

## Sunday

*Pete Karagianis*

The car took an extra long time to cool off today.

Usually the large V8 engine has no trouble jumpstarting the air conditioner. But today it took just a little longer. The fact that I was wearing a shirt and tie in eighty-degree weather didn't help much.

My soft dress-pant legs netted sweat like a super-absorbent Brawny paper towel as they drew heat from the deep, red plush seats of my sedan. This, I felt, was the beginning of my punishment. God, it seemed, had already caught on to my plan for the day and wanted to make sure that I knew that He knew.

Car rides like these made me wish that I had smoked.

I needed something to take the edge off, to relax.

But I was glad I didn't know the difference between menthols and regular, between lights and heavy.

It was about thirty-eight miles, half an hour, and three gallons of gasoline to get to Church. But I had been using that excuse for too long. I could only imagine the expression I would receive in the afterlife when, explaining my habitual absence, I simply noted that it was an hour round trip and five bucks of gas that prevented me from attending weekly service. That's \$260.00, fifty-two hours, and 4,000 miles a year. Too much damage and expense for an old car.

I hadn't been to church in six years.

The last time I had attended any kind of regular service was in 1996, the year my father died. My absence, however, was not out of anger at his passing, well, not mainly anyway, but instead due to the simple fact that my mother stopped going. It was logical. When she didn't go, and I didn't have a car, I didn't go. Then it was three years later, and I had a car, but hadn't gone for three years.

It became a habit of non-attendance, and it had gone on for too long.

The big guy and I had a few things that needed discussing, a few items on the proverbial agenda that needed checked off.

My leg was sticking to the cloth seat. I was sweating. I was nervous.

Perhaps because I remembered the last time I set foot in a church.

Two years ago a friend of mine was hit by a car and killed. He was crossing the street.

I cross the street so many times a day I couldn't even begin to count. I don't even look both ways any more.

His family held a reception at a church before the wake. I went, but I didn't know any of them; except from vague references made at the lunch table,

they were just faces. They looked in shambles, worse even than I thought my family did in 1996. I felt cold and out of place, no one recognized me. I walked in line to greet them like a lemming to a cliff. I was shaky. When I got there they all looked at me.

“Hi... I’m uh, I’m Bob’s friend.” Robert the Bear. Bob.

Something in my honesty and plain yet shocked expression must have struck Bob’s mom. She grabbed me, previously crying and trembling inconsolably. She grabbed me in a claw hug tighter than I’ve ever been grabbed before. I felt her handkerchief touch the back of my neck. There was more in that squeeze than everything.

“Thank you,” she whispered. Her fingernails dug into my back.

“Thank you.”

Release.

I walked out. On the way I didn’t see anyone else from our lunch table there.

The drive was short. It went by too fast. I didn’t have time to think about everything I needed to, to collect myself to enter somewhere I felt starkly unwelcome. I had to cram all my anxiety into my one minute walk from my parking space to the front door.

But some minutes are longer than others.

I wondered what the people inside would be like. I knew, even now, that I would not be able to attend as often as most of them. I wondered who was behind the large, carved, wooden doors. What faces. What stories.

I wondered how I would be. I had not seriously been to such a place in over half a decade. Would I want to come back? Would I be glad I had come?

Why did I find my way here?

This was a new place, a new town, with new people and new wooden doors.

I remembered the doors.

Large, heavy. So heavy I could not open them in fact. Not when I was a little kid at our small church in Texas. I remembered the inside, how the pews lined up so neatly, how the ceiling was so tall, how voices rattled through the church.

Six Years.

I wiped the sweat off my hands and reached for the handle and swung the doors wide. Heavy incense. A thick, church scent. I took quick breaths, but felt calm, like the tingle of numbness, like goose bumps on my back.

Lit candles in sand in a wooden box. Icons on the wall. Colors. Paintings.

Paintings everywhere. It was comfort.

I felt like a small child again, holding my father's hand as we walked up the aisle to communion. He would lift me to the sour bread and bitter wine. Everything made sense.

I found a seat in the back, near the door. My hands felt cool.

I did not sweat anymore.