

Florian Zoll

*In the end, the true enemy is the bystander.*

The sound of gunfire. A door with no lock. Footsteps, approaching, much quicker than you have time to text your family or think. The door opens, a small creak louder than the gunshots and the screams and the alarms.

It started as a regular school day-- Wednesday. The ring of the bell makes you sigh. Someone spilled their coffee in the front entrance, and you just barely avoid falling on your face when you step in it. *What a wonderful way to start the morning*, you think, sarcastically, laughing at the high-school-stereotype your day had become. You make your way to math class, your friend stopping by to say hello. You tell him that you'd rather get shot than learn anymore about algebra.

*Be careful what you wish for.*

That cliché was far beyond you, a high-achieving English student. Or, at least, you'd like to believe so. Now it's the only thing you can think of. That sentence, one you've heard a thousand times before, repeating like it was mocking you. Over and over and over, you begged it to stop. Be careful what you wish for. Be careful what you wish for. Be careful what you wish for.

Math was on the third floor of the building. You walked slowly, procrastinating your boredom. You look over to your friend; he's chugging down an embarrassing amount of energy drinks. He smiles at you, and then he falls.

*Crack.*

You always hated onomatopoeia. It seemed stupid, unnecessary, a fatal flaw in a piece of writing. But it was the only thing that could describe it. *Crack.*

The sound of his head splitting open on the floor.

In 2022, there were 51 school shootings that resulted in injury or death. This number was record-breaking, and not in a good way. The warning signs of a shooter can be almost overwhelming, and yet students don't report them.

And then, and only then, silence is betrayal.

Betrayal to your peers. To twelve children who die from gun violence each day. To yourself.

The bystander becomes the victim-- metaphorically or literally. Whether they die at the hands of the person they couldn't bother to report, or the guilt of the students who passed due to the ignorance of the bystander consumes them until it's their turn, they will never be the same. They are the victim. And they are the judge at which the hands of their fate are tied. Their crime? Silence.

*And in the end, the true enemy is the bystander.*