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the LONG GOODBYE

➔ AUGUSTUS MONROE figured he'd drop dead long before he'd need a NURSING HOME. A decade later, his son considers the weighty financial and emotional costs that come with a parent's IMMORTALITY.

By DOUG MONROE | Illustration by Emiliano Ponzi



Read Monroe's 2002 piece about putting his parents in an assisted-living facility at atlantamagazine.com/features

WE THOUGHT DADDY WAS GOING TO DIE IN 2001.

He was staggering around the house in his underwear, gasping in pain, his eyes hollow, his face slashed from shaving with an old-fashioned safety razor. He was eighty-two years old. We took him to a doctor, who said his spine was deteriorating, gave him pills, and suggested he pray. A few days later, Daddy fell at the mailbox, bounced his head on the pavement, and crawled up the driveway, scraping the skin off his knees before collapsing on the front steps. Mama sat in her recliner in front of the TV, worried and clueless, until a neighbor called an ambulance. The EMTs got Daddy propped up in his recliner. He refused to go with them. When I arrived, Daddy was gulping down whiskey. I called the ambulance back, and they took him to DeKalb Medical. Doctors found prostate cancer and operated. My sister and I cried, sure Daddy was in his last days.

That was eleven years ago. Since then, Daddy's long goodbye has drained his retirement income and life savings of more than \$300,000. Where's that money gone? Assisted living, mostly. Of course, that amount doesn't account for his medical bills, most of which have been paid by Medicare and insurance policies that were part of his retirement. Daddy's income—Social Security, plus monthly checks from two pensions—pays for the facility where he lives, his taxes, his life insurance policy premiums, and such incidentals as a visiting podiatrist to clip his nails.

And he has been kicked out of two hospices for not dying.

Daddy is ninety-three now and wears a diaper, is spoon-fed, and urinates through a catheter, drifting in and out of deep sleep in which he gasps for air and appears to be dead. Trisha, my sister, texted a picture of him in October to one of her daughters, who texted back: "Happy Halloween!" When he wakes up, his caregivers dress him and plop him in a wheelchair. He rolls around like a child until it's time to eat again.

I cannot imagine that this once-dignified Southern gentleman, who clawed his way out of the grit of a Depression-era tobacco farm in North Carolina and bought a snazzy double-breasted suit with one of his first paychecks, would be anything but humili-

ated by what is happening to him now—if he had all his faculties. Yet as one of his nurses told me, "Your father has no interest in dying." It is not heroic measures keeping him alive; he just keeps ticking. He takes only two medicines: an antibiotic for a urinary tract infection and OxyContin for the pain in his spine.

At sixty-four, I am at the leading edge of baby boomers who have ringside seats to the slow-motion demise of the Greatest Generation, watching our parents pass away slowly and stubbornly, dying piece by piece over a decade or more, often unwilling or unable to share their feelings. Most of us, such as my sister and I, head into the turmoil of caring for an aging Immortal utterly unprepared.

Daddy used to laugh at Trisha and me whenever we suggested discussing assisted living and long-term care insurance with him. He insisted—with the unshakable confidence of a career civil engineer—that he didn't need to make such plans, that he would simply drop dead one day and that would be the end of it. He refused to discuss it further.

It didn't work out according to that plan, and there was no other plan.

➔ Augustus Currie Monroe was the hardest-working person I've ever seen. When he graduated from the University of Florida in 1942, he got a job at the U.S.

Army Corps of Engineers. A big reason? The guaranteed pension. He never trusted the stock market, with the crash from what he called the "Hoover days" always fresh in his mind. He ended up earning two pensions—one for his career as a civilian engineer and one from a second career as deputy director of DeKalb County's water and sewer department.

For twenty-five years, he and a partner operated a private land-surveying business. With me as their rod man, we surveyed many of the subdivisions that went up in DeKalb and north Atlanta during the city's boom years. For twelve hours every Saturday, Daddy stomped through the woods, chopping down bushes, dripping sweat, and stepping over snakes. He never complained or seemed to get tired. At the end of the day, we always got a milkshake at the old Dairy Queen on North Decatur Road. About once a year, he would take me to an Atlanta Crackers game at Ponce de Leon Ballpark, and we always went to the Georgia-Georgia Tech freshman football game every Thanksgiving.

He was tall, strong, quiet, and had a wicked sense of humor. We used to watch Ernie Kovacs on TV and laugh until we were in tears. He was also pathologically stubborn. As an old man, he refused Trisha's efforts to move him and Mama into

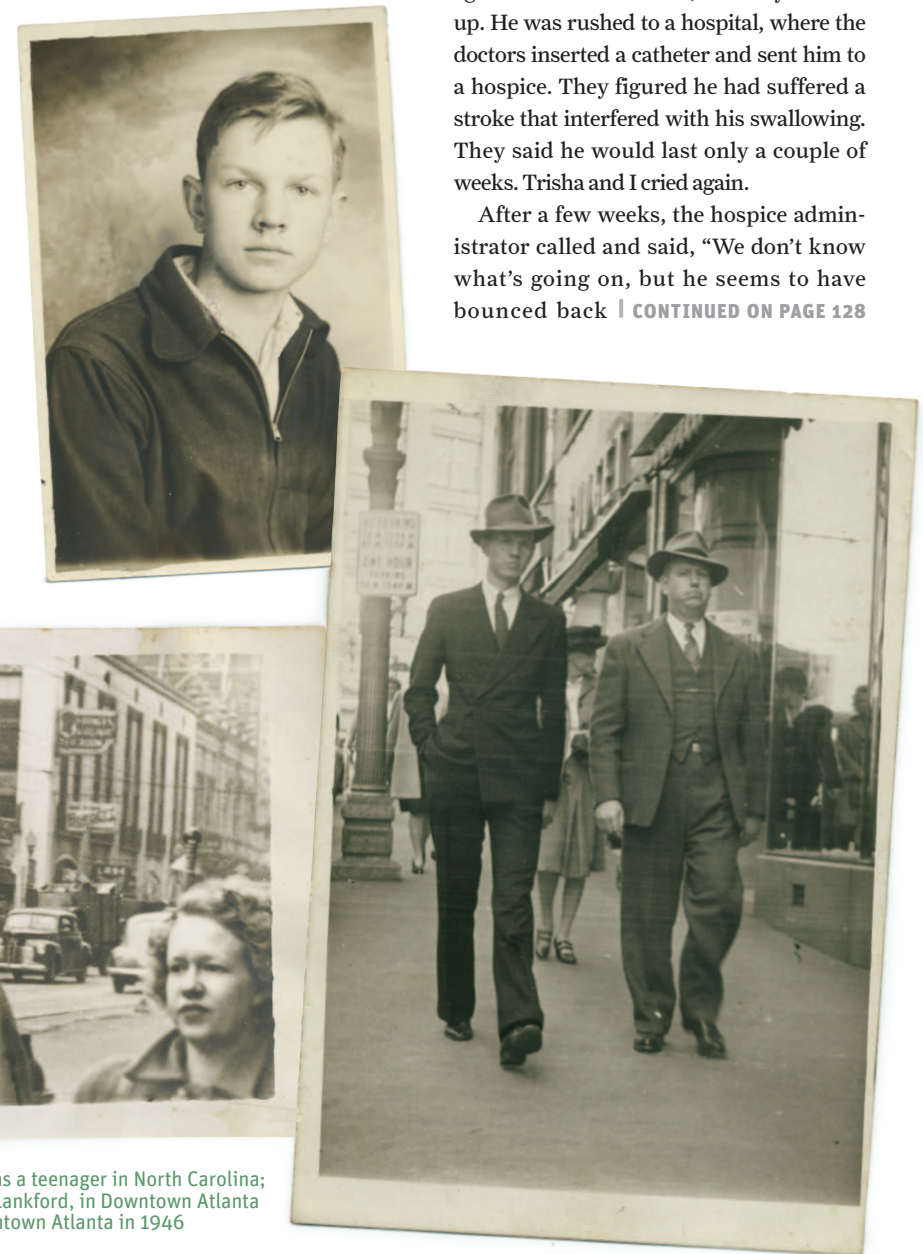
her home or even her neighborhood. When he retired, he just sat down in his recliner. He was worn out.

After his fall on the way to the mailbox, Daddy told us his final wishes. He had a cemetery plot and wanted a graveside service with no flowers and a medium-priced "outfit," by which he meant a casket. He clearly thought he was about to die. We moved Mama and Daddy into a Decatur assisted-living facility in 2001. Mama needed their highest level of care, so Daddy paid about \$6,000 a month for both of them.

After Mama died three years later, he moved to a floor with less care and paid \$2,500 per month. During that decade, he lost most of his vision, most of his teeth, and more than a hundred pounds from his peak weight of 250 on his six-foot-three frame. Today all of the meat and muscle is gone.

Last May he fell in his bathroom and broke his shoulder. Doctors were afraid his heart wouldn't make it through surgery, but they operated anyway. We moved him to a nursing home for rehabilitation, where the aides dropped him, breaking the shoulder again. Unable to urinate, his body swelled up. He was rushed to a hospital, where the doctors inserted a catheter and sent him to a hospice. They figured he had suffered a stroke that interfered with his swallowing. They said he would last only a couple of weeks. Trisha and I cried again.

After a few weeks, the hospice administrator called and said, "We don't know what's going on, but he seems to have bounced back | **CONTINUED ON PAGE 128**



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF TRISHA CAMPBELL

Clockwise from the top: Augustus Currie Monroe as a teenager in North Carolina; with his land-surveying partner, the late William Lankford, in Downtown Atlanta in the late 1940s; with his wife, Winifred, in Downtown Atlanta in 1946