



Emma

Sage Okolo

There is a point in time when your own memories do not belong to you. They're too tangled up in someone else's thoughts and words to be your own. When you speak about it, it seems to speak for you, ready to remind you of what happened. Every little thing reminds you of your stolen memories: the way the heat presses against you, the beads of water sweating on the outside of your cup. None of those memories belong to you. You don't own them. You don't own anything from that day. You will sit in your bed, in your dorm, lying awake thinking about the way she would brush up against you and poke and prod at your stomach. You will remember the way the cherries felt bursting on your tongue, rolling the pit around your mouth, the heaviness, the bitterness, somehow fixating and mirroring what you'd feel soon. You will remember the way the sun

beamed down on you. You will remember that this was the last time you thought you were a kid. As you sit on a plastic lawn chair on the roof of your best friend's house, listening to this new singer, Halsey, you will notice that your best friend, Emma, has stopped looking you in the eyes. With her collarbones, brown hair, and brown eyes, she will walk away from you. She will have her arms folded, and the vein in her forehead will pulse as it does before a chem test.

"What's the problem?" you will ask. Your teeth will be stained a dull red when you smile. In certain lights, they look brown, a little rotten, a little bitter. Your braces will catch bits of the juicy redness. The music will stop, and you will be left alone in the silence it leaves.

"We're the problem," she'll whisper, her tone very casual, almost like she's asking you to pass the rolls at dinner. "I think we eat

too much. I think we're getting too big." She will press her hands into her stomach before using them to cover it again.

"I think we're fi—"

"Look at yourself. Tell me you feel comfortable walking around looking like that." She will poke you hard in the stomach, so hard that her fingernails will leave faint little crescent moons in you. You will bite your tongue. "I don't feel good as me anymore...I don't want..." She falters through. She will grab your hand and you, still fazed and numb, will follow her. You follow her off the rooftop, your shirt and shorts feeling too tight against your body, past her kitchen where her mother will have Costco cookies laid out for you two. She will take you into her room, which will feel dangerous when you cross the threshold, and you will sit on her bed. Follow her. It will be hostile, the takeover of your mind. It will be a virus, hijacking your heartbeat and stomach; your body will never be your own again. Emma will keep you. She will keep her hold on you even after she moves out of state in the eighth grade. She will keep you at your junior prom. She will keep you on your first date. She will keep you on your first kiss. She will ruin it all for you.

Emma will pat the bed, telling you to sit and stay, and you will obey. Got it? She will pull out her laptop. She will show you what we're supposed to look like. She will show you how to be a better you. She will hand you the first toothbrush. It will be orange and white and from Rite Aid. You will get one before your freshman winter formal (blue and red), one before prom (purple), a new one after a late-night rehearsal (orange and white again), and there will be a clear one

from an American Airlines flight when you can't handle the peaks of pudge from your seatbelt. You will take it to school and use it in the basement bathroom. No one will ever be there.

Emma will show you YouTube videos on how to pretend to eat, how to trick people at meals, how to mush and toil around your mashed potatoes and peas, telling your mom how good it is. Emma will help you the first time in the bathroom, playing the same song you did that day on the rooftop. That song will cover up the sound of heaving and throwing up over toilets, of locking bathroom doors, and of food going down the garbage disposal. It will cover up the sound of the mirror you break in tenth grade and of the torrential tears you cry when you give up. You will hate that song when it comes on during prom and be sick when you think of the food you just ate—you're a year strong but that song will ruin you; it will restart the download of the virus.

When you are seventeen, Emma will send you three letters from her comfy hospital bed in Atlanta. Only one will be loving. The rest accuse you of being lazy and unfaithful in your joint crusade of perfection. You will read them in your own bed with your parents above you, who will never know why that song will blast after dinner, why the mirror has been moved into the trash late at night, or why you cry after the mail comes. When you look in the mirror, it won't be you. Your clothes won't fit you right ever again. You will always find fat pooling out of your shorts and skirts and dresses and crop tops. You will always find something wrong with you. Even when you try to hold onto an air of confidence, it will always fall, slipping away in the gusts of wind.