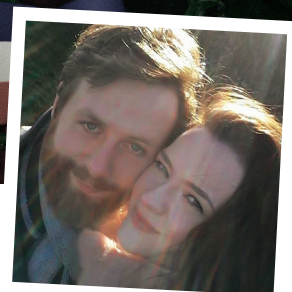


Tributes at the
site of the attack



“I survived the
BATACLAN
MASSACRE”

On November 13 last year, three ISIS terrorists opened fire at the Bataclan theatre in Paris, killing 89. Katie Healy, 28, and her boyfriend, David Nolan, 33, were in the crowd. This is Katie’s harrowing account of the night she was convinced would be her last. As told to **Julie McCaffrey** ►



Eagles of Death Metal on stage at the Bataclan, moments before the terror attack

His black leather boots were inches from my head as he walked around piles of bodies, shooting anyone who moaned or moved. He fired his Kalashnikov at people who were already dead. I felt a quiet and calm acceptance that I would soon die.

Lying face down on the Bataclan floor, I knew my words to my boyfriend, David, who was lying protectively on top of me, would be my last.

“This is it. I love you. Goodbye.”

Our trip to Paris had come at the happiest time. In love for two years and living together for six months, David and I felt everything was falling in to place. On my 28th birthday, three weeks earlier, David started the day coolly acting as if he’d forgotten it. Then he brought me warm croissants and 48 red and white roses in bed. I felt utterly loved, lucky and positive about the future. Inside his card he’d written: “Pack your bags – we’re going to Paris.”

We landed around lunchtime and strolled through the streets of Paris, wrapped up against the fresh chill. The weekend was our first mini holiday abroad as a couple. We’d

“**In between the shots it was eerily quiet. We were all too afraid to scream”**”

planned to browse boutiques, sight-see and people-watch from street cafés.

That night’s Eagles of Death Metal gig was unmissable because we’re both fans. We got to the Bataclan early, found a table on the terrace and ordered baguettes so we could enjoy the buzz from people milling around. Excitement about seeing the band gave the air an electric charge. Eagles of Death Metal are impossible to watch without smiling, laughing and dancing. They give their crowds a joyful escape from harsh reality. But the harshest reality decimated that fun, safe zone.

David and I settled in a spot downstairs not far from the door, with our backs to the ►

◀ bar. We were beaming as we danced. Six or seven songs in, I felt a push from behind. Then something wet hit me.

I turned towards David to ask if a drink had spilled on me. A flash of light, snap of gunshot. Then snap, snap, snap. There was no time to process one bullet being fired because there were so many. It didn't stop. I felt disbelief. I thought, 'I know what's happening – but it can't be happening.'

Suddenly I was on the ground. I hit my head hard when I fell. I heard people say "firecrackers", but I knew it wasn't. The taste of blood is like a mouthful of copper. The smell of gunpowder is like a firework times one thousand.

David crawled on top of me and we lay flat. The man who'd been standing in front of me was definitely dead. The lady with him was gone too. I knew then that this was a massacre. David has always said it's his instinct to protect me – that's one of the many special things about him. But I wanted to protect him too. I was terrified of feeling a bullet take him. If they hurt David, I would run at them.

The first round of gunshots sounded merciless against the backdrop of screams. When they stopped, David hauled me up and said, "Run!" The ground was slippery with blood, which was frothy because it was so fresh. The floor was so thickly covered in body parts and blood, I do not know if it was wooden or carpeted.

After we'd taken barely a couple of steps, the shooting started again. Immediately we dropped to the floor. I knew the *Charlie Hebdo* offices were close by. I knew this was ISIS. And I felt indescribable cold, still fear. David scrambled on top of me again, covering my torso and head. My heart was beating so loudly, my breath was so heavy, I worried I would make him heave just by breathing. We were one big moving target.

The lights came on and I saw a man close to my face choking to death on his blood. I tried to keep looking at him so the last thing he saw



I kept thinking, "These are my last thoughts and breaths"



The massacre that shocked the world

wasn't a gunman. My head and nose were flat to the floor, with blood on my lips and face.

The shooting raged on. Every shot made the floorboards quake. Bullets cracked and ricocheted. Beneath the sound of gunshot, David quietly spoke to me the whole time. We repeated the same things to each other: "Stay down. Keep calm. Don't move. I love you. It's OK."

In between the shots it was eerily quiet. The screams that had erupted when the firing first started died down. We were all too afraid to scream. Even people dying made as little noise as possible. I kept thinking, 'These are my last thoughts and breaths.' I wanted to fill the time I had left with thoughts of those I loved.

The instruments on stage were still plugged in and I could hear an electrical hum. After each gunshot blast, the strings vibrated. I still hear that hollow hum now. At night it keeps me awake and brings me back. That's what I'm finding so hard – it's small things, like the haunting sound of vibrating strings.

The doors were closed, people all around us were being murdered and it was impossible to get out. We heard footsteps and gunshots, footsteps and gunshots. The gunman was

getting closer. We saw his boots six inches to the right of us. Black boots coming to steal our lives. I thought of my family and an image played out, repeatedly, of Mum and Dad in the sitting room and Mum being handed a phone which would bring bad news. I thought of never having kids, of dying with David. We said our goodbyes.

Then he walked past us. And I will never know why. It seemed like a second later that David saw a door open and said, "Get up and run!" I said, "No, please no. Play dead." But he dragged me up and we stumbled towards an open door while they shot at us. We jumped over bodies and I tried not to stand on anyone. I looked to see if there was anybody we could drag with us. But no one was alive. Around ten of us escaped into the street. I heard the door ►

◀ slam shut behind us. My shoes were dangling from their straps, and filled with blood. I ripped them off and kept running. When I urged David to hurry, he said, "I can't. I think I've been shot."

His shoe was overflowing with blood and more was pumping out. So I dragged him until we reached a road. I screamed and tried to wave down cars that wouldn't stop for us. I panicked then. My calls weren't getting through to the emergency services and I started to despair.

Then a girl behind the gates of an apartment block saw me and led me in. There was no hiding from the stark reality in the bright, mirrored hall. It showed David lying down, his face the same colour as the cold marble floor. He was fighting to stay conscious. I caught my reflection. My face was covered in blood and I tried to wipe it with my sleeve, but my arm was covered in blood too. I didn't feel safe in a glass lobby with fluorescent light, so we took a lift to a higher floor.

In the corridor, the girl tried to stop David's bleeding by tying her scarf around his foot. She was in her mid twenties, and very competent. She took off David's shoe and we saw a hole burst through it. Another resident called their doctor friend, who came quickly. And as he treated David, I texted our families. "David's been shot. I am OK. Going to hospital. Will call."

In the car on the way to hospital I crouched over David, terrified he'd be hit if there was shooting in the street. Doctors sped him away as soon as we reached the hospital, and I fell to pieces. I was in a waiting room, with blood on my clothes and bits of horror in my hair, without word of David for five hours. Sobbing, unable to communicate because all my French had disappeared. My glasses had been knocked off and my fuzzy vision exacerbated my fear.

Finally, a doctor took me to David and I stayed by his bed for two nights, dressed in a child's tracksuit given to me by the Irish Embassy. My sister Faye had contacted them from home.

David has since had five operations on his pulverised foot and is in a wheelchair. We are not yet sure of the outcome, and are



Our happy lives are in tatters, but David and I are determined to rebuild them"

concentrating on his health for now. Mentally, I'm struggling. I had one session of counselling, but I didn't find it helpful. How could anyone understand?

The constant ringing in my ears means I haven't heard silence since the Bataclan. I still hear footsteps and gunshots. I still see, feel and taste that night. Sleep eludes me. And I'm nervous in crowded places. Just walking through a shopping centre can give me a tight feeling in my stomach, a sense of doom that tells me, 'You've got to get out of here'. But I try to remind myself I'm safe now.

I have no anger. Just sadness for the people lost. We saw on the news that the people eating beside us on the terrace all died. We witnessed them eating their last meal. I'm even sad for the terrorists. So many lives lost, and for what? Whatever they tried to do, it didn't work.

The outpouring of love from strangers in France and at home has overwhelmed us. We've seen so much kindness, so many flowers and cards. The girl in the apartment block. The man who wrote a moving poem for us and sent it to "Katie Healy, Bataclan survivor" – and it reached me. We saw the worst and the best of people.

After a hospital appointment in Dublin in December, David treated me to a night in my favourite hotel. In our beautiful room, I turned to see him out of his wheelchair and down on one knee. He proposed and of course I said yes. He had planned to propose that weekend in Paris and the ring was in his bag back at the hotel.

I Tweeted our news – a spark of light at a dark time. But I immediately regretted it. Because the next day I was stunned to see myself on the front page of Irish newspapers. It looked like we were flaunting our happiness and I felt guilty that so many people at the Bataclan won't get engaged or don't have a husband or wife any more.

Our happy lives are in tatters, but David and I are determined to rebuild them. We are not the same people but we are still in love, and hate must always be defeated by love. We won't give terrorists the hatred they want. We have to prove that love wins. ©