

A silhouette of a young boy stands in the center of a grassy field, facing away from the viewer. He is wearing a t-shirt and shorts. To his right, a round object, possibly a ball, sits on the grass. The background features a line of trees and a sky filled with large, white clouds, with a faint rainbow visible on the right side.

BYSTANDER

A BYSTANDER? OR THE BULLY'S NEXT TARGET?

JAMES PRELLER

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[ketchup]

THE FIRST TIME ERIC HAYES EVER SAW HIM, DAVID HALLEN-back was running, if you could call it that, running in a halting, choppy-stepped, stumpy-legged shamble, slowing down to look back over his shoulder, stumbling forward, pausing to catch his breath, then lurching forward again.

He was running *from*, not *to*, and not running, but *fleeing*.

Scared witless.

Eric had never seen the boy before. But in this town, a place called Bellport, Long Island, it was true of most

kids. Eric didn't know anybody. He bounced the basketball, flicking it with his fingertips, not looking at the ball, or the rim, or anything else on the vast, empty grounds behind the middle school except for that curly-haired kid who couldn't run to save his life. Which was too bad, really, because it looked to Eric like he might be doing exactly that—running for his life.

Eric took a halfhearted jumper, missed. No lift in his legs. The ball bounced to the left wing, off the asphalt court and onto the grass, where it rolled and settled, unchased. Eric had been shooting for almost an hour. Working on his game or just killing time, Eric wasn't sure. He was tired and hot and a little bored or else he would have bounded after the ball like a pup, pounced on it after the first bounce, spun on spindly legs, and fired up a follow-up shot. Instead he let the ball roll to the grass and, hands on his hips, dripping sweat, watched the running boy as he continued across the great lawn in his direction.

He doesn't see me, Eric thought.

Behind him there was the sprawling Final Rest Pet Cemetery. According to Eric's mother, it was supposedly the third-largest pet cemetery in the United States.

And it's not like Eric's mom was making that up just to make Eric feel better about "the big move" from Ohio to Long Island. Because, duh, nobody is going to get all pumped up just because there's a big cemetery in your new hometown, stuffed with dead cats and dogs and whatever else people want to bury. Were there pet lizards, tucked into little felt-lined coffins? Vietnamese potbellied pigs? Parakeets? People were funny about pets. But burying them in a real cemetery, complete with engraved tombstones? That was a new one on Eric. A little *excessive*, he thought.

As the boy drew closer, Eric could see that his shirt was torn. Ripped along the side seam, so that it flapped as he ran. And . . . was that blood? There were dark red splotches on the boy's shirt and jeans (crazy to wear those on a hot August afternoon). Maybe it was just paint. The whole scene didn't look right, that much was sure. No one seemed to be chasing after the boy. He had come from the far side of the school and now traveled across the back of it. The boy's eyes kept returning to the corner of the building, now one hundred yards away. Nothing there. No monsters, no goblins, no ghosts, no *thing* at all.

YOU THINK YOU HAVE A CHOICE?

Eric is the new kid in seventh grade, and he needs new friends. Griffin is cool and popular and wants to be his friend. But Griffin always seems to be in the middle of bad things. And if he doesn't like someone, they're in big trouble. The more Eric hangs out with Griffin, the more he ends up in the middle of bad things, too. But he's just there, just watching while it happens; none of it is his fault. He'd like to do the right thing and stop being friends with a liar and a bully like Griffin. But how can he stop being a bystander without becoming a victim?

★ “[Pfeffer’s] characters are well developed with authentic voices. . . . The action moves quickly, keeping readers engaged. . . . This must-read book is a great discussion starter.”—*School Library Journal*, Starred Review

“Famously discussable as a middle-school read-aloud, [with] appeal across gender lines.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Pfeffer displays a keen awareness of the complicated and often-conflicting instincts to fit in, find friends, and do the right thing. Although there are no pat answers, the message (that a bystander is hardly better than an instigator) is clear.”—*Booklist*



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