

Sample translation

***Latino King* by Bibi Dumon Tak
(Amsterdam: Querido, 2010)**

Translated by Laura Watkinson

I was dreaming that I was in a rusty old train and it was coming off the rails. The noise of the wheels banging over the sleepers was deafening. Someone shouted, 'Baby, wake up.' I opened my eyes and saw Cola's smiling face. 'You were miles away, man,' he said. The banging continued. The guards were bashing the bars with their batons. All of the prisoners had to assemble by the door. It was six in the morning. Everyone was swearing, except for Cola, because he was always happy, even when he was up to his neck in shit. How did he manage to be so cheerful all the time? I could see Rocky through the curtains, taking something out of a drawer and stuffing it into his mattress. The guards opened the door and yelled at us to come out. All of the prisoners on A wing were to go to the courtyard. Usually, this was the quietest moment of the day. A time when everyone was asleep: the night owls and the early risers. And that's exactly why those bastard guards chose that time to carry out a full-scale search.

Hundreds of us were out there, huddled together in our underwear. They counted us all and then, one by one, they made us take off our underwear and jump over a low wall. If you'd hidden something up your butt you'd lose the load when you jumped, so you'd be crazy to stash your drugs or your mobile up there. By the time it was my turn, everyone was wide awake. They all started clapping and shouting, 'Jump, Baby, jump!'

Cola had to go after me. He did a lousy run-up and he tripped. One of the guards kicked his butt and told him to open his legs and bend over. Those Nazis didn't have any sense of humour. We just went on clapping and shouting. In the meantime, the guards were turning our entire cell upside down. Those motherfuckers turned every last thing inside out. They got their grubby paws all over my mattress, rifled all through my clothes, and turned the envelopes with Mum's letters in upside down and shook them until everything was lying on the floor. If they found any dollars during their search, they went straight into their own pockets. Here in La Victoria you had nothing of your own. Even your skin didn't belong to you.

One prisoner after another jumped over the wall, under the watchful eye of the guards, and we clapped along as though we were in gym class, but we were all shitting ourselves. Almost everyone had something to hide. Rocky had weed, Cola had a knife, Daddy owned a bottle of illegal drink, Troy was hiding a machete, Littleman had coke and he'd just helped me get my hands on a mobile. Littleman looked kind of anxious. The idiot hadn't hidden his coke behind his balls, had he? He was due to go home that afternoon; we'd been celebrating for a week. He wasn't going to blow it now, was he? He took a run-up and I forgot to clap. He jumped much higher than he needed to. He was five foot three, which is where the nickname came from. I didn't know what his real name was.

When he landed, he threw his arms in the air. The crowd whooped. He walked over to us, hips swaying as though he'd just set a new world record for the high jump. Rocky whistled wildly through his three teeth. And, all that time, Littleman didn't say a single word. When he took his place in the line behind me, he gave me a wink. I just whispered to

him, 'Where?' He clicked his tongue. And I realised he'd hidden his coke in a condom behind his back teeth.

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By seven, we were back in our cell. And all the mothers in the entire Dominican Republic and the rest of the world were being cursed all over again. No one in here called you a shithead or a fuckwit. You were a son of a whore, a son of a fucking whore or of a million whores all at once. They were planning to fuck your mother, or bum her, or rape her or even shit on her. If you really wanted to let off steam, you just slagged off a whole bunch of mothers. Back home, we'd have told them to leave our mothers out of it, but no one made a big deal of it here. Just as well. You'd have had your work cut out.

Anyway, when we got back to our cell, it looked as though a bomb had gone off. The whole room had been turned upside down. I saw that they'd thrown my clothes off the shelf, but the brackets and the actual shelf were still fixed to the wall. I'd hollowed out one of the brackets and part of the shelf. And that hole was where I'd hidden my mobile, my line to the Netherlands.

I heard Daddy swearing. His bottle was gone. And Troy had lost his machete, which wasn't so bad, because Troy was a bit of a crazy bastard. He was absolutely raging. Not because of the machete – he could just buy that back from one of the guards for a hundred pesos – but because someone had cut his mattress to pieces. And where the hell was he going to get a new one any time soon? Someone was in for it tonight – there was no way on this earth that Troy would sleep on the floor. But he'd better not try it on with me, the *hijo de mil putas*. If he did, I'd cut his throat for him.

We managed to get the cell back into some kind of order by about nine. There were twenty of us sharing the room. If it got busy, there were sometimes thirty of us in there. When you first arrived, you had absolutely nothing. You had to sleep on the floor of the corridor. The strongest guys and the ones with the most money had set up their own rooms on either side of the corridor. They made the rooms themselves by stretching ropes from one wall to the other and hanging pieces of material from them. Every cell had a network of ropes hanging from the walls. It looked like a curtain shop in some Third World country. It was a month before I got a room for myself with some money that my mum had sent. I paid a hundred and fifty dollars for it, far too much, but I'd have gone insane without that room. For the first few days I just slept on the floor because I refused to lie on a second-hand mattress. And by 'second-hand' I mean a mattress that had already had a whole army of bodies on it. Bodies sweating. Bodies fucking. Bodies puking. Piss, shit, blood – all the mattresses in La Victoria were brown and stiff with filth. Some of the guys were so happy when they finally scored a mattress after weeks of fighting that they jumped up and down on their newly acquired bed like a little kid. The next morning they stank just like the mattress, but they didn't realise because everything in there stank so bad. I preferred to lie on the concrete floor with the rats scratching away around me until one day my lawyer brought me a brand-new mattress.

Once every so often, the guards would search our cell for forbidden objects. Whenever we came back after a search, they'd pulled down the ropes, cut up the mattresses and turned all of our clothes inside out. It took ages for you to get your own stuff back, because the shitheads threw everything all over the place. Deliberately, just because they had the power. Your trousers would be in the toilet, one shoe would be in the left-hand corner and the other in the right, like they'd been playing catch with them. All of your letters would be spread all over the floor beneath the piles of curtains. If they'd had any money in them, you'd seen the last of that, and when you went looking for your photographs, grabbing hands tore them into a thousand pieces.

The first time I went through a cell check, I lost the envelope with my photo of Mum inside. I was in a complete panic. I didn't want anyone to know I had a picture of her. Then I saw Troy smirking at me. He had something in his hand. 'Whoa, check it out!' he shouted over at me. I knew he'd found the photo. I could feel the fury rising within me. It's important not to lose your temper straightaway in La Victoria. First you need to count to ten and work out who exactly it is that you're dealing with, but I only ever got as far as one. Sometimes I didn't even get that far.

Troy saw me coming. He said, 'Hey, kiddo, when that woman of yours comes to visit, you just send her straight to me.' I went for his throat, but he stood there laughing. So I grabbed a length of rope from the floor and tried to twist it around his neck. Troy was a head taller than me and twice as wide. He worked out like crazy the whole damn day. He had the most toned body I'd ever seen. He picked me up and held me against the wall with my feet dangling above the ground. I kicked him between the legs. He just laughed. And called me Baby. Then I took a swing at him and whacked his teeth down his neck. That stopped him laughing. He put me back down on the ground and shook his head. A stream of blood was trickling down his chin. He said, 'You'll go a long way in here, Baby.'

I picked up the photo of Mum. The others stood there, speechless. Their feet were buried in the mountain of curtains. Since that day no one had called me by my real name, just Baby. I was the youngest in the cell. Eighteen years old and without any sign of facial hair. Because I had a habit of lashing out, some of them started to call me White Lightning. Daddy had a different name for me though. He called me 'Trouble' from the first day we met, because of the problems I caused in the cell right from the beginning. My real name soon disappeared. Sometimes I said it out loud to myself at night, to make sure I didn't erase myself for good.

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The taxi driver blew his horn at six on Monday morning. Mum had filled the entire blender with fruit so I could drink down a litre of health. 'Enough vitamins for the whole week,' she said. I gave her a quick hug and I could feel how thin she'd become. 'Fancy you going to the railway station in a cab,' she said, shaking her head. 'Don't forget to give me a call now and then, eh?'

'Sure.' I had a lump in my throat. I stroked Bubblehead, our boxer, behind her ears. Her loyal gaze almost made me abandon the whole thing, but the driver blew his horn again and I picked up my bag and left the house without looking back.

The taxi took me to Schiphol. A friend of Faatje's cousin, or a cousin of Faatje's friend, or whatever, had brought over a ticket for me the evening before. This time, I was going to the Dominican Republic. I'd be making more money out of this trip than the last one, which is exactly what I needed to make a new start. I took the additional risk as part of the deal. Who dares wins.

Someone came to collect me at the airport in Santo Domingo in the usual way. Like an experienced mule, I threw my arms around the man who'd come to pick me up and asked him how he was. The car that took me to the hotel was a rusty Toyota four-wheel drive and the hotel itself turned out to be a whorehouse. The tourists staying there hadn't come for the beautiful white beaches of the Dominican Republic, but to be looked after by girls of sixteen. My first thought was: what the hell is this? The men who dropped me off said they'd be in touch. I went up to my room early, but I kept waking up all night because the hotel had transformed into one giant mattress.

The next day I took the bus to the beach. As soon as I got there, I wanted to go back to the hotel because I was scared that the client wouldn't be able to find me. As a mule you can't just go strolling around and pretending you're on holiday. You always have to be ready and waiting, just in case you need to leave in a hurry.

I didn't hear anything from them. I felt even more isolated than I had the first time. I started to curse Faatje. Faatje in his red overalls, drooling all over the bonnet the moment he saw the blue and white checks of the BMW logo. Faatje, who didn't hide the drugs in a case, but inside his stomach. Faatje, who told me in great detail about how he swallowed all those balls, one by one, until he could hardly move and had to stagger on to the plane, stuffed like a pig. Fuck Faatje. I phoned him. He said, 'Honest, man, it'll be fine. Those guys always take a while, but they've never fucked me over, so why should they screw you?' I calmed down a bit. He told me a new Beamer had come in. A roadster with a TV receiver, a rain sensor and 231 horses under the hood. He was about to embark on a long list of specs, but I told him I'd come and take a look myself when I got back.

It was Friday by then. I'd said to Mum that I'd be home at the end of the week. I didn't want to call her. I didn't feel like coming up with all kinds of excuses again. All the lying and manipulation was making me feel like a fraud.

I phoned her anyway. 'I know what you're up to,' she said as soon as she answered. 'Come back, don't do it.' I said that I couldn't go back now. 'If I leg it, they know where to find me at home.' They'd paid for my ticket and my hotel and given me a stack of banknotes for a few days of fun. If I cleared off now, they'd be waiting at Schiphol to kill me.

'Don't you worry, Mum. You know God always makes sure there's a guardian angel sitting on my shoulder.'

Mum said, 'When you get home, I'm going to tie you up. See if you can get out of that!'

'Fine, Mum,' I said, 'when I get home I'll be your prisoner.'

They came round that evening to tell me that there'd been all kinds of problems. They said they were going to book me a new flight, but no one had showed up by the time I was supposed to leave. I was totally stressed. I called Faatje. He told me it was all completely normal. 'You want to swallow the stuff, then they can't keep you waiting,' he laughed.

I spent all those days just hanging around at the hotel. There was all sorts going on: people fighting, snorting cocaine and breaking into the tourists' rooms. It was terrible, but I didn't dare to pray anymore. I thought: no use talking to God about it – he knows me too well. And I didn't phone Mum again either. I started to think about going back home without the coke. What in God's name was I doing here in this Fifth World country anyway? Now that I was far away from home my problems didn't seem so bad. That always happens when you put some distance between you and the shit. And you start thinking: what was I so worried about? I can start over again, can't I?

But I waited too long to decide. One morning I found myself surrounded by four men. '*Mula*, it's time,' they said. They told me to pick up my bag and get into the car. They raced through the city like lunatics and didn't stop until we reached a field out in the sticks. They sat down on the grass and opened a bottle of rum. The whole bottle was empty in no time. Everything around me was spinning. I thought that if I got drunk at least I wouldn't feel so nervous. Then they took out a pair of shorts, sort of cycling shorts that went down to the knees. They told me to put them on over my underpants. The shorts had these long compartments sewn into the legs and the men started stuffing blocks of compressed cocaine into them.

I said, 'What about the dogs?'

'Not a problem. There's anti-dog spray all over this stuff.'

I pulled my jeans back on, but you didn't have to look hard to see the coke. They told me it was fine. If you didn't know it was there, you wouldn't notice it. Then they opened another bottle. I asked them if they had a pair of jeans with wider legs. Everything in my head had started screaming: Don't do it! Get out! It was almost as though they could hear the shouts too, because they said I could always decide not to take the coke, but then we'd have a problem.

I was completely paralysed. It's terrifying to discover that there are certain moments in your life when you have absolutely no say about what's happening to you. I just sat there, on that parched grass, surrounded by scrawny cows, and, like a robot, I accepted the bottle that the men passed around. I drank until they said, 'Get in. It's time to go.'

We drove to the airport. 'Hold your bag in front of your legs,' they said, 'then no one will see anything.'

They were a bunch of amateurs, that much was obvious, but I was too stunned to make a fuss. I'd chosen this path and there was no way back. We said goodbye. I joined the queue and checked in. I kept the bag with me as hand luggage. I was dripping with sweat by the time I reached the security check. I clamped the bag to my legs.

I put my bag down on the belt just before it was my turn to go through the security gate and I hunched over a bit as I walked through. I'd pulled my T-shirt down over my legs as far as it would go. When the alarm went off, I nearly had a heart attack. They asked if I had anything in my pockets. I dug into my pockets and pulled out my lighter. My T-shirt was sticking to me. They told me to go through the gate again. A female security guard was studying me really closely. I felt her eyes boring through me, as though she was an X-ray machine. As I walked past her, I could smell my own sweat. 'Come back here,' she said. I decided to pretend I hadn't heard her and just carried on walking. My whole body was shaking. 'Señor,' she shouted. I saw people looking at me. I turned around. Sweat was running down my forehead into my eyebrows. 'Hat off,' she said. I was wearing one of those tourist baseball caps with 'República Dominicana' on it. I showed her my hat. It was soaking wet. She said I could carry on. I laughed. I was so nervous and so relieved that I had a huge smile plastered all over my face.

I sat down in the departure lounge and wiped my face dry with my T-shirt. When I looked up, a man was standing right in front of me. He flashed his ID at me. 'Police,' he said.

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The first thing I thought was: this is God's revenge. I swear. I was sitting there on one of those plastic bucket seats, with the sweat pouring off me, and I knew that I was fucked. 'Come with me,' the man said. He looked like an actor in a B-movie. His belly was hanging over the top of his trousers. He had a gleaming black moustache and a gold ring with some kind of flashy stone on one of his fat fingers. He snapped shut his police ID in the same arrogant way they do it on TV. He didn't even look at me, but just acted as though I didn't exist; he stood there, sighing and studying a plane that was taxiing out to the runway.

I stood up and followed him into a little room. There was another man in there who looked just like him. They could have been twins. 'Passport,' they chorused. 'Hat off.' And then, 'Bag open.' I had a gold chain around my neck and about a hundred euros in my pocket. I'd learned how to cope out on the streets and I was going to get through this as well. Never give up. Always keep on going, even when it looks hopeless.

'Spread your legs,' they said. 'Hold out your arms.' They started tugging at me.

'What's this?' one of the moustaches asked, running his hands down my thighs.

'I'm sick,' I said.

'Sick?'

'My stomach's not working.'

'What do you mean, not working?'

'It's just not working.'

'Show me.'

'I can't.'

'Why not?'

'The tubes will come out.'

'Tubes? What are you talking about?' The moustache banged his fist on the table.

'Get them off!' he screamed. I removed my jeans. They nodded as they looked at the lumpy cycling shorts. They asked me what the lumps were.

'I told you! Tubes!' I yelled. My brain had stopped thinking and I just kept repeating what I'd already said, like a machine.

'Tubes? What the hell for?' they shouted angrily.

'For my stomach.' I was angry too. One of the moustaches gave my shorts a tug and one of the blocks of coke fell straight out onto the floor. They told me to take off the shorts.

When I'd got my jeans back on a while later, I gave each of them a fifty-euro note. They accepted the money but didn't say anything. 'I want to get out of here,' I said. They silently wrote things on a form and put the shorts into a transparent plastic bag. I removed my gold chain and one of the men took it from me. The other man told me to follow him. I said that I didn't want to miss my plane. 'Come with me,' he said again. I asked where we were going. He told me to be patient and that it'd be over soon.

'Please let me go,' I said.

‘Soon,’ said the man who was playing with my chain. They pushed me into a rickety old lift. We were going down to the basement. My plane was leaving in half an hour. With a bit of luck, I could still make it. We walked down a long corridor. It was cooler there and I found it easier to breathe. The corridor led to a large room, with a studio lamp standing in the centre. A photographer was bending over his camera, chatting to a man in uniform. They were all fat and these two had moustaches as well. The man in uniform started questioning me again. More and more people came in and they all wanted to ask questions. They seemed very happy about something and they kept on making jokes that I didn’t understand. I just repeated that I didn’t know anything and that I couldn’t give them any names. They were getting impatient and so was I. There was no clock in there, but I could tell from the growing pile of cigarette butts that my flight must have left ages ago.

I asked them what was going to happen to me now, but all they said was, ‘Shut your mouth, you little shit.’ That’s when I knew that I’d lost. They took photographs of me. I was going to end up on the wall there along with all of the other portraits of people they’d caught. Some of the photos were faded and crumpled, as though the people in them had died in that room and then been forgotten. They handcuffed me. Nobody mentioned the gold chain and the hundred euros. Someone spoke into a walkie-talkie and before long there were five soldiers standing around me. It sounds like a cliché, but I really did think to myself: any moment now I’m going to wake up.

They took me with them and pushed me into a Jeep. I sat on the back seat, squeezed in between the soldiers. They all kept their fingers on the trigger. With every bump in the road, the barrels of their guns bounced all over the place. We left the city. And I knew for certain that I wouldn’t be seeing the Netherlands in the next few days. I had to phone Mum and tell her I’d be a week or so late. Maybe I shouldn’t tell her exactly where I was.

Seriously, I thought it’d take a week and then I’d be out. What’s a few grams of coke? And if they didn’t let me go soon, the embassy would make sure I was transferred to the Netherlands. That’s what I thought to comfort myself as the Jeep lurched over the cracked tarmac. My handcuffs were far too tight, I needed to pee and my head was killing me. I kept thinking about Mum. I couldn’t understand why I’d checked in even though everything was telling me it wasn’t going to work. Anti-dog spray, that’s where it started. You didn’t have to be a super sleuth to see that I was hiding something under my jeans. I’d fallen victim to a bunch of amateurs, a gang of sixth-rate dealers who wanted some moron to be a mule for them. Why hadn’t I just said: ‘Fuck off. You try walking through Customs with a load of cocaine on display for everyone to see!?’ Faatje had warned me. ‘You got to swallow it,’ he said. But I couldn’t do that. I just couldn’t get that stuff down my throat.

The Jeep stopped in front of a police station, a sun-bleached building with the word ‘Policía’ on it in peeling letters. We walked down a corridor. I said that I needed to go to the toilet. ‘Later,’ they said. Some men in uniform were smoking around a wooden table. The atmosphere in the room was stifling. A woman was sitting on one of the chairs. She wasn’t wearing very much. The token slag. She had bright-red lipstick on and when she

saw me she clicked her tongue. The men looked up with weary faces. They clearly weren't in the mood for work. One of them pulled himself to his feet and went and sat at a table with a typewriter on. It looked like something out of the fucking middle ages. The other men started rifling through my bag. They even looked at my underpants. They kept on asking me questions, the same questions I'd had to answer at the airport. I asked if I could go to the toilet. 'Later.' I asked if I could have some water. 'Later.' Then I asked if they had a cigarette for me, because I wanted to smoke even more than I wanted to quench my thirst. The gorilla on the typewriter told me that smoking wasn't allowed in the building. As he said it, he was exhaling smoke from his own cigarette. The token slag took pity on me and made sure I could go to the toilet. Then she gave me a plastic cup of sickly sweet lemonade.

Four hours later (there was a clock on the wall), they took me to my cell. It was already way after midnight. We walked down a corridor with bare walls. I could hear men screaming. When we went around the corner I saw bars along both sides of the corridor, with dozens of prisoners behind them. They reached their arms out to touch me. I'd landed up in a movie; the only difference was that I could smell this too. I breathed in the stench of putrefaction. This was a zoo, but it was worse than a zoo, because these were people. We walked all the way to the end of the corridor. Our footsteps echoed dully and the guards' keys rattled. The guards stopped at the last cell, the most overcrowded one. The prisoners went wild when they saw that I was being put in with them.

'Bring him here,' they shouted. 'Bring that fresh meat over here.' The prisoners in the other cells shouted their protests and pulled so hard on the bars that I thought they were going to break. They were like starving hyenas who had just spotted a weakened buffalo. I looked at the hysterical men clutching at the bars and climbing over each other to get a good look at me. None of them were wearing T-shirts and their trousers were held up by rope. The stench from the last cell was unbearable.

'That one's mine,' one of them shouted.

'You out of your mind?' another one called. 'That sweet butt's mine tonight.'

I started to panic. I turned to the guards, but they weren't taking the slightest notice. I'd been through so much already that day. Despair, fury, sadness about Mum. But now, for the first time, I was frightened too. They were going to rape me in here and the guards didn't care. I said, 'Please don't make me go in there.' They took off my handcuffs without saying anything. I begged them to let me sleep in a cell by myself. All the while, the other prisoners kept on pulling at the bars. They were howling. I heard them shouting 'gringo'. Tasty gringo. I was furious. I braced myself as the cell door opened and then kicked and hit out when the guards pushed me inside. They didn't even have to push that hard though, as dozens of grubby hands grabbed hold of me and pulled me inside.

I was an exhausted prey, surrounded by a pack of wild, slavering wolves. The door of the cell banged shut. I heard the guards laughing as they walked away. I was absolutely certain: I was going to be eaten alive.

It may sound strange, but I believe in God. You might wonder what He would want with me, a boy who'd strayed so far from the path. But, to be honest, I don't think God gets to choose. He doesn't say: I'll listen to that guy, but not that one. I reckon it's impossible to get into God's bad books, otherwise I'd have been hearing a buzz on the line whenever I tried to talk to him for a long time already. God is merciful.

There were a lot of churches in La Victoria, at least ten. Not buildings with steeples, but simple prayer rooms with a Bible, where services were held. They were quiet places and sometimes there was a sermon by a fellow prisoner who had promoted himself to minister or priest. Nothing official. The church I usually went to was led by a clergyman who was in for rape. He had a tattoo the size of a headlight on his neck. Whenever he opened his mouth, he said he'd found the path to Jesus and that it was a beautiful path, with bright colours and full of love. I didn't want to listen to someone talking about beauty and love when he'd violently raped a woman not so long ago. But Manolo took me along with him. Manolo came into our cell not long after Littleman left.

Manolo was ten years older than me, but he looked like he was about twelve. At first, I completely ignored him. What would I want with a toddler running around after me? One morning I was playing basketball and I was making a right mess of it. Manolo picked up the ball and scored a perfect shot from an impossible position. 'That's how you do it, Americano,' he said. That was the day he started to teach me to play basketball. We became such a good team that we won every game. Manolo had really got into God since he'd been in prison. But before that he'd had such a bad reputation out on the streets that people in Santo Domingo used to shake when he went by. He had devils tattooed on his calves and his arms were covered in hell too. One day he shot a man dead for bothering his sister. They gave him ten years.

He devoted all of his time in prison to two things: basketball and the Bible. Either he was explaining how to pass the ball or telling me yet again about Jesus dying for us on the cross. 'Do you know how long the nails were, Baby?' And he would hold his hands so far apart that it looked as though they'd used tent pegs to nail Jesus up. And then he jabbed his finger at my chest. He practically had to stand on tiptoe to do it. 'For us. For you, for me. That's who Jesus did it for. That's love, Baby. You get it? You want to save people, you have to die a painful death.'

Manolo wrapped bandages around his legs so that you couldn't see the devils. Sometimes he wore long trousers even in that heat. He said we went to the rapist's church because everyone deserved a second chance. Manolo made no distinction between murderers, rapists and dealers, but, to be honest, I did, and I still think that dealing is the least bad of the three. So I didn't listen to the preacher's sermons, but I did listen to Manolo's.

Even though I only went to church to please Manolo, I still prayed silently to God. I made my apologies and asked Him to help Mum. But I couldn't stay in there too long,

surrounded by the sickening scent of the incense and the so-called repentance of all those kneeling criminals. I just kept thinking: this isn't me. Thinking about God only felt good when I was on my own, like when I was lying on my mattress between the curtains of my room.

The actual church was too holy for me. Too pompous. So I preferred to bypass the church when I spoke to God and to do it in my own time. If you thought about it, God and Mum were pretty similar: even though I didn't always listen to them, they always listened to me.

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I had to tell Mum the bad news, but I kept putting off the phone call. One afternoon, Daddy said, 'Go on. Just call her and say what you need to say.' I lifted up the wooden plank and took out my phone. My fingers were shaking so badly that I had to redial the number about twenty times until I finally got through.

'Sssh,' Mum said before I could say anything. 'I'm coming to see you.' I nearly had a heart attack. I didn't want her to see me here in this hellhole. And where was she going to stay? In one of the lovely tourist hotels with all of those happy holiday-makers? And then how would she get to La Victoria? It was the kind of neighbourhood where people would stab you just for a packet of cigarettes. I told her not to come. 'I'll decide that for myself,' she said. Sometimes there was no reasoning with her. 'Mum,' I said, 'we've been robbed.' I lit a cigarette. 'Look, you mustn't come here. Everyone's insane in this country. Stay at home and I'll come to you. I'll be back by Christmas.'

She started crying. And when I told her that the lawyer had run off with her eighteen thousand euros she actually started screaming. He'd been in to visit me at first and brought me some shopping and a mattress. He said he'd worked out a plan to get me out of there, but when he stopped answering his phone after a while, I realised he'd done a bunk. And that was before the judge had even given his verdict.

It was all my fault. It made me so mad when I thought about it. I'd actually forced Mum to send all of that money to the Dominican Republic. Well, not actually forced her, of course, but I knew she'd listen to me if I said, 'Mum, if you're really my mother, if you love your son, then you'll help me. If you love me, you'll send the money.' What kind of mother wouldn't empty her savings account to help her son? So, by choosing my words carefully, I basically forced her. And now I really regretted those words. So much so that it physically hurt. She's the sort of mother who always protects her child, against everyone and everything. When I did bad things on the outside and everything went fine, then I never gave it a second thought. But if things went wrong, I ran to my mum, like a little kid who'd fallen over. I was a real mummy's boy. And no matter what I did, she never stopped loving me.

She hadn't noticed that I was going out at night, leaving the house via the drainpipe and climbing back up again in the morning before she got up. I was her baby. So the nickname they'd given me in La Victoria was a good one. At home, I did my own thing and there was no one to stop me. My will was stronger than hers. I was thoroughly spoiled. Not with things, but with patience. Maybe she should have let me fall now and then, so that I'd know what it was like to try and stand on your own two feet. To see how I'd cope. But she never did that.

The pain I felt for Mum was worse than all of the pain I'd ever known in my entire life. When I cried in La Victoria at night, I was crying just because of her. Because of what I'd done to Mum. Because of that one sentence: 'If you love me, you'll send the money.'

And she did it. She took the money that she'd saved for her old age and transferred it to some lawyer, a complete stranger.

'Mum,' I said, 'there's nothing you can do about it. I don't want you to come here.'
She just said, 'I'm sorry, but I've already booked the ticket.'