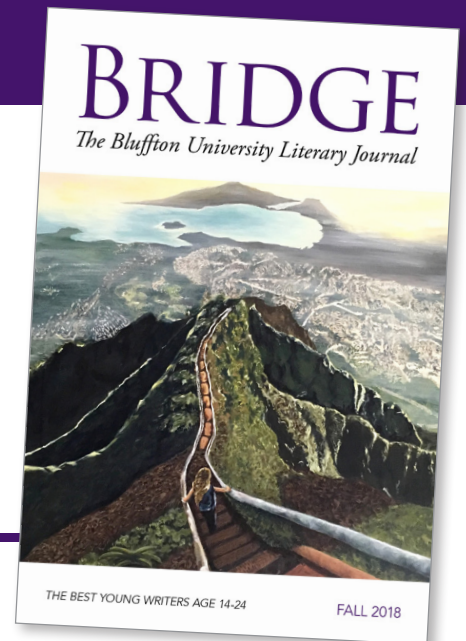


BRIDGE

The Bluffton University Literary Journal



CHERRY COFFIN, OLD CHURCH

Faith Mayhew

INT. TEEN BEDROOM -
TOWNHOUSE - LOS ANGELES
SUBURBS – MORNING

We open on the morning light glistening through crooked blinds. Has potential for organization, the bed is unmade and La Croix cans are littered throughout. The chipped paint walls are partially covered by posters of indie-rock bands.

TEENAGE GIRL (V.O.)

Journal Entry #570. I am officially two weeks overdue...

REVEAL

A TEENAGE GIRL asleep in the middle of a desk strewn with papers, head down on top of a leather journal. This is MARA SIDNEY, 16, face of an angel with a bad cocaine addiction characterized by a bald head and stage-four leukemia.

MARA (V.O.)

...for my death. Just when I think it's about to come...

A PHONE ALARM is heard. Mara sleepily wakes up, pawing around her desk for a pair of too-big glasses and the

offending alarm. We follow her as she places the phone and journal in the pocket of a small purse and exits.

MARA (V.O.)

...I get stood up. It's like all of a sudden I'm six years old again, waiting for Prince Charming on a white horse to come and sweep me off my feet...

JUMP CUT TO:

EXT. TOWNHOUSE PORCH –
MORNING

We see Mara, wrapped heavily in several scarves and shawls, exit the front door of the house. As she approaches the street corner, a black 2008 Subaru Outlander approached the curb.

MARA (V.O.)

... except my Prince Charming drives a hearse.

Mara enters the passenger seat of the car.

CUT TO:

INT. BLACK SUBARU

In the driver's seat is Mara's caretaker and

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FAITH MAYHEW

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aunt, KILANI, 35 but looks closer to 25, so cheery she makes Mickey Mouse look like Edgar Allan Poe. Just came home from the early morning shift at Jamba Juice. She is drinking some sort of kale-based green juice, we see an identical one in the cup holder on the passenger's side. POP COUNTRY MUSIC plays quietly in the background as they drive.

KILANI

Talk about impeccable timing!
(gesturing to extra green juice)
I brought you a juice if you want it,
kiddo.

MARA

(sleepily)
Thanks, Kilani.

Mara leans back and closes her eyes.

KILANI

C'mon kiddo, you can sleep when we get there.

MARA

Here's a fun plot twist: I can sleep here too.

Pause.

KILANI

Y'know... I got another call from your dad today.

MARA

(still half-asleep)
Doesn't he have something better to do?

KILANI

(trying to persuasive)
He really wants to see you...

Mara's body tenses, but her eyes remain closed.

MARA

He can see me at my funeral. Maybe he can bring balloons-that might be cool.

KILANI

Mara...

MARA

Y'know you don't really see a lot of balloons at funerals these days. I mean that would add a nice atmosphere, y'know? Really get the party started-

KILANI

All I'm saying is that it might be nice to reconcile with him before-
Mara sits up, fully awake and alert.

MARA

Before what, Kilani? Before I die? Let's face it, if there wasn't a funeral to go to... (softly) He wouldn't want to see me in the first place.

(beat) Actually, I don't think I want balloons after all.

Kilani opens her mouth to say something, then promptly shuts up. Instead, they both stare out the window. The SONG CHANGES, Kilani reaches to turn the volume up.

KILANI

Alright, I love this song!

CLOSE UP

Kilani's hand presses the increase volume button rapidly.

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. CHEMOTHERAPY TREATMENT CENTER - DOWNTOWN - DAY

A NURSE rapidly presses an increase button on an IV.

REVEAL

Mara is now hooked up to an IV in a tattered lounge chair; Kilani sitting in

her own folding chair beside her, flipping through an US magazine. The rest of the room is half-empty, the few other occupants being older patients half asleep. Mara is relaxed, casually writing in her journal.

NURSE

(to Mara)

Tell me if you need anything else, dearie.

Mara mumbles as the Nurse exits.

MARA (V.O.)

Journal Entry #570. The one thing I won't miss about being alive is all the chemo.

You'd think after a couple years I'd get used to it, but no. If it wasn't for Kilani, I would've stopped long ago, I know that mom would've liked it that way-she was all about "natural remedies" and stuff.

Granted, I don't think this is what she had in mind-

Mara pauses writing, interrupted by a QUACKING SOUND. Kilani perks up immediately, searching through her bag until she pulls out an old iPhone.

KILANI

One second Mara, I gotta take this.

Kilani rushes out of the waiting area to take the call.

KILANI (O.S.) (CONT'D)

(on phone)
Hello?

Mara resumes writing.

MARA (V.O.)

Speaking of mom, Kilani brought up dad again today. I know she really wants us to make up, but it's more complicated than that. Reconciling or whatever isn't going

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to magically make him a better person. It certainly isn't gonna make me one either.

Kilani returns to the waiting area, still on call.

KILANI
(on phone, faint)
Okay. See you soon, sir.

Kilani hangs up, and resumes sitting and reading a magazine. Mara pauses writing and looks up.

MARA
Who was that?

KILANI
No one important.

Kilani smiles sheepishly.

CUT TO: INT. LIVING ROOM -
TOWNHOUSE - LOS ANGELES
SUBURBS – EVENING

Mara is lying across a large brown couch, propped up by several handmade pillows. She faces towards a small television, the reflection of some grainy sitcom casting a shadow over her face.

Behind Mara, we can see Kilani in the kitchen stirring a bright yellow pot of chili. Mara smiles dazily, breathing in the intoxicating scent.

MARA
Watcha making?

KILANI
Chili.

MARA
Mmm... (beat)
Wait. You only make chili when someone's coming to dinner. You got a date tonight?

KILANI
Can't I just make some chili for my favorite cancerous niece?

MARA
Uh-huh. What's her name?

KILANI
Seriously, no one is coming over.

As if in response, or rather in torment, the DOORBELL RINGS.

MARA (playful)
I'll get it.

Mara stands up, wrapping a blanket around her and stands by the door. Kilani, suddenly alert, quickly enters the living room.

KILANI
(suddenly anxious)
No, no, no I got it Mara! You should just rest, I mean you had chemotherapy today and-

MARA
Don't worry Kilani, I know how to behave around one of your girlfriends.

KILANI
Mara don't!

Kilani's warnings come too late. Mara swings open the door to reveal... SERGEANT NOLAN SIDNEY, mid-fifties, dressed in stained sweats and a military backpack. His uniform military buzzcut reads "war hero" but his shaggy beard and cold gaze holds clue to something much darker about him.

MARA
Dad.

There is a tense moment of silence as Nolan examines his daughter, the ice in his eyes looking as if it could almost crack. Suddenly, Mara SLAMS THE DOOR.

KILANI
Mara!

MARA
You invited my father to dinner?!

KILANI
Well... Not exactly.

Kilani cracks an embarrassed smile. Mara's face drops, she quickly opens the door again and examines the man in front of her.

NOLAN
Listen Mar—

Before SLAMMING it again.

MARA
(through clenched teeth)
You... invited... my father... to live with us...

KILANI
Only for two weeks. C'mon kiddo, please, he's homeless and you know how hard it is for veterans in this country and please just look on the bright side of all of this-

Mara sighs deeply, burying her hands in her face as Kilani begins to ramble. She slowly creaks the front door open again, revealing Nolan.

NOLAN
Hello.

Mara slams the door again.

CUT TO:
INT. KITCHEN - TOWN HOUSE
- LOS ANGELES SUBURBS –
EVENING

Mara, Nolan, and Kilani sit around a small table in the kitchen, the peeling

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paint of which matches the tacky curtains in the background. All three are looking down at their food, but barely eating. They sit in the company of an uncomfortable silence.

KILANI

So... Nolan... (chuckles nervously)
Long time no see!

Mara drops her spoon inside her bowl, emitting a LOUD CLANG.

MARA (faux enthusiasm)

Yeah, I mean it's been like, what, seven years since you killed mom and abandoned your entire family? Wow, does time sure fly!

Nolan looks up, emotionless.

NOLAN

Mara.

MARA

Why don't you kill me while you're at it? I'm overdue anyway.

Mara ignores him, placing her dish in the copper sink behind them, and exits.

KILANI

Y'know... I think she has improved a lot.

NOLAN

It wasn't my fault. The thing with Joselyn. It was just...

Kilani places her hand on his forearm for comfort.

KILANI

I get it. You're a veteran, you've seen some awful things, the car crashed, you hear sounds like gunshots—

NOLAN

KILANI

You run.
You run.

A tense moment of silence.

KILANI

More chili?

CUT TO: INT. LIVING ROOM -
TOWNHOUSE - LOS ANGELES
SUBURBS – MIDNIGHT

Mara is writing in her journal, wrapped in blankets, on the left side of the couch. Pan right to reveal Nolan sitting on the right side, the 12 o'clock news playing on the television providing both an ambient noise and a reflection across both their faces.

MARA (V.O.)

Journal entry #572. Dad is home. Another reason I wish my death would hurry along. Maybe by the time he leaves I'll finally be buried six feet-

NOLAN

What are you writing?

As Nolan peers for a closer look at the journal, Mara flips the page hastily.

MARA

Nothing.

Nolan moves closer to Mara, trying to get a good look at the journal.

NOLAN

(reading the journal over Mara's shoulder)
"My Dream Funeral?"

Mara doesn't look at him, but responds aptly.

MARA

Most little girls write about their dream weddings. I get to write about my dream funeral. But I at least have control about

some part of my death.
(sarcastic)Yippee.

Nolan chuckles. He turns to face Mara, who has angled the book away from his view.

NOLAN

(still reading)

"Cherry wooden coffin. Old church."
That's all?

MARA

Do they teach you to read minds in the military too?

Mara looks up at Nolan. Nolan points at his eyes.

NOLAN

No. They teach us how to read backwards. Mara, offended, takes off her glasses and puts them on the couch next to her. Nolan reaches into the pocket of his sweatpants and pulls out a piece of battered paper he hands it to Mara, who eyes it up and down suspiciously.

MARA

(reading the paper)

Are you serious?

NOLAN

A hundred percent.

Mara looks down at her journal and cracks a small smile. She hastily scratches something out.

MARA (V.O.)

Journal entry #572. Dad is home. And I think it might be okay.

CUT TO: INT. TEEN BEDROOM
- TOWNHOUSE - LOS ANGELES
SUBURBS – MORNING

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A KNOCK ON THE DOOR is heard. Mara is still asleep, wrapped in a ball. Enter Nolan holding a stack of pancakes.

NOLAN
Mara?

Mara rolls over, opens her eyes but doesn't move.

MARA
You don't cook.

NOLAN
Kilani made them. Thought I'd bring them up to you.

Nolan walks over to Mara's bed and extends the plate of fluffy pancakes. Mara sits up, eyes them suspiciously and takes them.

MARA
This doesn't mean we're magically close together.

She begins to devour them. MUSIC begins to play.

MONTAGE - THE RELATIONSHIP

- Mara and Kilani singing in the car loudly, Nolan in the back seat, annoyed, but eventually cracks a smile.

- Mara sitting in a doctor's office while writing in her journal. Nolan enters and hands her a magazine, Mara continues writing.

MARA (V.O.)
Journal entry 576. It's been nearly a week since dad came...

- Mara and Nolan yelling at each other over the dinner table.

MARA (V.O.)
Not going to lie, there are times when I want to rip his tongue out...

- Mara and Nolan sitting on the couch,

watching TV. As Mara falls asleep, she rests her head on Nolan.

MARA (V.O.)
But at the end of the day... we seem to forgive each other...

- Next morning, Nolan and Kilani make waffles together. She hands a plate to Mara as she enters the kitchen.

MARA (V.O.)
Even if it takes a plate of waffles to do it.

- Nolan and Mara hiking through the woods. She quickly gets winded and has to sit down. Nolan gestures for her to follow -- she throws a pebble at him.

MARA (V.O.)
He's been taking me hiking just about every other day. I can't always keep up, but at least it's been keeping my mind off of the cancer.

- Mara and Nolan sit side by side writing in her journal.

MARA (V.O.)
I mean, who knew that planning your own funeral could be a familial bonding experience?

- Mara writing in her journal in the chemotherapy facility.

MARA (V.O.)
They should start advertising that at funeral places -- "Want to reconnect with your estranged father? Plan a funeral together!"

- Mara is making pancakes, she tries to hand a plate to Nolan, but drops it. Nolan immediately drops down for cover out of reflex. Mara extends her hand and helps him up.

MARA (V.O.)
I have to remind myself that just as

imperfect I am, he is equally imperfect.

- Nolan and Mara driving and arguing.

MARA (V.O.)
Sometimes more than equally imperfect. - Nolan and Mara hiking through the woods at sunset. She has to sit down, and he sits down next to her. She hugs him.

MARA (V.O.)
And sometimes... just perfect.

BACK TO SCENE
EXT. FRYMAN CANYON - LOS ANGELES - TWILIGHT

Mara and Nolan sit together on a log as joggers run pass, a light drizzle of rain. The mood is overall light-hearted. As the sun sets, they sit in silence as Mara writes in her diary, coughing slightly. She looks happier now, if not frailer- almost as if she was becoming death herself.

NOLAN
Am I ever going to be able to read what you write in there?

MARA
Over my dead body.

Realizing the weight of what she just said, both Nolan and Mara pause.

NOLAN
Y'know Mara, there are other experimental treatments for this kind of cancer-

MARA
Promise for my funeral you'll have it in an old church and bury me in a cherry wood coffin.

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NOLAN
Have you at least considered-

MARA
Dad, I've been sick for nearly three years.
I don't want to undergo some phony
experimental treatment that won't even
work, that'll just make me feel sicker... If I
wanted that I'd just drink the green juice
Kilani gets me.

NOLAN
(chuckles)
You are just like your mom, y'know?

A dangerous pause, Mara coughs.

MARA
What happened? To mom, I mean.
After the crash?

Nolan swallows hard. He leans forward,
suddenly becoming distant.

NOLAN
I don't know. Kilani said she died later
in the hospital. I fled, and that was a
cowardly thing-I know. I regret it every
day-it's just... once you see things...
it's hard to-

MARA
Stop. Just stop. I don't need to know this.
I don't need you to run away again. I
know, I know, I don't have mom and I've
been obsessing over it but... I have you.
And that's cool too... I guess.

Mara rests her head on Nolan's shoulder.

MARA (CONT'D)
I'm sorry. For everything.

NOLAN
I'm sorry. For more.

The sun sets and the darkness sets in
completely. The light drizzle begins to

turn into a rainstorm, THUNDER is
heard in the distance.

NOLAN (CONT'D)
We should get going, before the rain sets
in.

They stand up together and begin to walk
together. Mara quickly starts to stumble
and fall behind, coughing and breathing
shallowly.

MARA
Dad... I... I... can't...

She collapses. A SLOW BALLAD begins
to play.

SLOW MOTION SHOTS:
Nolan rushes to her aid. We see him
carry her limp body down the hill in the
pouring rain. The lights of an ambulance.
Kilani picking up the phone at home,
covering her mouth in shock. The medical
gurney picking up Mara's unconscious
body.

END SLOW MOTION.
INT. OUTSIDE HOSPITAL ROOM --
SAINT JOSEPH'S MEDICAL CENTER

We can see inside hospital room, a barely
conscious Mara hooked up to a million
machines and IV tubes, an oxygen mask
over her mouth. Pull back to reveal Kilani
and Nolan standing outside, both teary-
eyed, looking like they've stared into the
depths of hell.

KILANI
It should be you.

NOLAN
Pardon?

KILANI
If this is going to be the last conversation
she has... it should be with you.
(wiping tears)

Mara loves me, I have no doubt, but... at
the end of the day, I'm just her caretaker. I
don't want her to think I've failed.

NOLAN
You haven't.

KILANI
No... I have. And that's okay. I did what
I could. Now it's time for you to do what
only you can. Go. See her.

They hug. Nolan enters the room.

NOLAN
Mara...
Mara moans softly.

NOLAN (CONT'D)
I just can't—

Mara grunts again... pushing her journal
and the piece of paper Nolan gave her
before into him.

NOLAN (CONT'D)
I can't take —

Mara weakly removes her oxygen mask
and smiles.

MARA
(very weakly)
Promise. Cherry coffin...

NOLAN
...Old church. I promise.

Nolan takes the journal and paper from
her frail hands. Mara puts the mask back
on, lays her head down, and closes her
eyes.

MARA (V.O.)
Journal entry #580.
A FLATLINE is heard.
FADE TO BLACK.

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MARA (V.O.)

I know it's the end, but for the first time
in three years, I don't want it to.

REVEAL

INT. OLD CHURCH - LOS ANGELES
– AFTERNOON

Nolan enters, wearing his military
uniform. He walks down the aisle, journal
in hand. In the center is a closed cherry
wood coffin.

MARA (V.O.)

I don't know if it was Dad returning, or
Kilani's borderline annoying optimism, or
the fresh pancakes in the morning, or that

weird sense of peace people who
are dying say they get... But. For the
first time in my life...

JUMP CUT:

INT. OLD CHURCH - LOS ANGELES
– EVENING

Nolan stands at a church altar reading
Mara's Journal. We see below him is a
small crowd of mourners including Kilani
and her nurses and doctors from before.
Pan left to reveal the casket closed next
to him, adorned with all sorts of colorful
flowers.

NOLAN

MARA (V.O)

Whole. Whole.

As Nolan closes the journal, the paper
that he gave to Mara falls out onto the
floor below him.

CLOSE UP

Piece of paper reading:

“SERGEANT NOLAN SIDNEY: LAST
WISHES 06.28.02
Bury in a cherry coffin.
Funeral in old church.”

END.