

Mum's the Word

A hundred years later, an old secret surfaces and sheds light on a family's torment.

By **Doug Monroe** - February 1, 2011



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Whenever I take MARTA from the airport, just before the train dips underground in College Park, I crane my neck to see the high, wooden house that my great-grandfather built for his family. In fact, he built most of the beautiful old homes in College Park that have stood for more than a century. His name was D.G. Bettis; people called him Duke. He was a contractor and banker who served one term as mayor of College Park. He filled the enormous house with children. He had six girls and two boys. He is buried with many of them at the College Park Cemetery, and I have visited their graves. My interest in the old home has deepened since I uncovered a dark family secret that was hidden from my sister and me by the dishonesty of our mother. Throughout her life, my mother told me that Duke died from an accidental shooting. He had a gun beneath his pillow, she said, and it discharged accidentally. That was her story, and she stuck with it until she died in 2004. About a year ago, I had an urge to Google Duke's name and found a 100-year-old newspaper article detailing his death. Turns out it was no accident. Duke had gone spectacularly insane and shot himself three times in the chest on February 11, 1911. One bullet passed through him and wounded his wife, Belle. His fifteen-year-old daughter Nora, who

would become my grandmother, cradled his body as his life ebbed away in a room filled with screams and the smoke from his gun. He was forty-six years old.

The headline on page four of the *Atlanta Constitution* the next day read: "Mind Unbalanced, Bettis a Suicide . . . Former College Park Mayor Kills Himself. Brooding over ill health, the acts of a wayward son and other troubles, well-known citizen leaves a family of eight."

In the six months leading up to his death, Duke lost an infant son and his own bid for reelection. His seventeen-year-old son Roney ran away to sea, sending a letter from New York saying he was shipping out as a deckhand on a freighter.



Duke reportedly declared, "This is enough to drive any man crazy." When he visited his office the day before his death, "his strange actions caused comment among his business associates," according to the article. At a construction site the next morning, "his abstracted gaze was particularly noted by the workmen." When Duke got home, he "acted so queerly that his wife's suspicions were at once aroused." Belle followed him upstairs. He had a pistol, and she tried to take it from him. "Don't be afraid," he told her. "I'm not going to kill myself. They are after me, and I'm just going to protect myself." Belle was able to partially undress him and get him to lie down in their bed. Then he suddenly whipped out the revolver and shot himself in the chest. The bullet passed through him and struck Belle in the abdomen. Duke fired two more shots.

"All three of the wounds were inflicted almost directly over the heart, within a circumference that could be covered by a silver dollar," the *Constitution* reporter wrote. Belle was hospitalized but recovered from her wound.

After Duke died, his business partner stole all Duke's money and ran away to Florida. The family moved out of their grand home in College Park, moving from apartment to apartment for the rest of their lives—except for two of the girls, who married well. Roney never came home. The family believed he was murdered at sea. One of Duke's daughters, Lula, died at sixteen in 1914 after swallowing a pin.

Duke was obviously mentally ill. Could he have gotten any medical care in 1911, when Freud still walked the earth? Who knows? But what I do know is that it didn't do a damn bit of good to lie about what happened.

I believe Duke Bettis bequeathed a genetic time bomb that exploded in my mother and me. When she was in her late forties, Mama had a wild breakdown at her job in Midtown and was carted off to the mental ward at Grady. Our family doctor said my father chose not to pursue further psychiatric treatment for Mama and urged my sister and me not to upset her. We never mentioned it again, although Mama experienced some fairly extreme paranoia, such as the time she wrote me, "The neighbors think I have a boyfriend who looks just like your daddy."

Would it have helped me to know about Duke's medical history? As a teenager, I became a blackout drinker and careened in and out of deep depressions. I started therapy in my late twenties and quit drinking in my mid-thirties. Along the way, I considered suicide, often fantasizing about shooting myself—not knowing that my great-grandfather had pulled it off before me. I never owned a gun, because I knew exactly what I would do with it. Knowing the truth about Duke helps me understand a little more about myself when I take inventory.

As far as I know, I'm the only current family member who has had extensive psychiatric treatment. Mama would never consider it.

I also know this: The day I found out about Duke's suicide, I forwarded the link to my sister and both my children. When my kids were small, I told them the truth about my alcoholism and depression. When they asked questions—"Have you ever been in jail?" or "Have you ever smoked pot?"—I told them the truth. I made a point not to lie to them. Not about this stuff. Shakespeare wrote, "Truth will out," in *The Merchant of Venice*. And in Duke's case, the truth came out for me a century after his death.

I don't blame Mama for lying, but she was wrong to deny her children such an important piece of medical information. While she was lying to us, she was also lying to herself, denying her own mental problems. Now that I know the truth, I can only wonder what else she might have lied about. My sister once mentioned to one of Mama's neighbors that our mother never seemed to cry. "Oh, I've seen her cry," the neighbor said. We never did find out what Mama was crying about. Maybe it's about time to start Googling my mother.

Monroe was a senior editor, columnist, and blogger for Atlanta magazine. He now lives in Brooklyn.

Illustration by Chris Silas Neal

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