

A Government Office in Al Ain

Andrew Madigan

And it was like knocking four quick times
on the door of unhappiness.

—Albert Camus

Oct. 11

A bad day.

When I came home from work, K. was standing in the kitchen, staring out the window. Grocery bags were scattered around the floor, but she hadn't put the food away. A yogurt had exploded. Ants were lining up. The milk had already started turning. There was broken glass in the sink.

K. lost the baby. I'm not sure what I said to her. It probably doesn't matter. I held her in the kitchen for a long time until I had to get the kids from school. When I kissed her on the head and pulled away, she didn't seem to notice. I remembered a story someone told me about falling in love and getting married. The guy went off to work one morning and his wife was on her hands and knees scrubbing the inside of the oven. When he got back home nine hours later, she was still scrubbing.

She'll be alright, won't she? I backed away from her carefully, so as not to squash any food. From the doorway, it looked like the ruins of a classical city. A Carthage of bananas and plums. A Persepolis of crinkly bags.

Oct. 12

We learned things today. K. cried a lot, but she was more responsive.

She was twenty weeks along, which means they can't just scrape it out, or whatever it is they normally do. No, K. will have to deliver

it, as if it were still alive. The procedure's in three days. *Deliver* seems like the wrong word. I couldn't stop looking at her stomach. It looks hollow now. I feel as if the baby's already been removed, but it's still there, waiting.

Him, not it. We found out he was a boy. We're going to call him Charlie.

Oct. 13

K. cried all day. Her doctor said the hospital would take care of the burial procedures. We hadn't even thought about that. I guess I just assumed they would ... I don't know what I thought.

Here in Al Ain, in the Emirates, abortion is illegal and every baby, alive or not, every fetus and embryo, must have a proper burial. That's nice, I guess. They're also going to perform an autopsy to make sure we didn't abort the baby. A murder investigation. That's what it really comes down to. I didn't tell K. about this. Her doctor didn't think it would be a good idea.

At dinner we had a small service for Charlie. Everyone said a few words. K. cried, the kids cried, I cried. K. started wailing and the kids were scared. I tried to calm her down. I don't want to worry the kids. Denise, who's eleven, had a strange look in her eyes. It was like she'd lost her mom, not a baby brother.

Oct. 14

We had a fight today.

"What is it?" I asked, for the third time, or maybe the fourth.
"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"No, really. What is it? Come on."

"I'm fine. Nothing." Her jaw weighed a thousand pounds, but she managed to pry it open. Something in the neighborhood of a smile.

Later, while I was getting ready to go out—my department had a working dinner—K. was sitting on the corner of the bed.

I was trying to get my watch on. “Can I do anything for you while I’m out?”

“You didn’t want the baby in the first place, did you?”

“Of course I did.”

“Then how come you’re not crying all the time? You know how hard it’s been not to cry in front of the kids? It takes all I’ve got. I—”

“—Hold on, hold on. You can cry in front of them. Of course you can. That’s not what I said. Not what I meant, anyway. It’s just, you were really freaking out the other night, and that was freaking *them* out.” I sat next to her. “I just thought you should be careful. I’m worried about the girls, you know? They were so excited about the baby.”

“We *all* were.”

“Yeah.” I found it hard to keep up with her thoughts, especially while I was trying to knot my tie. It was like running after a train that was pulling away from the station.

“Why aren’t you crying? I’m sick of you, you know that?”

This is when I started to get worried. “No... what’s going on?” I’d gotten up, but I sat down again and put my hand on her leg.

“You know.” She squirmed out from under my hand. “You don’t even care, do you? No, I know you don’t. You’re just going on as if nothing happened.”

“What? No, not at all. I’m sad. I cried a little. You know me. That’s just not how I react to... to these things. There’s no law about how you’re supposed to act. Everyone’s different. Come on, you’re being silly.”

I’d spoken to the doctor. I knew about hormones, chemicals quietly surging within. K.’s body had been preparing itself to care for a baby. Her job, at the biochemical level at least, was to protect the baby. But now the baby was dead. Her body was telling her that she’d failed. The doctor spoke of confusion, depression, erratic behavior.

“You should just leave me, okay? I think we’re through. We’re over.”

I didn’t say anything. It’s all chemicals, I remember telling myself, nothing else. It’s normal. The doctor said to expect this. There’s nothing to worry about.

She got up and walked across the room. She stood by the dresser and knotted a scarf. She unknotted it a few seconds later, then started knotting it all over again. I was mesmerized.

“What do you have to say about that, huh? Nothing, that’s right.” She was screaming now. “So go ahead and leave me if that’s what you want. Selfish, as always. You never think about anyone but yourself.”

K. threw the scarf as hard as she could against the wall, but it wasn’t a rock or a baseball or a porcelain mug. There was no velocity or crash, no spray of broken pieces tapping against the floor, washing across our feet. Only a confetti of fear falling over the room.

“Quiet, K. Please. The kids.”

She yelled incomprehensibly, then fell on the bed in a hard lump of tears and muted groans. I could see her muscles grow taut, the veins in her arms and shoulders straining against the skin.

At some point I finished getting dressed and went to the dinner. I don’t remember anything else.

Oct. 15

We took care of it today. I left her at the hospital an hour ago. She needs to stay overnight, maybe longer.

When we got there, K. was supposed to get a pill, something to induce labor, but all the doctors were busy. We had to wait for an hour. She was supposed to have a private room, but they were all full, so they put her in a crowded ward with dozens of Indian and Emirati women. Some were in labor, or getting close, and some had already delivered. The sound of crying babies was too much for K. She looked at me the way our kids do when they’re trying to fight

back the tears. The quivering mouth, the milky eyes, the fear without end.

I spoke to the head nurse, but she could do nothing.

K. got the pill, eventually, but it didn't seem to do anything. After a few hours we rang for the nurse, but no one came. They seemed to have forgotten about us.

The doctor wouldn't be coming, we were told. The nurses—*sisters*, they're called—would handle everything. I spoke to the head nurse again, to voice my complaints. She nodded her head and murmured and looked at me with dark eyes. She smiled halfway, a look of tolerance and understanding for difficult patients. Some of the nurses were midwives, she told me. Very skilled. This was supposed to make me feel better, but of course it didn't. A midwife was fine, if you were having a baby.

K. got another pill. She asked for pain medication as well. "Soon," we were told. "Soon. Doctor too much busy now."

We waited. I was glad we'd dropped the children off with friends. They didn't need to see this. I read all the signs and posters on the wall. It was a Catholic hospital. Christ, I had no idea. I didn't even know they had them here.

At the end, it came quickly. Her water broke, a nurse wheeled her bed into a spare room, and things were arranged. There was no need for K. to push. The contractions were enough to nudge him out.

The nurse, from South Africa, was nice and efficient and somewhat abrupt. She said the cord had become tangled, which is why he died. She asked if we wanted to spend a few minutes alone with the baby. K. said yes. The nurse arranged Charlie's body so that he wasn't all curled up. She stretched out his arms and legs and turned his head to the side. She worked quickly, but with care and skill. I was afraid his body would break apart when she touched it, but it didn't. It looked like it was made of gelatin. It looked weak and fragile, but it wasn't. She cut the cord and went somewhere else, leaving the three of us alone.

He was blue, gray, translucent. I was surprised how real he

looked, how fully formed. I had expected a bigger head. I thought he'd look more fetal, more alien. But Charlie wasn't like that at all. I couldn't stop looking at him. He was beautiful.

I was frozen. I would stare with utter objectivity and detachment, amazed at how perfect and miniature everything was, and then I would remember he was my dead son.

K. cried and screamed and dug her nails deep into my arms. I knew there was blood dripping down and falling from my elbows to the bed, but I didn't feel anything. I held her and said nothing. I kissed the top of her head, matted with sweat. K. looked like someone else's wife. Her eyes were different. Her mouth. She was a stranger.

It was hard to cry. K. sucked all the tears from the room. She didn't leave any for me. I felt desiccated and barren, like those pictures of dried-up lake beds in Africa where the earth is another planet, cracked and dead.

We couldn't take our eyes off him. I had no idea there would be fingernails and a rib cage and a nose that looked just like mine. He didn't look dead. He looked perfect. He had K.'s chin, my cheekbones. You could tell he was ours. He looked like he was sleeping. Charlie was my son, and now he was dead. I knew this, of course, but at the same time I didn't. The idea had been knocking at the door, insistently, but I refused to answer.

The nurse came back. She wrapped Charlie in a blanket and placed him on a silver tray.

A doctor came to see how K. was. She put on a rubber glove and stuck her fingers inside. K. was screaming again, worse than before. The doctor removed things, sticky and red. I stood in the hallway for a few minutes.

K. was moved to a private room, sort of. It was a large room that had been divided into three, with makeshift walls that didn't go all the way up to the ceiling. The doors didn't lock. The bathroom was down the hall. K. had trouble walking and there was no buzzer to call for a nurse. I took her to the bathroom. What if she had to go

in the middle of the night? I asked if she wanted me to stay, but she didn't. She wanted to be alone.

Oct. 16

I got to the hospital early. I had to bring a marriage license. If we weren't really married, then we had committed a crime by fornicating. The police would be notified. They would have to investigate the abortion angle with greater care.

K. was dressed when I got there. Her eyes were red and angry. The woman in the next room, the next cubicle really, had kept her up all night. She'd had a baby girl and it had cried incessantly. Her family had squeezed into the tiny room and stayed all night. Talking, singing, laughing, cooking on a portable stove. The noises, the smells. There must've been more than a dozen people in there.

Before we could leave, a Sri Lankan nurse came in with the director of patient relations. He had a gray beard, an approachable sweater, a jittery smile. He was American. We spoke for a few minutes in soft voices. He said the same things that were printed on trifold brochures. I barely heard what he was saying.

"Do you mind if we pray for you?" he asked.

I was shocked, but then I remembered this was a Catholic hospital. Prayer was the last thing I wanted, and I know K. felt the same way. I smiled, to soften the words. "As long as you do it somewhere else." I thought this was a pretty good answer.

"Okay." He left the room, but the nurse stayed behind. She'd been holding K's hand all this time, comforting her, which I thought was strange. That was my job. I was standing right there.

The nurse stared at the floor, eyes closed. She was praying. I had just said not to do it here, and she was doing it anyway.

She opened her eyes and smiled. I noticed that she was covered in gold. Gold-framed glasses, small golden earrings, slim gold watch. Gold bracelet, rings, necklace. She held K.'s hand even tighter. "It is all for best. God's will. It is his plan. You will see. It is all okay now."

She left the room.

K. took my arm and we walked downstairs to reception. I had to settle the bill. There was no line at the desk. We sat down and the man brought up our information.

“You’re here for deliver baby?” he asked, smiling widely, eager to share our joy.

I nodded. I didn’t look at his face but soon, I imagined, it would register.

A couple came up to the desk a few moments later. The woman had a newborn wrapped in a yellow blanket. K. left the room. I remembered what the nurse had said, that everything would be okay now.

Oct. 17

The director of patient relations called me at home. Did I remember him? Sure, sort of. He spoke in circles, faint splintered circles. I didn’t get what the point of his call was, but then I figured it out. He didn’t want to get to the point. He was afraid.

The hospital couldn’t take care of the burial, not alone. Someone from the family had to accompany the body to the morgue. I was confused, stuttering, lost. He said I needed another copy of the marriage license. He said he would go with me. We agreed to meet tomorrow at 3:00 PM.

Oct. 18

He was late. Rick, the director of patient relations. When he showed up, he let us into his office and we sat down. The small talk was very small indeed. A few minutes later, a nurse came in with Charlie. He was still wrapped in the blanket. She handed him to me. He was so light.

“I, I, I...” I looked at Rick. I looked at the nurse. I stared at a

dark green filing cabinet. "Shouldn't... don't you have something? Will he be alright?"

"It should be okay," he said.

"It... doesn't feel right. I expected something more official, more secure. Shouldn't he be. Preserved? Is that right? A coffin, a cooler. Something more... sanitary? It's almost 120 degrees outside. It gets so hot in the car.... he'll..."

Rick looked at the nurse, another Sri Lankan wrapped in bright gold. She shook her head discreetly, with a tight mouth. "We don't have anything like that. I'm sorry."

It was as if this had never happened before, but of course it had. In fact, the nurse, the midwife, had talked about it quite a bit the night of the delivery. Much more common than we realized. So why didn't they know how to handle it?

"I... a bag or a box at the very least... I mean..." I don't know what I said, exactly. I probably wasn't making much sense. But I couldn't walk out of there carrying my son in a blanket.

Rick nodded to the nurse, who left and came back a few minutes later with a plastic grocery bag. She held the bag open while I placed Charlie inside. There are moments, I discovered, when you have no feelings at all, good or bad, because no part of you is prepared to feel.

I followed Rick in my car to the city morgue, which was at another hospital across town. I kept stealing glances at the bag. I was afraid of what would happen to the body. I didn't want it to get jostled. I turned the AC on full-blast. I hoped Rick would drive slowly.

The UAE is a place of gold and glass and steel towers, but the government offices are ramshackle affairs. The Catholic hospital had been quite... basic. Peeling paint, broken light bulbs, chipped furniture, a jaundiced tint in the air. But the morgue, or rather its administrative office, was another step down. Dirt strewn across the floor like carpeting. Doors flung wide open. A large hole in the wall.

Birds flew in and out. There was no air conditioning so the building was painted in mold and mildew, uneven brushstrokes of brown, black, and green.

An old man covered with scabs slept on a crumbling wooden bench in a narrow hallway. I didn't know who would collapse first, the man or the bench. He sat up. "Salaam."

"Salaam," I answered. The man rubbed his head. One or two teeth remained standing, the last survivors of a failing colonial outpost.

We entered a large empty room. Everything was quiet except for a ceiling fan with a missing blade. As it spun on a lopsided axis, the absent blade hummed and whirred.

Rick spoke to a Sudanese man sitting behind an old metal desk. A nameplate read *Abdulrahman*. I stood back, silent, holding Charlie in his grocery bag. Every minute or so, I would look down at him. Rick was more assertive now, trading his threadbare cardigan for a black leather motorcycle jacket. He spoke in a thick, loud, rapid Arabic, pointing and nodding with great force. Do you become a different person when you speak another language?

I watched Abdulrahman. He sat with his legs tucked under his body, a posture I'd never seen before, not in a government office. He wore a robe that had probably been white at the beginning of the week. He was tall and thin with a rubbery body and corrugated face. He had a small mustache speckled with gray. His broken sandals sprawled on the floor, one on top of the other. His toenails were long and crooked. He stared at a dark-green metal trashcan while Rick spoke.

Abdulrahman motioned for us to sit. He took my paperwork. After some introductory nodding and blank staring and nonverbal muttering, he borrowed some of Rick's circumlocutions from the day before. I floated on waves of incomprehension, hoping to someday reach the shore. I may have closed my eyes. Charlie was still sleeping in his blanket, in the plastic bag, sitting carefully on my lap.

"No," Abdulrahman finally said, with clarity, "the morgue does

not do this. You go Fahqa with body and make bury. City cemetery there.”

“But we just spoke on the phone,” Rick said. “Yesterday, remember? We just went over this. You will take care of it for the father. You said that you would.”

“No, no, you misunderstand. We do not do this.” He raised both hands and leaned backward, smiling cautiously. The universal gesture of self-absolution. “You go there and they will make bury. No problem. This is best.”

“It’s not best for me,” I said, on the perimeter of shouting. “It’s not best for *me*. I was told that the hospital would take care of it. I don’t even know where Fahqa is. Look—”

Rick stopped me with his right arm. He was sitting to my left. “—So we just show up at the city cemetery and they’ll take care of it? Right then and there?”

Abdulrahman spoke quickly. “Yes, no problem. Like this.”

Rick did not seem convinced. His words became Arabic again.

At some point, Rick must’ve touched a nerve. Abdulrahman put on a new set of body language. His shoulders bore some responsibility now. His eyes wore a furtive and guilty hood. Yes, his hands were saying, perhaps I could do something. Maybe there is a small chance of helping you. “Okay, it is possible to put the body here in morgue overnight. Then, we make bury tomorrow morning. It is not our responsibility, I want you to know.” He looked at me sternly, though his mouth told me he was bluffing.

I nodded.

“Still, it would be better for the father to make bury himself. However...” Abdulrahman leaned back again, falling into his soft leather chair. “But okay, we will do this.” He looked at Rick, who nodded. He looked at me with question marks in his eyebrows.

“Yes, thank you. Sukran.”

Forms were sighed, seals were affixed. I left Charlie sitting on the desk. I hesitated for a moment. I was worried about my boy. The government official did not stand up or speak as we left the room.

Today someone asked me how I was doing. Usually, they ask about K.

Strange, I didn't know how to answer the question. It was someone at work that I don't know very well. Not even sure how she knew about the baby. I just stood there and stared into space. We were in a long hallway in the human resources building. I remember someone was trying to get by, but I was blocking the way. I sort of knew this was happening, but I didn't move. I couldn't.

The woman who'd asked how I was—I think her name's Sara—eventually took my arm and pulled me aside.

It was getting pretty weird for her, I'm sure. "I don't know, I don't—I have no idea how I feel." I made eye contact, did something with my mouth. Eventually, Sara moved on. She said that she would pray for me. I didn't try to stop her.

The house was clean. That's the first thing I noticed when I came home. K. didn't cry today, not once. At least not that I could discover. She doesn't look the same, though. She doesn't smile much. I tried to make her laugh. When we hug, her back doesn't tense up the way it's been doing.

K. and I had dinner together. The kids were already asleep. I've been working late almost every night. We had very little to say. We don't talk much these days, but at least no one's shouting or throwing things. Everything's back to normal. Things are going to be fine.

