why do you want me out of the house?

DAD

We don't want you out of the house.

SARAH

Yes, you do. And it's you *and* mom, you just said "we."

DAD

(Proud that she picked it up, but defensive.)

Maybe just because it's a strain to take care of such inquisitive little 12-year-olds.

SARAH

Dad.

DAD

You can be really rough sometimes, always running around, leaving little messes. Not as bad as a boy, sure--

SARAH

--Dad!

DAD

(Not missing a beat.)

Your mother and I need to talk. Alone.

SARAH

Are you splitting up?

DAD

What?

SARAH

I was talking with Tom, and when his parents--

DAD

--No! Not like that, certainly.

SARAH

Like what, then?

DAD

I think everything will be back to normal when you get back. Just... back to normal. Just fine. You can go, enjoy the weekend, and then come back home.

*Fade out, but keep the car engine going quietly in the background.*

## Scene 2

DAD

Stop fidgeting, Sarah!

*Lights up on Sarah and her father, again in the car, but with Sarah, now 17, driving. Dad, looking worried, is sitting in the passenger seat.*

SARAH

I am really not fidgeting right now. Would you *please* calm down?

DAD

I am perfectly calm.

(Sarah says nothing; she focuses on the road. He is clearly not calm.)

Or couldn't you tell?

(Sarah gives him a quick quizzical look then turns her attention back to the road.)

Don't look at me while you're driving.

SARAH

Then stop squirming!

DAD

I am not squirming.

SARAH

You're right. Do you know what you're doing?

DAD

No, but I am *breathless* with anticipation to find out.

SARAH  
(Triumphantly.)

You, dad, are fidgeting.

DAD

This is all some sort of awful karmic revenge.

SARAH

My driving?

DAD

Brought down by some higher deity of great and unfathomable power, and equally great and unfathomable cruelty.

SARAH

Is my driving that bad?

DAD

It must be your mother.

SARAH

Dad!

DAD

Don't get emotional while you're driving, Sarah. It'll break your concentration. And breaking things is always bad in a car.

SARAH

There are words describing people like you.

DAD

Using your brakes, on the other hand, would be very nice right now...

SARAH

But those words aren't suitable for a nice young lady like myself.

DAD

(Gripping the side of the seat.)

Sarah, Brake!

SARAH

(He impulsively reaches over and grabs Sarah's shoulder. Sarah brakes; she and her father lean forward with the momentum.)

Dad. *I... am... fine.*

DAD

That was rather abrupt braking.

SARAH

Don't *ever* touch me when I'm driving.

DAD

Yes, well.

(He removes his hand from her shoulder, which he had forgotten there.)

That *was* rather abrupt braking.

SARAH

We have plenty of room! It was abrupt because you grabbed me!

DAD

Perhaps.

SARAH

Do you know what you're going to do? You're going to sit there, and smile, and be quiet, *and not move*. I assure you that this will keep us both alive, because otherwise, if I don't get into an accident, I *will* kill you.

DAD

(He is cowed into silence. Then:)

I do believe our genes are playing a huge joke on humanity. Do you know that you have inherited the most terrifying parts of both myself and your mother?

SARAH

(Forcefully, even proudly.)

Yes, actually.

DAD

Good. At least you're aware of the horrible damage you can wreak upon the world.

(Pause.)

Either with your mouth or with this car, I'm not sure which.

(Pause.)

You are aware that I have the license here and you are still learning?

SARAH

A bureaucratic oversight. If the governor wants my vote, he'll revoke your license before the next election.

DAD

Nice comeback. I'll have to remember that.

SARAH

Do you ever shut up?

DAD

No.

*Sarah sighs loudly. Dad is actually silent. They drive for a brief while. Then, abruptly, Sarah pulls the car over.*

DAD

(Dry.)

Sarah? Sarah honey, you've stopped the car.

SARAH

Dad, we need to have this out--

DAD

--At least you pulled to the side of the road.

SARAH

That's very observant of you, dad, but--

DAD

In an ideal world, you'd take this opportunity to just pull back onto the road, keep on driving, and apologize for the interruption. (Slight pause.) Compromising man that I am, I'll settle for turning on your blinkers like other civilized people.

(She does. Beat.)

You know, if you weren't my daughter I'd be worried you'd be trying to kidnap me right now.

SARAH

Would you stop talking for just one minute?

DAD

Okay.

SARAH

I need to ask you something.

DAD

Okay.

(Beat.)

Well?

SARAH

I need to ask you something.

DAD

(Snappy.)

Yes, I got that.

(Beat.)

DAD

I'm sorry. What's wrong?

SARAH

I need to ask you...

DAD

Sarah, dear, you'll never be a writer if you can't do better with dramatic tension than this.

SARAH

(A sudden gush.)

Are you and mom breaking up?

DAD

Oh.

On second thought, that's not so bad with the dramatic tension.

SARAH

Dad?

DAD

Definitely something of your father in you.

SARAH

Dad! Come on!

DAD

(Loudly.)

Yes!

(Beat. Quietly.)

Yes, I think we are.

SARAH

Okay.

(After a silent moment, Sarah leans over to be held by her father.)

DAD

We'll be okay, honey. We'll be okay.

SARAH

I haven't been able to stop thinking about this since that car ride five years ago.

DAD

I know.

SARAH

You said you weren't separating.

DAD

We didn't.

SARAH

No.

Can I... can I stay with you? After, I mean.

DAD

We'll work it out. Yes, we'll work it out.

(Several beats as no one moves.)

You know, you're welcome to stay here on my shoulder as long as you'd like, you know that, but someone might find it funny if they pulled over to help a car in distress and found this.

Not quite the kind of distress they'd be prepared to help out with.

I can just imagine Officer Lindeman.

(Sarah laughs.)

SARAH

Okay, okay. We'll get going.

DAD

I don't want to rush you.

SARAH

It's fine.

DAD

Do you want me to drive?

(Sarah pulls the car out.)

SARAH

No, it's fine. I'll be fine.

*Fade out. The car engine dies off in the distance.*

### Scene 3

*In the darkness, we hear the sounds of a train.*

*Lights up on Sarah and her father, on an Amtrak train. They are in seats next to one-another. There is a silence for some time while they sit there.*

SARAH

Did you have to tell them you were a writer?

DAD

It went over fine.

SARAH

Dad, everyone was talking to you.

DAD

And this, by you, is a bad thing?

SARAH

Couldn't you just have been normal? All my classmates will think of me as your daughter.

DAD

Sarah, I hate to break it to you like this, but you *are* my daughter.

SARAH

That's not the point!

DAD

You don't even go to Tufts yet. You haven't sent in your acceptance form. No one will remember me!

SARAH

Except for those with autographed books!

DAD

I only autographed three.

SARAH

Dad... you autographed another prefreshman's book. What if I end up sitting next to her in a class? Or in her dorm? You could have kept a lower profile!

DAD

By telling them I wasn't a writer?

SARAH

I don't know. You didn't have to be so showy.

DAD

I wasn't showy. I was *charming*.

You should try it some time.

SARAH

Do you have to turn everything into a joke?

DAD

Trust me, Sarah, when you're a writer and my age, everything about people your age is funny.

SARAH

Would you cut it out?

DAD

This is not your problem.

SARAH

What?

DAD

You don't care about the autographs. Not really. That is not your problem.

SARAH

You told stories about mom.

DAD

Yes.

At the parents dinner.

SARAH

I'm sorry. It just came up.

DAD

You--

SARAH

--should've made it un-come up, I know.

DAD

(Beat.)

I know.

It doesn't make sense; you've been separated for a year.

SARAH

(Beat.)

What's going on now between you and mom?

I don't know. I really don't.

DAD

Are you two getting back together?

SARAH

No. Yes. Yes. Yes. Maybe.

DAD

Well, that cleared things up.

SARAH

I'm glad you can joke about this, Sarah.

DAD

It was more of a diseased quip than a joke, but that's all I have left.

SARAH

(Beat.)

Why?

DAD

Why am I glad you can make jokes?

SARAH

Why are you two getting back together?

DAD

I don't know if we're actually getting--

SARAH

--*Why* are you getting back together?

DAD

Certainly not until after you've left for college--

SARAH

--Answer the question!

DAD

(Beat.)

I'm going to be lonely, Sarah. I'm going to be lonely when you go away. The house is already so empty when you're at school.

SARAH

I'm sorry.

DAD

No! Please don't think it's your fault.

SARAH

And mom?

DAD

She's been lonely for two years now, and she's had enough of it.

SARAH

That doesn't sound like love to me.

DAD

Yes, it is. In its way. A different kind.

(Beat.)

I'm not looking for love anymore, Sarah. I want company. It'll make us both happy.

(Beat.)

If nothing else, it sure will make things more exciting at home.

SARAH

That's the truth.

(There is a long silence as they sit there on the train.)

DAD

(Half to himself.)

Well, either funny or disgusting.

SARAH

What?

DAD

People your age. Everything is either funny or disgusting, and you should count your blessings that you stay in the former category.

SARAH

Dad!

DAD

You'd prefer to be in the latter?

SARAH

*This* is charming?

DAD

Well, actually, there is your boyfriend. And since he's not funny — well, not in that way, anyway — —

SARAH

Dad, cut it out, really. Stop trying to change the subject.

DAD

(On a roll; dry but jokingly.)

He has a goatee.

SARAH

Dad, I mean it!

DAD

(Still dry, hamming it up further.)

No one your age should have a goatee. It's undignified.

SARAH

(Lightening up, maybe even giggling.)

I've seen pictures of you --

DAD

And look who I turned out to be.

SARAH

You're being ridiculous.

DAD

Your mom really got the short end of the stick on that one.

(Big misstep. Dead silence.)

SARAH

(Quietly.)

Please don't.

DAD

(A pause. Suddenly serious.)

Sarah, you do know that I only have the best wishes for you and Sean, right?

SARAH

Yes, dad, I know. I also know that it's teenage romance and we probably won't stay together.

DAD

Now, where did you get a mature perspective like that?

SARAH

Only from the most immature man I know. Some weird old guy who used to have a goatee

and refused to shut up.

DAD

Sounds like a good man. I'll have to meet him.

SARAH

(Beat. Silence.)

This is so strange.

DAD

What?

SARAH

We're just sitting here, talking about this like nothing is happening.

DAD

(Pause.)

So, do you think you're going to enroll at Tufts?

SARAH

No thanks to you. But yeah. Yeah, I liked it.

*Fade out as Sarah talks. Train noises stop.*

#### Scene 4

*A porch outside their family's house. It is an early afternoon in the spring. Sarah's father is on a chair, looking out. Sarah comes in with two mugs of tea.*

*The tone is muted. Conversation is slow and quiet, in stark contrast to previous scenes, with numerous breaks and pauses. Sarah and Dad are perpetually lost in thought, and are, at most times, only barely present mentally to take part in the conversation. They are both a bit unstable emotionally, though Sarah is better collected.*

SARAH

(Handing him a mug.)

You okay, dad?

DAD

Stupid question.

Yeah. SARAH

Neither of us is okay. DAD

Yeah. SARAH

(Silence.)

I can tell, you know, because you're not talking.

(Silence.)

Never thought I'd wish you talked *more*.

(Silence.)

Hmph.

(Silence.)

You'd never have let me get away with "hmp" before. You'd always make fun of me for them.

Times change. DAD

But dad waxes eternal. Or so I thought. SARAH

Hmph. DAD

Oh, no you don't. No way you're lost for words. I'm the master of "hmp"s, and there's always something you really want to say when you're just sitting there grunting. SARAH

*Hmph*. DAD

Dad, it's been a week. You know I have to head back tonight. SARAH

DAD

Convenient of mom to die right before your spring break. Fits right into your class schedule.

SARAH

Dad!

DAD

Sorry. I didn't mean that.

SARAH

No, you really didn't.

DAD

(There is a pause as they both sit there, thinking their own thoughts.)

My daughter the professor.

SARAH

Your daughter the postdoctoral fellow. I'm not a professor yet.

DAD

Another thing mom never got to see.

(Pause.)

We haven't really seen you in years.

SARAH

I know. I'm sorry.

DAD

I didn't mean that to be an accusation.

SARAH

I know. But it works that way anyway.

DAD

Why didn't you come back?

SARAH

I was busy.

(Dad looks at her. She relents.)

No. Not that busy.

I couldn't bear to come back.

DAD

Things were good between your mom and me.

SARAH

There were all these things I'd never know.

I'd step in the house, and it'd be peaceful, but I never knew when an argument might break out. I never knew if mom was out because she was at work or if it was because she was avoiding you. I never knew if the potted plant that was tipped over in the living room was like that because she'd hit it while dusting or if you'd hit it in anger. I never knew where I stood in this house, or what kind of marriage you two still had. Or didn't have. I didn't even know that.

I always wanted to see you, dad, but I couldn't face that. I couldn't face mom.

DAD

You used to be closer to her.

SARAH

Never so much as to you.

I told her to her face I wanted to stay with you after the separation. She didn't take that very well.

DAD

No. But she never got mad at you.

SARAH

Which wasn't fair! She blamed *you*, because you had all this time to spend at home, writing, while she had a job she had to go to. She blamed you because she didn't spend enough time with her daughter. I couldn't stand it.

DAD

Sarah...

SARAH

I'm here, dad, and I just want to talk. Now, I just want to talk.

DAD

So do I.

(There is a long silence. Then, dry.)

You better watch out. Once you get me talking, you know I don't stop. And nothing I say is worth a damn anyway.

SARAH

That's not true! People actually pay to hear what you have to say.

DAD

People pay to watch pro football. This phenomenon says much more about people than about football.

SARAH

(Beat.)

I've never seen you like this.

DAD

Well, haven't you been missing out.

(Sarah is frustrated at being unable to get through. Another silence.)

Never thought it'd be your mom dying in a car accident. Always thought it'd be you.

SARAH

The way I drive?

DAD

The way you fidget.

SARAH

Oh, not this again!

DAD

Sorry. Ill-timed.

SARAH

No, no. It's okay. It's good to see it's still in you.

DAD

It's all a façade.

SARAH

Don't be silly.

DAD

Really, Sarah, it is. You'll realize that, eventually. When you get towards the end.

SARAH

You have plenty of years ahead of you.

DAD

Maybe.

SARAH

There isn't something you're not telling me, is there? You're not sick, are you?

DAD

No. No, no, no. No.

SARAH

Okay.

DAD

I don't know. I had some pains in my chest a few days ago. I thought it was the stress. I'm seeing a doctor tomorrow.

SARAH

Dad...

DAD

I'll be fine. Really.

(Brief pause; then changing the subject.)

You know, that's really just something you say. (Imitating Sarah.) "You have plenty of years ahead of you." It's not a real statement; it's a catch phrase, something you say because you have nothing else to say. If someone says "This dress makes me look fat," you don't say "Why, yes, you do bear a startling resemblance to a hippopotamus." You say "Why, no, you look as slim as a dachshund!" Well, looking like a Dachshund has other disadvantages, but I digress.

(Beat.)

Still, my point is made.

SARAH

What --

DAD

--This is the sort of thing I notice.

SARAH

Yes, I know that, but --

DAD

--I expect you to talk better than that, Sarah. Not like some character from a clichéd sitcom.

SARAH

My dad. Preaching even at a time like this.

DAD

You better believe it.

(Pause.)

Sarah...

(Pause.)

Words can be so empty sometimes.

*There is a long pause as these words settle in. They drink their tea. Sarah takes the mugs inside as dad continues to look out. Fade out.*

## Scene 5

*Darkness. Sounds of a car again.*

SARAH

Dear mom.

No. No, no, no.

*Lights up. A car. Sarah is alone, driving. She pulls over.*

(Starting over.)

All right, mom, let's have this out.

I'm sorry.

(With an little chuckle.)

Do you know what's strange? Dad, right? That day before he died? I kept wondering: what was he trying to say? For three months, I thought he was just trying to give me advice for life. "Drive carefully," or something, so I wouldn't die before he did.

Little chance of that.

Of course, that's not it, is it. He was just trying to say what we were all trying to say. Or trying to hear. There is still something about saying it up front, letting it soak into our skin and bones.

It's probably too romantic to think that he was just trying to say "I love you," but I think that was it. He was a writer: he had to find just the right moment in the conversation, to preserve the rhythm and the mood. The time never came up, and so he never said it. You know exactly how frustrating that can be.

All that time, and he was just trying to say what you'd always said. But I never heard "I love you" when you said it, did I? I could *taste* it when dad didn't say anything, and all those times you said it to me — the hundreds of times on the phone, to my face, in letters — and I never really *heard* it. And I feel so guilty for that. I am so sorry. I was oblivious.

(Beat. An admission to herself.)

I think that I pitied you. You always wanted me to love you so badly.

(Dry, maybe?)

He probably wanted to apologize for all the jokes, too.

He must've hated the jokes, always getting in the way. We both knew something was missing because our conversation was all jokes. That must've been why he tried so hard not to make them — but what did I do? I put in my own, to cover for the absence.

No wonder there wasn't a dramatically appropriate time to say "I love you."

Well. Look at this. Even now I'm making up a conversation with you and it's *still* all about him.

Well, mom, maybe it's a little bit late now, but message received. Message received.

(Beat. It's still hard to say.)

I love you too.

(Brief pause.)

Both of you.

(Beat.)

And dad — I'll just pretend you said it, okay? We'll both be happier for it. And so long as you don't start fidgeting in your grave, I won't be fidgeting at the wheel, all right?

*Sarah pulls off the shoulder and continues driving. End of play.*