

My Friend Luis

Episode 1 — "The Stinky Has Gone Mad"

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LUIS: I've never been so alone in my life. I've never been so lonely. If I ever knew brokenness, at that moment I was aware of my brokenness. If I ever knew shame, at that moment I was full of shame. I was hungry. I was in a lot of pain. I was very cold. I was very hungry. And I was very — I mean, very, very scared.

WAYNE: Hi, I'm Wayne Jacobsen. And over the next ten episodes, I want to introduce you to my friend Luis, who is one of the most incredible human beings I've ever had the pleasure to know. And I've known many.

I've authored a number of books on spiritual intimacy. I've helped to facilitate conversations across some of the most divisive issues of our day with rooms full of polarized people. And to do both of those things, I've traveled all over the world. I've met thousands of people and find each one fascinating in their own way. But I've never met anyone like Luis. His story is one of the most compelling I've ever heard. Out of a painful childhood, he carries an unrelenting hunger for life. And in that pursuit, he has become a man of deep wisdom and unfathomable generosity. I've known him for the past twelve years, and he has become one of my closest friends and confidants.

So let's begin on the afternoon of December 19, 1994. It's a cold evening in Tijuana. Luis is 21 years old. He first came to the United States when he was 16 on a visa for competitive boxing. But when it expired, he stayed on with his brothers and sisters who were already living here. A few days before, he'd returned to Mexico to take a car to his mother, who desperately needed it. Now he's headed back. And without a visa, that means finding his way through the wall. Earlier in the day, he'd landed in Tijuana and made his way to the border. He's alone. And this is his story, in his own words.

[Flight announcement: "Ladies and gentlemen, we'll be arriving at Tijuana International Airport in about five minutes, where it's a chilly 50 degrees. Please make sure your seat backs and tray tables are in their upright position."]

LUIS: The first thing I recall is when you're on the plane and the pilot announces that you're coming to Tijuana — that thing starts bringing like shivers into your body. And you get goosebumps and your heart starts racing, just knowing what's to come. Lots of fear. And then that's the moment where you start questioning yourself: why in the world did I leave the U.S. to begin with? What was I thinking? So on the excitement, I wanted to see my mom and everything — everything is fine, you're on your way back to Mexico. But on the way back, that's when you're paying the price.

And being 21 and single, I didn't think I had much responsibility. So, you know, I was a bit reckless. That's something — a chance I would not take now, especially with a wife and kid. Back then, I took that risk,

and I paid a hefty price for it.

I remember when you first come here, you're in a place — it's kind of like limbo. Tijuana is still part of Mexico, but you don't belong there, and you're not where you were born. You just don't belong there. I don't think they even want you there. That's a place where there's a lot of predators and a lot of prey.

I remember the night when I was crossing — you try to cross as soon as possible. So on that very same night, I tried to cross. As I was preparing to cross, you just get as close as you can to the border. And at that point, there were three points of entry. There was one that's called the canals, where the sewer lines go — you know, the canal for the sewer lines. There's another one called playas, which means by the beach. And there's another one called el cerro, which is the mountains. So I decided to go with the canals.

As I was getting close to the canals — because you have to get close to the border — there's an area like a no-man's-land where the Mexican police patrols, and you have to go through that. They had another police back then that was kind of some sort of a secret police called Beta — B-E-T-A. It's an acronym. I don't know what it stands for, really, but it's called Beta. There was so much corruption that they changed it. Now it's a support team — they help migrants now at the border, if somebody gets hurt, stuff like that. Kind of like a Red Cross type of thing, but not to confuse them with the Red Cross — what they did, they all dressed in orange from top to bottom. So back then, they used to be dressed like us, you know, like civilians, like anybody else. And their job was to infiltrate — just go into people and find out who was in drug cartels, or who was a smuggler, or who was a pickpocket, things like that. But there was a lot of — I'm not saying all of them are or were, but the ones I encountered, they were corrupt.

I didn't know they were part of the law enforcement, because they didn't even identify themselves. One of them approached me and he pulled a knife and he says, give me all your money. At first, he was kind of like twenty feet away from me. I didn't really take him seriously. I just kept walking. I ignored him. And then two more came — I remember one from my left and one from my right, and the other one was behind me. That's when I knew this thing got real.

And having a background in boxing and being fit — running seven miles every day, and not just running, but I mean really running — I was in great shape. The only thing I had back then, it was two things: a hundred-dollar bill, which was a mistake, and one of those ChapSticks that my mom gave me. It was a brand new one — I remember it was still in the seal, it was still wrapped. It was December, and I remember her telling me, "It's going to get cold and your lips will get chapped. So here, this is for the road."

It's not a mistake to have the hundred dollars, but having the actual bill — not having different denominations like fives. You can stack ten dollars in one shoe and then twenty in the other one, and different pockets. If they take one hundred-dollar bill, they take it all.

They wanted money, and at one point I tried to reason with them, telling them that, look — you're here, you're struggling. I'm struggling. I mean, what are you doing? And my mentality at that point, the way I was trying to reason with them, is by telling them: you should take from the rich, right? Come on. In my

mind I said, why are you taking from me? I have nothing. So they said, well, you have shoes. You have everything on. So you're going to give us all of that.

So as they got close to me — I guess it's one of those reactions, fly or fight — I started to fight them. And I remember the first one, when he approached me, he kept the knife really close to me. And just by a reaction, I flinched and I grabbed his right hand with my left, and then I punched him with my right, and then I came back with a left hook again and knocked him out. Then the other two attacked me, and I just knocked out all three of them. And I started running.

And then as I was encountering people — because at that time, it was around, I don't know, probably 11-ish p.m., so you see a lot of people there; there's people all night there, they're doing all kinds of things, whether they're selling, buying, or crossing — as I was encountering them, I said, hey, there's robbers back there. Don't go that way, right? And I just kept running. And then I heard them back there, screaming the words "¡Pareja, ayúdame! ¡Pareja, ayúdame!" — your pareja, it's your partner. Help me, help me. That's when it was starting to dawn on my mind — I was like, wait, why are they calling each other partners? You know, it's something that you don't use like that. And then they started running behind me, and I started hearing radios. And so I was like, what did I get myself into? Later I learned that they were actually police officers. I didn't know. And even — I mean, they tried to rob me; it doesn't make it right either. But at least I would have just probably handed them the \$100. Get it over with.

So they started chasing me, and they chased me down the canals. They chased me for like, probably, I don't know, maybe like two hours. By then it was like probably one a.m. Because there's a part where there's no fence between the U.S. and Mexico — at least not in the '90s. It was like the width of two football fields. That time there was a lot of water running, because it was still raining — it was kind of full. On top of that, then you have roads, and then you have parks. So it's about, kind of like, I don't know, about four or five football fields' width from the fence of the United States border to the first road on the Mexican side. So it's just empty. It's just empty. You're just running on concrete this whole time, because the canals are so wide.

The first thing on my mind when I started hearing that — I just hid, because I couldn't explain myself. I mean, it was my word against theirs, and I was going to lose. Those three were corrupt, definitely. On the edge of the canals, there's these kind of like gaps, if you want to call them. And what I did, I hid in one of them. Some of them are wider than others. So what I did, I just went sideways into one of them, and I just hid there for like, I don't know, maybe about two hours probably — until I didn't hear any more sirens of cars, or cars running around, or seeing any movement or hearing anything.

After that, I thought it was done. I got out, and then I started walking, and I was really hungry, thirsty, scared — very scared. So I started walking toward the Mexican side, to the houses there in Tijuana, to see if I could find a place where I could eat something. There was, I remember, a chain-link fence, and I started walking toward it. As soon as I jumped the fence, I saw a police car coming, actually, in the opposite direction. But there was a divider on the road — the car couldn't make a U-turn there. So when I saw the car going by, my heart started racing again, because I thought, they're probably still looking for

me. As soon as there was the first opportunity to make a U-turn, it made a U-turn and turned on the lights. At that moment I knew — I knew it was because of me. So I took off running again, back into the canal.

When I ran into the canal, that same police cruiser, that same car — they actually drove to the chain-link fence. Because in their mind, I assaulted police officers. So in their mind, I was the worst, and they needed to stop me. They started following me in that car. There's parts where you cannot go in cars, so they got out of the car, they started chasing me, and I started seeing police everywhere. They looked like ants — I mean, everywhere. I didn't know it was such a big deal. They were all looking for me. They made it a priority to catch me.

They started shooting at me, and some were screaming "stop" — others were just shooting at me. All of a sudden I got this thought, very strong thought in my mind, that said: Stop. Stop. So I didn't obey them — I obeyed the voice that said stop. So I stopped. And I remember when I stopped and I put my hands up, they started shooting at me, and I thought I was getting shot in the legs, because I started feeling like — kind of like bee stings. They felt kind of like bee stings on my calves and my legs. But what it was — when they were shooting, they were hitting the concrete, and all the little shrapnel from the concrete was hitting me on the legs. And then I looked down and I touched my legs and they were all bloody. In my mind, I thought I was shot.

So they got really close to me. They had all their guns drawn and everything. They started giving instructions: get on the ground. I got on the ground. They said, put your hands behind your back. I put my hands behind my back. They handcuffed my hands, and they also handcuffed my legs. And as soon as they did that, that's when the beating started. They started kicking me — like, I mean, I don't know for how long. It seemed like an eternity. They broke two ribs on my right side. I was all beat up. Then they put me back on my feet and they started carrying me down, like dragging me. And my face was hitting the concrete because they were dragging me like I was a — I don't know, a piece of luggage.

When somebody else came in, he ordered them to take the handcuffs off my feet. So they took them off, and then they helped me up. When they helped me up, I remember this female officer came in, and as she got really close to me, she spit on my face. She spit on my face, and then she says, "This is the guy that beat up our partners." And then she tried to slap me. And I saw it — when she tried to slap me — in boxing, it's called telegraphing. I saw it coming. So I slipped the punch, and then she hit somebody else. I thought it was really funny. And then she grabbed my chin, and then she started punching me in the face. When she did that, I said something I shouldn't have done. I remember looking at her and saying, "Is that all you got? Really?" And — I don't know why I said that — I said, "You hit like a girl." Then a guy came in, grabbed my chin, and hit me with his flashlight, with his flashlight right on top of my head. He hit me so hard that my eyes were watery. I didn't cry because of the pain — the tears were forced into my eyes. It was really painful. And then he looked at me and said, "How's that? Did I hit like a kid, like a girl also?" All I remember, all I did, was I looked down and I didn't say a thing. I just remained quiet. It was the best thing I could do.

They took me back to the station. And once I was there, they put me in a lineup. And then they brought these two Caucasian girls, probably in their early twenties. They said, "Is this the guy who tried to steal your money?" And they kept pointing at me — there were more people in the lineup. And then she said, "I can't even recognize him. He's so bloody." So I remember they cleaned my face with paper towels. And then I looked at her — and I don't know why I said this, but without even her recognizing me, I should have just kept quiet, I guess, but I was so filled with rage and anger, I had a lot of emotions going — I looked at her and I said, "Did I do something to you? Did I?" And she looked at me and she says, "No, I don't even know this man." And then they separated me, and they said, "You cannot talk to her, because you intimidated her — that's why she doesn't want to accuse you." So, okay. So they brought me back out. I looked at her, she looked at me, and she says, "No, this man didn't try to rob from me." Apparently their M.O. was — their motive was — that I was the one that tried to steal from her, and that's why the other three officers attacked me, and that's why I beat them up, in their mind. They were trying to frame me like that.

After these two girls said that they didn't recognize me, then they brought me right away to the judge. Then I explained my case, and I told him what happened. Because he saw me so beat up and everything, he didn't want to deal with any medical bills or anything. So what he did — he just released me. He just said, "Okay, okay, you're free to go." He says, "But how can you prove that you just came from Mexico?" I remember reaching into my pocket, and I still had the ticket that they give you at the airport. So I showed him that. Because they took my wallet — I had nothing. So they gave my wallet back. I checked to make sure everything was there. And that's when I noticed — I said, "Where's my \$100 bill?" They went off and huddled between all of the officers, and they talked for like two minutes, and then they came back and said, "No, you had nothing."

I asked them, I said, okay, at least can you guys give me a ride back? I asked them for a ride back to the border. They said okay. So one of the guys says, "Here, I feel bad for you." So he reached into his pocket and he gave me a little bit of cash — it was like 200 pesos at the time, which is, what, like 55 cents. One of the captains there, he says, "I will take you back to the border. I'll give you a ride, as community service." As we were going out the door — remember I said that my mom gave me one of those ChapSticks — one of the police officers who arrested me, he was unwrapping it and using it. I looked at him and I said, "You have my \$100 bill." And he says, "What are you talking about? I don't even know you." And I said, "Where did you get that ChapStick?" And he said, "Well, I bought it." And I said, "Let me see." At the bottom, I'd put the letters "LA" — I did that; I always do that. Even now, today, I still do that in my house so nobody can use it but me. And then after that, they said they searched him and everything and they couldn't find anything. But this guy, out of the kindness of his heart, he says, "I didn't steal from you, but you know what? I'm a victim here, but here's 500 pesos, okay? Leave me alone."

When he dropped me off, he dropped me off almost in the same area where they picked me up. So I started walking in the canals. It really, really started hitting me — really, really hit me. I've never been so alone in my life. I've never been so lonely. If I ever knew brokenness, at that moment I was aware of my brokenness. If I ever knew shame, at that moment I was full of shame. I was in a country that was my country, but it was like it wasn't. I was hungry. I was in a lot of pain. I was very cold. I was very hungry.

And I was very — I mean, very, very scared. I didn't know anybody there. I was lost.

So what I did — remember the gap I mentioned earlier, where I hid? I was looking for one of those gaps, because I didn't want anybody to see me crying. I found one of those gaps, but this one was bigger. And I went in there, and I just sat there, and I cried and I cried. And I remember hearing and feeling rats walking by my feet. I didn't care. I felt like I'd touched bottom. At that moment, I was actually questioning — I knew about God. I'd heard about God. I didn't have a relationship with Him. I knew God as a father that was far, far away from me. So I started crying out to Him, and I started questioning, and I started saying, "Look — I mean, my whole life, it's nothing but a struggle. What is this? Why me?" I said, there's so many people — and I started questioning, because there was a lot of bad people on earth — and why not them? Why me? So I started crying and crying. I mean, I cried, I don't know, maybe for half an hour.

All of a sudden, I started feeling this — hearing this rumble. It was like this rumble, like something shaking. In my mind, I didn't know what was going on. All I remember was trying to look up, and then as I looked up, there was like an explosion — really quick, like a split second. I was down, and I was in water — a lot of water. I was swimming in the water, and I didn't know what happened. So I'm fighting, trying to get up to the top and get some air. I don't know what's going on. I'm in a lot of pain, really cold. So my instinct is to swim toward the sides — not to fight the current or go with the current. When I got to the other side, I figured out what happened. What happened was that the gap where I was standing in — it wasn't a gap. It was a relief valve, where they release water from the sewers. They just opened it up, and that thing flew me off — shot me with such force that it just shot me off and flew me off. And then I learned that they do that at night, to prevent people getting hit during the day, because at night there's less people. It was sewage water, yes.

In Mexico, there's an old saying that says, "Solamente falta que un perro venga y me mee los pies" — the only thing left is for a dog to come and pee on my feet. That's the only thing left. That's how low you've come.

I started crying, and I went on my knees. I saw this group of people, and this group of people, they were like — they were homeless and junkies, and they were sitting around this can. It was like a 200-gallon drum cut in half, you know, made out of metal, and they made it like a fire pit. So I got close to them — I was obviously very cold — and I said, "Would you guys allow me to get close to the fire so I can warm myself up?" — because the circle was so tight; there was a lot of people there. As I got closer, they started kicking me. They started calling me Stinky. Can you imagine — you know, homeless — they were telling me that I was too bad, they were too good for me. That's how low I'd come. I wasn't mad at them. I was so full of shame that I felt like I had no right to even get mad.

What I did, I asked them, "If I get my own wood, can you give me some of your fire, so I can start my own bonfire here?" They said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah — just pick up your own sticks, whatever, and come back when you need fire." Okay. So I started picking up papers, I started picking up sticks — everything I could, you know, dead grass, whatever. When I was ready, I went back to them and I asked them for some fire. They lit up a piece of paper, and then I remember running back to my little pit. And when I started the

fire, I put sticks on it, and I started throwing papers on it so I could keep the fire alive. I had this piece of paper that I was going to throw in there, and my hands were still like soggy, or wet, and it got stuck to my hand. I remember that. Then I shook my hand and it fell down on the floor, and then I picked it up again and I threw it — not just put it there; I threw it so it wouldn't get stuck to my hand — and it didn't land on the fire. It landed on the side.

When I picked it up, I noticed that it was folded. When I unfolded it, I started seeing these letters in there, and it was written like with a Sharpie. It was in Spanish. It's just letters in there — it didn't have no numbers or anything. And as I started reading it, it said this: "Thus said the Lord, the one that formed you, Israel, and the one that created you, Jacob: I call you by your name. You are mine. When you walk through the waters, you will not drown. And when you walk through the fire, the fire will not burn you. Because I love you, and you are honored."

I mean, when I heard those words, my entire world shook. Anything I knew on this earth — nothing mattered. I looked up to heaven and I said, "You do exist. You see me, and you hear me. When I was there, you were not silent. You were paying attention to me. I matter. There's billions of people on this earth, but you see me. You're a God that sees me as one — you don't see me as part of the masses." I said, "Thank you. I love you. I love you, Father." For the first time, I called someone Father. I call that honey-like, thick love — it sticks to you, and it's there, and you can't even imagine it.

After that, I started crying and screaming, and you could hear the people on the other side, the homeless, screaming, "The Stinky has gone mad! The Stinky has gone mad! He's crazy! He's crazy!" And somebody walking by — I remember that at that moment, I was raising my hands to heaven, with the paper in my hand, and screaming a lot. I said, "I love you too. I love you, Father." I was calling Him Father. He didn't tell me He was my Father. I knew He was my Father. Nobody had to tell me He was. I knew He was.

Then this guy walks by, pulls a gun, and demanded money. At that moment, I still had the paper in my right hand. I remember opening my arms and saying, "Look at me. What can you take from me? In fact, you can't kill me." I got close to him. You know how the Bible talks about the peace of God that surpasses all understanding? At that moment, I was so cold, but the peace of God surpassed it. I was in so much pain, but yet it was secondary. It didn't even matter. I was so cold, so hungry, so thirsty — but none of that mattered. The only thing I didn't have anymore was fear. It was peace and love combined. Explain it with words, I cannot. And at this moment, when I talk about this, when I tell this story — it's a well that God opened, and I still drink from it as of today. Because I feel the same thing. I feel His love. I feel it.

So after I said that to this guy trying to rob me, he shook his head. He looked at the other guy and he says, "Yeah, you guys are right. This guy is crazy." He left. I continued to read the note, over and over and over. And I continued to cry and cry and cry. I don't know what time it was by then. All of a sudden, I heard this voice — the same voice that told me "stop" when the police officers were chasing me. That same voice, this time, He called me, and He said: "Come to me." But He called me from beyond the fence.

WAYNE: Believe it or not, this story gets even wilder from there. In the next episode, however, we'll take a step back to understand why a 21-year-old would be alone on the border, risking his life in the hope of

freedom. And to understand that, we've got to go back to Luis's childhood, and why he so desperately wanted to return to the United States. Next time, on My Friend Luis...

LUIS: I used to stand by the road watching for these so-called motorhomes to come. I heard that they can take children, to adopt them. So in my mind, I was just standing by the side of the road waiting for these so-called Americans — I'd never seen one — to drive by, so I can just flag them down somehow, so they can pick me up and take me with them. I was like, that's my chance. That's my way out.

This transcript was generated from the episode audio and lightly edited for readability: paragraph breaks and speaker labels were added, and obvious transcription errors were corrected. The speakers' own words and phrasing have been preserved.