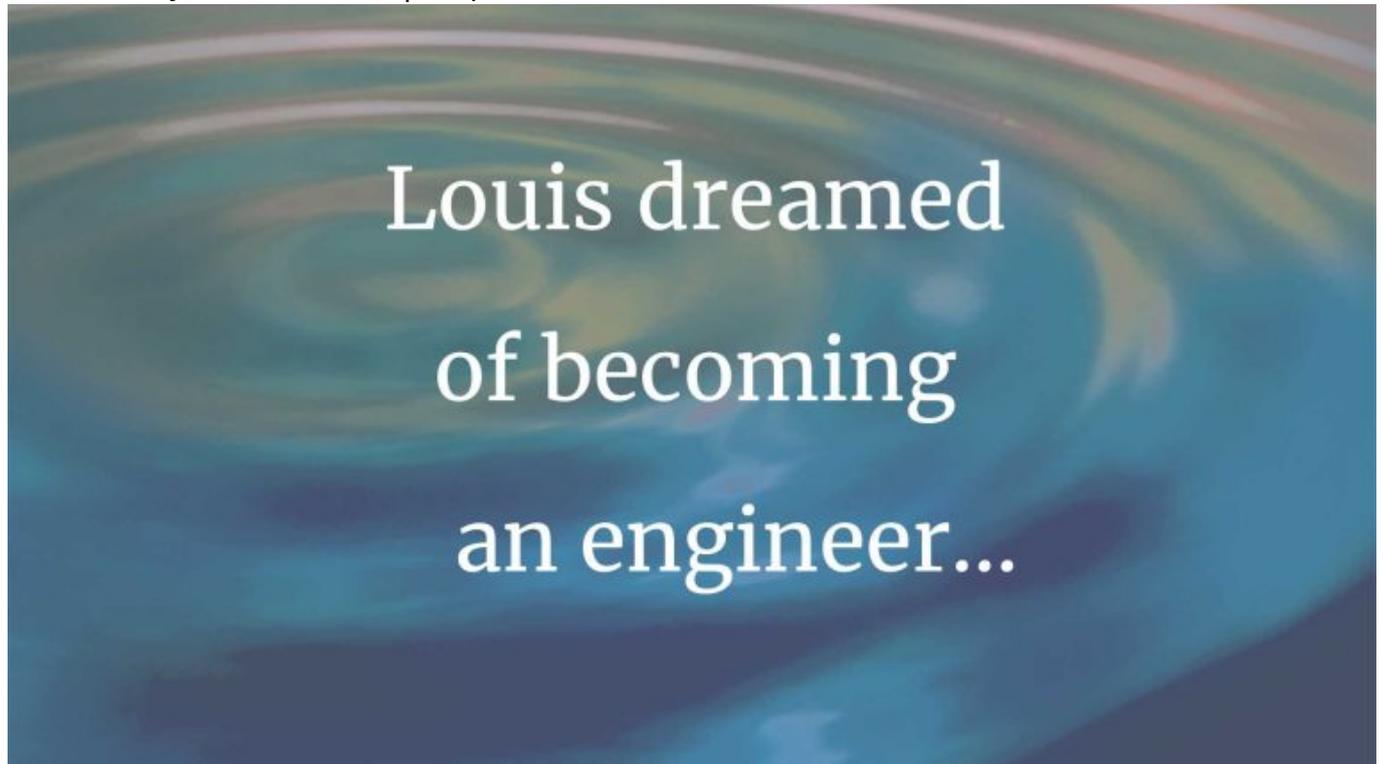


# Choosing to Believe

Category: Stories

written by Dua Hassan | September 5, 2025



"We got into a fight last night," Maria said, more to herself than to me, her fingers tracing invisible patterns on her jeans.

"About what?" I asked.

"I told Louis, 'God doesn't exist—because if God did exist, why would this be happening to you?' " she answered.

She stood and started pacing the hospital room where her son, fifteen, had spent the past two weeks. In that time, while caring for Louis as a pediatric hospitalist, I'd come to know Maria fairly well, but her words made my chest tighten. She voiced the very thing for which medicine offers no comfort—the questions that keep us awake at night.

As Louis emerged from the bathroom, Maria quickly sat back down.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"I'm okay," he said, not looking at her. His hospital robe hung from his body in huge folds. His arms were so thin, I found it miraculous that he could use them to lift himself into bed.

Originally from Guatemala, Louis had come to the Bronx with his family as a very young boy. Like me, he was the oldest child; he lived with his mother and his younger brother, now age six.

Maria worked cleaning offices in Midtown, barely supporting them. She'd stayed by Louis's side every moment these past two weeks, while his brother stayed with a trusted neighbor.

"Mom, I'm okay...Go home to José," Louis said between gasps, breathless from walking the five feet from the bathroom door to his bed.

"No, you need me more," she answered quietly.

Watching his chest heave beneath his robe, I could see every one of his ribs. I felt like I was examining a skeleton.

Louis pulled out his computer.

"Sorry, I need to check something real quick," he said apologetically. Last week, he'd tried to explain to me the elegant architecture of a software program he'd been building, but his words had gotten tangled in his breathlessness.

He'd honed his programming skills in his scarce free time between studying for AP classes and working at a part-time job. Although no one in his family had ever attended college, Louis dreamed of becoming an engineer; and in a fair world, his hard work could have turned that dream into reality. But in this world, where fairness didn't exist and hard work was never enough, that dream would always stay a dream.

"He's so kind to everyone. Everyone tells me, 'You're so lucky to be his mother,' " Maria had told me when he first transferred to our medical team.

Three months back, walking home from school, Louis had suddenly collapsed. He was diagnosed with a rare hereditary form of interstitial lung disease. It had progressed rapidly—so rapidly that when I'd called the transplant fellow this morning, hoping for answers to my questions, the fellow had simply said, "It's unlikely he'll make it to transplant," then hung up.

"I'm all alone here," Maria told me. "Sometimes I ask myself why I didn't go back to Guatemala—but when I look at him, I know why. Here he can have something. *Something*," she repeated, then concluded, "Yes, I am lucky to be his mother."

Her words reminded me of something my father had once said.

"Baba, why do you stay here?" I'd asked, looking into his bloodshot eyes. "Why don't you go back to Sudan?"

I was getting ready for school, and my father, who worked nights as a security guard, had just gotten home, exhausted. These rare early-morning moments were the only time we saw one another; by the time I got home from school, he'd be back at work for another night shift.

My father looked at me. "Because I have four daughters, and there is nothing for girls back home."

"Can you ask the chaplain to come see me again?" Louis said, putting away his computer. Raised in a nonreligious home, he'd grown increasingly devout as his disease progressed.

When I entered his room the next day, the chaplain was already there.

"Do you have any questions?" I asked Louis after completing his exam and explaining the day's treatment plan.

"Just one," Louis said, gazing up at me. "Can you pray with me?"

Despite my Muslim background, I joined him in prayer, pleading with Jesus for help—and in that moment, I pleaded with everything inside of me.

Louis died two months later. We'd sent him home, but he returned within days and, unbeknownst to me, was admitted directly to the ICU for a turbulent course that ended in his death.

I learned this months later, when I felt compelled to pull his chart to check on him. Something I'd glimpsed on my morning walk to the hospital had reminded me of him.

It must have been the morning light hitting the stained-glass windows of a small church and breaking into a thousand colors. I'd passed it before, but this morning the heavy wooden doors stood slightly open, an unspoken invitation. I entered, feeling a familiar pull I'd never been able to explain.

I was Louis's age when I told my parents that I would no longer attend Islamic school on Saturdays.

"I don't need God," I'd declared, full of the youthful hubris and certainty that leaves us as we age. "Religion is for those who can't face reality."

My mother looked at me with wide eyes that slowly softened.

"I see," was all she said.

My father, reading the newspaper, turned to stare at me for a few moments before silently looking away. The next morning, I stumbled upon him praying in front of our living-room window. His silhouette, brilliantly illuminated by the rising sun, seemed delicate yet immovable.

Growing into adulthood, I developed a strange habit of visiting empty churches. I'd enter quietly and sit with folded hands in the back pew. Sometimes I sat for minutes, sometimes for an hour, letting the transcendent stillness overtake me. I'd close my eyes—not praying, but not entirely *not*-praying either—my heart full of a nameless longing that never seemed to find resolution.

It wasn't until I knew Louis that I understood why I felt drawn to those quiet churches. The declarations that had seemed courageous to me at fifteen revealed themselves as the musings of an individual who had yet to encounter

the void—the place where rational thought dissolves, and we find ourselves grappling with the inexplicable suffering that defines human existence. Tragedies so profound that logic could never explain them—like the death of a child on the threshold of realizing his dreams.

Learning that Louis had died was devastating. Inside, I felt a hope shatter that I'd carried without realizing it. Despite all of my medical experience and knowledge, and despite my lack of faith, I'd wanted to believe that he would survive.

We human beings are full of impossible contradictions. This is something that Louis, writing code for a future he'd never see and delivering his breathless prayers to a God apparently determined to look away, seemed to understand. It was through this fluid duality, this ability to hold contradictory truths simultaneously, that he found a way to be fully alive, even as his body failed him.

Louis taught me that faith is a choice. Maybe faith isn't something we fall back on when our scientific explanations fail, but something we reach for even while knowing that our explanations will never be enough. Maybe it's the unanswered prayers that we keep sending anyway, the lost dreams for the future that we hold onto, the hopeful borders that we cross, not knowing what new problems may await on the other side.

Not a light in the darkness, but the courage to acknowledge that both the light and the dark exist, and to keep on walking anyway.