

ANNE FINE

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day

'A superb and subtle writer' Guardian

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About the Book

Everyone thinks they know what it's like – going to school.

But have you ever wondered what life must be like at a boarding school? A school for young offenders? A school for the blind?

With her trademark humour, sensitivity and razor-sharp wit, Anne Fine explores these different worlds in a short-story collection that will fascinate readers.

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RHCP DIGITAL

For Frances

I didn't want to go. Is that so odd? Sometimes you just don't feel like shlepping all the way to school to spend a whole day listening to the same old nagging from the same old people.

'Can you please open your workbooks.' 'You won't find the right page while you're staring up at the ceiling like that, will you, Felicity?' 'Take off that scarf, Gurdeep.' 'Are you *eating*, Robert? Put it in the bin.' Bleh, bleh. Bleh, bleh . . .

When I was really young I used to get to take a day off every now and again. I never pushed my luck. I had an excellent attendance record. I *liked* my primary school. But once in every blue moon, I don't know why, I didn't want to go. So I'd start moaning about having a pain in my stomach, or a headache or something. My mum would put on that wry look - the one that means, 'I'm not sure I believe you're feeling quite as bad as you make out, but I can't prove it and you're usually very good . . .'

So she'd let me stay home. I'd slop about, not even dressed. Mum works in a corner of the living room, using the phone and computer to fix the daily schedules of minders who take care of all the old people on her patch. If I distracted her, she'd say, 'I wonder if you would get better faster if you went back to bed . . .'

I would stop irritating her at once.

I *loved* those days at home. Sometimes, of course, I'd find out next morning that I'd missed something really good at school. But not that often. And as Mrs Tyler next door says each time she sneaks off to climb Filbury Topping, everyone needs the occasional break in routine.

And we'll be getting our own soon. Dad's coming home. He's in the army so he's away for weeks on end, sometimes whole months. Everything's different after he comes home. I can't quite explain why, but though Mum and I seem to be able to run through our days easily enough together, when Dad walks through that door, it's as if he brings a scattering of grit into our family machine.

Don't get me wrong. I love my dad. And I admire him. All of his mates say he's a brilliant soldier. It's just that, before he comes home, I get a little tense. I start to chew my nails again. I worry that he'll pick on me for things I haven't done, or have done wrong. I know for sure Mum will stand up for me if she thinks that he's being unfair or unreasonable.

Still, I get tense.

So I don't care if I'm too old for what Mum used to call my 'blue moon days'. I felt like having one. To get it, I came down and stood behind her as she shook an avalanche of charred crumbs out of the toaster into the sink.

'My stomach's killing me.'

'What *sort* of killing you?'

'It really hurts.'

'You don't *look* very poorly.'

'You haven't even turned round! And for your information, I feel rubbish.'

She finally swivelled to face me. 'Oh, yes?'

'Yes!'

'Sam, this isn't a very convenient day for you to be off school.'

'Oh, sorr-ee! Sorry that I can't pick the very best time to feel so terrible.'

'*How* terrible?'

Since I'd begun the performance, I'd pretty well convinced myself I was in agony. I clutched my stomach. '*Really* terrible. Honestly. I feel as if whole chunks of me are falling out.'

Mum sighed and looked at the calendar. 'This is a busy day for me. Are you *sure* you can't go?'

I suddenly felt guilty. There on the calendar were lots of little black squiggles, some even spilling backwards into yesterday or over into tomorrow. I realized it was the one day in the month when Mum drives round her area to check that all the minders she sends out are doing their jobs right. She'd made a heap of appointments for the day, and some of her old people get confused when things are switched around at the last minute.

'I'll be all right at home here by myself.'

It was quite obvious that wasn't going to wash. Hastily I added, 'Or I could come with you and stay in the car.' (After all, what did I care? Off school's off school. And even with those squiggles on the calendar, I didn't think that we'd be out all day.)

'I thought you said that you felt really sick.'

'No. What I said was that my stomach hurts.'

Now she was looking anxious. 'But you won't throw up?'

'What, in your nice clean car? I'll take a bucket with me, just in case.'

I was just being *sarcastic*, but she nodded, satisfied. 'Right, then. Go and get dressed while I call the school. Be ready to go in five minutes.'

Just as I reached the stairs, she called, 'And don't bother bringing any waste-of-time computer games. Even if you're off school, you can be doing something sensible, like reading. And so I know that you're not cheating, you can leave all your screens behind and bring an old-fashioned *book*.'

'Come *on!*' I said. (I was outraged.) 'I am not faking it. I'm really ill.'

'Oh, yes,' she said. 'And I believe you. Now just hurry up!'

I knew she would be out of the car most of the time, so I slid my Stellar IV into my pocket anyhow, to keep me going till she crept up on me from behind and caught me at it with: 'What did I say? No stupid, waste-of-time games!'

After that I would really need something to read.

And there was nothing. Absolutely nothing. I looked along the shelves and couldn't see one single book I wanted to plough through again. There were a few I'd never read, but I was sure there'd be a reason. Either I'd started and then hated them, or something else had put me off.

I'd taken too long to get dressed. Mum was already at the bottom of the stairs, yelling away. 'Sam! Sam! We have to go!'

She's ruthless, is my mum. The moment Dad puts on his uniform and leaves the house for his next tour of duty, she turns into a Sergeant Major herself.

'Sam! Get down here at once! If we don't leave this minute, I shall be late for my first visit!'

I know how much she worries about keeping clients waiting. So I just reached out for the nearest book I'd never opened before and ran downstairs. I slammed the door behind me. She was already in the car, gunning the engine. I slid in at her side, clutching the book. She leaned across to read the title.

'Away From Home? Who gave you that one?'

'Granny.'

'Is it good?'

'I don't know yet.'

'What's it about?'

'I don't know that either, since I haven't read it.'

'Don't you get smart with me. What does it say on the back?'

I turned it over. Nothing. I opened it and flicked the pages. Then I saw the contents page and groaned. 'Oh, no! Short stories.'

'Don't be so negative. Some of them might be good.'

'Oh, yes,' I said. 'And all your old people might be in a really cheery and grateful mood.'

We shared a laugh at that. The lights at the corner turned to green, and we were away.

At the first house on her list, she outmanoeuvred me. (Dad says that, as a forward-looking strategist, he

isn't a patch on Mum. He says, if she'd been in charge of his brigade, they never would have had to abandon their patch of Helmand Province.)

'OK,' she said. 'Show me what's in your pocket.'

'What, now?'

She nodded.

'Here?'

'For heaven's sake,' she said. 'Stop stalling, Sam.'

She probably had one of Great-grandpa's old service revolvers hidden up her sleeve. I wouldn't put it past her. I handed the Stellar IV over.

'Enjoy your book,' she said.

And she was off.

I stared out of the window for a while. I watched a couple of raindrops race down the windscreen. I studied the hedge beside me. I inspected my blackened fingernail from when I trapped it in the door.

Then I got bored, and started on the first story.

Exile

I suppose I didn't really think that it would happen. They'd talked of it so often. I'd stood behind the door and listened.

'The trouble is that having a tutor come in for Rick two or three times a week is really not enough. He should be in a real school.'

'I worry too. But you keep saying there'll soon be enough of us out here to make it worth while for the company to build a school.'

'Not soon enough.'

'But the idea of sending Rick away makes me so queasy. He's still so young.'

'He's not that young. I started at Tower House at *seven*.'

'Things were different then.'

'They weren't *that* different, Emily. Getting the right education, and knowing how to manage in the world is still important.'

On and on they went, chewing it over. I reckon that the threat of being sent away to school had hung over me so long that, by the time they actually did decide, I'd learned to blot it out. I know Dad talked of sports I would be able to play, games I would learn. And Mum went on about how quickly the weeks would pass, and how soon I would fly back home for my first holidays. I must have made all the right noises when I answered them, but I paid no attention.

I didn't even count the days.

So that last morning came as a horrible shock. I hadn't even seen Hasan send off the trunk. I asked about it and Mum said, 'Oh, darling! That was shipped off weeks ago!'

I made a horrid face. 'And now it's me you're shipping off.'

'Oh, darling!' she said again. Her voice was wobbly, but she put on that Got-To-Be-Nice bright tone she uses through all the tea and drinks parties she has to organize. 'It's not like that at all! Daddy and I will miss you terribly! Every single day! But you'll get used to it, I promise. And you'll have lots of the sort of fun you couldn't possibly have here.'

She waved her hand as if to say that there was nothing in the miles of desert sand and rippling heat beyond the factory compound that could compare with what they'd managed to arrange for me - as if being locked up inside one of those damp boarding schools I'd seen in films was going to be a *treat*.

It was a weird drive to the airport. They both kept up some cheery chat about how many things I would be able to do at this Walthorp Manor place. 'You'll never be bored,' my dad kept saying. 'No one is ever bored in school in boarding school!'

I didn't laugh. Firstly, I didn't think the pun was funny. And secondly, I wasn't really listening to anything they said. My mind was racing. All I could think was things like, 'I've still got time to jump out,' and, 'If those big traffic lights by the racetrack are on red, I could just open the car door and make a run for it.' I reckoned I could hide in all the prickly scrub along the road, then make my own way home. I was quite sure Hasan and his family would let me live with them.

Then maybe Mum and Dad would get the message.

There weren't many people on the sides of the road. A few shrouded women. One or two raggedy children. Now and again I'd see a huddle of old men squatting in dust, playing some dice game. I stared as we swept past. Everyone looked so calm. If I could speak the language properly, I would have rolled down the window and

shouted, 'Don't simply carry on as if today's nothing special! Make the most of it! You don't know how *lucky* you are to be allowed to just stay here and get on with your life!'

The flight was all right, I suppose. The screen at my first seat was dead, but the air steward asked a woman busy on her laptop if she'd mind changing places, and her screen was fine. Because the plane was late in taking off, the stopover in Abu Dhabi was only forty minutes. 'Please, darling! Ring us from the lounge,' my mother had begged me. 'We'll stay awake, waiting.'

But I thought, 'No. I have a good excuse: there wasn't time. And if you were so keen on hearing what I have to say, you should have let me stay *home*.' (We'd moved a lot, but all the places that we lived did feel like home to me. And I'd known plenty of others my age whose parents worked for the same company, and lived in out-of-the-way places. Not many had been sent away to school. Some, like me, had had lessons at home from local teachers. Others were taught from courses you could get over the internet.)

On the last flight I got so nervous that my stomach clenched. I must have slept, though, as the journey didn't seem that long. After we landed, a stewardess made me wait till all the other passengers had left the plane, then took me off with her. The walkways were all freezing cold. We reached the airport halls and walked straight past the queues. It all went very fast. And suddenly I was being pushed towards a woman younger than my mum, with frizzy red hair. She was still panting.

'Hello,' she gasped. 'I'm Ruth. I help out at the school sometimes. I've come to drive you there. I'm lucky I even made it here! The traffic was horrendous. Absolutely *awful*.'

I knew about the traffic from the holidays we used to take in England before Gran died. I didn't see how anyone could be surprised by it. My dad would sit behind the wheel of

our hired car, cursing the crawling lines of vehicles. 'It beggars belief! Each time we come, I think it can't have got worse, and it always has!'

After Gran's house was sold, we used to go to New York for our winter breaks. (That's where my mother grew up.) And in the spring, we would go anywhere my parents fancied - usually somewhere hot if Dad was working somewhere cold, or to one of their favourite ski resorts if we'd been, as we were then, somewhere that was baking hot.

So I had not been back to Britain for three whole years. I was astonished by the sheer *green* of it, but couldn't say the traffic seemed any worse. I didn't care, in any case. I'd have been happy for the drive to last a hundred years.

'That's it,' said Ruth. She pointed. 'See the chimneypots above the trees? That's Walthorp.'

She was taller than I am. I couldn't see a thing and wasn't going to hotch up in my seat. So I just waited. We turned off the road and down a twisting drive shadowed by trees.

I don't think I will ever forget my first sight of the place against the sky. The car burst out into a circle of sunlit gravel that I took for sand until I heard the crunch of it beneath the wheels.

And there was my new school.

I hated being there right from the start. I hated everything about it. I look back now and realize that what I hated most was feeling lonely all the time, but never being alone. The only time I could be halfway to certain no one was watching me was when I was in bed at night. And even then you had to wait to be quite sure that you could cry without being heard because some of the others mucked about for ages. They would wait till Lisa the Junior Matron had scolded the last of them into lying quiet, but then as soon as she'd turned out the light and gone away, they'd