

HOW TO ACQUIRE A STALKER

KATHERINE MARQUAM

The day your father dies, you post a status about it on Facebook with a link to a song from *Grey's Anatomy*. Jay comments: "Pardon my ageist statement here, but you are too young to have this on your plate." He calls you a beautiful soul. You have only ever talked to him in the class that you share, but he seems to care, so you message him a month later to say that you might be a lesbian. He says you are too young to know about that sort of thing. You are not too young, but you keep talking to him anyway. You are younger than most people in a college classroom while he is older, so you share an immediate bond. He becomes one of your mentors, a faint light cast against the void left by your father. Mentorship is like fatherhood with all of the credit and none of the responsibility. Jay likes this. So will many other men.

Nights are hard. Every shadow has your father's face sunken into it, morphing from sunrise to sunset. Your father has been dead for two weeks, but you know that he's always standing right behind you. You think you are going crazy, but no one believes you. One night, you dream of yourself standing before a mirror. The flesh is melting from your shoulders, and the skin flakes from your face in soft pieces until your father stares back at you. You tell your Sensei about the dream because you think this is the sort of thing he should know, as one of your mentors. "Am I going crazy?" you ask. "Yes," he says, "But it won't last forever." This is the only thing that helps.

Three months later, your Sensei writes an article about what a terrible student you are and publishes it on his blog. You cannot stop crying after class that day, and Jay tries to comfort you. He reminds you

that you are still young, but does not wait for the tears to stop before he leaves. Someone else does that. You never talk to that person again, because you are embarrassed. Four years later, you will still exchange awkward nods with them in the hallway.

You go to Kendo three times a week. You would rather stab yourself in the throat with one of your mother's kitchen knives than miss a practice. You think a lot about your mother's kitchen knives. You snuck one into the bathroom once, after your father said that no one would ever marry you. A week after that, someone very important to your Sensei said you had a beautiful soul. You promised yourself you wouldn't use the knives again after that. You haven't broken that promise, but you spend a lot of time staring at them.

Your mother has been fucking this German guy for about a year now. It's been one year and one month since your father died. You aren't fine with it, but one day, you are. The German guy says he's sorry about what happened to your father, and that it wasn't your fault. He convinces your mother to let you drop the Calculus class you are failing, but says that he is not trying to replace your father. You find this comforting, but some part of you wishes that he would.

Jay tells you to read some Faulkner. You hate Faulkner, but read it anyway, because you love Jay. Jay gets very depressed some nights, and tells of the bad things that have happened to him. There are many bad things. It is four in the morning and you are very tired, but the bad things keep scrolling through Facebook messenger. You bite into an apple and watch his tragedy unfold. "I'm going crazy," he says. You don't know what to say. For some people, it does last forever. It is not your fault, but you apologize anyway.

There is a girl at Kendo who hides when she laughs, but only because she wants you to see her. You like seeing her. She comes over for sleepovers most weekends. She always waits until you take your shirt off to hug you. Your Sensei teases her about being your girlfriend, so you stop having sleepovers. You wouldn't mind losing her, except the nightmares stop when she's there. You still feel your father standing behind you sometimes, but you don't talk about it, except sometimes to her. Usually after you take your shirt off.

You go to the Kendo National Championships and lose. You can tell that your Sensei doesn't love you anymore. You keep on going to

practice for another year, but no one will talk to you, except the girl who still won't date you. You stop going to Kendo. You think a lot more about the kitchen knives. When you think about the kitchen knives too much, you talk to Jay. One particularly bad night, he Skypes with you until four in the morning. Both of your worlds lack centers, so you gravitate toward one another. You think that he cares about you more than he should, but he recommends good books to read, so you stay quiet.

Two years later, Jay is the only thing that has stayed the same about your life. You no longer live with your mother and the German guy. You live with your boyfriend and two other roommates, but still talk to Jay quite often. One day, he comments on one of your Facebook posts and calls you a lot of names because you believe that black lives matter. He blocks you on Facebook. You cry for a while, but then stop. Your mother finally marries the German guy. You bring your boyfriend to the wedding. Your boyfriend is not very smart and he lies to you sometimes, but he makes the nightmares stop. You suppose this is what love should be. He shares the same name as your father. You try not to think about this too deeply.

Six months later, Jay sends you a message. He misses you. Your roommates say that you shouldn't talk to him anymore. They also think you should break up with your boyfriend. You do neither of these things. You tell Jay that you tried Faulkner again and liked it. He asks to see your poetry, so you send him the one about the kitchen knives. He says that it is juvenile. That night, you think about the kitchen knives more than you have in a very long time. Your roommates say nothing, but take the knife drawer with them when they go to bed. They know you. Your boyfriend does not notice. He is too busy lying to you.

You want to break up with your boyfriend, but he still makes the nightmares stop, so you don't. He lies to you again. You think you are okay, but when your professor asks how you are doing, you start crying. "I'm sorry," you say. "I think I'm going crazy." She hugs you and doesn't let go for a long time. "We all go a little crazy sometimes," she says. You tell her about your father and your boyfriend and all of the men in between. She listens, which is unexpected. When she first refers to herself as one of your mentors, the word catches you by surprise. She says mentor like something that you have rather than something that she is. She is capable of shining with or without your darkness. You realize that perhaps this is how things should have been all along.

You break up with your boyfriend two days later, and drink a lot of tequila. Your father's face is in the shadows again. Because of the tequila, the crying does not stop. Your roommate holds you in her lap until four in the morning. Jay tells you that he knew the relationship could never last. He is glad that he was right. Your professor emails you to suggest drinking less tequila, because she knows you well. It is a sweet gesture, but comes much too late.

A month later, Jay attacks you on Facebook again, because you still believe that black lives matter. You ask him to stop attacking you. He says that you are ungrateful. "I have called you brilliant more times than I can count," he says. "I give far more than abuse." Your roommates tell you to block him, so you do. He sends you a text reminding you to block his number. You block his number. He sends you an email. You tell your professor about it, and she sees that you are shaking. She gives you a hug and a phone number for the campus police.

You feel Jay walking behind you the same way your father used to. It doesn't matter that neither of them are there. Every man who walks behind you is your dead father.

