ROGER LOFT

Beach Kids, 2004
Epoxy, fiberglass, pigments, 74.5 x 59 x 3 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST

BILLY BAITES

Daddy Don't Go!

When the Nearly Departed Become the Dearly Departed

I was five years old when my parents dragged me out to God's Pastures Nursing Home on a summer Sunday in the early 1960s. God's Pastures was a far cry from the modern facilities of today and there were minimal, if any, laws governing the care and treatment of its inhabitants. It was hotter than blazes at the time and the walls and floors were dark, depressing colors illuminated by flickering fluorescent bulbs in filthy plastic covers filled with dead flies and mosquitos. The air was pungent with the odors of urine and Lysol.

We were there to visit my Great-Aunt Jossie, who had gone off the deep end in recent months, though I didn't understand that. As we walked into her room I held my mother's and father's hands in fear. Jossie was in bed staring vacantly out the window when my mother spoke up and said, "Hello, sweet Aunt Jossie. Do you know who this is?"

Jossie turned her bony skull in our direction and glared. Beneath an unruly mop of white hair, she had a wild look in her sunken, bloodshot eyes, and she was wearing something that looked like a dark-gray shroud. I noticed her shrunken, shriveled mouth and on the nightstand saw a glass jar with cloudy water containing her dentures. Without missing a beat, the ancient woman sat up in bed with a look of complete horror, pointed a bony index finger at me, and shrieked, "That boy is Satan! Satan who has come to snatch my soul away and take it to Hell! Look at him! He's the Devil and he's after me! Jesus help me! Take him away! Take him away!"

The sprout of wispy white hair atop her head shook back and forth violently, and spittle flew from her mouth as she spouted her accusations. I had not a clue about what was happening. I only knew I was terrified by this old woman and wanted to get away. Mama said, "Billy, she doesn't know any better, honey. Your daddy will take you out in the hall to wait while I finish my visit."

As the tears welled up in my eyes, Daddy took me by the hand and led me into the hallway without a word. He leaned down and looked me in the eye and said, "Son, that old woman can't help it. She has never been the same since her husband, Jake, ran off with that waitress. Let's just stand out in the hall and wait while your mama finishes up with her visit."

In the hallway I noticed another very sad old woman sitting in a wheelchair directly across from us. She stared

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at us with sort of a stunned expression and a bizarre open-mouthed smile on her face. She had a face like a dried apricot with long, stringy unwashed gray hair hanging on either side of her face. Her sagging eyes looked dark gray and she wore a tattered old hospital gown covered in a pattern of different-colored balloons. Two bony legs rested in bunny slippers on the wheelchair footrest. Her frozen, crooked smile revealed a handful of remaining teeth, all dark yellow and brown. For a few minutes she appeared to be almost paralyzed, when suddenly she raised both of her sticklike arms and extended them in my direction.

"Little boy, you come here and say hello to old Swanee. She don't git to see many little boys in here, honey."

Daddy gave me a shove and said, "Billy, you go over there any give that nice old lady a little hug to brighten her day." I was terrified. She looked like someone who had managed to dig her way out of her grave. Taking very small steps, I cautiously moved in her direction while she continued to grin disturbingly. As soon as I was within her grasp, she snatched me by both shoulders, shaking me back and forth and screaming, "It's the end! It's the end! I'm comin', Popaw! Old Swanee's coming! This old world is a lettin' go of her!" As I turned and tore off down the hall screaming and crying, she let out a final bloodcurdling scream that pierced my ears and rattled the few grimy windows in the hallway.

Nestled in the heart of rural farmland outside of Greensboro, North Carolina, is the Simpson-Miller Funeral Home. When I was growing up, it was a two-story, white-frame farmhouse built around 1900 that had been converted into a funeral home. It sat back from the road and was surrounded by woods, with the exception of a strip of lawn leading down to the road. When I was a young boy, it wasn't enough for me to get scared knowing I was going to a funeral home. It also looked like a haunted house, with dark windows on the first and second floors. I was terrified and certain that the dead inside the house would rise from their coffins and step out of them to wreak havoc on the living with their bulging eyes, extended frozen arms, and grasping claws. Because my mother had grown up in a large family on a farm in that county, it seemed that we had relatives everywhere. That also meant there was a steady march of elderly and sick ones on their way to the grave. It was not unusual for our family to end up there for a visitation on at least one Saturday night a month.

It was also not unusual in rural funeral homes like this one to place netting over the occupied coffin to keep the insects at bay. This was especially true in the summer if the windows were open and didn't happen to have screens. One particular Saturday morning in mid-July, my mother announced that we were going to the funeral home that night to see my mother's sister-in-law's father, who had died a couple of days earlier.

"Now the three of you go to your rooms and lay out what you're going to wear tonight, so I can make sure you will be dressed up nicely."

I hated to have to go out on a Saturday night, especially to a funeral home. It meant I would miss *The Jackie Gleason Show* and, particularly, the June Taylor Dancers. Much to my father's chagrin, as soon as they kicked off a dance number, I was up in front of the television dancing right along with them and absolutely certain that June would one day hire me as part of her troupe.

The time finally arrived for us to get dressed and go. My brother and I had on our coats and ties, of course, and as soon as my mother put a dress on my sister, she started crying and screaming that she hated dresses. That didn't last long, though, because my mother would grab her by the arm and just about jerk it out of the socket and yell, "You keep up that crying, missy, and I'm going to give you something to cry about!" My brother, sister, and I climbed into the back seat of the black-and-white 1956 Buick Special, and as my parents sat down in the front seat, my father turned around and said, "I know three children who had better pull those bottom lips in and stop pouting. I don't want to have to tear all three of you up on the side of the road but I will if I have to." And he meant it. He kept a belt over the sun visor and had no problem taking it out and putting it to use when necessary. After a brief ride into the countryside, we turned into the driveway to the funeral home, parked, and then entered the place.

The overpowering scent of lilies hit me the minute I stepped in the door. All of the draperies, walls, and carpeting were in dark tones of maroon, navy blue, and a depressing shade of deep green. The air was heavy with heat and humidity. Our parents led us past the guest register, where the front hallway was lined with small groups of the bereaved. There were soft whispers and sounds of sniffles and the sharing of tissues. As we progressed to the viewing room, I caught snippets of conversation.

"How he suffered . . . thank the good Lord it wasn't for long."

"The doctors cut him open and just shook their heads and closed him back up."

"Mr. Simpson used too much makeup on him."

"He never fixed his hair like that."

We entered the viewing room, filled shoulder-to-shoulder with relatives of all ages. At last we were brought alongside the coffin, in which lay a very old and certainly dead man in a black suit, white shirt, and dark-blue tie. The coffin was covered with netting. I was paralyzed with fear that he would suddenly sit up, lean over, and look at me and say, "I'm coming to get you, Billy!"

Daddy pushed all three of us up next to the coffin and said, "Now y'all say goodbye to Great-Uncle Floyd. He's gone on to his reward." My brother and I were just tall enough to peek over the edge of the casket and see him. My sister, who was no older than three, couldn't see anything, so Daddy picked her up by the waist and lifted her up over the coffin to get a good look. Just as Joan was hovering directly over Great-Uncle Floyd, she let out a scream and shouted, "Daddy, a fly just walked up that man's nose!" Many of my relatives in the room let out a collective gasp and raised their hands to their mouths as my parents rushed us out of the room and then out of the building. Needless to say they didn't take us to the funeral.

By the time I was in my twenties I had become a pro at weathering these events and always had my dark suit at the ready. One of the traditions in the South that is hopefully starting to die off in more contemporary times is that of the open coffin at a funeral home and at the funeral service. It really makes no difference how the deceased passed. That person could have been run over by a transfer truck, pulled through a grinder at a meat-packing plant, or lingered through a multiyear deadly disease that left nothing but skin stretched over a skeletal frame. The family is bound and determined to give the funeral-going public one last good show.

I had a distant great-aunt who was diagnosed with terminal cancer sometime in the mid-1980s. While it was a terrible thing to learn, she was in her early nineties and had lived a long and full life. I was a young adult at the time and the way we usually found out about such things was listening to my grown relatives whispering about them at family gatherings. At one particular gathering I overheard the following: "Aunt Pearl had been feeling poorly for some time, you know. Just dragging around the house and getting nothin' done. I reckon Uncle Vonnie got tired o' eatin' Lucks Pinto Beans and fried hamburger patties and give her a shove to go see the doctor, which she finally did. Well, sir, the doctors told her they were gonna do an exploratory surgery on her and she pitched a fit. They gave her a nerve shot to calm her down and after that did the trick she told 'em she was already there so they might as well git it over with. They took her over to the hospital and hooked her up to a bunch of tubes that knocked her out. Bright and early the next morning they wheeled her into the operating room with three or four doctors and a handful of nurses. She wasn't in there more than a half hour after they had cut her open and the doctors all looked at each other and sewed her up and sent her on back to her room. It was too late and the cancer had already spread too far."

Everybody in the room shook their heads and there were a couple of "mercy mes" and "lawsys." Great-Aunt Pearl was a fighter though. They pumped her full of medications to keep her energy up and the pain at bay so she could live as normal a life as possible. She managed to hang on another six years until, as my grandma used to say, "It finally took her down and she went to be with Jesus."

It wasn't long until she was all made up and spread out in her coffin at the funeral home and visitation was just getting started. The line must have wrapped around the block at least twice. Everybody wanted to get in that one last good gander (in actuality to see just how awful she probably looked).

I've always hated going to funeral homes but I knew it was better for me to show up than to not show up. Most of my blood relatives on my mama's side would be there and you could rest assured their eagle eyes would be taking into account who in the family was *not* there. Anyone who dared *not* show up would be talked about and ostracized for years. It was better to go ahead and take the medicine rather than suffer the consequences later. Eventually, I worked my way through the front door and down the hall. As I stepped into the room where Great-Aunt Pearl was on display, I spotted several older men I recognized as uncles and distant relatives wearing Hawaiian shirts. A number of the women were dressed in pastel shades of pink, yellow, and aqua with matching accessories. To the casual observer, this would have probably seemed strange but to me, this was par for the course. This was basically a subtle way of saying, "This is not happening. She did not die. Life will go on. It's her fault she got sick and died, not ours. We're just here to be nice."

At last, I was at the foot of the coffin. I stared down at Great-Aunt Pearl, who was wearing a powder-blue pantsuit, not something she would have been caught dead in while she was alive. Her hair, originally a steel gray before the chemotherapy did away with it, had been replaced with what slightly resembled one of those Eva Gabor wigs women could buy through mail-order houses in the sixties and seventies. With entirely too much pancake makeup and rouge on her cheeks, she was also sporting what appeared to be Revlon's Fire and Ice lipstick, a fire-engine-red lip paint that was popular at the end of World War II. The most bizarre thing of all, though, was that the undertaker had put her glasses on her. This is something I have never been able to quite grasp. Why would someone who is dead need glasses?

Just in front of me an elderly couple from my great-aunt's church was gazing down on the deceased. "Lord, don't she look good. She looks like she just dozed off."

I got a quick glance and got the hell out of there.

The following day was the funeral service. Let me warn you, dear reader, if you ever plan to attend a funeral service that was put together by two gay brothers, make sure you pack a lunch and a change of clothes. Both of them are my first cousins and I love them dearly. Like all of us in this family, and there are five who are gay, they love theater and ceremony and make no excuse for it. It was one of the sweltering, humid August days with the temperature in three digits when the only thing you feel like doing is sitting around waiting for the day to end. The church was packed to the rafters and, although it was air-conditioned, the heat generated by the bodies in the congregation combined with the soaring temperature outside pretty much counteracted any cooling air coming through the vents in the sanctuary. We stood up, we recited a psalm, we sat down. The choir sang. We stood up, we sang a hymn, we sat down. A screeching soprano sang all of the verses of "Trust and Obey" in a key that was pitched slightly higher than her range. We stood up, we recited the Lord's Prayer, we sat down. The minister gave a eulogy that ran just under twenty-five minutes. We stood up and so did the choir and we all sang three verses of "Victory in Jesus."

Then it was open-mic time for personal remembrances that ran the gamut with eight relatives sharing their history of experiences. Then the organist provided an interlude that featured a theme and variations on "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing." It was about halfway through this that my cousin seated next to me turned and said, "I don't think JFK laid in state this long." The organist concluded the piece with a series of grand arpeggios and then blasted out the final chord while reaching over and pulling out the stop that started the chimes. Bringing it all to a dramatic halt, she threw her hands up in the air and looked out at the audience with a beaming smile, hoping for a rousing hand of applause, which did not happen. The minister stood up and said a final prayer and then raised his head, motioned his hands to the right, and said, "We will conclude the service at the graveside in the adjacent cemetery."

The whole church filed out into the merciless heat and reassembled at the graveside.

The immediate family was seated under a small tent next to the coffin, but the rest of us were left to bake in the sweltering heat. Usually by the time you make it to the graveside, everybody is so worn out that the remaining portion of the service is over with rather quickly. I should have known better. The minister stood up and read the Twenty-Third Psalm and after he commended her spirit into heaven, he sat down. Several people near me turned to leave and just as they did, a ninety-year-old tenor and an alto with hair that looked like she had been standing on the tarmac in front of a jet as it took off stood up and cleared their throats. They proceeded to belt out all seven verses of "Just as I Am." By the time they finished, sweat was running down from my forehead into my eyes. They plopped down in their metal chairs and an ancient woman sitting with the family in a wide-brim hat covered in white silk roses and a veil screamed out, "Praise Jesus!" and we all concluded that the service was over.

I quickly turned to leave and just as I did my cousin grabbed me by the arm and said "Billy, you're coming back to the house, aren't you?" I said I hadn't planned to and needed to get on home. He said, "You have got to come back to the house and take some food. There must be at least three hundred deviled eggs there and enough congealed salads to feed the entire congregation."

Like many men of his generation, my father smoked most of his adult life, which led to his abrupt and early demise. One spring evening in 1973, after I had finished my first year of college, he bent over to start a lawn mower and had a massive heart attack and died on the spot at the age of fifty-four. My father was a good, loving husband and father, someone who was well loved in the community. I know my mother was devastated and I don't think she ever recovered. It was one of the worst losses I have ever had in my life and I remember the deep, gnawing pain in my gut when the minister called me and told me to get to the chapel at the local hospital, where the rest of the family had gathered, as soon as possible. My mother was wailing and crying, "God had to have him, God had to have him." I don't remember ever feeling so lost, either before or after. We went back to the house and I went in my bedroom with several of my cousins and my siblings. Shortly after that,

We walked to the front of the church where my father's open coffin stood and were allowed one last look and then we stood there staring blankly until an usher closed the lid for eternity.

Mrs. Ruby Taylor, from our church, came in and handed me a paper sack. "These are the clothes your daddy died in. I know you will want to keep them." I was horrified. I threw them in my closet and ran out of the house and rode my bike down to the end of the street to the woods and sat down under a oak tree and cried for what seemed like hours.

The day of the funeral arrived. In true southern fashion, my mother firmly believed that if she willed it away and pretended it had not happened then it hadn't. On the day of the funeral, my mother wore a lemon-yellow dress and my brother, sister, and I were dressed like we were going to somebody's birthday party. The only thing the three of us should have been carrying were three brightly colored helium balloons tied to a ribbon with "Bye-Bye, Daddy" written on them. His death was never discussed, never talked about, and the only thing my mother said to the three of us just before the funeral was, "I don't want any crying at this funeral today. We have a long row ahead of us to hoe." A martyr to the end, she was never hesitant to refer to my father as the one "who did that to me." As we filed into the church, which was packed as my father was

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a well-loved man, many people turned back to look at us with pitying expressions on their faces. We walked to the front of the church where my father's open coffin stood and were allowed one last look and then we stood there staring blankly until an usher closed the lid for eternity. I don't remember much of what happened during the service except that I kept pinching my leg to make sure this was really happening. Finally, we filed out of the church to go to the cemetery to the strains of "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

At the time of his death, I was already working a summer job on the production lines at the Vick Chemical plant in Greensboro. My father had died on a Friday, the service was on Sunday, my family took the day off on Monday, and then by Tuesday, our regular schedules resumed, minus one father. Neither he nor the funeral proceedings were ever talked about again. Occasionally, I would ask my mother if she wanted to visit his grave. She would look at me as if I had just suggested she take all of her clothes off and say, "Why would I want to go do that? Your daddy is not there," and return to her chores. When I returned to my job at Vicks on Tuesday, all of my fellow coworkers, students and full-timers, were quick to speak to me and express their condolences. One person just looked at me but did not say anything at first. That was Iola Swiggett and she was the forelady on the Vicks 44D Cough Syrup line where I worked. Finally about three weeks passed and she cornered me one afternoon with tears in her eyes and said, "Billy, I shore am sorry about your daddy. I ain't said nothin' afore to ya because my daddy died when I was young and it tore me ta pieces and took me years to git over it. Lord, it's such a shame. Them Sears men drop like flies!"

Fast forward thirty-six years to August of 2009 and my mother had passed away after an extended illness. While I wasn't crazy about the idea, I knew she would have wanted a full, traditional funeral with all of the trimmings, so that's what we gave her. I made certain she was dressed in one of her favorite outfits and had all of her best jewelry put on her. Mama had always loved beautiful, tasteful, expensive jewelry and that was one area where she never scrimped, so she was certainly decked out like the Queen of Sheba. At one point in the evening a close relative walked up to my sister and said, "Lord, Joan, are y'all gonna bury Hilda in all that expensive jewelry?! Ain'tch'all gonna keep it for yaselves?" My sister immediately replied, "Of course we're letting her wear her jewelry. Those were all favorite pieces of Mama's and they belong to her." I had a fit when she told me what she had said. "Why did you tell them that!? Knowing that family, they'll be out there by tomorrow night digging her up to take it off of her!" Such was the respectable family mourning of my mother's passing.

Entire weeks were planned around a visitation to the funeral home on Saturday night. Who cared whether or not you knew the deceased or the family? It was a place to see who was coming and going and to also see some of the more elaborate flower arrangements created by local florists. One particular florist was known for creating elaborate and thought-provoking arrangements that were meant to smooth the path to the great beyond for those who had passed. One florist was known for an extremely popular arrangement that featured a small version of a late-model pink-and-white Cadillac placed strategically on a stretch of golden highway headed upward centered in a wreath of white carnations. Above the Cadillac stretched a flowing band of wide pink ribbon, on which was written in flowing golden script, "God sent down his Cadillac for Brenda Rae and she got in."

The undertakers who owned the funeral home, Mr. Jesse Simpson and Mr. Cletus Miller, also went out to practice their trade in many rural homes throughout the county. One particular incident became somewhat of a legend associated with these undertakers. Their wives, Mrs. Viola Simpson and Mrs. Mable Belle Miller, were always eager to hear the events of their husband's day. Only seconds passed from the time their husbands arrived home from their day's work and repeated the events of the day until their wives were on the telephone spreading the tale throughout the county. The specific incident to which I'm referring involved the white trash branch of my mother's family, the Whitters. I heard my mama and other locals tell this tale time and time again at family reunions.

Grandpaw Whitter had died at the age of ninety-six and his oldest daughter, Earline, and her husband, Odell, offered to let Grandpaw's coffin be placed in their living room for the two days of visitation preceding the funeral. It was late in the afternoon when the hearse finally arrived and Mr. Miller knocked on the door. Earline, with her hair teased up to a massive height and wearing a cherry-red pantsuit, answered the door clutching a tissue to her face. As the door swung open, a chicken walked out of the entryway beside her and trotted on down into the yard.

"Well hello, Earline. How are you faring, given all that you've been going through?"

Earline let out a sob, "I'm a doing as best as can be expected, Cletus. I thought Daddy would live forever but I guess ever'body's time runs out sometime. Having my sisters Janell, Dotty, and Tammy Lynn with me through this has been such a comfort. Well, bring him on in. Me and Odell thought Daddy would like it right here by the front pitcher winder. That way when anybody is a drivin' by they can glance over and get a good look at him."

Cletus motioned for the two young men in suits who had come with him to bring Grandpaw Whitter's coffin on into the house. Earline had planned ahead and had her dinette table that seated four moved from the kitchen into the living room in front of the large window. She had draped the table with a white bedsheet on which she had strategically placed iron-on appliqué patches of angels, crosses, the pearly gates, and other related symbols that she was sure Grandpaw Whitter had already witnessed during his glorious ascent to heaven. The young men placed the coffin on the table and Cletus Simpson opened the upper half of it. Earline and her sisters gathered around and peered in.

"Lord, don't he look good. Cletus, you done a good job with him. Lord a mercy, he looks like he is just 'bout to sit up and say hey."

"You done a good job of coverin' up them marks they made on his face when they tried to revive him. Janell, I'm so glad we are buryin' him in a suit instead of a shroud. Them shrouds are morbid. They give me bad nightmares."

Earline finally added, "Well, Cletus, y'all come on out to the kitchen and git you some iced tea and a plate of food. I'll swanee, we got enough in there to feed Pharaoh's army!" The kitchen counters were nearly sagging under the weight of fried chicken, deviled eggs, green bean and squash casseroles, and orange, yellow, and red congealed salads filled with miniature marshmallows, pineapple, and chopped pecans. Large platters of homemade biscuits stuffed with country ham, mashed potatoes and gravy, and miniature pimento cheese sandwiches beckoned. On the center table rested coconut, pound, and chocolate cakes surrounded by Toll House cookies, chess and lemon meringue pies, and a massive peach cobbler. They all retired to the kitchen to partake in the truckload of food that had been brought to the house that day and then Cletus and his gentlemen departed, satisfied with their day's work. The lone chicken that had been a guest in the house now stood under an elm tree in the front yard and glared at them as they left. The day drew to a close as all of Odell's and Earline's family gathered at their house to have supper and a nice long family visit with Grandpaw Whitter.

A few quiet hours passed and then a little after 2:00 A.M., the Millers' phone rang and Cletus answered. "Oh law', Cletus, you got to git over here right away. Somethin' bad and awful has done happened." It was Earline, sobbing as she choked to get the words out with a voice that sounded like it verged on the edge of a nervous collapse. "The whole family is here and in a uproar. Ain't nothin' like this ever happened and none us knows what to do next."

"I'm on my way, Earline!" Cletus shouted into the receiver. He quickly dressed and headed out. As Cletus turned his Corvair into the Whitters' driveway, he looked up to see every light in the house blazing. Through the closed sheer curtains he could see people running from room to room, clearly in a panic. As soon as he started into the driveway, the front door flung open and Odell, barefoot and in a pair of orange- and green- and white-striped pajamas with diamond shapes, shot down the steps and across the yard to the car door.

"Lord, Cletus! You ain't come a minute too soon! The whole family is so worked up that Dotty is in there on the phone trying to git a hold of Doc Burnside to try to get some nerve pills to calm us all down. I hope to hell you can figure this thang out!"

Before Cletus could open his mouth, Odell snatched the door open and dragged him out of the car, strong-arming him all the way into the house. As soon as he stepped in the door, he could hear crying and high-pitched wailing coming from everywhere.

Tammy Lynn and Janell ran up to him, bawling their eyes out and through their sobs they were blubbering, "We done Grandpaw wrong! He ain't never gonna forgive us! He'll come back as a haint and torment us the rest of our living days!"

As they pushed Cletus through the doorway to the living room, he looked over at the coffin. It was empty. Three or four relatives were on their knees facing the coffin with their faces looking upward and their hands locked in a prayer position, rocking back and forth while they howled and cried out things like "Jesus please forgive us! We didn't know what we was doin'!", "Lord, don't rain down your lighten' on us and send us all to hell for what we done to Grandpaw!", "Dear Sweet Jesus, don't send Grandpaw back as a haint to torment us until our dying day for what we done!"

As Cletus stood, stupefied by this spectacle, Earline suddenly grabbed him by the arm and started dragging him toward the hallway. "Grandpaw is back down in nar, Cletus. You come on with me and see what we has done." Earline led him down the hallway that was lined with sniffling relatives, big and small, their hands clutching wads of sodden tissues. She led him into the bedroom at the end of the hall. There on the bed, flat on his back with his arms laid out high above his head, was Grandpaw. His eyes were wide open as he lay there staring blankly at the ceiling. Surrounding the bed were more relatives, most of them with their faces in their hands.

"What, in the name of heaven has happened here? What is he doing out of the coffin?" Cletus shouted.

Ella Mae Hickey, one of the second-removed cousins of the sisters, stepped up. Definitely on the hefty side, she was in a green flannel nightgown, with tiny white rabbits and turtles, so tight it left nothing to the imagination, and yellow chenille bedroom slippers. She had a face like a Cabbage Patch doll but it was still heavily made up from the day.

She bawled, "Cletus, we didn't mean no harm to nobody. We got to talkin' just after midnight and we done realized that we ain't got a good family pitchure with Grandpaw. So Odell and a couple of other fellas pulled him out of the coffin and sat him up in a chair in the living room. Me and Janell took some Scotch tape and taped his eyelids open so he would look alive. Sugar, the colored woman that works for Odell and Earline, was still in the kitchen a cleanin' up and her husband, Mr. Jarrell, had just showed up to git her. Afore she left, we asked her to take a pitchure of all of us with Grandpaw. At first when Sugar seen him, she screamed and went runnin' out of the house yellin', 'He's come back! He's come back!' Odell caught up with Sugar and grabbed her by the arms and explained and offered her five dollars to come back in and take the photos. Sugar snapped about ten pitchures and we thanked her and she left. Then the awful thing happened. Odell and them other men picked up Grandpaw and went to slide him back down in nat coffin but he wouldn't go in. They tried bendin' his feet ta git him in but that weren't no good. They tried everthing they could think of afore they finally give up and carried him back to the bedroom, laid him on the bed and then we called you. What you reckon we gonna do, Cletus?"

Cletus, with his right hand covering his mouth to hide his smile, said, "Y'all come on back up to the front room with me now." They all trailed behind him back to the front parlor and stood in the room. Cletus walked over to the coffin and turned to the family and said "Now y'all looky here." He reached down, unclasped the latches and opened the bottom half of the coffin lid. The group let out a collective gasp. Without missing a beat Earline called out, "Y'all run back down that hall and git Grandpaw and put him back in here before the wrath a God comes down on all of us!"

Four of the men rushed down the hall, grabbed Grandpaw by his legs and feet, and carried him back up the hall and placed him back in the coffin in a flash. Earline stepped up and closed the lower half. "Praise Jesus that's over with. I just hope he don't come visitin' us tonight after we have gone to bed to punish us for what we done."

"Thank ya, Cletus," several of them called out as he exited the front door and headed back to the car. Earline gave the instructions to her sisters while the others in the family either left out the front door to go home or sauntered back to their respective bedrooms.

"Now, Janell, you can open them front curtains again so's the passerbys can see Grandpaw. Tammy Lynn, reach up there and turn on them clip-on work lights I bought at the hardware store to show him off real good. Okay, I think we is done. I'll see you all in the morning. Whew, I am worn to a frazzle after all of this."

As Earline started out the door to go down the hall to her bedroom, she suddenly put her hands to her face and rushed back over to the coffin, "Lord a mercy!" She reached down and took the Scotch tape off of Grandpaw's eyes and they once again closed.

Then there was a distant relative's funeral about thirty-five years ago where the patriarch of the family, who had lived to the ripe old age of 103, had died. As was my family duty, I was in attendance with a slew of other relatives. The service was held in a small country church and, as was the custom, the gentleman who had died was displayed in all of his glory in an open coffin at the front of the church. Those wishing to get one last look before the lid was closed for eternity were welcomed to come forward and pay their respects. To get things rolling, the church pianist, Lolena Belle Garshaw, who was slightly obese and sporting a dark-blue choir robe, buck teeth, a slight mustache, cat's-eye glasses, and very high hair, waddled over and plopped down at the piano. With a nod and smile to the congregation, she launched into everyone's favorite hymn, "Standing on the Promises." Despite the funereal proceedings, Lolena was in a festive mood this particular day and was putting some real energy into her rendition. Her left hand was giving the hymn a bit of ragtime treatment with a rousing two-four rhythm. It was when she started the second verse and begin adding rolling arpeggios to the right hand that Miss Dory, the eldest daughter of the deceased, was led in while being held up by her two grandsons on each side. Seventy years old, Miss Dory had lived at home with her father her entire life and was now crushed with grief that she would have to go on alone. Dressed from head to toe in black, including a wide-brim black hat cloaked with a black veil, she stumbled up the aisle. To the horror of all in attendance, she was sobbing at the top of her lungs the entire way. Women in the congregation covered their mouths and shook their heads; small children tried to hide behind their parents in the pews; grown men looked on in shock and disbelief at the spectacle. By this time, the minister had stepped out into the pulpit in preparation for the beginning of the service. When Miss Dory was about three feet away from the coffin, she broke free of her grandsons, ran to it, and threw herself on top of it screaming "Daddy, don't go!" As the grandsons attempted to pry her grip on the dead man loose, to no avail, the minister, looking on in horror, motioned for the congregation to stand and, in an attempt to drown out Miss Dory's wailing, he instructed them to belt out the last verse of "Standing on the Promises." They did not succeed.

A native of Greensboro, North Carolina, **Billy Baites** is a classically trained pianist whose career in arts management spans four decades. After positions with two leading New York classical music arts management companies, he managed the performing arts series at Emory University and served as executive director of the Rialto Center for the Arts, both in Atlanta. For three years he held the position of cultural affairs manager for the City of Miami Beach before returning to his hometown to tend to family matters in 2006. "Daddy Don't Go" is one in a debut collection of stories, *Billy Is That You?*, which recounts the outrageous adventures of a gay Southerner and celebrates a cast of colorful characters who have paraded proudly through his life.