

Happy Death Day
A short story by Adan (Adam) Mora, Jr., MD FCCP

"I am a fighter!" Words never to be heard - echoed only in the foggy mind of a frail body assaulted by machines and medicines. Joseph was fighting - for relief, to be reunited with his wife and family. He was a victim of his own making.

He lay there hearing his doctor. "He is actively dying, not responding to our interventions. Yes- he is strong, but his body can only endure so much." Joseph's children listened.

Joseph's son Micheal spoke first, "He was clear. He wanted everything done. You must do everything."

Joseph's daughter Maggie interrupted, "This is what *he* wanted. These are *his* wishes." Her voice trailed off, carrying the weight of uncertainty, finding herself traveling back in time to when Joseph was admitted to the ICU in shock from a severe blood infection and informed that no treatment options remained for his end stage pancreatic cancer.

Joseph, though weak, scared, and exhausted welcomed the words, but one look at his children's faces and he said, "I want everything done - all treatments. I want to fight."

These words transformed his children who still carry the trauma of losing their mother only 6 months before just two doors down. Tear-stained faces of dread gave way to hopeful smiles. Joseph believed his children would be alleviated of some suffering.

Simultaneously, Joseph also traveled back in time. He regretted his attempt to be strong, to spare his children more agony, to not appear weak in front of them, to create a lie that their father was not going to be leaving them orphaned. He realized his mistake and now he was condemned to suffer the consequences.

Micheal said, "We hear you. We see what is happening, but do not want to be responsible for our father's death. Especially when he said he wants to fight and for us to do everything."

The doctor compassionately explained, "You are *not* responsible for his death. Cancer and infection are responsible. He is fighting. He is letting us keep him here to the point that we are preventing his death. A death that is

inevitable.” He paused realizing the weight of his words were crushing Joseph’s children. “You have done everything he asked. His body is asking for something else.”

Maggie appeared reflective. “I no longer see the strong man who carried me to bed, walked me down the aisle, and even six months ago could toss my 3-year-old up in the air. However, we always abided by our parents’ wishes. For the last thing we ever do to be an act of defiance is something we cannot live with and violates how we were raised. It would dishonor our father.”.

Joseph heard these words. He realized he had created more suffering and stolen an opportunity to process death. He had placed them in an arena to battle their philosophy, upbringing, relationship with him and even their humanity.

Micheal looked at Maggie, “But was he right? Did he make that choice himself or for us?”

Maggie and Micheal looked at each other in awe realizing that Joseph had once again sacrificed himself for their sake. Joseph’s love was that of support and sparing hardships. They turned to the doctor.

Maggie said, “We need to stop.” She looked at Joseph, a shell of the man she knew, who laid lifeless in the bed. “Its okay, Daddy. You’ve done enough”.

Micheal whispered in Joseph’s ear, “I am sure Mom is waiting and you know how she hates to be kept waiting.”

Joseph felt peace - he had permission.

The doctor gave the orders - all life support was removed, and comfort medications were administered. A weak hint of a smile appeared on Joseph’s face when his breathing tube was removed. His children held his hands.

Joseph exhaled a final breath.

“Happy death day, Daddy.”