

# Eat Your Heart Out

Katie Boland



# Monster

I am a monster.

This is how I was born, a fault in my stars. I can do no more to change it than an old dog can trade his worn, dirty fur for the clean feathers of a baby bird just because he dreams of taking flight.

I can only really breathe when I am alone. Sometimes, in these moments, I think of James, the man who loves me, the man who will marry me next month, and I feel cruel. He does not know that I was born wearing the blue uniform of a prisoner inside myself. Everything else feels like a costume.

Especially that white dress.

I get on my knees and pray that I have a fighting chance.

I started killing animals when I was five.

It was around then that I began the long, solitary walks around our property. My mother never seemed bothered by my absences. She was a woman preoccupied by herself only. She spent her days tanning her lithe body and having gentlemen other than my father over.

“Just friends.” I was jealous of her. I saw how men looked at her and I wanted that same attention myself. How does a five-year-old covet that specific and twisted breed of sex?

I saw a bird on the side of the road. It had a broken wing, and it was yelling. I didn't recognize that it was in pain, only that it was helpless. I lifted my shoe and I felt its wing break beneath me. I

remember feeling it move, how it wanted to fly, hearing it scream, the struggle and then the collapse.

Suddenly, I was not angry anymore. I was not happy. I was not anything. I was calm for the first time, and all I wanted was to recreate that feeling again and again.

I wasn't particular: mice I caught, any bug, any living creature I could get my hands on. Birds were always difficult. When I was eight, I killed a neighbourhood dog. Seeing the MISSING signs, I felt no guilt, only stupid for being so brazen. I considered myself lucky that I was never found out and was not so obvious again.

I knew there was something wrong with my behaviour, my compulsions. I cried once to my mother about it.

"Stop making up stories," she said.

I learned to shave my legs when I was ten. I lost my virginity when I was eleven to a seventeen-year-old boy. I developed early, I could lie and pass for fifteen.

Suddenly, almost overnight, men had become my act of violence. I've had so many I've lost count. James is the first man I have fooled for a long time, the only man who has promised to take care of me.

I've grown old and my looks have faded, I wear my promiscuity like a memory, a stale perfume that I can't wash off my body.

How do you begin today with all of yesterday still inside you?

Sometimes, still, I'll catch a mouse and take great pleasure in crushing it with my fist. Bodily fluids do not move me; blood, semen, tears—none of these weigh heavy on me.

As the big day approaches, I find myself studying James when he is asleep. He looks so helpless. More helpless than I could ever be in the most dire of situations, and this helplessness radiates off him in his sleep. Looking at him, I feel like a monster in a fairy tale: hairy,

yellow-eyed, and mute. I want to crush him like that bird, sit on him until he suffocates.

When I wake from these spells I am horrified because I thought I knew better than this.

I promise myself daily that I will be discreet and that I will only take other men when I feel like I'm drowning. I will be a good wife to James.

I repeat this to myself over and over, hoping, somehow to believe it.

Some nights, I feel so torn that I cannot share a bed with him and sleep alone on the wood floor beneath him.

He is taking me on a getaway this weekend; "some time alone before the wedding," he told me.

"Isn't it beautiful?" he asks, waking me from a sleep that until now I wasn't certain I had fallen into.

I look out the window of our red Ford truck that's covered in road dust. I lift my head and straighten my shoulders to get a better look at what's on the other side of the glass. The clear, hard sky stretches for miles. Mountains, presidential in the distance, dwarf every tree and farm around them. It is breathtaking. Being around so much space I feel myself wanting to wander like a lonely buffalo.

"Baby?" he asks.

I had forgotten James was in the car with me.

"Yes, beautiful," I tell him. My accent is barbed with the softness only sharpshooters can imitate, sounds different in my own head, when I am alive in thought, than it does when I speak to him, dead in conversation. I don't understand where the pretense comes from, but I am being dishonest with my voice when I speak, except

within the confines of my own skull. My real drawl is lower, has more gruffness, and a depth that I don't share with anyone, guarded like jewels.

He smiles at me, and then he puts his hand on mine, and I keep it there until the car stops. That is what normal people who are in love do.

If I can convince him, how far behind am I?

When the car stops, James and I bring our luggage to the front door of the cabin. As I slam the trunk, I feel his hand graze my ass.

We are kissing on the doorstep now, and I feel his excitement, about us, about the future, about everything that life offers most people. His hands travel all over my body, with an increasing pressure, and for a moment I feel sad. I have never felt excited, not like that, about anything in my life. I can mimic excitement, as I am now, by mirroring his actions, putting my hands on his body where he puts his on mine.

But right now my body acts like an orchard of bones. James takes my hand and leads me through the cabin up the stairs to our bedroom. He lays me down and undresses me. His touch is soft and I am used to it.

"You feel so good," I tell him.

I am not lying. He does feel good. He is different than the other men. We are gentle with each other where they used to bruise me, bite me, make me bleed. Usually, I hide my body from James until my map of scars, traces of the other men are gone.

When I look untouched, like now, our bodies fit together well, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. It doesn't feel satisfying, only like kindness's sister. He cups my left breast in his hand. I wrap my legs around him. We begin.

As he thrusts himself inside me, I smile at him, trying to force myself into a dream—a state to silence the private voice in my head. That voice thinks it's writing my story as the narrator, as the double, secret-sharer of my existence. But in truth, there is no duality. I am that voice, and the person that I pretend to be only exists when there's a stage.

“You're so wet.” I run my hand along his back.

He is speeding up now. His rhythmic motion calms me, feels natural, like cylindrical parts of machinery finding their cogs. I know it will end soon, but I don't want it to, feeling like I could fall asleep and stay that way forever if only he could continue until his heart stopped.

It's working, I tell myself. This is working.

“I love you,” he tells me. My James has loved me, intimately, since the moment he laid eyes on me. No other man has ever loved me like that. I have long wondered if that was because somehow James knew, though not consciously thought, that I could never love him and, attracted to that calamity, threw himself against me.

“I love you too,” I say back but sound so hollow that I wonder how he can believe it.

When he rolls off me, I lean to the side, placing my back against his front. He holds me tightly. Too tightly. I'm suffocating.

“I can't wait until you're my wife.”

I reach around my body, hold his hands, and also hold myself, further shortening my own breath.

The new moon rode high over the modest golden fields and bruised skyline. Too hot, tangled in sheets and sweating, I left the bed frustrated, wanting for sleep but unable to find it. I needed to walk. The space I create cutting through the thick air is cooling,

and when I am far enough from James I can breathe again.

How could I think this was working?

Since he proposed marriage, my hair has been falling out. All around the house I see it, like small golden chains, littering the floor. No matter how much I sweep, I cannot clear them away. The strands multiply each day. They are little lightning bolts made of my dead cells that mock me and remind me there's a reason that actresses wear wigs. I wonder if a bald bride is still a beautiful one.

My mother died last year, bald. I know now that she was faced with this same decision. She chose to marry my father. She gave him forever within the numbered days.

I wonder if it cost her life; the cancer sprouting everywhere it could, seeping into her bones, punishing her for lying. Sometimes, I want to ask her what to do, even though I know it's ridiculous to believe a dead person can hear you.

My mother watched me as I got older. She knew that we were two of a kind, that she had given birth to herself. She was jealous of me, my youth and beauty, but I was her accomplice. She'd tell me the truth and I would cover for her. She would leave for hours to visit with friends who did not exist. I told my father she was seeing Mary, her friend from church, who never attended when we did. There was her doctor, Mr. Green, whose office did not exist in the phonebook. And there was Mrs. Merriweather, the sick old widow to whom mother would bring dinner every Saturday night, to an address I made up, that did not exist anywhere in Texas.

"You and me, we're liars. That's not so bad. Anyone who tells you they aren't is a worse type than we are." That was one of the kinder things my mother ever said to me. I was not loved by my mother, but she did claim me as her own.

I lie to James almost constantly. Most of the lies are meaningless, it's just that telling the truth feels so flaccid.

Lately, I have started telling him I am seeing a psychiatrist when really I cannot think of anything more pointless. For three hours every week I drive as far away as I can before I have to turn back, giving my face a break from its metallised mask.

He does not know that I have seen dozens of therapists but after two or three sessions, I never return.

I walk home through such blackness that I cannot see two paces in front of me. I dread each step closer to the cabin knowing I will not sleep tonight. There is no extra blanket for my wooden mattress.

"Should I get a six-pack? Or enough for us both?"

It is now noon, and we are among the yahoos at the local grocery store. James will drink the beer as soon as we get home. He thinks it's celebratory. I do not. So, I shake my head: no, I don't want any.

Alcohol rarely passes my lips and I never get drunk. Alcohol provides James an escape, I guess. But it is my belief that escaping through alcohol allows people to remain stuck in lives they hate. I believe that if you are unhappy, you might as well know it, and know it always.

Three children are in line in front of us, buying candy. They are arguing over who will pay the fifty-seven cents for their sweets made of pink, thick chalk.

"You said you'd get it, Laura! I got it last week!" says the first one.

"NO, I did! Stop lying, you liar!" says the second.

"You're all stupid!" says the third.

I will lose my mind if this continues.

"I'll get it," I tell the older lady at the register. I lay the quarters, a

nickel, and two pennies on the counter. The sound of metal hitting metal hurts my ears.

On the way out James grabs my hand and rubs my index finger slowly with his rough thumb.

“You will be the most wonderful mother.”

“I can’t wait,” I say, smiling.

I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I will not have his children. I will take birth control pills until the day that I die.

Not having children raises fewer questions than never marrying.

On the way back home, I did make my decision.

I was in the same position that I was on the drive there, only reversed. Everything was exactly the same. We listened to the same music, his hand was resting on mine, and I was staring at the hard, blue sky above me out the dirty window, and in the nowhere and everywhere moment, I felt so cruel I swore I bled.

I wanted to pick a fight with him. A desperate scrap. I am a useless old boxer with a bum shoulder, fighting to prove that I can still hurt.

I looked over at him. He caught me staring. He smiled at me so broadly, and like skies after thunder, the light grew.

I knew in that moment that he loved me more than he could ever love anyone. He was committed to me. Tangled, matted so deeply. He looked so natural, so serene, as if he was made, created solely, to meet his maker. He would never get out alive.

“I can’t do it.”

“Do what, baby?” he said.

He looked at me, still serene, unmoved. I searched his face for any sign that he knew what I was saying. There was none.

“What’s wrong, baby?”

I look away, and I feel all alone in the car next to him. The loneliness invites breath back in me. He will never know that we are strangers. I can lie to him until we both turn to dust, and he will never know.

Why did I think that I needed to change?

It is winter now, and the wind shakes the bare branches above me.

I walk on cobblestone. I am not used to the heaviness that I am carrying with me.

I reach the end of the path. I look backward.

He lifts my veil. The brisk winter air slaps my face like angry hands.

A few moments later, we are pronounced man and wife.



KATIE BOLAND is an actress and writer who divides her time between Los Angeles and Toronto. She was chosen as one of the Toronto International Film Festival's "Rising Stars" and as one of three Canadians to watch by *Elle Canada*. She has appeared in more than forty films and her writing has appeared in *The Toronto Star* and *TChad Quarterly*. *Eat Your Heart Out* is her first published work. Please visit Katie online at [katieboland.com](http://katieboland.com), [@katieboland](https://www.instagram.com/katieboland), or on her blog, [comedy-and-drama.blogspot.com](http://comedy-and-drama.blogspot.com).