

# Penance

An act of faith.

**T. F. Davenport**

"For a small fee, I can say a prayer of some kind."

"No thank you, Father."

"Do you have any metal plates in your skull?"

"No, Father."

The blessing takes place in the hallowed small room at the back of the church. It was once a minister's office. The supplicant sits with his spotted pate bowed, baseball cap resting across his thighs. Quietly grateful for the end of a long day, Father Lin applies the wand to the old man's head. He traces the motions of redemption and bliss: tight circles above the right ear.

"Aaaahhh..."

The old man slumps back in the armchair. Father Lin relaxes. There's always a danger that instead of the gentle, kind god advertised and sold by the church, its vengeful Old Testament twin will show up. That happens quite rarely, always by accident, but not — thank goodness — today.

The old man snuffles back tears, fitting the baseball cap on his head. "Thank you, Father." He pulls Father Lin into a hug; church rules oblige him to reciprocate. Holding the man and patting his back, staring over the cap's stiff bill into an Oakland Athletics logo, Lin contemplates using the wand on himself. The end of the week means no one to talk to, no one to pull him into the unwanted hug which, by the end of his day off, he always longs for again.

But he doesn't use the wand on himself. Somehow that would be cheating. He escorts the old man out, locks the door, turns off the neon sign. He files the man's medical waiver then goes to the broom closet. All that remain are a few minutes mopping the scuffed linoleum, then a Starbucks latte on the way home.

The flow of supplicants started early that day, keeping up until closing with hardly a pause. One after another, holding their numbered tickets, they had their minute in the overstuffed armchair. They told him their sins, troubles and grievances against life. He listened without judgement. Some of them cried when he picked up the wand. The wand is a solenoid on a plastic rod, hooked up to a large capacitor; the sacrament is a dime-sized brain region known

to produce epileptic seizures — and, perhaps as a consequence, ecstatic visions. It takes careful work to get the second without the first.

He's dragging the mop across the wood-grain linoleum when he hears someone knocking at the church's front door. Faintly annoyed, he carries on mopping, but whoever it is just won't go away. He leans the mop against the wall and goes to the tall windows flanking the door. The building was once a church, a real church of the sin-and-pray variety. Unable to maintain

church is closed until Monday, but the light in her eyes upon seeing him, a plain expression that nobody, ever, has been so kind to her, brings a stammer to his lips instead.

"Thank you!" she says. "Thank you!"

"But, ma'am..."

"Thank you," she says firmly. Her eyes brim with gratitude as she takes his arm, and Lin finds himself leading her inside. His heart swells as he takes her through the nave, past the shadow of the absent altar, into the sanctum. He sits her down in the armchair; her tears of despair turn to gratitude, and now the words pour out of her. Polish, he wonders? Whatever the language, Father Lin knows guilt when he hears it. He waits for her confession to end before he gives her the blessing. Perhaps a different blessing from the one she expects, but this one at least is guaranteed to work. As she winds down she's still crying. She holds his hand to her wet cheek. He doesn't have it in him to make her pay.

She signs the medical waiver without looking at it.

Father Lin cranks up the voltage as the woman rattles her hands in prayer. She pauses, briefly alarmed, as he removes her metal hairpins.

The wand hums as he brings it close to her head. She looks up, bumping the wand with her temple. Magnetic fields reach into her skull and in place of the small cortical patch responsible for religious ecstasy, they find her motor cortex. Her hand curls onto itself. Tendons

pop out on her neck as she emits a series of strangled grunts. She slides to the floor and curls there into a fetal convulsing heap. Foamy spittle collects on her lips.

Father Lin curses and rubs his eyes. Then he takes out his phone and stabs the autodial. The paramedics arrive to find him seated and the old woman prostrate, hugging his ankles. His face is worn out with fatigue and loneliness, and the woman tearfully repeats the only English she knows.

"Thank you, thank you..."

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it, the dwindling parish had no choice but to sell: either to Abner Lin with his associate's degree in neurodivinity, or to a neighbourhood Muslim group, eager to open an interfaith dialogue and offer classes in adult literacy. There was no deliberation. Father Lin took possession and hauled the pews out onto the kerb for the trash service. Now the only trace of the building's past is the double front door, wide enough for a coffin and pallbearers, and the skinny windows flanking it.

Through this window he now peers at a stooped old woman clutching the handrail. With a kerchief pinned over her grey hair and a tired, desperate expression, she looks like an escapee from a medieval peasant theme park. Radiating utter hopelessness, she knocks at the door again.

He opens it. He means to tell her the