

My Friend Luis

Episode 2 — “Please Kidnap Me”

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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 stand on the road and stop them or flag them down somehow, so they can pick me up and take me with them.

WAYNE: Hi, I'm Wayne Jacobsen, and this is My Friend Luis — the story of one of the most engaging men I've ever met, and of the friendship that developed between us. It has transformed both of our lives and left us in grateful awe at the adventure of life on this little planet.

In our first episode, we left Luis on the border after a brutal evening with law enforcement in Tijuana and an amazing visitation that set his heart on fire. Before we pick up that story, there's more you need to know about Luis's childhood and why he was at the wall that evening. You'll discover just how unlikely it is that we would become fast friends. Our childhoods couldn't be more different — one of privilege and limitless opportunity, the other of poverty, abuse, and hardship. And as you will see over the course of these episodes, our paths were on a trajectory to converge in 2008 in Southern California, and each would enrich the other's life in ways we'd never foreseen. That's the story we want to share. Let's begin with Luis's childhood.

LUIS: I was born in 1973. The number seven in my family — there's eight of us, ten with my mom and my dad. Your typical family. There's two rooms in the house, and then they spread everybody, you know — girls on one side, kids on another one. We used to share the same bed with my four brothers. We used to fight for the best side of it. And of course, being the smallest one, I always lose. So I always end up with the one with the big springs, you know — springs coming up and poking you all night.

Sometimes we used to have two meals a day. And that wasn't every day. It was like, if you get lucky. And sometimes my mom — I used to ask her to stay while I was eating, so all the brothers won't take my food. Going to school, it was another battle there. You have to walk three miles and then three miles back. So what I used to do, I used to run just to stay in shape. And I used to run to school. My brothers sometimes used to wake up earlier than me and used to stay ahead and try to stop or push me or beat me, so I don't make it before them. I don't know — it was an everyday thing. To me, it was normal. I was kind of expecting it. So I was — I didn't even make much of it. I didn't know any better. The only time I knew that it was a different life is when somebody treated me nice. That's when I make the connection on the difference. I was like, wait, what's going on? Why is he treating me like this?

WAYNE: There were a lot of fights in the family, you guys?

LUIS: Every day.

WAYNE: Was it play fighting, or was it serious?

LUIS: Oh, no, no, no. It was serious, serious. I mean, to them, it was a game, beating me. But to me, it was — you know, being on the receiving end, I took it very seriously. That's one of the reasons, actually, I started boxing — so I can defend myself, mainly against my brothers.

WAYNE: Did your parents not protect you? Your mom or your dad?

LUIS: Yeah, when they see it, but most of the time they hid it. And — okay, this is the way it worked. When you're in that, at that time, or that culture: if you're the oldest, you're supposed to protect the one below you, right? And then the one below you protects the other one below them, and so forth. Being the smallest one — because always getting all the hand-me-downs — I never wear anything new. New shoes, new nothing, nothing. Everything was passed down from my brothers down to me, because you always had the short end of everything. In return, you're supposed to get protection, but it never happened.

I end up doing their chores, so they beat me up. I end up doing everything, all the dirty work — anything that they don't want to do, I will do it, or they beat me. Or they just will tell my parents that I didn't do it, and my parents will beat me, because you do not disobey authority. You do not disobey your brothers, and their authority over you — the older brother over you, it's authority over you. It doesn't matter. There's no excuses. I choose to obey, but on a lie, I deserve a beating. They have this power over me — not just physical power, but also the power of knowing that they have the authority of telling my dad, and my dad will believe them instead of me. If I raised my hand against my other brother, it was a horrible sin. You don't do that — because he can beat you up, but you can't beat him up, because he must have his reasons. They used to beat me up all the time and I couldn't say anything, and they just beat me for the sake of beating me.

But when it was anybody else — school, the teacher used to say, "Hey, your kid gets in trouble all the time." But that wasn't the case. I wanted to learn. I was doing my homework. I was doing everything. And funny thing that I actually started reading on second grade — but not because they taught me how, because I taught myself. One of my cousins, her name is Cecilia, but we used to call him Cece, right? And I put two and two together one time, and I was like, okay, and I said, "Cece." And I said, wait — if I put an E in it, in front of it, it's an A. And then if I put another E in front of the other one, which is an A in Spanish, it says "Cece." What? And to me it was like an explosion inside of me. And I said, so my name is Luis — if I put an L and a U and — what? And I was always writing on the air, like with my hand, like this, and doing math — like two plus two equals four. Everybody thought I was nuts anyway. So they saw me writing on the air with my finger. Some people call it, "What are you doing?" I said, "Stop it. Stop it. You messing me up. I'm doing math." You know, so everybody thought I was crazy.

The pad I had for school, it had to be for school, because there was no money. To write on, I used to write on rocks, you know, with another rock. So they buy you one pencil, and the pencil has to last you for the entire year. If you get it stolen, well, tough luck. So that's what I started doing. And anytime I used to see a piece of paper — anytime I see a piece of paper on the ground, I picked it up and started reading it. And everybody thought I was crazy because I was collecting all these newspapers. I used to go to trash cans and

pick up stuff to read.

When I started reading — one time this lady, she was trying to read a letter from her son in the U.S. And most of the people there, they were illiterate. They didn't know how to read or write. So my generation, they were the ones that started more to, you know, to finish like sixth grade and stuff like that. When I started reading, I said to the lady, "I can read it for you." And she called me Soronguito. She says, "Ah, you little Soronguito." She said it in an Indian way, but Soronguito, it's like a little — that's what they used to call it, right? — a little ball of manure, but that's more from a rabbit or from a goat, because they're round. She called me little Soronguito, like a little piece of poop, kind of like that, right? But kind of endearing — to her it was like, you know, endearing. "So how could you read?" — like I said, these older people can't. And I said, "No, I can read it for you." And she says, "Really? Because I've been looking for somebody to read it." I said, "Yes, but I charge." I charged her 25 cents, because I needed money. I needed to buy a pen or a pencil so I can keep writing. She says, "Okay" — it was nothing to her. But to me, it was like — one, I could have one piece of bread I could buy with that at the time.

So I read the letter, and from that, it exploded. It went out to the entire little town that I could read, and they used to go to the house to call my mom from the fence: "Amalia, Amalia, can I borrow your son, Luis? Can I borrow him so he can read me this, please?" And he was like, "Oh, he's doing homework." And I'll be like — I can't, I can't, I can't — running like, "Yes, what do you need?" You know, sometimes up to three or four letters a week I used to read. But it's 25 cents. They go like, "It's okay," you know, because they receive money usually with the letter — they send them, you know, money orders. So they say, "Yeah, it's okay, but I can only pay when I cash this check." I said, "That's fine. But you owe me, okay?" I said, okay. I said, "Next time you come back and read it, if you don't pay me, I cannot read it. Sorry." I was like, you know — I looked back, and I was an entrepreneur. Yeah. And then I started reading the prescriptions. I did all kinds of stuff for them. I used to write — I started writing letters for them. And that cost them 50 cents.

You're always with your guard up. You have to sleep with eye open, in a sense. One time I got woke up by one of my brother. I had the measles when I was a kid, and I was very sick. My mom sent my older brother to wake me up. And when I got woken up, there was this shears — one was holding my finger, and when he closed it, it cut through my finger. And when I woke up, I was — I mean, I was in so much pain anyway that the cut on my finger was like, it's just normal, I guess, but that pain. But then I noticed all the blood, and I was like, why am I bleeding? And then when I look at my hand — all the deep cut — and them laughing at it. And it was like — when they were laughing at it, as if they were enjoying it. I looked at him and I was like, "You're my brother. You're supposed to protect me. You're supposed to be in charge of me. What is wrong with you?" So at that moment, I stopped seeing them as something that I needed to submit to, and start seeing them more like a threat. It was more like survival now. So something switched on me at that moment.

WAYNE: How old were you, do you remember?

LUIS: I was 11. I just finished elementary. Since I used to be fighting all the time — you know, now, in my defense, I never started any fight. Never. It was always on self-defense — not just against my brothers, but against anybody.

WAYNE: Would you ever want to run away? I mean, do you have any other relatives you could run to, to protect you? I mean, nothing, right?

LUIS: Relatives I had, but it would have been probably worse. And if I try to run — oh, no, no, no, no, you can't do that. Yeah. That means I'm dishonoring my entire family by doing that. And if I do that, man, I get caught — I mean, the punishment will be unbearable. It will be horrible.

WAYNE: Hearing Luis's story makes my heart hurt. I can't imagine the loneliness and frustration Luis suffered at the hands of his own family. I can't imagine a childhood without pizza and sneakers and candy bars. My childhood couldn't be more different than Luis's. I'm a second-generation Californian of European descent, born in 1953 in the Central Valley to a World War Two vet and his wife. My dad's parents immigrated from Denmark, and my mom's heritage is mostly from England and Scotland. The third of four boys, I grew up on a small family vineyard within sight of the Sun-Maid raisin plant outside Selma, California. Our parents were loving and taught us the values of integrity, honesty, hard work, and generosity to others that have served me well through life.

Faith was a critical component to our family life and rituals. And from a young age, I was endeared to the story of Jesus and how he wanted to engage me. I had many moments throughout my formative years of knowing I wasn't alone in the universe, and desired the relationship with God that Christianity promised me.

We weren't a wealthy family by U.S. standards, but we weren't poor either. We always had enough to live comfortably and had a life filled with friends. I was a Cub Scout, played Little League, and performed well in school. I attended elementary schools on the wrong side of the tracks in our small town, where farmers' kids from the south and west of town were bused in. We were one of the first ones on every morning and the last dropped off at night, which meant an hour-long bus ride each time. It usually gave me all the time I needed to get my homework done.

Our education mixed us with those of Mexican descent, though we didn't mix well, especially the older we got. There were few crossover friendships, and when classes began to be separated by academic achievement, mine were mostly filled with white students. Looking back, I see now how biased I became, as most Latino students didn't seem to apply themselves as diligently to their studies and had discipline problems in the classroom. The few friends I had with brown skin I regarded as exceptional, not as disproof of a growing unconscious bias. In addition, at certain times of the year, we hired Mexican-American farm workers to help prune the vines or pick the grapes on my dad's vineyard. My brothers and I had to pick up litter after they left the farm, which only added negative feelings about them. Needless to say, César Chávez was not a hero in my home when he began to organize farm workers. Increased labor costs could spell the doom of the small family farms like ours that could barely provide for the farmer and his family.

I loved sports, but after sixth grade, my height began to seriously lag behind my classmates, and I was too small to compete in interscholastic sports. Instead, I gave myself to academics. My childhood dream was to be a pilot, and at 16, I got a Saturday job at a local airport washing and refueling planes in exchange for flight lessons. I soloed at 16, and by 17, I had earned my pilot's license and hoped for a career as an air traffic controller. By 17, I had an enduring sense that God wanted me to give up my dreams in aviation and go into the ministry. I wouldn't express that the same way today, but at the time, I thought that meant I had to be a pastor or go on the mission field. Since I didn't like the idea of strange lands or foods, I thought that would take me to pastoral ministry.

When my senior year arrived, I was increasingly pressed to make a decision. If I stuck with air traffic control, I would volunteer for the Air Force. If ministry, I had to get into a university and begin my studies. I wanted the one, but felt called to the other. I'd often told God in my prayers that I was willing to follow my heart to ministry if that's what He wanted, but I wanted to know for sure.

That all came to a head one weekend in San Francisco. My family had gone there to watch a 49er football game one Sunday afternoon, but first, my dad and mom wanted to visit a storefront church in San Francisco. My parents were friends with a Greek pastor there who also worked the docks during the week. We were far more excited about the game. Prior to the service, however, we were invited into the pastor's study. As my parents talked with the pastor and his wife, my brothers and I stood across the room talking about going to the game. Suddenly the pastor interrupted us and pointed right at me. "What's your name?" he asked. I wasn't sure what was going on, but answered him. "There's an angel standing behind you," he said. Immediately I was freaked out. "He has something for you from God." And then he began to quote the 23rd Psalm. And when he got to the part that says "thou anointest my head with oil," I felt a splatter of thick liquid on my head that splashed onto my coat. "The angel is anointing you to teach his people to know him. This is his calling to you."

Well, there went my dreams in aviation. Took an angel to sidetrack me, but I went on to Oral Roberts University to prepare for ministry. This was 1971, in the midst of the Vietnam War, and I was one of the last classes subject to the draft. Student deferments had been abandoned that year because too much of the cost of the war was being borne by low-income and non-white Americans. Draft numbers were assigned by a lottery for our date of birth. If I got selected, I was going to volunteer for the Air Force and pursue my dream. However, I drew number 300 and was never called.

I've spent the rest of my life preparing for and helping people discover who God is and how he wants to relate to them, in a variety of ways — first as a more traditional pastor, then as an author and consultant, counselor and friend. It hasn't always been easy staying the course. I've had a lot of frustrations with the conflicts I perceived between the modern-day religion of Christianity and the message and example of Jesus. At one particularly low time in 1981, President Ronald Reagan had fired striking air traffic controllers. I knew the system already and was just the right age to go off to training. My conscience, however, wouldn't let me, and I remained in my role as a pastor in Visalia, California. A major conflict was brewing, however, that would eventually resolve my frustrations and set me free to live inside the reality of Jesus without the politics or hypocrisy of religion. But that will come further down the track.

While I had all the benefits of growing up in middle-class America in my childhood, Luis was groping to carve out a life in his, between his abusive brothers and a cultural system that was arrayed against him. Despite all the odds, he still yearned for freedom and life, even if his attempts can be misguided. From an early age, Luis's hope was fixated on America — even if that meant he had to get kidnapped to get there.

LUIS: What I used to do — there was a big road, right? Like the way you should call it, federal road, because it was made of pavement, and it was beautiful. It had a beautiful white line and beautiful dotted line on the middle. I was mesmerized by looking at it. You know, you're always walking on dirt roads and rocks and everything, and seeing that, to me, was amazing — and how long it was. I used to go on it, and I used to see cars every now and then, and I was amazed to see them, how fast they ran. They used to be this big — they look like big buses, right? I didn't know what they were called; now I know, and they're motorhomes. And in Mexico, no one had those. So the only people who had those, they were Americans, and traveling through the country.

I was told by everybody — they go like, "You know what? They're Americans. You know, if one of them adopts you, or one of them takes you — you know what, you're going to be in the United States. You're going to have an education. You're going to have three meals a day." And they go like, "You know what? You're going to have your own bed. You're going to have your own room." And I was like, what? And they say, "And you're going to have a dog." I was like, what? Who does that? I mean, to me it was like — I'd never seen anything like that.

The only reason I knew I was poor, it's when I met somebody who was rich. Because seeing everybody at the same level and everything, I thought it was the norm. I said, okay. But then I met this kid that — he was, and he came from the U.S. And he was telling all these stories, how he used to eat pizza and that. And I was like, "What is pizza?" And he says, "Oh, no, no, no, it's amazing." He has — I remember him saying that he has eggs on top. But what he meant by eggs, it was cheese. And I said, "Well, we have eggs here. We can make pizza." He says, "No, no, no, no, no, it's in a different level." And he says, "And then you eat this ham." What is ham? And they say, "Oh, and then you have this roast beef." What is that? All of these things — he talked about Snickers, and he talked about shoes. And I was like, what — you know, name brands, Nike. You know, at that time it wasn't as popular, but things I never heard of. And then he showed me a pair of sneakers that he had. And I was like, "Is that what kids wear in the U.S.?" He says, "Oh, yeah, yeah." And I'm like, wow — that was amazing.

So I used to stand by the road watching for these so-called motorhomes to come. On my mind was that if I can flag him down — 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. So I didn't even see it — I didn't even know what a motorhome was. So I was just waiting for a big bus to drive by, so I can just stand on the road and stop them or 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. That's my ticket out. I'm going to go to the road. I'm going to stop these, you know, so-called American people. And I'm going to tell them to take me with them. And I'm going to tell them that I'm going to be the best son. I'm going to do everything they want. I'm going to do all the chores. Some people that used to come from here, they said they used to prune trees. I said, I'm

going to prune their apple trees. And I'm going to be the best son. I'm going to bring him A's all the time. I'm going to join the army. And I want to make him proud. And man, I want to tell them all of that, just to entice them to take me. I want to be with them. I don't want to be here.

WAYNE: Did anybody ever stop?

LUIS: I stopped this — and I didn't know, but it was a bus. It was a bus for people. And when the guy came out, I looked at him, and I said, this guy doesn't look like American. He was really angry at me and tried to beat me, and I ran away from him. But I didn't — I never seen a big bus. So I flagged one of those buses, public buses. At that moment, I knew that not all buses were equal — that all buses were just, you know, Americans. I didn't know what a motorhome was. I saw a big bus, and I just started flagging each one — just jumping in front of them, waving my hands up and down, and hoping that they can stop and take me with them. And yeah, at that time, I almost got a beating by this bus driver that got very upset. He says, "Do you want to get killed? You want to get killed?" I said, "No, no, no, I don't. I just want you to take me to the U.S." And he says, "What do you mean? What are you, nuts? Get out of here." And the people inside of the bus, I could hear them, because they were talking to me — because they can open their windows on the side. And they would call me a chiquillo loco, because they see me sometimes. I guess they used to travel back and forth to work, and they used to see me every now and then standing there. And then they used to scream, "Go home, chiquillo loco!" Chiquillo loco means crazy kid. In my mind, it was the more sanely thing I could do, the most intelligent thing I could do — go out there and be adopted, in my mind. I didn't thought about anybody that could abduct me or not. Now that I look back, I was like, what was I thinking?

WAYNE: Yeah, but you go out there a lot of days — if these people recognize you, you went out there a lot.

LUIS: Oh, yes.

WAYNE: Did an American ever stop?

LUIS: Well, one time, I saw one that had a flat tire, but I was with my dad. And then I told my dad, I said, "Hey, can we stop there and see if we can help him?" And anyway, I didn't know they were Americans, and they didn't have a motorhome, but they had a pickup truck, and they were pulling something big on the back. And now I know that they're called trailers, or big fifth wheels, I think they're called. He says, "No, no, no, let them be. They're fixing it already. Let them fix it." He says, "Besides, they wouldn't understand us." And then I said, "Why not?" He says, "Because they're Americans." And I was like, oh — in my mind, I was like, that's my chance right there. So I was kind of waiting for an opportunity to run to them and talk to them.

WAYNE: So you go out there a lot of days, and you hope that somebody will stop and take you to America, to the U.S. And you told me, when you first told me this, that you were praying. You had some religious exposure growing up — I mean, you went to Sunday school or went to a church?

LUIS: My parents used to send me to church, but they never took me to church. They used to say that I have to go to church because if not, I will go to hell. To me, it was really long and boring, and it was the same thing over and over.

WAYNE: So would you pray? Would you say, "God, please help somebody stop"? Would you pray that way when you were out on the road?

LUIS: I did. The only knowledge I had of God, it wasn't because of the church. It was more because of something inside of me that told me that there is something out there — something I never experienced, I never seen. But I used to call Him Diosito, which is really endearing. It's like saying, kind of like, little God. But in Spanish, it's more like endearing — you know, my dear God, my beautiful, wonderful God. But in Spanish, it kind of sounds like my little God. I used to say, "¡Ayúdame, Diosito!" all the time, which means help me — my God, help me.

WAYNE: How are you feeling? You go out there and you're praying. You're being beat up by your brothers. You're asking God to help you. You're asking for Americans to maybe stop and take you home. How are you feeling when you go back from that and none of those prayers are answered?

LUIS: When I look back now, I know that they were not answered for my own protection, in a sense.

WAYNE: Right, but at the time?

LUIS: Well, it was very disappointing. At one point I thought there was no God, because nobody's up there, nobody's paying attention, nobody's listening.

WAYNE: I can't imagine how young children survive in an environment with such great scarcity, personal risk, and without the love and unwavering support of their mom and dad. And yet, so many do. For Luis, a stranger he met one day in the mountains near his home offered him the support and wisdom he needed. Next time, on My Friend Luis...

LUIS: He was the only person I had ever — and the only person that actually had me, it was him.

WAYNE: What do you think when you look back? Do you think this was some kind of supernatural thing, or do you just think it was a guy up there who just took an interest in you?

LUIS: I think it was an angel. I truly believe that.

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