

natalie
standiford

The
ONLY
GIRL
in school

illustrations by nathan durfee



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Summary: In a story told in letters, when Claire's best friend moves away just before the start of fifth grade, Claire becomes the only girl in her tiny island elementary school—and suddenly boys she has been friends with her whole life turn into resentful, bullying strangers.

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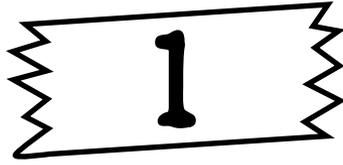
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Yucky Gilbert Sits Next to Me

*To: Bess Calhoun
San Francisco, California*

*From: Claire Warren
Foyes Island, Maryland*

Dear Bess,

Here's how I imagine your first day of school:

You hated it. The kids are mean. Your teacher is mean. And boring. It's very strict with lots of dumb rules that make no sense, like *No one is allowed to go to the bathroom without a buddy*. Which means you can never go to the bathroom at school, ever, because there is no other girl IN THE WHOLE ENTIRE SCHOOL to be your bathroom buddy.

Oh, wait. That was MY first day.

But you hated yours too, right? Please say you are begging your parents to move back to Foyes Island right now. If they don't move back, you'll run away and live here with me.

I miss you. Can you tell?

I know it's not your fault you moved away. And I know it's not your fault that our town is so small and our school is so teeny and that through some freak coincidence, all the other students happen to be boys. It wasn't bad when it was just the two of us. I liked it when it was the two of us.

I do not like it when it's just the one of me.

I thought it might be SORT OF okay because I still had Henry. You know, Henry Long, the third-fastest sailor on Foyes Island (after me and you), my other best friend? Ha ha ha.

Henry was supposed to pick me up this morning so we could walk to school together, just like we've done every school day since first grade. Only this year Gabe was going to go with us. Gaby was wearing a bow tie and everything, in honor of his first day of first grade. He's a cute little dork.

Gabe and I waited on our front porch for an hour.

No Henry.

Finally it was 8:15 and Henry still hadn't showed. Poor Gaby was frantic. He didn't want to start his very first day of school ever, not counting kindergarten, by being late. He kept saying, "My teacher will think I'm bad and I'll never be able to change her mind!"

"Don't worry," I told him. "He'll be here soon. Henry never lets me down."

Mom came out and said, "You're still here? You're going to be late for your first day!" So Gabe and I gave up

on Henry and ran all the way to school. The whole time I was thinking, *What happened to Henry? Oh my gosh I hope he's okay!!!! What if he got hit by a car on the way to my house? What if he's got a deadly bacterial infection? What if he died???!?!?*

Because what else could keep Henry from walking to school with me, just like always? What else besides the end of the world?

But when I got to school, there he was, hanging out by his locker with Webby and those guys, perfectly safe and healthy and not the least bit dead.

“Henry!” I was shocked. I couldn’t understand what he was doing there.

“Oh, hi, Claire.” He said it all casual, like, *Oh, hi, Person I Barely Know.*

It doesn’t make any sense, does it?

I stood in the hall for what felt like a million seconds, flapping my jaw open and closed, trying to understand why Henry was acting so weird. Finally I said, “Henry, what are you doing here?”

“What do you mean?” he asked, like it was the stupidest question he’d ever heard. “It’s, you know, school.”

“Yeah, so why didn’t you stop at my house to walk over with me like you always do?”

As soon as I asked this, Webby snort-laughed. I officially hate Webby and his snort-laugh. Since when is Henry friends with him anyway?

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Henry told me.

Before I could ask him if he'd had a brain transplant over the summer, or at least a complete memory wipe, the bell rang. We had to go to class. Webby and Henry walked into Mr. Harper's room and sat down next to each other. Henry took an end seat, so I couldn't sit on his other side.

I sat down in the second row. The seat next to me was the last free desk in the room. It was strange to see boys all around me, and to be the only girl. When you were here, it wasn't as obvious, because I could compare what I was wearing to what you were wearing, or I could flash a look your way, and you'd know what I meant. I was not the only creature of my kind. But now I'm like an alien, a castaway from the planet Girl, stranded on Boys Island.

I counted the number of kids in the class: six boys and me. There was one boy missing. I looked around to see where Yucky Gilbert was . . . and he wasn't in class yet.

Oh no.

Oh yes.

Mr. Harper was just closing the door when Yucky Gilbert ran in. Yucky G. looked around for an empty seat, spotted the one next to me, and grinned so wide the sunlight flashed off his braces, temporarily blinding me. He dashed over to plant his butt next to mine. He smacked his sloppy lips and said, "Hi, Claire." There was a little string of drool dripping off his braces, between his upper teeth and his lower teeth. It stretched while he talked but never broke. Yucky Gilbert's drool is strong, like a spider's web.

I read his mind. Here's what he was thinking:
Hi, Claire. Welcome to another year of me constantly trying to kiss you. And this year I'm going to triumph.
I swear, Bessie, I could see it in his eyes.



What am I going to do? I used to have you and Henry to shield me from Yucky G., but now you're three thousand miles away and Henry is acting like I don't exist. I pray that Mr. Harper won't make us keep these seats permanently for the rest of the year. Because if I have to spend a whole year fending off Yucky G., my life will be one continuous saliva shower.

I know you're squirming and gagging and saying, "Claire stop being gross," so I'll stop the Yucky G. Report for today.

Later tater,
Claire