

WHY IS HE SPREADING RUMORS ABOUT ME?

by JENNIFER LICATE



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ISBN: 978-0-938510-68-0; eISBN: 978-1-5457-5593-8

Published by Boys Town Press, 13603 Flanagan Blvd., Boys Town, NE 68010

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Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication Data

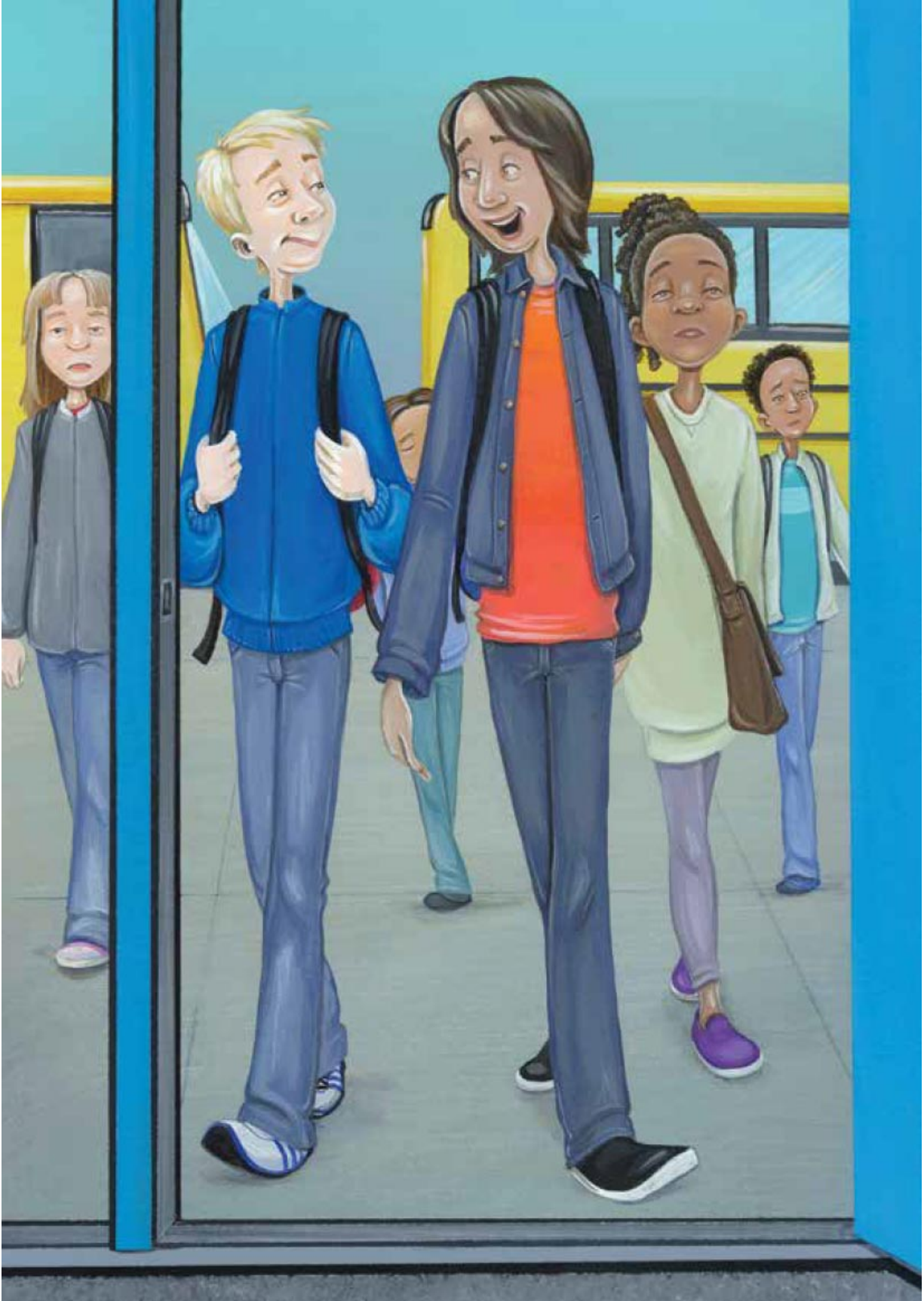
Names: Licate, Jennifer, author. | Beaky, Suzanne, 1971- illustrator.

Title: Why is he spreading rumors about me? / by Jennifer Licate ; illustrated by Suzanne Beaky.

Description: Boys Town, NE : Boys Town Press, [2022] | Series: Navigating friendships. | Audience: grades 4-8. | Accompanied by: Why is he spreading rumors about me? teacher and counselor activity guide. Identifiers:

ISBN: 978-0-938510-68-0 (book) | 978-0-938510-69-7 (guide)

Subjects: LCSH: Rumor--Juvenile fiction. | Gossip--Juvenile fiction. | Teasing--Juvenile fiction. | Friendship in children--Juvenile fiction. | Interpersonal relations in children--Juvenile fiction. | Security (Psychology) in children--Juvenile fiction. | Anxiety--Juvenile fiction. | Self-esteem in children--Juvenile fiction. | Peer pressure in children--Juvenile fiction. | Children--Life skills guides--Juvenile fiction. | CYAC: Rumors--Fiction. | Gossip--Fiction. | Teasing--Fiction. | Friendship--Fiction. | Interpersonal relations--Fiction. | Security (Psychology)--Fiction. | Anxiety--Fiction. | Self-esteem--Fiction. | Peer pressure--Fiction. | Conduct of life--Fiction. | BISAC: JUVENILE FICTION / Social Themes / Emotions & Feelings. | JUVENILE FICTION / Social



Chapter 1

I'M MATEO. I'M A HAPPY KID WHO TRIES TO SEE THE BEST IN EVERY SITUATION. Heck, I even like going to school. You may think that's weird, but I'm the guy who gets excited when it's time to go back to school after long breaks. Of course, I don't admit that to my buddies. They'd probably laugh and not believe me anyway. My parents tell everyone I love school. I think they're right.

Classes and studying aren't why I like school. It's more about being around my friends and joking around with them. My good buddies are Tyler and Malik. We've been pals for years.

IF I WASN'T AT SCHOOL, I'D BE STUCK AT HOME. I don't do a lot of after-school activities because my parents need help looking after my siblings. I have three younger brothers and a younger sister, and each one is a handful. My parents depend on me – the free babysitter – to help out as much as I can. I don't mind. It's fun, mostly, but definitely **EXHAUSTING**. Being in school gives me a break, which is a funny way to think about school.



So far, the school year's been good and bad. Sometimes teachers get on my case about incomplete homework, but they're mostly cool about it. **I THINK THEY KNOW I TRY HARD EVEN THOUGH I HAVE A LOT OF RESPONSIBILITIES AT HOME.**

Lunch, obviously, is the best part of my school day. I get to hang out with Tyler, Malik, and my other friends. But today it wasn't fun, and I blame Harris.

The trouble started when Lily walked over and talked to me. She's the only friend I have who's a girl. I don't have a lot in common with most girls, but Lily and I've known each other since we were little. I like that she doesn't get all weird about little things. There's no drama with her. She's really funny, too. She did a laugh-out-loud imitation of her mom yelling about how Lily needs to clean her room. Her mom's nice but is super strict about keeping the house clean. Anyway, the guys noticed Lily and I laughing. They stared at us, and then Harris started in with me.

"Do you have a new girlfriend, Mateo?" he snickered.

“Yeah, she’s my girl... friend,” I joked. To make sure everyone knew I was just goofing, I used my fingers to make air quotes when I said it.

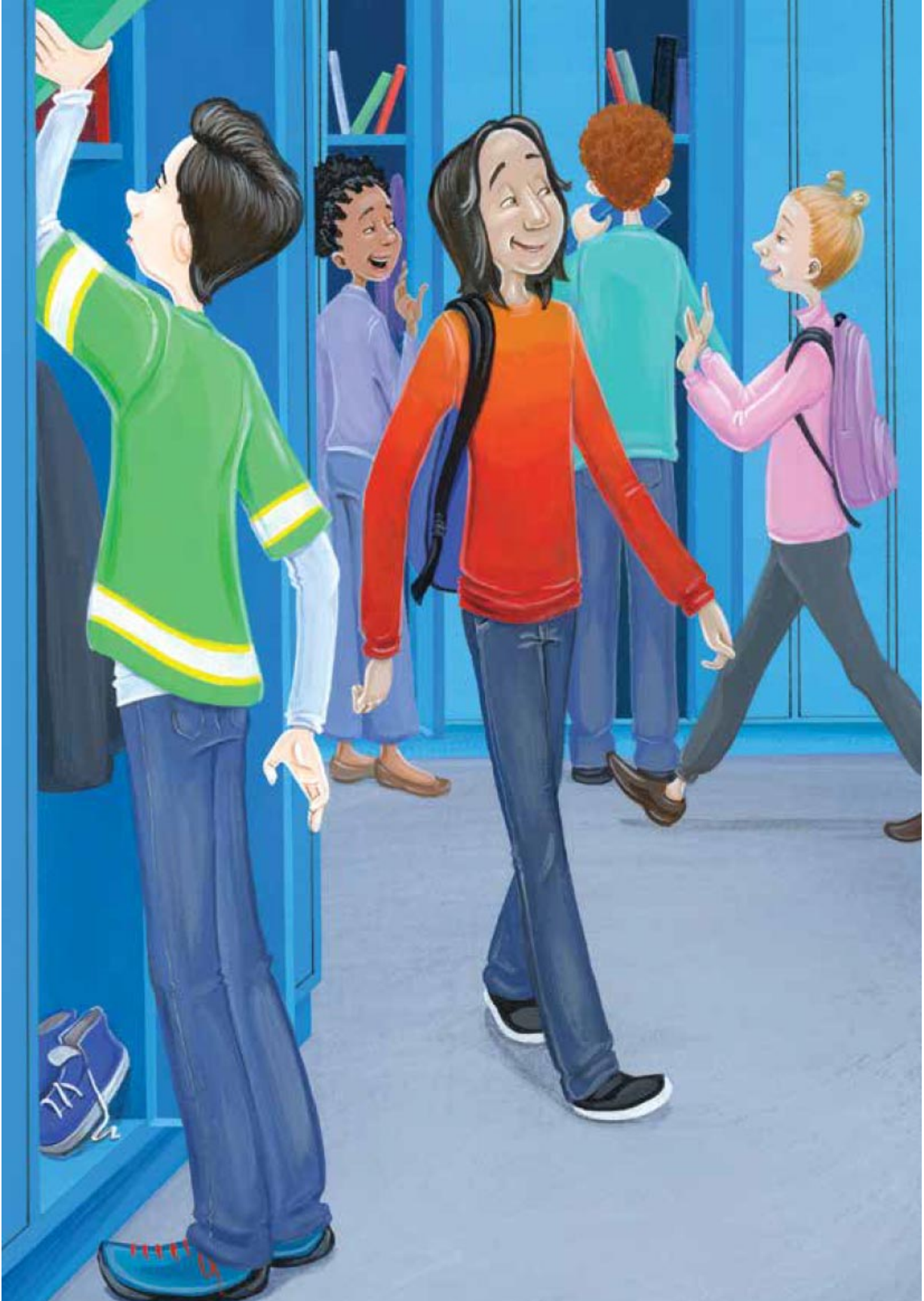
Lily called him out, too. She rolled her eyes and, with lots of snark, said, “SERIOUSLY, HARRIS?”

“Well, it looked like you two were on a date over there,” swore Harris.



Then the bell rang. Lunch was over. We all grabbed our books and left the cafeteria. As I walked to class, I thought about what Harris had said. I USUALLY GET ALONG WITH HIM, BUT BOY DOES HE LIKE TO STIR STUFF UP. HE LOOKS FOR DRAMA WHERE THERE ISN'T ANY. I don't know why he had to make a big deal about

me and Lily goofing around. It's not like I want her to be my girlfriend. I feel kinda embarrassed just thinking of her that way.



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