

## The story of a near-death experience and three plastic saints

Joe Ferullo | Jan. 5, 2012 NCR Today

This is one of those odd-but-true stories people tell around the holidays. It involves me, my near-death and three plastic 3-inch figures.

Bear with me.

Seven years ago this Christmas season, my insides exploded. I thought I had severe stomach flu -- and everyone around me readily agreed. ("Oh, for sure. There's a bad strain of it sweeping through this year; my sister-in-law's cousin from Philly ... ") Despite the insane pain, I got on a jet and flew from Los Angeles to visit my parents in Florida.

A few hours after I walked in their door, I fell on my mother's kitchen floor in unbearable agony. My father raced me to the hospital -- where the doctors discovered my large intestine had blown open and was spilling bile all over my internal organs. The last thing I remember as they wheeled me into the operating room: The surgeon turned to a nurse and said, "There isn't much time."

I woke up the next day in intensive care, with a 15-inch scar up and down my mid-section. I stayed with my parents for five weeks before I was well enough to head home to L.A. During that time, something miraculous happened: I got to know my mother and father again.

I was one of the kids who moved out of the house as fast as he could after school, and then -- for good measure -- eventually hiked it another 3,000 miles to the opposite side of the continent. I always kept in touch with my parents, but the distance set us at odds: Whatever my issues were with them when I was growing up in the Bronx, I was never able to get re-introduced to them, adult-to-adult.

My illness gave me what I came to see as a gift: They got to know me as a grown man, and I was able to watch them as senior citizens, learn some lessons from them about how to grow old together, things I would need later on. We grew closer than any other time in our lives.

In a way, I knew who to thank for this -- God, of course. But something nagged me about that: It felt like my gratitude needed to be more, well, specific somehow. Someone, something, pulled some strings to make me sick, keep me alive and let me back into my family in such a full way.

I came back to Los Angeles in early February, but I still needed some time to regain my strength before returning to work. I would walk from my house a few blocks down to the main boulevard and then back up. About a week after my return, I passed by the local bookstore, a Barnes and Noble. Now, you know chain bookstores these days (what's left of them anyway): They carry lots of things along with books. In one of the main windows, this store always piled up gift items, like calendars, stationery and how-to kits for origami or poker.

But this day, my eyes fell on a red box sitting in the window. It read: "Household Saints." I still couldn't tell you

exactly why, but I walked myself into the store and over to the item. It had a flap, and I opened it up to reveal three brightly painted plastic figurines sitting in front on a thin book that explained the powers of various Catholic saints. This was an odd item for Barnes and Noble, I thought -- more like something you'd find at a religious store with a wry sense of humor.

Then I noticed the three figures: St. Joseph, my namesake saint and my father's; St. Clare, the patron saint of television (my career); and St. Jude, my mother's favorite.

More than a favorite, really: We had a statue of St. Jude in our Bronx backyard since I was 8 years old. It was one of the few things my mother took with her to Florida, where it sits in her garden. My mother, who lost her mother when she was 4, who was raised in an orphanage, who herself raised my mentally disabled older brother, prayed to the patron saint of hopeless causes every night.

And here he was, next to my father's namesake and the patroness of my profession. Who would think of grouping these three together? What religious kitsch-maker would pull this trio from the thousands of saints and put them randomly in one box? I looked around for other red boxes, to see what other odd combinations had been created -- and that's when I realized this was the only red box there. It stood by itself atop a high pile of friendship bracelet instruction booklets aimed at the upcoming Valentine's Day sales season. Just this one.

So you could understand, then, after all that had happened, how it came to me in a flash that these were the three. It was this seemingly unrelated trio that drew me, my father and my mother together again.

I took the red box home. I went back to the bookstore every day for three more weeks, looking for other red boxes, another shipment, maybe one that was returned. But no others ever appeared.

The three figures sit on my nightstand. I touch them lightly with my right hand every night before I go to sleep. I sometimes shake my head and laugh at myself -- I'm not that kind of person, the one who carries around talismans and rabbit's feet, who knocks on wood and circles wide past ladders. But this thing I do -- these three I believe in.

They are to me a small mystery that reminds me of the larger mystery.

It's an odd little story, I know: The kind you only tell around this time of year.

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