

My Family in Tennessee

By Rachel Jennings

“Oh . . .,” my father draws softly outside my bedroom door. His voice is shy, hesitant. He knows I do not like to be wakened or called. “Oh . . .,” he says, but soon he will explain that he and Mom are getting ready to go to the grocery store and would like me to go along. Or Mom is ready to wash clothes, so do I have any clothes I would like to add? They are early risers. Their busiest activity is early in the morning. I open my eyes.

His “oh” was a dream or an auditory illusion. I am in San Antonio, not East Tennessee. Mom and Dad are not here.

The last time I saw them was Christmas 2019. I had just started chemotherapy for breast cancer. The day after my flight from San Antonio, I lost my hair. In preparation, I had gotten a radically short haircut before the trip home. At the last moment, though, I chose not to shave my head. I needed time to adjust, I thought. Besides, I



Rachel Jennings, educator & activist, endured chemotherapy for breast cancer in 2019.

could not predict precisely when my hair would come out. Now hair covered my chemo hats, shirts, sweaters, scarf, and bed pillows. I was less worried about my hair, however, than about the stone bruise I had gotten while walking at Brackenridge Park. Due to my weakened immune system after two rounds of chemo, a large blister beneath a callus on my foot had become infected. During my days home, the infection worsened. A trip to an urgent care clinic and a prescription for an oral antibiotic did not help. On the afternoon of Christmas Day, I was admitted to the hospital, where I stayed until December 27, my parents’ fifty-ninth anniversary.

When I returned to my parents’ house from the hospital, my father, who would turn ninety-one a month later, wondered what we might do together now that Christmas was over. He and Mom and I might enjoy a special outing, he said.

The way we always have. I have always come home from Texas each summer and each Christmas, and we have always gone on excursions together. Maybe we could go to the library. Would I like that? They have books about local history, he reminds me. Or maybe I would like to visit the Green McAdoo Cultural Center, which commemorates the twelve black students who in 1956 entered Clinton Senior High School, my and his alma mater, the first public high school in the South to be integrated. Or, he suggests how about a drive in the country, as we have had so many times before?

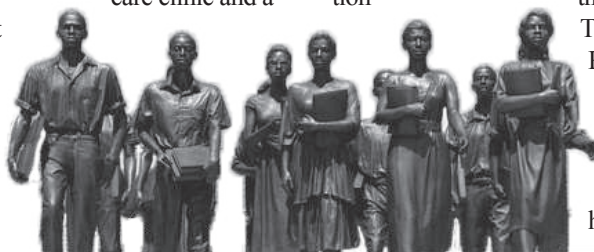
For a moment, I imagined the drive. As sprawl spreads across East Tennessee, the rural countryside has shrunk to a few hard-to-find backroads. We use memory, storytelling, and our imagination to conjure the country as it used to be. “Where that dump is now,” he will say, “there once was a school that your grandmother attended.” A quarter-mile later, he will recall, “There’s where the Shady Grove Tavern was,” Dad will say as we turn onto 25-W. “You know, your Uncle Charles worked there during the Depression.” His voice is sheepish. “But he just worked there. He didn’t drink anything, I don’t reckon.” He adds, one memory leading to another, “That was before he entered the CCC. That was good work. He would send money home to Mom.” My imaginings are not simply fiction. My father repeats these stories every time we leave the house. For my father, the valley and surrounding ridges are alive with the people and culture that existed when Clinton was mostly known for its textile mill and its Tennessee river pearls rather than being the quaint town next to Oak Ridge, the secret city where uranium was enriched for the production of the atomic bomb.

I explained to my dad that my flight was the next day. I had chemotherapy on Monday and had to be rested and ready. There was no time for rides in the country or trips to the library or the Green McAdoo Center. I was packing today and tomorrow would need my brother to drive me to the airport.

Throughout January, I wore a boot as my right foot healed from the infection. By mid-January, however, after I had completed four chemotherapy rounds, I had come down with a gastrointestinal infection that compelled me again to enter the hospital.

The stay this time was about four days. Returning to my house, I felt weak and tired but relieved. Then, at a routine checkup just a couple of days later, the doctor noticed I had a rapid pulse and slight fever. She sent me directly back to the hospital. This time I had blood clots in my lung, heart, neck, and left leg.

Despite che-



value and none of us have any freedoms any more.

GREEN McADOO CULTURAL CENTER

The Green McAdoo Cultural Center in Clinton, TN tells the story of the Clinton 12 — young black students who on August 1956, entered the front door of the all-white Clinton High School, making it the first desegregated public high school in the South.

motherly, hospitalizations, visits to the doctor, and classes to teach, I might have called my parents or, since they are hard of hearing, written to them in January. It is not so hard to dial a phone or pen a short note. The less they knew about the hospital, though, I felt, the better. Enduring both leukemia and congestive heart failure, my mother should have nothing else to worry about. I had been sick, but I would get better. I was about to begin a less severe course of chemotherapy with different drugs. I had reduced my teaching load, I would be in touch when life settled down.



Rachel's mom, Hilda, 85 years old and her Dad, Sam, 91 years old.

Mom, who is eight-five, did worry, of course, updated by my sister about the severe side effects of my chemotherapy. "I wish I could be there to take care of you," she wrote. Yes, she would have loved to bring fresh bedsheets and hot vegetable soup with crackers. I smiled.

By March, of course, the pandemic hit Texas and the rest of the nation. Like everyone else, I entered lockdown. As a chemotherapy patient, I knew too well how vulnerable I was to infection. Besides teaching my class virtually on Zoom, I had both groceries and prescriptions delivered. I left the tip in an envelope on my porch. When the groceries arrived, I wiped down each package with a Clorox wipe before taking it inside the house. Without a washer or dryer, I washed my clothes in the kitchen sink and dried them on bushes outside or on a towel rack in the bathroom. I stopped going to church or meetings of the Esperanza board, Jewish Voice for Peace, or the Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty. To avoid encounters with others, I walked no more than two blocks down the street. When I swiped my credit card at the gas station, I wiped it down afterwards. I wiped the handle of the gas hose. I wore a mask when I left the house. Finally, I informed the few people who had taken turns driving me to chemotherapy that I would drive myself now. I had cherished their company and conversation on the way to the infusion center, but I had to protect all of us from COVID-19.

For weeks, I avoided writing letters to my parents, who are not familiar with texting or online messaging. The COVID-19 virus, I feared, might find its way onto an envelope and infect my vulnerable parents. I called them, but they are hard of hearing. The letters give

them something to look forward to as they stay in their home without visits from children and grandchildren. Only in late April did I dare to resume sending letters.

Although I have completed chemotherapy, I also have continued to isolate myself. At the time I am writing, COVID cases continue to rise. During all of this time, I have worried incessantly about my elderly parents, my brother-in-law with severe osteoporosis and hypertension, and the many relatives who are "essential" workers or who have lost their jobs. Having had cancer not once but twice, I know that illness can strike anyone at any time. What will happen to my family?

I think about past visits with my sister Kathy. A spinner of yarns, a visionary and prophet, my sister describes the late capitalist world of war and climate change with imagery of the apocalypse. Imagining a dystopian future, she has shared with me her vivid nightmares involving fires on the ridges and crowds of fleeing people. Almost two decades ago, she shared with me a secret code so that we can communicate when the end times come.

I think, too, of Cormac McCarthy, the novelist whose early novels were set in East Tennessee and later novels are set along the US-Mexican border. His 2006 novel, *The Road*, describes a post-Apocalyptic world my sister might recognize. In the novel, a father and son travel together across a barren, scorched landscape. Although McCarthy identified the city of El Paso as first inspiring his novel, critics have identified locations in the narrative that match sites along a path from Middlesboro, Kentucky, to places throughout East Tennessee. He seems to allude to my own hometown, Clinton, and many familiar sites that roughly correspond to the route of the 25-E Highway. (See Wes Morgan's "The Route and Roots of the Road," 2007).

Both my sister and Cormac McCarthy envisioned our current dystopian world of violence, strife, and cataclysmic environmental harm. The element missing from their narratives is the pandemic, this catastrophe that forces us into our homes rather than down from the ridges or onto the road. The pandemic kills us but also isolates us. I cannot walk home through a barren landscape as do the characters in *The Road*, nor can I drive or take a bus or fly. When will I see my sister and brother, my niece and nephew, my cousins, my elderly parents? When will go on our drive in the country? I miss my home.

BIO: Rachel, a local poet & teacher, is also a boardmember of the Esperanza.



From left standing are Rachel, Kathy and Julie. Seated is Hilda, their mom, celebrating her 40th birthday in 1974 with Danny, the baby on her lap.