



I Can See U by Matthias Morgenroth  
Sample translation by Catherine Wolterman

Pp. 5–22

‘Ben?’ I call again.

I weigh the iron bar in my hand.

My weapon.

Heavy and reassuring.

I’ll open the door, carefully of course, and if he tries anything, I’ll knock him to the ground.

I’ve thought long and hard about whether it’s too dangerous. But my weapon is powerful.

My curiosity even more so.

I clutch the bar in my right hand. With my left, I turn the key.

Once.

Twice.

I push down on the handle, slowly opening the door. I am ready for anything.

Ben is sitting there.

Totally calm.

Totally peaceful.

Eyes closed.

I look at him.

My Ben. So this is how he looks now.

So peaceful.

His eyes snap open and the look on his face cuts me to the core.

‘Marie,’ he says. ‘I knew it.’

My world is in ruins and I feel like I’m treading on shards of glass. But at least now I know what I am. Or rather what I am NOT.

I AM NOT A MONSTER.

I am writing these lines in pen. With ink. On paper. Yes, I am writing our story down on paper, in pen, so that nobody can ever tamper with my words. Because once something has been written down in ink, it can’t be erased – that’s the difference between paper and pixels.

This is my side of the story. Read it with respect. Read it with fear. I have to try to take all the broken mirrors and the fragmented thoughts and piece them back together into a person.

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ME.

And now, I'll start at the beginning.

Monday 11 May

Ben.

I still remember everything. Every detail. The way Ben first entered our classroom. Mr Bachmann pushed him to the front and introduced him to us, and everyone looked at him in surprise, because he had shown up in the middle of the school year. And I no longer recognised myself.

Was I still ME?

I'm not usually the type to gawk at boys and they definitely don't lust after me. Unfortunately. In fact, most of the time I feel like they don't even see me, no matter how colourful my clothes and whether or not I wear makeup. But this was no ordinary Monday. Everything felt different.

'This is Ben Olympion,' said Bachmann. 'He'll be in your class from today. Make him feel welcome, won't you? I'm sure you will.'

When Ben walked into our classroom on that Monday in May, I felt myself filling up with sunshine and I heard birds singing just for me. Wow, that sounds corny. But that's what happened.

'Ben can sit at the table right at the back,' Bachmann continued. 'Is that all right?'

Ben bowed his head and smiled and I automatically smiled too; I couldn't help myself. It's impossible not to smile when you've got a belly full of sunshine.

Bachmann cleared his throat, but Ben made no move to sit down. He just kept smiling at the class – and that was when our eyes met for the first time.

Nobody had ever looked at me like that before.

If someone had asked me that evening what the new guy looked like, this Ben, I would have struggled to describe him. His straight, light brown hair, his well-proportioned lips and even his swaying gait, which has since become so familiar – I remembered none of it. All I could remember were his eyes. He had looked right into my heart. Sounds crazy, but that is really how I felt. Like he'd looked into my HEART! As though, for him, I wasn't just an average fifteen-year-old girl with a flabby waistline, a mouth full of precious metal and a stupid grin.

He saw ME. Marie Inning.

And I could tell he was intrigued. Intrigued by me?! Why would he be intrigued by me, of all people...? But he was, and the feeling of sunshine expanded deep inside me – it almost felt like other people would be able to see me glowing.

Keep talking, I wanted to shout to Bachmann, tell us everything you know! Where has he come from, this Ben? Why is he starting here now, in the middle of the school year? What sort of strange surname is that – and why is he looking at me in a way that fills me with sunshine?

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There were some unkind murmurs, I noticed, and some whispering. Niko, used to being the cute one in the class, was exchanging scornful glances with the other boys. Perhaps he was scared of the unexpected competition.

I kept smiling, though. Without even thinking. And I held my breath as I watched Ben walk through the classroom to his seat at the back.

I'm not normally like this. Really I'm not. And I don't know what came over me, but the birdsong in my head was getting louder and louder and was suddenly joined by soft music... violins, trumpets, delicate flutes...

Elli elbowed me in the ribs.

'What?' I asked, confused.

'You're staring at him.'

'Who??'

It took a moment for her words to sink in. And, very slowly, I realised that I was most probably making a bit of a fool of myself. But I couldn't help it.

Elli giggled. 'God, Marie.'

I tore my eyes away from Ben and repeated, trying to stay cool: 'What?'

Elli just snorted quietly to herself.

As if she had anything to snort about! The boys were always looking at her. Not that she had been enjoying the attention much lately. Her eyes had been heavily lined in doleful dark blue ever since she and Marc had broken up two weeks earlier. Even though she was the one who had broken up with him.

My face must have been bright red, and when I looked around warily to check whether anyone else had noticed my embarrassing behaviour, Yun was grinning at me mockingly. Yun is the quiet one in the class, always staring and grinning. Of course I went even redder.

'Please don't forget,' Bachmann's voice bored a hole in my thoughts, 'that we will be starting our presentations this coming week. Leon, you're first, then Alina and Pia, and then' – his eyes darted to us – 'Elli and Marie.'

I could not have cared less about our presentation at that precise moment, but I nodded automatically, my face still crimson.

'I've read the book already,' whispered Elli. 'Have you?'

I nodded again. 'Sure.'

What was the new boy doing now? I peeked over my shoulder. Ben was sitting in his seat. Obviously. Where else would he have been?

Elli giggled again – and well she might!

'Oh yes,' I heard Bachmann say through the violins and flutes in my head, 'this would give our newcomer the chance to get involved right away. Ben, how do you feel about a presentation on Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*? Would you be able to do that?'

Ben sat up straight. 'Excuse me, I don't understand the question.'

A scornful grin from Niko.

Bachmann grinned too. 'Which question? The question of how you feel about a presentation on *Wuthering Heights*? Or the question of whether you would be able to do it?'

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How unkind! The new guy couldn't be expected to know anything about the literature project Bachmann had dreamed up for the summer term! Ben didn't react, he just looked at the teacher expectantly. I thought that was pretty cool.

Luckily, Bachmann decided to be nice again.

'Let's see. The presentation needs to last half an hour and it should tell us about the plot and the context in which the book was written. But you still have two weeks to prepare, and in the meantime you'll see how the others do it.'

Ben turned his head slightly and our eyes met for the second time...

'I would be happy to do it,' he said. 'I love Emily Brontë. I love Romanticism.'

ROMANTICISM?!

I looked down quickly. My heart was pounding. What was wrong with me?

'Well I never!' said Bachmann, visibly surprised. 'It looks like we have an expert in the class.'

'There's a seat free next to me,' shouted Josh. 'I've been saving it for the day an EXPERT walks into class.'

Everyone laughed. And Ben smiled too.

'I've got time this afternoon,' I heard Elli's voice next to me.

'What for?' I asked, utterly confused. Could she have been talking to me without me noticing? I wouldn't put it past me today.

'You know, for the presentation,' Elli responded. 'Should I come straight to yours after school?'

'Oh right, the presentation.'

We had lessons until 4pm on Mondays. And something was happening this evening, my mother had said, but I hadn't really been listening. 'Today's no good. Tomorrow?'

'Okay.' She jabbed me in the side with her pencil. 'I think you'd struggle to concentrate today anyway, right?'

How mean.

But, of course, I knew she was right. The music in my head had turned into an entire symphony.

#

I can't begin to describe how ashamed I was of my classmates in physics that day. Especially the boys. The way they were acting, I wondered what on earth the new guy must think of us.

Mr Koppe was busy setting up an experiment, something with coils and wires and bars and magnets. It was about induction again. You produce electricity by taking a bar magnet and inserting it into a wire coil. And then pulling it out. The quicker you do it, the more electricity you get. The boys were cracking lewd jokes, and who knows, maybe I would have found it kind of funny on any other day – but today it was just so incredibly embarrassing!

'Are we doing biology then?' yelled Jasper, casting a sleazy grin around the room. 'In – out!'

Niko clapped him on the back. 'I didn't know you could create electricity that way.'

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‘Not if you use a condom!’ shouted Leon.

Everyone howled. Even some of the girls.

‘You’ve got it all wrong,’ said Koppe through clenched teeth. ‘This experiment is about gaining energy, not using it up, which is what would happen with what you’re alluding to.’

Of course there was no denying that what Koppe was up to at the front of the physics lab looked fairly obscene. But did that mean the others had to act like little kids?

WE ARE NOT LITTLE KIDS! I tried to beam this message to the bench at the back, to Ben, who was once again sitting alone. God knows what he must have been thinking! WE ARE NICE. WE ARE COOL. WE ARE YOUR NEW CLASSMATES. But when I dared to turn around and look at him again, I saw how perfectly content he looked, not remotely unsettled, and I was glad that he didn’t seem inclined to join in with the other boys’ smut.

He just sat there, looking gorgeous.

Looking perfect.

I felt myself getting hot.

The rest of the physics lesson continued in the same vein, with half the class moaning suggestively and rhythmically whenever Koppe demonstrated anything. Once again, I found myself turning red as a beetroot, although of course turning red was the last thing I wanted to do, and I was so annoyed with myself that I accidentally bit my lip so hard that it started bleeding.

‘Yun!’ roared Koppe suddenly, shortly before the end of the lesson, and our class wallflower jumped a mile. ‘Would you be kind enough to turn off your phone? What do you think you’re doing?’

‘He’s shooting a porno,’ said Leon, grinning. ‘When the coil met the magnet...’

‘That’s enough!’ Koppe exploded.

Our school has recently become a so-called pilot school and we’re allowed to use our phones ‘within reasonable limits’, in the name of media literacy and so on. But we’re still not allowed to use them for our own purposes during lesson time. Yun murmured something inaudible and shoved his smart phone into the pocket of his trousers.

‘Don’t follow the example your classmates are setting,’ Koppe advised Ben.

‘I will,’ said Ben, and Koppe looked rather puzzled, because somehow it wasn’t quite clear what Ben was trying to say. But in any case, HE didn’t have his phone out.

Our eyes met for the third time. Ben seemed more amused than annoyed. And I was utterly smitten.

#

I don’t know if it was coincidence or fate, but either way, I found myself standing directly behind Ben in the lunch queue.

Wow. This was unexpected.

I still hadn’t returned to my normal state – quite the opposite in fact. My mouth was totally dry. My lip was swollen. I had never felt less capable of having a lively or witty conversation.

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Ben was looking around our canteen with interest. Once again, I felt ashamed, this time because of our grubby, dilapidated school. I'm so used to it I don't even notice it anymore, but our school is actually an utter disgrace. The plaster is crumbling from the canteen walls and there's mould on the wooden beams. I knew it was silly to think that Ben might just take off again if he didn't like it here, but something like that really was going through my head.

I took a deep breath.

'Up there it tells you what food there is today,' I said timidly, pointing to the little blackboard on the wall.

Ugh, I sounded so squeaky!

'Oh, thanks,' said Ben. He read out loud: 'Meatloaf. Mashed potato.'

Ahead of us, Jasper pushed his tray along the counter. 'No salad for me today,' he said to us, grinning, as he took two large spoonfuls of mash.

Ben did the same.

'You like mash as much as I do?' asked Jasper, with a satisfied glance at his new classmate.

Ben nodded.

'Meatloaf and mash is the best,' raved Jasper, and leaned over the counter. 'Can I have two slices, please? Or three?'

Mrs Muller winked at him from the other side of the counter. 'I know what you're like!'

'Can I have two slices too, please? Or three?' echoed Ben. Jasper laughed.

'This new guy's all right. Enjoy!'

'Thanks,' said Ben, putting his plate, complete with the three slices of meatloaf he had been given, on his tray.

I don't like that slimy mashed potato, the meatloaf or the brown sauce. On days like this, I always make do with a small bowl of salad and a bread roll.

'I hate the canteen,' I said to Ben, while we were paying. I didn't want him thinking that I thought this stuff was good.

'Oh, why's that?' he asked, taking his tray.

'The food's no good,' I explained.

'No? What would you prefer?' He looked at me with interest.

I began stuttering. 'No idea. Er... maybe something sweet once in a while. Blueberry pancakes or waffles, that would be something.'

'Sounds tempting,' said Ben with a smile.

TEMPTING.

Seriously?!

Okay, I know you shouldn't read into every little thing... but it kind of stood out that he chose to phrase it that way. My tray trembled in my hand. There was nothing I could do about it.

I tried to attach myself to Ben but Jasper had already called him over to his table, excited to have found someone who shared his passion for meatloaf. And so I had no option but to walk past the boys' table, heart pounding, to the next table, where Alina and Pia were

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sitting. What was taking Elli so long? Ever since Josh's party, when Marc had fooled around with that girl from another school, she had taken to spending most of her lunch break smoking behind the gym.

'Can I sit here?' I asked, sliding onto the bench before anyone could say no. The next table was still better than the other side of the canteen.

'Mpf,' Alina made a sound that I could choose to interpret however I wanted.

Alina had her own lunch with her, as always. Not that you could really call it a lunch, as it consisted solely of raw vegetables and dip – all organic, of course.

Pia, on the other hand, is from Spain and has a serious obsession with food. She spends hours in the kitchen every day preparing the perfect dish, taking pictures of it and posting it online with the hashtag #mylovelymeal. So I always know the night before what she'll be bringing for lunch the next day. Today it was stuffed bell peppers with chicken.

'Want a taste?' Pia pushed her lunchbox towards me. 'Your hungry expression is putting me on edge.'

'Oh, thanks,' I murmured, poking at it with my fork.

'Have as much as you like,' said Pia, 'I actually can't stand peppers.'

'Why do you make them, then?' asked Alina, biting into a radish.

'Because they look so good,' Pia retorted. 'Did you not see my photo?'

'Yes, of course,' Alina answered quickly. Everyone knows how sensitive Pia is about her online culinary studio. 'What did you call it again?'

'Hot Matador on the Hunt for Chicken,' said Pia.

Cooking something just because it looks good and you can post a picture online seems crazy to me, but as I was benefitting from this fad, I said nothing. Instead, I peered over at the next table and tried to catch what Ben was saying. If only our canteen didn't echo so badly.

I was aware, of course, of how embarrassing I was being, but I just could not take my eyes off him. I felt as though the entire canteen was decked out for a festival or for Christmas. Everything sparkled, everything seemed to be full of mystery. And at the next table... there was Santa. No, better yet... Santa and the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy all rolled into ONE!

Is it possible to fall in love so suddenly? Without even knowing anything about the other person? Simply because of a look that fills you with sunshine? Or rather, because of three looks?

'Oh yeah, Marie!' Alina tore me away from my thoughts. 'I haven't even asked you yet.'

'About what?' I swallowed a mouthful of Hot Matador.

'You know, about the play.'

Alina was part of the school theatre club, I remembered. The performances were in a few weeks, as always right before the end of the school year. This year they were rehearsing a musical. *My Fair Lady*.

'Evi from Year 9 dropped out,' explained Alina. 'She's got glandular fever and the doctor says she has to stay at home for weeks. Weeks! Now we need a replacement, urgently.'

I was confused. 'Why are you asking me?'

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‘Well, it’s not a big part and you... I mean... you don’t have to sing. It’s just a bit of dancing and kissing.’

My reaction must have been written on my face, because she abruptly went quiet. Never in a million years would I get up on stage and make a spectacle of myself!

‘Oh, come on,’ I deflected, ‘I’m not cut out for the stage. And definitely not for kissing.’

Or was I? I peeked over at the next table again. But if it happened, it wouldn’t be on stage, in front of everyone! It would have to happen in real life first...

Raucous laughter was coming from the boys’ table. Jasper was on top form. And Ben actually seemed to find him funny! Or was he just pretending? Seeing him waste his time with the fattest, slimiest boy in the entire class was almost like a knife to my heart. I thought he had more taste than that... What was he really like? What was he actually thinking right now? Did we like the same things? The same music? The same books? At least Ben’s appetite didn’t seem to be quite as large as Jasper’s, I noted with a certain satisfaction. It didn’t look like he’d touched the mashed potato. Hm. How was I going to work it so that I could have another conversation with him?

I pushed the rest of Pia’s Hot Matador back. ‘Thanks. It was really HOT. What are you bringing tomorrow?’

‘Something with asparagus tips,’ she said.

‘Oh,’ I said. ‘I don’t like them, I’m afraid.’

She shrugged. ‘It’ll be a great post. You’ll see. It’s a seasonal vegetable, after all.’

‘I’ll give it a like,’ I promised. ‘But I won’t try it, if that’s okay.’

On the other side, one table farther away, sat Yun, alone as always. He was holding his smart phone in his hand and taking a picture of us.

‘Hey!’ I shouted, ‘Put your phone away, will you? Or I’ll tell Koppe!’

‘We’re allowed now during lunch,’ said Pia, glancing at her own phone. ‘And in some lessons.’

‘I know,’ I grumbled, ‘but I don’t want Yun posting a picture of me eating the food you posted yesterday.’

When I turned back to the neighbouring table, Ben had got up and was following that idiot Jasper out into the playground.

What a pity. I sat there with my belly full of Hot Matador and sunshine and didn’t know what to do with myself. Sighing, I stood up and went in search of Elli. She must have finished smoking by now!

#

‘Hey you,’ said Elli, when I appeared behind the gym. ‘Want one?’

‘Of course not,’ I retorted, squatting down next to her. ‘I just want a chat.’

I gestured towards the smart phone in her hand. ‘What are you up to?’

‘I’m watching Josh’s new video. JUST FOR GIRLS. It is Monday, after all.’

This might distract me. Or at least bring me halfway back down to earth.

‘Budge up,’ I said. ‘I want to see too.’

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... and now it's about time I finally wrote something about Josh. After all, he's one of the main people tangled up in this web with us. And, on that Monday in May, we were already starting to get caught up in it.

So. How do I describe Josh?

Back then, I still didn't know him very well. Back then, I suppose I only knew him from the outside. And from his YouTube channel. Because Josh isn't just a member of our class, he's also a YouTuber. And quite a funny one at that, if you ask me. You name it – no matter how ridiculous – and he'll do it. Every other Monday, he posts a new video on his channel, 'Just for Girls'. An ingenious title, because of course just as many boys as girls want to know what a boy has to say that's only intended for girls. And now EVERYONE watches it and he has loads of subscribers.

Josh's nose is slightly too long, he has a bit of a squint and he lets his hair fall nonchalantly over his eyes. That's what he's like in class, at least. In everyday life. Kind of inconspicuous. In his 'Just for Girls' videos, on the other hand, he always wears a bra over his T-shirt, SERIOUSLY, and it's so stupid that somehow, it actually works.

You can leave him a comment with an assignment, anything supposedly 'girly' – putting on makeup, flirting, painting flowers, doing crochet, whatever – and he'll try it out and make a huge song and dance out of it. Elli's always saying how sexist it is and that there's no such thing as stuff being just for girls or just for boys – it's all just for PEOPLE – but she still finds it funny and even she has to admit that most boys DON'T wear makeup. And often someone we know from school or church or wherever crops up in Josh's videos, which of course makes it even funnier.

Elli started the video again from the beginning as I leaned in to watch, and Josh sprang onto the screen, as always in his full get-up with a bra over his T-shirt, and shouted, 'Hey girls, Josh here, your BREAST friend and right-hand man, with a new video. JUST FOR GIRLS! Who wants to give me an assignment today?'

Cut. A binman in orange overalls is standing next to Josh, looking confused.

'Erkan, mate, are you a girl?' asks Josh and Erkan shakes his head. 'Sorry, ladies...'

Cut. Simon, Josh's little brother from Year 5, leaps onto the screen and squirts shaving foam all over Josh. 'Hey, short stuff, JUST FOR GIRLS!' shouts Josh and gives the camera an exasperated look.

Cut. Now there's an ancient woman with snow-white hair standing next to him, grinning from ear to ear, and Josh opens his eyes wide like a pro. 'Just for GIRLS!' he insists, acting even more exasperated.

But the old woman nods benevolently and croaks, 'The fresh air will do you good! This is what we used to do and it's still fun for girls these days.'

And Josh breaks down theatrically and stammers, 'Oh no, THIS is my assignment today?'

Elli chuckled. 'I wonder where he got hold of the granny?'

And just like that, he's at the riding stables. Cut. A close-up of a horse's teeth. Dramatic music. Josh struts into view and swears to accept his challenge: 'Learning to ride and stuff.'

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A girl with a brown plait introduces herself as Lou and hands him a series of index cards, each with a new assignment, and Josh attempts to muck out a stall and bridle a horse – though the horse seems to be ticklish. Cut to Josh actually sitting in a saddle, claiming to have a new-found understanding of why boys act like stallions in order to win over girls. Finally, Josh gallops through the stable like a wild horse, before letting Lou pick out his HOOVES.

We were laughing pretty hard.

‘Oh my God,’ said Elli eventually, ‘the video of him in the lingerie department was better. But this was good too.’

‘It was a bit childish,’ I said, but of course we both gave the video a thumbs up, if nothing else because we were proud of the fact that Josh, OUR CLASSMATE JOSH, had got something so cool going and was even managing to earn a bit of cash with this nonsense.

I still hadn’t completely come back down to earth though, and the afternoon’s lessons sped past me without me taking anything in. Unfortunately, I didn’t get another chance to talk to Ben. I even hung around by the bikes after school especially, but he must have gone out the back way, because we didn’t bump into each other again.