# ON THE WALL



Anne Fine

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*For Teddy*

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# Here We Go Again

Finley Edward Tandy was sitting at the bottom of the stairs, tying the laces on his new black school shoes.

"Get a move on," his brother Luke said, "or I won't have time to go with you as far as the gates."

"How long was I at my last school?" Finley asked his mother. She was in the doorway, waiting to see him off on this, his first morning, before she left for work.

She tipped her head to think. "Well, not counting your year in nursery, it was seven years."

"Seven whole years!" He seemed amazed at the thought. "That is an awfully long time."

"Good thing you did something useful, then," his brother said, "and learned to read and write."

"And count," said Finley. He turned back to his

mother. “So how long will I be at this school?”

“If you last to the very end,” teased Luke.

“If I last to the very end.”

This time his mother had already worked it out. “Another seven.”

“Another seven!” If possible, Finley seemed even more astonished. He turned to Luke. “Did you do *fourteen whole years* in school before you left?”

“I must have,” Luke said, somewhat surprised himself. “Now hurry up!”

Finley tightened the laces on the second shoe and stood up. He hugged his mother and reached for his sturdy new school bag stamped with the Windfields School crest.

“Right, then,” he told her cheerfully. “Here we go again.”

# Some Hopes

Juliet's father walked her all the way to the school gates. She held his hand tightly until she spotted others in the same uniform who were going the same way. Then she pulled away.

"You'll be all right," he tried to reassure her. "Truly you will. Just try and remember what Surina taught you, and breathe out slowly and gently whenever you get to feel tense."

She didn't say a word, so he suggested yet again, "Or I can come in with you, and explain."

"No!" Juliet said fiercely. "I'll be all right. I want to try this by myself. I don't want people feeling sorry for me."

Her father laid his hands on her shoulders and

turned her to face him. “Look,” he said, “Mum being so ill for so long was *horrible*. For both of us, Nobody was surprised you went to pieces afterwards. But think how much better you were feeling even last year. Miles better. You managed to get to school and stay there most of almost every day. And this year might turn out to be even easier. Fresh start, and all that.”

He reached for Juliet’s hand just long enough to squeeze it, and they turned to walk on. Now they were nearing the entrance to Windfields School, the pavements were much busier, with others slowing their progress by gathering in untidy groups, or pushing past, shouting to friends.

“They’re all so *big*,” breathed Juliet.

“Not all of them. The ones in your class will be mostly the same as you.” He pointed. “See. There are Cherry and Jamie, just ahead.”

Juliet craned to see them, and for the first time in her life wished that she, too, was a twin. She would feel safer.

At that moment, Cherry turned.

“You have to go now,” Juliet told her dad, panicking. “Nobody else’s parents are going through the gates.”

He hesitated before saying, “Bye, then, sweetheart. Try to have good time.”

Some hopes, thought Juliet. But she couldn’t bring herself to say it aloud in case he worried about her even more. She couldn’t have stood that.

# Into Battle

Mr Goodhew drove into the first free space he could find in Windfields School's new staff car park, and slid his permit onto the dashboard so that the name printed on it could be clearly seen.

*Julian Goodhew.*

"Right, then," he told himself cheerfully. "Here we go again. Into battle."

# Autumn Term

# Nothing special

Mr Goodhew left one or two of the heavier boxes in the back of the car and went straight to his home room to meet his brand-new class. As usual, a lot of their blazers hung a little too long. ("Room for growth," as the parents probably muttered, paying for all the items of uniform and sports gear their offspring were going to need.) And, as he did at the start of every school year, Mr Goodhew took a few moments to look around the room and try to guess which of the young people staring back at him might turn out to be a bit of a problem – too cheeky? too sullen? maybe a bit too talkative? His eyes rested on Finley Tandy for barely a moment. The boy looked no more nervous or uncomfortable than any of the others. He wasn't fidgeting, or making silly faces at old friends from his primary school. He wasn't whispering, or sniggering, or looking as if, at the first opportunity, he might step out of line.

No. Nothing special about that boy in the third row. Nothing at all.

# The full Finley you shall be

It was nearly an hour later before Mr Goodhew had his first moments of doubt about Finley. He had been calling them up to his desk, one by one, to have a quick private chat, and he was well over halfway down the register.

"Finley Tandy," he called out, and waited for the boy to come up beside him before laying a finger on the printed list in front of him. "Right, then. I have your first names down as Finley Edward. So all I need to know right now is if you're happy with the name Finley."

The boy stared blankly. "Happy with it?"

"Yes. I'm just checking. I mean, are you all right with being called Finley by all your teachers? Or do you prefer to use Edward? Or maybe even something else. Finn, maybe?"

"Finn?"

"Yes," Mr Goodhew said patiently. "I've had three Finleys through my classes in my time, and two of them turned out to be Finns."

Since the boy still looked mystified, Mr Goodhew explained. "A lot of you come to us with one name on

your paperwork, but another you actually use." He added a couple of examples. "Like most Benjamins are Ben, and one or two of our Mohammeds are always called Mo. I'm simply asking you what name you prefer to use."

"But I don't use my name," said Finley Tandy. "It's only other people who ever have to say it."

Mr Goodhew inspected the boy's face. Was he trying to be clever? He could be a little bit slow on the uptake, of course. Or he could be one of those pupils who truly do see the world in a purely literal fashion? Whatever it was, Mr Goodhew decided that this was a busy morning, and he didn't have time to worry about it. "Right, then," he said. "Since you don't have a problem, the full Finley you shall be."

He marked the name typed on the list with a small tick, and finished off with the short speech he made to every one of them when, for the first time, he was speaking to them privately like this. "Now, Finley, I want you to be sure to come to me with any problems you may have. Anything at all. And I hope you'll be really happy in this school."

"Oh, I'll be happy," Finley said. "I'm happy absolutely everywhere. And all the time."

And he went back to his desk.

## All right?

As soon as the second buzzer sounded, everyone went off for lessons. So the next time that Mr Goodhew spotted Finley it was almost at the end of break. He was sitting, idly swinging his legs, on the flat-topped wall that ran between the recreation ground and the now abandoned old school car park behind. On an impulse, as Mr Goodhew walked past, he stopped for a moment to ask the boy, "All right?"

"Yes, thank you," Finley answered politely.

Mr Goodhew glanced round. With no one else within earshot, he felt free to ask, "Do you know any of the others? There must be one or two, at least, who've come up from the same primary school as you."

"Eight of them," Finley told him. He reeled off their names. "Jamie and Cherry, Alicia, Akeem, Maria, Jia Li, Stuart and Katherine."

"But you're not spending break time with any of them?"

"No."

"Is there a reason for that?"

The boy shrugged. "Not really, no."

Mr Goodhew wasn't convinced, but he remembered what Finley had told him earlier that morning. "Well," he said heartily, "you did tell me you were happy all the time."

"Yes," Finley said. "And I think I'm probably very good indeed at being happy by myself."

## Red dots on a map

Mr Goodhew wasn't the only one to have noticed Finley on the wall by himself. Mrs Harris, who taught everyone Geography, prided herself on her ability to notice those of the newcomers who might be finding it difficult to settle in. In the first lesson she'd had with them that morning, she'd handed to each of them a rather faded photocopied map of the world. Mrs Harris had been teaching this first 'getting-to-know-you' lesson for so

many years that one or two of the countries on the map were labelled with names they had long since forsaken, and some of the national borders had shifted quite a lot. But since the only thing she wanted her pupils to do was think about their friends and family, and put red dots on their map to indicate where these lived, that scarcely mattered.

"Some of you," she assured them before they began, "will find that a lot of your dots are all on top of one another because most of your family and friends live very near you, around here. And one or two of you – " – and here Mrs Harris put on a specially comforting look, and used her most sympathetic tone of voice – " – will find your dots are more spread out over the map."

You could learn quite a lot about them, she'd found, just from the questions they asked her while they were doing this first task.

"Do they have to be *real* friends?"

"What if their family had to leave Sudan right after yours did, but you're not yet sure where they ended up?"

"Do online friends count? What if you don't know

exactly where they live?"

"Can I count someone I met on holiday and really, really liked, but I'm not sure would even remember me, because it was so long ago?"

And the saddest of all: "What if you can't think of anybody at all?"

Mrs Harris drifted around the room until she reached Finley. Since he was the boy she'd noticed sitting on a wall all by himself for fully twenty minutes, speaking to no one, she made a point of looking to see where he'd put red dots on his map. And, truly, it might as well have had measles. They were all over the British Isles. There were several in various parts of Asia, at least five in the United States, and quite a few in Italy and Spain.

"These are all friends and family?"

"Yes," Finley told her confidently.

"You've certainly got a lot of them."

"I do."

"That's nice," said Mrs Harris and went back to her desk, wondering if the boy was inventing a life knee deep in friends and family he didn't have, or whether,

when she was fretting that he might be a bit of a loner, she'd got him totally, totally wrong.

## A bit of a strange one

As he walked out of the lunch hall, Mr Goodhew spotted Finley back on the wall. He was alone again, but cross-legged this time. Mr Goodhew wondered for a moment if he should stop to exchange a few more words with the boy, then decided he'd rather go on to the staffoom. But Finley stayed in his mind, and, pouring scalding water over his tea bag a couple of minutes later, he told the other teachers who were gathered there: "That Finley Tandy I've landed is a bit of a strange one."

"They're all strange," Dr Yates said. She stretched out a foot to press open the pedal bin so Mr Goodhew could drop his tea bag inside. "My theory is that, if you don't think they're strange, it's just because you don't yet know them."

"Well, this one's *different* strange," insisted Mr Goodhew. "Out of a completely new box."

"In what way?"

Mr Goodhew wondered how best to put it. His sister had been a yoga teacher for a while, and in the end he said, "I suppose I think he's what a meditation expert might describe as 'centred'."

Dr Rutter, who taught Chemistry, was clearly baffled. "Centred?"

"Well, put it this way. He's peculiarly calm."

Dr Yates said, "I only wish we had a few more like that. In fact, I could do with a whole class of them. What did you say his name was?"

"Finley. Finley Tandy."

"Have we had other Tandys?"

Everyone looked towards Mrs Harris, who was reckoned to be the best at remembering past pupils. Scraping a few last, unwanted strands of her lunch time noodles into the bin, she said, "We had a Luke Tandy, but he must have left at least three years ago. If this one is his brother, that is quite a gap."

"Where did this Finley come up from?" Mr Brownlow asked.

Mr Goodhew did a brain search for a few of the

names Finley had mentioned. "The same as a Cherry, and an Akeem and an Alicia."

"Janson Road Primary, then," said Mrs Harris.

Mr Brownlow snorted. "This Finley won't have learned his meditative skills in Janson Road Primary, that's for sure!"

"Maybe he was taught them in order to survive the place," Dr Yates suggested.

The buzzer sounded for the start of afternoon school. Glancing out of the window, Mr Goodhew saw Finley Tandy slide off the wall and walk towards the south doors. Several of the younger boys going in the same direction slowed as he came close and, almost imperceptibly, Finley appeared to be accepted into the group. One of them even put an arm round Finley's shoulders in a friendly fashion.

So, Mr Goodhew thought, no obvious ill-feeling there. He can't have been on that wall to try to stay away from them. He hadn't *needed* to keep apart from all the noisy chaos of the lunch hour break.

He'd clearly simply been preferring to spend his time that way.