

My Dear Brother

Out of all four of us, you most closely resemble our grandfather. Your high cheekbones, your dark skin, your afro hair, even your very frame - heavy set with sloping shoulders and large hands, all distinguished you as a member of our paternal family. When we visited father's neighborhood in Sudan, our uncles would flock around you, remarking at how closely you resembled their father and his father. They would balance you on their broad shoulders and walk with you around their farms, lift you onto the backs of their donkeys and camels and parade up and down the street, announcing to the world that their nephew from America was in flesh and blood a true Itmani, a Sudanese from a long and respected lineage of farming peoples.

You loved every moment of it. When you were young, mother would worry about you because you spent all of your time with the older men. You would listen as they talked about crops and livestock and interject with your opinions on the matters at hand, drawing on your four years of life in this world. You would escape out the back door and run to the corner store to drink soda with the storeowner, make your way to the candy shop to have a treat with the clerk, and invite people to dinner without our parent's knowledge or permission. A social little ball of excitement, you were always the most fearless out of all of us.

However, it would be naïve to remember Sudan only as a land of soda and candy. During our time in Sudan before moving to the US, there were many days when we lived without food, water, or electricity. I am sure that neither I nor you can name our favorite childhood toy because we didn't have any; if you remember, we made toy cars from scrap wood, rusty nails, and bottle caps for wheels. We have seen cousins and friends unable to scrape together enough money to buy lunch at school, having to settle for hot-sauce on a bun which the lunch lady provided for free out of the goodness of her heart. This was the world we inhabited, a world of constant struggle and worry. If it wasn't for the tightknit community that we had, a community composed

of close friends and family who depended on and supported each other, life would have been unbearable. Life in Sudan taught us the value of family and culture. Most importantly, we learned how to be grateful for and take pride in what we had, a lesson that will remain relevant throughout our lives.

We came to Virginia twelve years ago with only an idea of what a good life was supposed to look like. We landed in Ragan Oaks, a rough housing project which to us was heaven. For nine years, we lived without worrying about lack of electricity or food, with access to clean water and subsidized healthcare, and with proper education and employment opportunities. For that we must always be thankful. However, we were introduced to problems we had never known before. In our neighborhood we met drug addicts and drug dealers, domestic abusers and victims, criminals and crooked cops. Our parents' English was weak and every government letter that came in the mail was a source of anxiety until we deciphered its meaning and every school meeting or other interaction outside the house chipped away at our mother's confidence. What made everything worse was the fact that we were alone, with no family or close friends to depend on. We were a family of six in a row boat, desperately trying to navigate a cruel and merciless sea.

I could see that the environment in which we lived changed you. You were no longer the energetic kid that I knew. You grew to distrust those you didn't know, which was both a result of our parents' chronic unease and a trait necessary for survival in our new environment. We buckled down and focused on our studies, realizing that the only way to gain a foothold in this new land was through hard work. Outwardly, you tried your best to fit in with the rest of the kids in the neighborhood and in school. You told them to call you Rahman, because Abdelrahman was too difficult for them to pronounce. You diligently monitored ESPN so you could contribute to conversation at the lunch table, and you picked up strange ways of walking and talking, all in

an effort to fit in. Inside the house you may have been the Abdelrahman that we knew, but once you stepped out the door you switched your white Sudanese robes for Jordans and graphic t's.

Jordans and graphic t's can only hide so much. Try as you might to assimilate, your name, your background, and your very identity will always make you "different". If different means taking pride in your culture and in your roots, then you should strive to be different. We live in a country where a man is judged by the price tag of his car and the size of his house, not by the values in which he believes, or the worth that he associates with his character and identity as opposed to his material possessions, or by the love and happiness that abounds within his family even when they are facing difficult circumstances. This materialistic way of life seems to have taken hold of the American youths of this generation, but it is amplified in neighborhoods like ours, where young men compete to own more and look better than each other, believing that they can hide their woes and suffering beneath designer shoes and gold chains. Abdelrahman, I am here to tell you that while money is necessary for survival, it is the love and support of those we care about and the pride and value that we place on our identity that enables us to endure life's challenges with grace and dignity.

Throughout my high school career, and especially now in university where family has a weaker influence, I have seen too many youths lose their sense of identity as they tried to conform to what society expected them to be. Friends dropped from around me as if shot by sniper fire, falling left and right to forces pressuring them to look, act, and think in ways that defied their traditions and values. It is important to fit in, but we must also make an effort to preserve our cultural integrity. We must live a concept of cultural duality, exemplifying and taking pride in our rich Sudanese heritage while simultaneously existing in and contributing to a western society.

I have also felt these pressures throughout my life, pressures to join others my age in

activities unbecoming of Muslims or of the people that our parents raised us to become.

However, I had three anchors that kept me grounded: you and our two younger brothers. If I was in doubt about a decision that I had to make, I asked myself if this decision would bring me closer to becoming the person that I wanted to become and if my younger brothers would be proud of me for making this decision. Our younger brothers look up to you as well. They expect you to make the right choices and you should expect them to follow in your footsteps. Use their love for you as motivation to stay on the right path, because if you veer off the tracks you're not only pulling yourself off but the two others behind you as well.

You are now preparing to apply to college. You use the same SAT prep book that I used, which was given to me by a classmate who graduated before me. The test has changed over time, but prep books are expensive and we can't afford to buy the newest one. Nevertheless, your scores on practice tests are higher than your classmates. You smiled when you told me that most of them attend expensive preparation courses. It was a smile of pride and defiance because you knew that you are accomplishing more with fewer resources.

You spend your time at the library, reading about history, psychology, and world literature. I am proud of you for deciding to study history, a decision that is too rare amongst those of our economic and social background. For those of us who have no extensive network in the country or parents' resources to fall back on in case of a bump along the road, a career in the humanities is almost impossible. If this is truly the path you want to take, you will have to work hard because failure is a privilege that you cannot afford, but hard work is nothing new to you.

Amongst the low percentage of poor black kids who go to college, most opt to study engineering or business because these fields don't require extensive years in school and allow one to make a decent wage after graduation. Long years in college are difficult for those who have families relying on them for survival. Fortunately, I have always wanted to become an

engineer. However, even these four years seem like an eternity. Our father has been a taxi-cab driver since he was young and long hours spent behind the wheel have taken a toll on his health. He might not have mentioned this to you, but I am sure that you may have guessed that it is only a matter of time before he is no longer able to drive. I hope that I will have graduated by then so I can support the family before that time arrives. Life at MIT has not been easy. On campus there are new challenges that I have had to overcome. Long, stressful nights of work are often punctuated by frequent calls with our mother discussing the problems that the family is going through at home and how I can help. Many times I have questioned why I am here, and many times I reminded myself of the three reasons, my three anchors. I am here because the three of you expect great things from me, just as I expect great things from you three. We have all been through much pain for me to get to where I am now and it would be selfish of me to consider losing all we have worked for. My identity is forever linked to our family, our heritage, and our experiences, and the lessons that we have learned about perseverance and hard work growing up in Sudan and in Ragan Oaks have been crucial to my survival at this institute just as they will be for yours when you leave for college.

I read somewhere that “Being African American is being African without memory and being American without privilege.” I disagree with this statement on a few levels. It might be true that you and I have been detached from Africa for over a decade, and African Americans as a group for two centuries before that, but memory of Africa will never leave us. We carry its memory in the way we look: our wide noses, our black curls, the way the sun shines off our skin, and the way we walk and talk. Memory of Africa is within us, built into not only our genetics but into our society. If we forget for one second where we came from, we are immediately reminded by others in the form of racist remarks or the contrast of our black bodies in a sea of white.

American without privilege - you and I both know that this is not true. Growing up in

Ragan Oaks is a privilege. Remembering what it means to be penniless and learning how to survive off little, understanding that we come from nothing and that we must work for everything we need and want - that within itself is a privilege. Knowing that we must succeed because failure is not an option, that failure means returning to an environment of hopelessness and despair, that is the greatest privilege. My dear brother, please understand that we are not victims of our circumstances. Rather, we are empowered by them. Our experiences in Sudan and in Ragan Oaks have taught us valuable lessons about family, perseverance, humility, and pride. With every achievement and accomplishment that you experience in your life, and I am sure there will be many, I hope you realize that you are not “successful despite your background” but are successful because of it.

At times you might look around and wonder if it actually is possible to defeat a system that tries, and will never cease trying, to drown you. You might feel the push and pull of society’s challenges, always threatening to knock you off your path. It is at times like these in which you must set your feet firmly on the ground and tilt your head up to the clouds, for if you remain humble yet ambitious nothing can ever stop you from achieving your goals. Root yourself in your culture and in us, your family. You come from humble beginnings, yet your background does not drag you down. On the contrary, it has armed you with the necessary lessons and experiences to be successful. Learn from these experiences. Use them as a reminder of why you work and as stepping stones to climb higher and higher. I can assure you that at some point your hard work will pay off. For now, always remember where you come from and where you are going. Good luck and Godspeed.

Your brother,