The Cedarville Review

Cedarville Review

Volume 22 Article 18

3-22-2022

appendicitis

Grace Kohler
Cedarville University, gekohler@cedarville.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/cedarvillereview

Part of the Nonfiction Commons

DigitalCommons@Cedarville provides a publication platform for fully open access journals, which means that all articles are available on the Internet to all users immediately upon publication. However, the opinions and sentiments expressed by the authors of articles published in our journals do not necessarily indicate the endorsement or reflect the views of DigitalCommons@Cedarville, the Centennial Library, or Cedarville University and its employees. The authors are solely responsible for the content of their work. Please address questions to dc@cedarville.edu.

Recommended Citation
Kohler, Grace (2022) "appendicitis," *Cedarville Review*: Vol. 22, Article 18.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/cedarvillereview/vol22/iss1/18

CENTENNIAL LIBRARY
CEDARVILLE UNIVERSITY

appendicitis

Creative Commons License

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License.

This nonfiction is available in Cedarville Review: https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/cedarvillereview/vol22/iss1/18

APPENDICITIS

Grace Kohler

Five hundred fifty-one hours, plus the evenings she spent with me before admittance

Twenty-three days: January-February.

The day before my sister's eighth birthday.

Five surgeons assigned to my case, two more residents.

Three hospitals, one doctor's office.

Two surgeries.

Two ambulance rides.

One nasogastric tube, twelve days.

One PICC line, ? (too many) days.

Countless IVs, one burst.

I don't even know how many nurses, but she met them all and remembered their names.

I felt sick Tuesday, January 15th, 2019. A minor stomachache, Mom had made me a large salad for lunch and my smoothie could have gone bad sitting on the counter the hour before. Stomachache turned to cramps—abdominal muscles squeezed into fists that won't unclench. Dad asked me if I was just on my period, and I glared at him. He had to apologize later. We all knew after I threw up—every hour on the hour starting at four o' clock. Two days later I was admitted—had surgery taking out my appendix that evening.

We're not new to how this works. My family, that is. One to be sick, one to deal with doctors, and one to hold down the fort. She was in the hospital for what felt like months. Maybe only a week. We got the meals for a while. It's Dad's job this time, to fit them all, like Tetris into the fridge. Instead of learning to cook, I became an expert in how to reheat pre-cooked meals and plate for the kids—leaving some for my dad, the note from one of the church moms magnet-ed to the fridge. I read all the Kindle books we owned during the space between when I put the kids to bed and when Dad came home. Those shadowed golden hours were my own, but unwanted. The black of the house crept into the studio, and the yellowed overhead bulbs glowed like circles of candlelight against the couch in my mind to ward off the dark. He'd told me I could go to bed before he got back, but he knew that wasn't my habit, so he'd text me in advance to let me know if he planned on staying the night at the hospital.

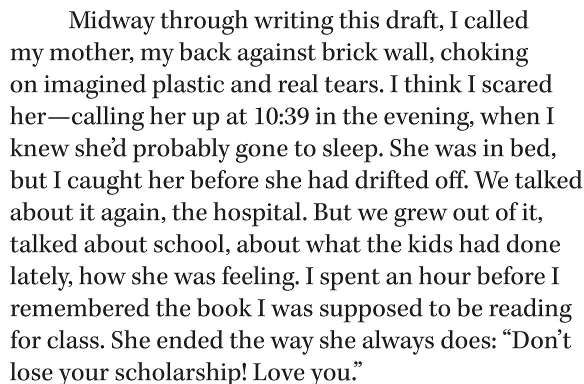
At least at the Cleveland Clinic, when they mercifully turned off the stark fluorescence of the lights into the stale grey, she was there. But she never went home to Dad, to fetch a change of clothes and sleep in her own bed next to him. She breathed the same antiseptic that I did. Maybe she didn't taste the bile in her own throat ebbing and flowing with each swallow, but she felt the convulsing of my throat every time I threw up in the spasms on all her heartstrings.

There were babies—weeks, months, I don't know how old—infants—in those hospital rooms all alone. At Fairview, I was the only real shakeup: longest stay, eighteen years old, still throwing up every time they tried to feed me, dependent on my daily injection of Pepcid because I can't even swallow that. My mom prayed for all of the children on the roster at the nurse's station on the pediatric floor. When we'd take our semi-hourly walks, me leaning on the IV pole and her arm around my waist, I could tell she was praying over them, even with her eyes open. When she wasn't casting her petition up to God on my behalf, it was for them. When I transferred to the main campus in Cleveland, we didn't know my young neighbors as well—they changed too frequently. I, at eighteen, was the only child in the pediatric ward with parental supervision. There was one father who went around to all of the children and gave out toys to play with, but he couldn't stay the whole time. He gave me a lottery themed Rubik's cube.

She went home once during the whole stay, and only for an afternoon. My aunt sat with me while she went to pack her own clothes and shower. I don't remember anything from our conversation. People came to visit, but I only remember what they left; I inventoried them and she arranged them in their gift wrappings on the far shelf, too afraid to keep them close in case I threw up again.

The night they put in my nasogastric tube was the most wretched. I had guests that evening, but they left as soon as we had to start the procedure. I assume it was night because I was told so, but it could have been afternoon for all I remember. The doctor said putting it in was the worst part, but it would be fine after that. The nurse said they needed to suck the bile out of my stomach to give my intestines space to recover. I had to swallow continuously as they fed a rubber tube up my nasal cavity. They gave me a cup of water that I drank too quickly, and I had to force myself to dry swallow. It couldn't have been more than a half-centimeter in diameter, but I could feel it, like a metal rod I was convinced dissected my esophagus.

I couldn't swallow. If I'd let my mouth hang open, I could breathe against the pole I imagined bisecting my throat. But the reflex to swallow would overcome every few minutes, forcing down my spit and gagging up rubber, choking, crying, and her hand was there, in mine, squeezing it back so I knew she was there as I pressed the cloth to my mouth and tried to stop my convulsing. She stayed like that the whole night, hand gripped in mine, arm stiff over the bed rail, plastic-threaded chair as close as she could get it. I couldn't speak, didn't know else how to communicate.



Midway through writing this draft, I called my mother, my back against brick wall, choking on imagined plastic and real tears. I think I scared her—calling her up at 10:39 in the evening, when I knew she'd probably gone to sleep. She was in bed, but I caught her before she had drifted off. We talked about it again, the hospital. But we grew out of it, talked about school, about what the kids had done lately, how she was feeling. I spent an hour before I remembered the book I was supposed to be reading for class. She ended the way she always does: "Don't lose your scholarship! Love you."

She. My mother. I keep forgetting "she" isn't enough specification. People tell me I look exactly like her and it makes her beam. Her eyelids fold over in a way I've told her mimics a sad hound dog's. When she's upset, they make me mad—how dare I make her eyes look that sad? How dare she make me feel that? I don't even think she knows she does it. I have my dad's blue hue, but her hound-dog folds.

Maybe I spend so much time dwelling on the "She" in my head that I forget to look at my mother now. Her hair is greying; she gave up plucking the white hairs out a while ago. I have one white hair that I refuse to pluck. It curls around the other hairs. My mother is entirely practical, but she knows to factor my tears into the budget as a regular expenditure, filed under "comfort." We get in fights more than we used to, but she still knows how to interpret my emotions to my dad most of the time. She wanted to be a doctor—all of the facts I know about anatomy came from her.