

Sunday Visit

By

Janice Daugharty

SIMILES, RARE WORDS, GREAT SENTENCES

Rooted in his stout reclining chair, he can see through the front window that the old blue car has what looks like about a dozen bulletholes in the left door, and the young man getting out is the type to take pride in getting shot at.

The man has rust-black hair, down to his shoulders. Is dressed in gray mechanic's coveralls. He is so raw-boned and hollow that the elastic in the waist doesn't even stretch. Hard black eyes and sucked cheeks and don't-give-a-damn beard make up the rest of him.

White feet, slim as wooden shoetrees, in the seat of the wheelchair before him, General Norton sits higher, straighter, waiting for the knock on the door. "Come in," he calls out and wags his feet on the blue vinyl seat. He has the TV tuned in to an ancient western shoot-em-up, in black and white. Guns a-popping and Indians tilting like trees from the mountain cliffs. The cowboys in white hats keep firing, and if it was the other way round, General wouldn't be wasting his time watching it.

The man opens the door a peep and sticks his head inside, puckering his fruit-red lips. "You General Norton?"

"The one with the goat for sale, that's me," says General.

The man steps inside. Closes the door easy. Like somebody slipping into church late.

"Have a seat," General says and hoists himself higher by pressing down with his elbows on the chair arms. "Let me turn this thing off." He

takes the remote control thingy from the small junked-up table next to his chair, aims and clicks it at the TV like a gun and the shots ring out to the humming of the air conditioner. "Ain't nobody here but me, and I can't get around so good no more. You'll have to go back there to the riverhill and get the goat your ownself, you want her." He places the remote back on the table next to his telephone with blocks of black digits and symbols like comic book curse words. He doesn't use the phone much anymore because he's got to where he can't punch in the numbers fast enough and the operator on the other end keeps getting on to him. Some woman who he had liked to fuss with, that is, till he found out she wasn't flesh and blood, just a voice on one of those machines. He had called her an H-O-R-E when she got him riled, spelling it out to keep from talking dirty to a lady. Later he'd figured out she wasn't even that. Made him wonder what the world was coming to.

The man sits on the end of the couch by the door, crosses his legs at the knees. He has on white socks and lace-up brown shoes.

"How long you been out here?" he asks.

"Out where?" says General. His chest is broad, stocky, in an old rough-dried green button-up shirt. His arms are tanned and strong-looking, but beginning to shrivel and go soft on him. Sprigs of hair like fine winter grass spring from the hollow of his throat. Otherwise he is hairless—the top of his head is bald and the edges, red-gone-gray, are cut close, almost as clean-shaved as his bull neck and square jaw.

"How long you been living out here in these woods." The man has a scratchy voice, keeps

clearing his throat.

"All my life," says General. "Born and raised right here on this place. Left one time, went in the army. I was a paratrooper in the

32nd Infantry, World War II. Bout your age, a little younger."

The man ratchets his left knee with both hands and kicks, like some sort of exercise, gazing about the neat white living room with cheap but new furniture curbing the four walls. Not listening.

General knows when he's losing them—these young people. "Young fellow like you, where you from?"

"The west coast." The man clears his throat. "California."

"Well what you doing down here in South Georgia?"

"Visiting an old aunt in Valdosta."

"What's her name?"

"Why?"

"Thought I might know of her, that's all."

"No. You don't." The man places his feet flat on the floor, props his elbows on his knees and nests his beard in his hands like a cushion. Leaning forward to look through the doorway to the kitchen on his left. "Got a fine house here," he says and clears his throat.

"New house, my two girls built it for me and her."

"Her?"

"The wife." General pauses, thinking he should never have advertised the goat on the radio, and regardless, he should quit talking now. But doesn't. "She's gone to Macon, to a wedding. Her brother's boy. I used to go all over with her my ownself. But not anymore. Can't get around like I use to could."

"What's wrong with your legs, partner?" says the man.

"Partner" kind of halts General again. Then, "Got some ole nerve problem. Doctor says I won't never walk again, but I aim to fool him."

"So, you can walk?"

"Not much." General motions with a wave of his hand. "Here to

the door and I'm wore out or fell, one."

"You mean your legs just give way?"

"Buckle right up under me." He places one hand under a knee.

"Beginning to wonder if it ain't my kneecaps."

"You mean your kneecaps need replacing, right?"

"That's it." General decides this fellow is okay after all, even if he is a hippie. <sup>B</sup> Better company than no company on a Sunday afternoon, and goes on to tell him about the old lady he met at the feed store a while back who had both kneecaps replaced. But in the middle of his story, the man butts in, "How old did you say she is?"

"I didn't ask," says General.

"I mean the nanny, the goat."

General <sup>tucks his thin lips & chuckles,</sup> lets out a laugh, green eyes glittering like glass. "I thought there for a minute you was talking about the old lady had her kneecaps operated on."

The man doesn't laugh. Sits back with one foot atop the other knee, fingers shimmed on the lap of his gathered gray coveralls. His nails are long, dirty.

"You mechanic?" asks General.

"Not if I can help it."

General waits for him to tell what kind of work he does.

Nothing. "I bet you one of them Moody boys; you know, Moody Field, Air Force base other side of Valdosta?"

" Nope," the man says, as if they're playing some kind of guessing game.

The sun through the west window stencils all eight windowpanes on the slick pine floor between General's wheelchair and the maple coffee table set before the couch. The air conditioner hums along with

<sup>1</sup> cheap new couch → in one corner stands a tall cabinet with glass panels exhibiting dolls in various crocheted dresses; a cougill with starched leases; a southern bell with a pink parasol. A crowd of dolls each vying for a place on the front shelves and General →

will tell the world it's a bit of nonsense, the wife's eroding.  
He's sat so long watching her — fingers work the thread in and  
out, pulling the thread from the ball by her side — same old, same  
old — ~~that~~ he ~~think~~ would like to wrap it around her ugly neck  
till her self satisfied look goes limp.

TURN (overused)

the locusts in the pear and pecan trees outside. And there's a warm oily smell of chicken and dumplings from the Sunday dinner his wife had cooked for him before she left for the afternoon in Macon. He'll have the same thing for supper, or when he gets hungry. She stews the chicken on the bone, gauging for just the right amount of broth after she drops in

the

*poorly* dough for dumplings. Some boiled egg, celery and black pepper. And there you have it—best dang chicken and dumplings in the world. *At least she can cook*

General wants the man to go, but doesn't want him to go. He dreads being by himself again. Can tell he's lost his audience, but launches into another of his war stories anyway. A miracle that he can tell this story so clearly, without dropping a single detail, because the man is openly, deliberately, going through the mail that the wife left on the coffee table with her crocheting. General cannot believe it!

"I guess you-all get Social Security?" says the man.

It's as if the game is over now and they've known each other for years.

"What happened to your car?"

"My car?" The fellow turns on the couch, parts the sheer white curtains and stares left and right up the pine-flanked lane, but not necessarily at the damaged car blazing in the sun out front.

"Them's bulletholes, right?"

"Oh that, yeah." The man laughs, lets go of the curtain, *turns* *at* General with an *amused* *look* on his sharp dog face. *a look of serious beseeching*

"Somebody shooting at you, huh?"

He clears his throat. "You a mighty curious old man."

"You right curious your ownself," says General. He moves his feet *with precision* *stiffly, slowly*, to the edge of the wheelchair seat, then to the floor. Bending forward with great effort he takes one soft-sole black

*Margaret 133*  
*33 after 7*  
*6:15*  
*Wm*

shoe waiting next to his chair and shoves a foot into it and then does the same with the other. Leaving the laces untied because he's too tired now to tie them, and anyway he is not yet sure how far he is going or even if he is going anywhere.

The man rests his head on the back of the blue and mauve print couch and ~~stares~~ <sup>stares</sup> up at the foamy white ceiling tiles while he talks. The knot on his neck slides up and down like mercury on a thermometer. "Had a little run-in with some ole boys over some dope. Said I owned em some money, but I didn't."

*the bubble on a carpenter's level*

General doesn't want to hear this. Once, he walked up on a moonshine still in the riverswamp and pretended he didn't see it. Next thing he knew the law had come in, wanting to know who he reckoned would be setting up a shine still on his place. Knew it wasn't him: General Norton, besides being a man of his word, never messed with illegal doings. Tended to his own business. How come him to tell them—"y'all barking up the wrong tree, if you barking at me, I don't know nothing and don't want to know nothing."

Still, he doesn't want the man to go, can feel his excitement building over what might be coming up next. "Bet the law pulls you over a right smart in a car like that?"

"A right smart," says the man and laughs. His voice is like a bull frog's, same low bass complaint blasted from a road pipe following a rain. "When you sell cows, do you cash the checks and keep the money here?"

"I don't know what you're driving at."

"Well, let me put it like this." He sits forward with his hands in praying position before his face. His board like a confessional curtain behind them. "If you...uh...deposit the checks, you risk losing your Social Security. See?"

*Man*

"You ever heard of safety deposit boxes?"

"Oh yeah. Heard of mattresses too."

"Mattresses?"

"You know..." The fellow grins, teeth overlapped as if from the pressure of his pursing lips, as he mimes lifting a mattress and sliding something underneath.

"You fooling with me now," says General. "I like a fellow'll cut up a little, long as he don't go too far."

The man laughs, unfolding, rising to a good six feet or so. "Ain't ever man can take a joke either."

Figuring the man is leaving, General shifts in the chair and at the same time shifts subjects. "You'll moren likely find that ole nanny out with the cows. Just drive on around back of the house and through the gate. See you latch it, coming and going, and follow the road along the fenceline and cross the branch. Lil ole washout's all."

"Hold it." The man holds up both hands. "Need to visit your little boy's room first."

"Just go on through the kitchen there. Down the hall to your left." General says it as if he is still <sup>3.</sup>relaying directions to the river hill, but believes as soon as the fellow gets to the hallway—he's in the kitchen now—he will get in his wheelchair and go out on the front porch so that one of his old-men cousins, up the road apiece, might find him with his throat cut maybe before the wife gets home and finds him and has one of her hissy-fits.

He tries to hurry: scoots forward to the edge of his chair with the pink towel the wife makes him sit on <sup>padding</sup> beneath his hips. His green cap, which he has accidentally sat on, is smashed flat as

if ironed, and before he can make his get-away he has to punch out the bowl of the cap and shape the bill



just so, setting it on his head at the precise practiced angle, covering his forehead and hooding his eyes.

*go back - don't use precision*

Leaning, he holds to the arms of the wheelchair and stands, shuffles round and plops into the blue vinyl seat, unlocks the brakes just as he hears the door open in the bathroom and the man clearing his throat. Is he going in or coming out?

out, General decides, paddling with both hands <sup>on the</sup> and almost to the front door when he hears a cabinet drawer in the kitchen <sup>(slide)</sup> open and shut and the man whistling a tune. He twists the doorknob and rolls back <sup>over</sup> for the door to swing wide. The faded and folded rag rug for wiping feet at the door seems as much an enemy as the man pilfering in the kitchen and whistling, of all things. Makes General mad as fire. How many times has he told her to get rid of the rug?

It rolls like a fat snake under his shoes and the wheels of the chair, and he has to kick at it about a hundred times, using up all his strength, before he can hump the chair over it and out. Outside on the not-yet-painted porch where the air is hot compared to inside and yellowflies are diving for blood, <sup>and he starts to wheel round</sup> and shut the door when the man steps into the doorway like some spook General has dreamed up in shades of gray.

"shut that door for me, will you?" general says. "yellowflies, hateful things."

###

*start editing now*  
If his life depended on it, General could not tell you how, why, he ended up in that old blue car with bullet holes in the door, heading across the pasture directly behind his house with the sun now bellying down over the strand of trees along the run of the branch. Smells of burnt oil, sunned wool and wet dog.

"that's the Norton cemetery there," he says to the man at the wheel,

and points south across the rusted wire fence shored up by scrub oaks and convenient sticks and stobs to the square of white headstones and an American flag (billowing) in the lit blue sky.

"You the one responsible for that flag there, General?" The man is driving fast over the dry-green pasture, ripping over ruts, following the diagonal cattle trail of white sand instead of the two-path road along the fenceline. A hand-painted blue disk with a chrome peace symbol swings from a leather strip on the rearview mirror.

"Ole girl buried her husband there put that flag up," says General. "I like it though, don't you?"

"Not so you'd notice."

"You a hippie?"

"You could say that." The fiery sun on The Hippie's face accents crescent lines like scars and little holes like beaten steak. "You a general?"

"No. Just got named that cause I was born in the First World War. Got named after some general or other everybody was talking about back then."

"Too bad you wadn't born later, then your mama could of named you Hitler." "That's a hell of a thing to say to somebody." The General is no longer afraid, only interested. When

the roved-up car gets to the branch ford, he figures, it's not going to make it across. Surprise! <sup>off the car bogged down it</sup> The car will be a whole lot easier to spot from the house, from the highway, by whoever will come to rescue him. Once it gets beyond the strand of trees and into the back pasture, <sup>the car</sup> the car will be hidden from view. If it bogs down in the branch, The Hippie will more likely be caught and The General himself will be at the center of a great commotion, his supertime ruined and his bedtime delayed for who knows how long. He might even be on the Six O'clock News on TV this time tomorrow. But deep down he's not sure whether he hopes the car will or won't bog down in the branch ford.

It loodies down the sandy slope, plashing wings of brown water, both sides, and just motors on up the yonder bank and under the drooped branches of a maple and into the flare of sun again.

"I be dogged if this ain't a fine car," says the General. Now he is scared, scared to death. "What time's it getting to be?" He latches

find rare word  
warms  
so back  
the sure  
General  
has told  
his name  
in

rare word  
flails

onto the strap above his door.

"Time."

"Yeah, what timer?"

"Time." The Hippie is smirking, clearing his throat. His face is the face of the

devil in the night-glow orange of sunset.

"The wife'll be on in anytime now. Looking for me."

The Hippie drives north up the long pasture with his eyes straight ahead.

"Cows come up about this time of an evening. Lii ole goat'll follow em wherever they go." Suddenly, The General loves the old nanny who has been getting on his nerves so here lately. Truth is, she hasn't done a thing to bother him; he simply decided to get rid of her because she wasn't a cow. He decided to get rid of her and called the radio farm exchange for something to do. To have somebody to talk to. Like now.

"I raised a big bunch of younguns," he says, "but they don't come around much anymore." He watches The Hippie's eyes for signs of sympathy, or ~~meanness~~ <sup>murder</sup>. keeps talking, though he knows it will likely be his ruin.

"Old man like me gets lonesome for somebody to talk to. You know what I mean?"

"I know."

"Yeah, I bet you do. A fellow like you must get mighty lonesome."

"A fellow like me. What does that mean?"

The old car is rattling and rocking; the headliner droops and touches them on top of their heads like the testing hand of a spirit or ghost breath. Makes The General want to scratch or jump from the moving

car. The back seat is buried under clothes and newspaper and suspicious-looking magazines, and the

floorboards, front and rear, are alive with rolling, clattering beer cans and bottles.

"Don't mean nothing," The General says. "Hey, there they are. See yonder, over by the beaver swamp." He points to the herd of russet cattle grazing fieldside of a mapped-out gray plat of dead trees in the northeast corner of the hardwoods. "Ole beavers keep damming up the branch, how come that stand of timber to be dying. I've set traps and shot at em, killed me one or two. But they just keep at it. You wouldn't be interested in hunting beavers for me, would you?"

"No."

The General had guessed that. A man of his caliber wouldn't be interested in working for a living.

"I believe I'll get me a calf while I'm at it," says The Hippie.

"Caives ain't for sale, no sirree." The General laughs. "See that lil ole bull there walking toward the car. I call him Red Man II cause he looks like his daddy. Ole bull yonder, Red Man I, now he's a sight. Full-bloodied Santa Gertrudis is what he is."

The hip-high calf tips like a woman in high-heels toward them, but stops when the car stops, standing before the front bumper as if inspecting the grill or waiting for it to reach out and pet him. The black and white nanny, in the midst of the red cows, is grazing the crab grass growing from the gray, turned dirt that The General never got around to planting. Hot and dry and it June already, and not much use in planting corn now. Even if the wife would let him get on the tractor to do

it. Says he might fall off and run over his self, feeble as he is. Feeble, meaning useless, to The General's way of thinking.

They fight

all the time about it. Same as they fight about him driving his cow-butted

✓ pickup truck. Got to where he was running red lights in town, trying to maneuver through the greens to get back home—his own private heaven and hell. He'd worked out a living for his family right here, he was born here and he aims to die here. He had left that once to serve in the Army, World War ~~Two~~. Got a Purple Heart when a piece of shrapnel caught him in the leg. When he got home from the hospital in London, England, he swore up and down that he would never leave again. He did take his wife and younguns to the beach, Fernandina, after that. Wasn't but two hours away and he could be back before sundown. As it turned out he got home way before sundown. They'd bought him a pair of those short swimming britches, and he can recall having waiked out to the edge of the ocean, letting the waves curl around his bare feet, while looking out over the eternal field of furrowed water. "I'm ready to go when y'all are," he'd said to the wife and kids.

Last time he drove the truck, he came home from the feed store, bringing a

coffee mug with the name of the store on it. Had their telephone number on it, and the wife had caught him in the act of dialing the number to speak with the gal works at the store. The General had been a good of mind to divorce the wife over that one; divorce her and marry the girl at the feed store, who would at least listen to his stories. She was pretty too, pretty and young. The wife is the ugliest old hag he's ever seen.

Course, the telephone operator had put an end to that bit of business.

He is startled to realize that what he'd thought was going on his head had been coming out of his mouth. His tongue ~~is~~ dry from talking, but from the nothing look on the face of The Hippie he hasn't heard a single word.

"Yep, that's the one I want, General," says The Hippie, clearing his throat. "That little

bull calf there."

"No sir, he ain't for sale. Come here, boy," General sticks his head and one arm out the window. "You got any apples in here?" he says back to The Hippie. "A cracker, what-have-you?"

The Hippie laughs. "You one crazy old man," he says and opens his door and gets out. "A general--shit."

The calf tips closer to The General's outstretched hand and stands while the old man scratches his broad red head and cord-boardy ears and the heavy waddle of skin that runs from his neck to his chest.

"At-a boy, at-a boy."

The Hippie, on the other side, is leaning against the shot-up car door, peeling a blue rubber band from a roll of cash that The General recognizes

from the drawer in the kitchen.

"Hoo on away from heresii," *too many sudden* Suddenly mad, The General nudges the calf back with the car door. Then he steps out, holding to the top of the open door and lashing forward to the hot hood and placing both hands flat on it. "You wanta come on around here," he says to the Hippie, "or am I gone have to come get you?" His black jeans ride low on his wasted hips.

The Hippie pops around his side of the car and leans on the hood, facing The General glaring at him across it. His green cap bill pulled low makes his green eyes a deadly focus.

"I thought you couldn't

walk," says The Hippie.

For an answer, The General begins sidestepping toward the front of the car with the bull calf butting and shoving at his back. Dust puffs around the shoes and hooves. The green popout scent of cooling earth swells around them.

The Hippie laughs out loud, striking up the hooting of an owl in one of the tall pines along the woods line east of the car. Across the open field, in the west, the sun gutters out behind the riverswamp, leaving a bruised rim of sky. "What you gone do when you get to me, old man?"

"Gone teach you..that's what." The General is out of breath, but has made it to the center of the hood with the help of the little bull who wants only to be scratched. He sidesteps again, palming the hood ornament, which best he call tell is another hippie symbol.

"It's a wonder to me you got to be old as you are, mouthing off like you do." The Hippie is standing with his fists clenched and his long arms cocked by his side, watching The General come.

He steps faster, closer, lets go of the car and lunges and grabs

the knob shoulders of The Hippie, who takes one step back and  
crumpies to the hoof-cut dirt with the old man wailing and  
socking and just missing his head. <sup>The General</sup> His cap flies off and lands on the  
ground next to him. The Hippie laughs and laughs and scoots

forward on his back with The General riding him till he lets go and rolls  
face-up and staring at The Hippie, on his feet now and staring down at  
him. The little bull steps up and begins licking the cankered dust from  
the General's ruby face, while The Hippie leans on the bullet-riddled  
door and brushes the dirt from his gray coveralls, then picks the  
blond thatch from his black beard and ropy hair. "For a crippled-up  
old man," he says and clears his throat, "you tough. Just ain't got no  
sense."

"I've whipped many a man bigger and uglier than you. Why don't  
you cut that hair and look like somebody?" The General rolls to one

side, propped on an elbow with his narrow hips twisted. He reaches for his  
cap and beats off the dirt with the flat of his hand, then sets it on his head,  
pulling the bill down on his forehead to just above his eyes. All around is the  
ripe-sour smell of cow. Katydid shrill in the darker boundary of woods.

"You in a prime position for me to get in my car and run over  
you." No laughing now, and the inside light of the car glows,  
back-lighting The Hippie's limby body.

"You just wanting somebody to notice you, that's all."

"It's the system gripes my gut, man."

"It's doing what's right gripes your gut."

"And what's right, General? God and country and keeping your  
nose to the grind till you lay down and die?"

"You got it." The General sits up with his legs spread and  
studies the vee of raw dirt between them. "Nose to the grind, eight  
to five, six days a week and church on Sunday?"

"That's your religion, old man, not mine. I'm Rastifarian."

"What the hell is that? A bunch of dope smokers?"

"If we want to, yeah." The Hippie stomps his feet as if he's standing in fireants. "It's a black Jamaican religious cult, just so you'll know."

"Then why don't you move to Jamaica?"

"Same reason you don't move to Jerusalem."

The Cali toddles over to The Hippie and tests him with his leathern nose, then toddles back to The General and stands still and close.

"So y'all worship somebody just like we worship Jesus, huh?"

"Fellow name of Haile Selassie."

"This Haile fellow, is he still alive?"

"Not as I know of."

"Well, Jesus is--I'd hate like hell to be worshipping some dead man just to get out of work." The General holds out one hand and the calf licks it; he waves the young bull away. "How bout giving me a hand here," he says to The Hippie.

###

He starts the car and turns wide with the headlights fanning across the open field of shadow-strong weeds and bushes, and the calf tipping close behind in the red glow of the tail lights.

General, seated on the other side now, stands an arm in the window and doesn't hold to the strap, even when the left front tire rolls over into a gopher hole and out. "you stole my money, didn't you?"

"I did."

"How much you get?"

"How much you have?"

"You can kill me, you know, Won't shorten my life but six months, a year, at the most." They are passing through the branch



again, up the rise and across the pasture where in the south sits the Norton cemetery with its <sup>drawn</sup> specters of headstones and striped flag that could be any color with the sun gone now.

"I don't want to kill you, man. What you think I am, some kind of freak?"

"I'd say so, yeah."

"Then you'd say wrong. My mama was a Christian lady, raised me right."

"Well, I've got all the sympathy in the world for her then."

Across the pasture the window lights of the long low house burn bright.

"Hey, if it was daylight, I'd get you to run me on over there to the feed store, just cross the Florida line. See an old girlfriend of mine."

"Got you a girlfriend, huh?"

"Yep. Six in the morning, they open up."

"So, You wanting me to ride you around, listening to that mouth till six in the morning?"

"I'd be dead asleep, moren likely. Wouldn't be saying nothing. snoring maybe, but I wouldn't be saying nothing."

"Then I'd have to knock you in the head."

"Like I say..."

"I know, don't start in on that again."

"we'd have a big time, me and you."

"Listen, old man, I done made up my mind"--driving, serious now, The Hippie speaks in a dull, laden voice. "I'm taking you back to the house, gone set you in your wheelchair and I'm long-gone."

"well, I'd like to say it's been a pleasure, but it ain't."

"Least it was something, wadn't it?"

"What you mean?"

"Least you wadn't just sitting there playing with your navel on a Sunday afternoon."

"I'd as leif do it." Lie. General can smell his own briny sweat, proof he is still alive, that his glands are working even if his legs and feet aren't.

The man stops the car at the metal wire gate, gets out and opens it, comes back and drives through with one foot dragging the ground out the door. Gets out again and closes the gate, securing it with the clanking chain. In the car, he drives forward between the tall bushy pines and on toward the front of the house where sits the blue and chrome wheelchair in the sandy ruts of the lane.

"So you don't aim to take the goat off my hands?" says General.

"Not this time, old man. I'm too wore out from listening to you."

"You think about it and let me know."

The Hippie helps him from the car, to the chair. The wife stands framed in the lit kitchen window like a picture poster for all that is standard and the same.

"I might call the sheriff on you," General says. The Hippie is pushing him in the wheelchair, across the yard, up the wooden ramp of the porch.

"Might ought to."

"Well, I ain't."

I gotta go."

"Think about that goat and call me, you hear?" says The General.

"Ain't many young people I'd mess up no time with."

The hippie walks off into the dark as if he never was or never would be again.