



# MUNEEB ATA

***The rain from this morning continues to drizzle as I haul the last box out of my car.***

My socks are drenched from the puddle on the porch steps, and my backpack is a hue darker than normal. Inside, the oak bookcase is hopelessly scattered with literature from middle school, some misplaced papers and a couple of odd yearbooks. On the left wall, there's a pinned Sam Bradford autograph, scribbled on the back of my sister's Arabic homework. I take a moment to sit down on my bed and stare into the barren closet. My childhood bedroom is exactly how I left it. I had been eager to return to Tulsa, but not like this.

My first vivid memory of Norman is my eldest sister's convocation. That day was dominated by black gowns, endless smiles and long hugs. When she walked across that stage, she became the first person in our family to graduate on American soil. I remember seeing my parents brush away their tears. Though the heat was brutal, after the ceremonies we walked to the main campus because my sister insisted on taking pictures in front of every building. Needless to say, my 14-year-old self was not only bored, but also perplexed. What was so special about these damn bricks?

I hear a creak on the stairs, followed by my mother's voice. "Muneeb, come down," she says. "I made biryani." A loose folder, dangling from the bookcase, catches my eye, and I empty its contents on the bed. Phrases like "I am pleased to" and "I regret" litter the mattress and send me back into the headspace of the high school senior who hesitantly committed to following in his sister's footsteps. In the months to follow, I would room with my co- "best bros" superlative winner, choose to pursue two

completely unrelated degrees and join every organization that brought me a semblance of excitement.

Every following year brought forth another version of life, with more friends, adventures and rigor. Suddenly, we began referring to locations on campus as "where we first met" or "our spot" instead of just the Carnegie Building or Cate Restaurants. There were late-night study groups in the Bizz where we got absolutely nothing done together, that afternoon tabling on the South Oval to convince a few more folks to go out and vote, and those evening meetings in the Union. The walks past the yellow fountain where we would throw pennies in and ask each other about our wishes. And those phone calls from bed in the middle of the night when you knew your friend needed you. Norman, Oklahoma, became the first home of our adult lives — and these damn bricks, they found their way into our stories.

I wanted so desperately to leave this magical place in a proper fashion, to hug my faithful friends tightly, to take pictures with them at our favorite spots on campus and to reassure them we would stay in touch. Though I never imagined this abrupt ending, I am still grateful for the generous time that I did have as a part of this community. And as I look more deeply into the years past, I see before me people of outstanding merit and character who bring me much hope for the decades to come. I cannot believe how lucky I was to not only meet them, but to know them as my friends. Thank you, and stay safe.

"I suppose in the end, the whole of life becomes an act of letting go, but what always hurts the most is not taking a moment to say goodbye." —Yann Martel