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Writing Sample

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Extracts from the novel *The Bad Memory* (2015)

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GIRALT

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Accounting

...Second Sorrowful Mystery, the scourging at the pillar of Our Lord Jesus Christ, those whiplashes might have hurt so much to poor Jesus at the cross. Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus, I would have loved to have a baby like the Virgin Mary who conceived him with the Holy Spirit, without carnal contact with a man, I don't regret never having had sex, men have those brute hands, that's what I liked from the travelling salesman, he had those delicate feminine hands, not like Osvaldo who has those big hands, I don't know how my sister felt attracted to him, at least he doesn't have hairy knuckles like Gracielita's husband, that really shocks me, although Ricardo is a very good and caring man, a hard-working man, Martincito has beautiful hands, like a woman's, he's a very delicate kid, he spends too much time with us, but he's a good kid, let's hope he doesn't become a fairy like Orlando, while he dyes your hair he dances like a woman and sings out loud, the boleros by María Martha Serra Lima, poor man, he's a nice person and people accepts him because he's a women's hairdresser, women trust him because no one thinks he would try to do something wrong cause he's like one of us... How does that bolero go? *Like any other woman, I have something in common, I'm jealous of the man that I love, I'm so loving, impetuous, rebel, voracious, like any other woman, I'm every woman*, he has a nice voice, he sounds just like María Martha Serra Lima singing boleros... I'm not going back to Orlando's salon because he charges too much, I prefer to take the hair dye product to Tita's house, now that Paulina is dead Tita and I can get closer, the only thing that bothers me is the dog barking to the corner of the room like he's seen a ghost, like if there's someone standing right in front of him, crazy dog. *Like any other woman, la di la dee da...* I don't have to forget to write down tomorrow in my little black book what Pedrito did to me with his bicycle and the answer Jorgito gave me when I said I was tired and he said: tired of what, of having so much sex with Mr. Cholo Eguia, so rude, he's always making obscene jokes, poor Mr. Eguia, he's been so sad since his wife died last year, she was so fat, poor thing, that she couldn't fit in the coffin, there were parts of her body sticking out, he had to pick a wider coffin, but the arms seemed so stuck, poor thing, they had to cover her with some white lace so we wouldn't notice how stuck she was, stuck in a coffin, if you ever are stuck somewhere... I'm a little distracted today, it might be I haven't had anything to eat and I'm only drinking water to see if this varicose veins get better, Tita says warm water with lemon liquefies the blood and helps with the swelling and the headaches, but my stomach is making so many noises waiting for me to get something to eat... *Like any other woman, like any other...* I love the bolero. What might have been of Olinda Muñiz, my best friend in high school? I never again had a friend like Olinda. All our friends in high school were obsessed with boys and who had kissed who, this and that, and we would meet a church for the afternoon mass while the others were hanging out with the boys downtown. We spent so many beautiful afternoons at the benches in the park, we talked about things, we slept in the grass, I would lean my head on her stomach and she would pat my hair until the sun said goodbye to another beautiful day. What might have been of her life? Where would my beloved Olinda Muñiz be? The last time I saw her she was moving with her family to Bariloche, we wrote a few letters back and forth, but we lost contact a short time after that. I must have a picture of Olinda in one of my boxes, she was so pretty, such a soft skin, but now she might be an old lady like me... I'll wait a little longer and if I don't hear any more noises I'll go get some whiskey from Osvaldo's stash, it relaxes me and helps me sleep. It's so hard to be so old and poor! I'm so distracted that I lost the

track of the counting of beads of the rosary. I must have completed two Hail Marys. Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus, Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death... I hope the hour of my death is really far, I want to see the year 2000, they say there will be flying cars and telephones with televisions in the year 2000, like in that movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* that I didn't understand at all, the theatre was packed because the movie won lots of prizes but I didn't understand a thing. I like love stories and movies with animals, they are so cute, I get more emotional with the misadventures of a poor little animal than with human beings. Oh, my stomach is making noises, I have such an empty stomach, *mamma mia*... I feel embarrassed to be in the kitchen when my sister or Osvaldo are there because with the inflation nobody cares about the list for maximum prices the government publishes and the price of food has rocketed high, even the kids come with the news about the price of bread or the US dollar exchange rate, as if it was something kids should care about. And they forget about us, the retired ones, if it wouldn't be for the social security I wouldn't have my money and my trips to the mountains, they criticize me for travelling with the social security plan, if they don't like the trips I don't know why they criticize, I loved going to the Rio Tercero Hotel that the General Perón built in the mountains, it's so nice, although I had to share a room with those noisy women who wouldn't let me sleep. And that daring Mr. Satur, he thinks he's so charming coming from the big city, come here, Norma, waltz with me, you have the rhythm in your blood, what rhythm would I have with this varicose veins my legs hurt so much I can barely move. And then at night, when I was trying to sleep, Angelica would go to the bathroom every fifteen minutes and the other lady that hid the money in different places all the time and she would forget where she put it, you would have thought she was a millionaire, but she was as poor as a church mouse, like all the rest of us, who would have known, and that disgusting old fart don Gregorio that would wait for me at the hall and tell me, come, Norma, come walk with me, don't be so outrageous don Gregorio, we are too old for this foolish things. But how beautiful was the air of the mountains, unlike this town, this damp humid weather that goes inside your bones and makes the heat feel stronger and the cold feel like you are freezing to death. I felt so good breathing the air of the mountains but when I came back home Osvaldo laughed at me, saying how could you go on the subsidized trips for the senior poor, it's shameful, that is not for people like us, he said... I'm not like him, I'm poor, he's the manager of a company but I'm a retired elementary school teacher. He has a car and travels to Buenos Aires, he goes to the theatre, to the movies, he eats out with my sister and I never leave this house. Who's that in the kitchen? I would have loved to have traveled, to have gone to Japan, to the other side of the world, I'd would have loved to go there, I love Japanese people, they do beautiful flower arrangements, like I saw in that beautiful book about ikebana that was in Olinda Muñiz' house, the book was in English but the pictures were beautiful, the arrangements were so nice and sophisticated, the book was a present from a cousin from Buenos Aires who traveled to London with her husband every year. What might have been of Olinda's life? Is she dead or alive? In the book the pictures showed beautiful Japanese ladies in the kimonos and those beautiful high hairdos with long sticking needles in them. But let's face it, I don't think I'll make it to Japan so let's keep looking at the pictures in the magazines and encyclopedias. I would have also liked to travel to Spain and Italy, the land of my ancestors, to go to Hita and Catanzaro... Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee, Osvaldo has gone to bed, let's see if there's some leftovers in the fridge, I'm starving, my stomach is making noises and I need a shot of whiskey to warm up my bowels and make the blood move, oh, these legs of mine, so old and full of pain, these damn varicose veins that give me so much trouble, if I die I'd like to have an obituary in *La Nación*, the Buenos Aires newspaper. Here in Venado the people from the funeral home will announce it on the radio, otherwise people would never know, it's included in the price of

the service said the girl from the funeral company, but I'd like a nice obituary in a Buenos Aires paper saying: Muscarello, Norma Elena, with my date of birth, march 24th, 1915, and my date of death, which I hope will be after year 2000, and it would say: beloved sister, aunt and grand-aunt, we will love you forever, your sister, your nieces and you grand-nieces and nephews, rest in peace...

*

Confessions

It's so hot in here! Oh, my God! I'm buried alive here, this is how it might feel inside the coffin.

"I was talking to my husband the other night and he asked me to pass him the salad bowl and I replied to him in a bad way and talking like that to a husband is a sin."

It might be a sin, then.

"And I don't remember any other sin."

"Ok. Your penance is fifteen Hail Marys and fifteen Our Fathers. I absolve you in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen."

Is the line long? I can't wait for mass to finish and get out of here. Father Horacio gives the Sunday mass with a fan on and I'm stuck here, hot as hell... But the new bishop doesn't like informalities, he says people respect us less if we are laid back and easygoing with the tradition.

"Good morning, Father."

"Good morning, Norma. How long has it been since your last confession?"

"Five days."

"What sins do you have to confess?"

"I lied three times this week, I said a few dirty words and have had some bad thoughts."

"Anything else?"

"Yes. I did things without putting all my heart in them, I wasn't thankful to be alive every day."

"All right..."

"No, I wanted to ask you something privately here in the confessional. It's something that doesn't let me sleep at night."

"Tell me, Norma."

"I live with my sister and her husband. Well, I used to live with my sister and her husband, now he's dead, you served the mass at his funeral. During all these years that I lived with my sister I wished him dead, somehow."

"Have you done something to make it happen?"

"No, no, I didn't kill him, no, Father, I'm not a killer. But I have committed a sin of intent and a sin of neglect, I wasn't nice to him. I always felt like I was an intruder, always in the back room, Norma, don't leave the room, Norma, don't leave the room, we have friends tonight, stay quiet in the room, don't make noises, Norma. And I wished him dead, I was so mad listening to everyone having fun and I was locked in that room, Norma, don't leave the room, Norma, don't leave the room... And they were drinking whiskey and talking and they didn't even ask me to join them for coffee."

"Ok, Norma. If He could forgive you, now you have to forgive yourself."

"It's true. How can I be so proud to deny God's forgiveness? I felt really bad, I didn't get along with him, he was a good man in front of everybody but with me he was different. I feel like a terrible sinner."

Well, Norma, don't exaggerate.

"You'll pray thirty Our Fathers and thirty Hail Marys."

"Thank you, Father."

"I absolve you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

My shirt is all wet with sweat. It's so hot in this town, I was so happy in Neuquen, the weather was dry and not humid like here, so hard to stand.

"How long it's been since your last confession?"

"Two weeks."

"What sins do you have to confess?"

"I lied, I didn't obey my mom and dad, I had a fight with my brother, my sister pulled my hair and I pulled back, I didn't help my sister with her homework, I pretended I didn't listen to my mother when she asked me to do chores, I masturbated, I told lies at school..."

"One moment. Did you masturbate?"

"..."

"Are you listening?"

"Yes, Father Julián."

"Do you do it at home when you are alone?"

"Yes. My brother gets together with friends, in the house of one of his friends whose parents are out all day and they watch triple X movies. My cousin showed me one but I confessed that already, but now my brother and I have some magazines hidden in the roof under the ivy that goes all the way to the neighbors' house."

"Magazines?"

"Yes, magazines. With naked women in them."

Yes, I see them at the stores. I found some in the seminary while searching the students' rooms.

"What's in the magazines?"

"In the magazines there's women with no clothes and men with no clothes."

"But what are they doing?"

"Should I go on with my sins?"

"Sorry. Go on with your sins, please."

When I was working at the school we used to find magazines in the students' bedrooms but the magazines were inspected in front of Father Gregorio and I didn't have time to look at them in detail. I remember the day he almost found me trying to sneak in his secret drawer to look at them.

"Are you listening?"

"Yes, sorry, it's really hot in here. I'm not feeling well."

"I imagine. I'm dying here too. I asked you a question."

"Tell me."

"Do you have bad thoughts at night? Because when I pray the I confess at mass I ask for forgiveness for sins of attitude, action, neglect, and intent, the sins of attitude and action I can understand, but sometimes my mind stumbles into sinful thinking and I don't know how to stop it, and also the sin of neglect, I look it up in the dictionary and neglect or omission is to omit through indifference or carelessness, and I think I can understand how the sin of thought works but not the sin of omission. How can I commit a sin when I don't know I'm committing a sin?"

"There's a line of people waiting, dear, if you want you can come by church an afternoon I'll answer all your questions. A sin of omission is not a sin that you commit for not doing something in general but for not doing something good."

"For example?"

He's chubby, no? This is the one that always comes with Norma. He has nice eyes, he's chubby, he looks innocent.

"For example, if you see a little bird in danger about to be eaten by a cat, if you don't save it then you have committed a sin of omission."

"But those things happen all the time in nature. My grandmother's neighbor's dog is a good dog but he hunts for doves because he doesn't understand he's ending another animal's life, he eats because he's hungry."

"I'm speaking metaphorically. What other sins would you like to confess?"

"You didn't answer the first question. Do you have bad thoughts?"

“Bad thoughts can’t be avoided but you have to make the effort to keep them out of your mind.”

“And how do you do that, Father?”

“Praying is the key. When bad thoughts come to you, you start praying, a simple Our Father or a Hail Mary and in a moment your mind fills with light and your heart with joy.”

“I’ll try.”

“I absolve you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

“One last thing. The daughter of my grandma’s neighbor is having an adulterous relationship with a man on my grandmother’s front lawn. Is it a sin of neglect that I don’t tell her mom what her daughter is doing?”

“No, no, no. The sins of other people belong to them.”

He has beautiful little hands, the chubby kid, he looks innocent.

“I didn’t understand a thing then, Father.”

Get up and go, people are coughing behind you, don’t you hear?”

“There’s a lot of people waiting their turn for a confession, it would be good if we finished your turn. Any other sin you would like to confess?”

“Yes. I really wanted to talk to you about something else but you don’t really have the time.”

“Ok, if it’s important maybe we should talk about it now.”

“The other night it was very late and I was watching a movie because my cousin lent me his VHS player while he is on holidays. It’s a beautiful movie, I’ve already watched it in the movie theatre. It’s called The Color Purple and it’s about the discrimination of black people in the United States. It’s so long that it takes to full VHS tape and I love long movies and long books. That movie got me thinking about many things. First, why do my mom and dad say ‘f... niggers’, I won’t say the bad word because I don’t want to sin, if black people are people that love and suffer just like we do? My mom makes me roll up the car window if she sees a ‘f... nigger’ coming close. And they are not even as dark as the black people in the movie. Isn’t discrimination against black people a sin?”

“Yes. We are equal in the eyes of God.”

Who puts these ideas in this little chubby kid’s mind? Father Gregorio says you don’t even have to look at these kids, you have to compare with the poor kids from the provinces in the North, but they don’t have such nice skin. It’s so hot in here.

“And the other thing that got me thinking is a scene where the main character, her name is Celie, it would be Celia in Spanish, an old maid’s name, kisses Shug Avery, a cabaret singer, on the mouth. I wonder, is it a sin for a woman to kiss another woman and for a man to kiss another man?”

What questions this fat kid is asking to ruin my morning, what the fuck. The line is getting longer. Who sent this little asshole?

“Are you listening, Father?”

"I absolve you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

"Amen."

"Your penance is to pray two full rosaries to get all those evil thought out of your mind."

"Goodbye, Father."

"Goodbye, son."

Translated from the Spanish by the author.