Larry’s Lease on Life

Sean Strub checks in with his old pal Kramer a month after the last angry man became one of the first HIVers to get a new liver.

April 1, 2002 By Sean Strub

How long were you waiting in Pittsburgh before you got the liver?

David [Webster, Kramer’s lover], Rodger [McFarlane, his health-care proxy] and I came here [the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center] just after Thanksgiving. A couple of livers came up but were rejected by my surgeon, John Fung. On December 20, I got the call at about 11 p.m. They had a good liver, with no viral complications. The hospital found me a cab (no easy feat in Pittsburgh), and I was admitted by midnight. I was under anesthesia for 15 hours; the operation took 12. It was evidently much more complicated than Fung thought it would be. He said he had to literally, on the spot, burrow and find new ways to connect the organ.

How frightened were you?

I was *not* frightened. I was excited: “At last! This is what I’ve been waiting for!” But I want to say that adefovir [a hepatitis B drug] gave me an extra year -- the time it took to locate the liver center that would accept me. In fact I felt so good physically that I wondered if I needed a new liver at all. But Fung said the old one was hideous, and while he wouldn’t say how long I had, it wasn’t long. I got the transplant just in time.

Rodger’s e-mail reports were like listening to the old CBS series *You Are There*! It was a great comfort to your friends.

Rodger is doing a phenomenal job. I’m not out of the woods yet. David, in his own quiet way, has also been inspirational. He hugs me and whispers in my ear when I get frightened. I live in fear of just going back into the hospital for an adjustment. I am so lucky to have two men who love me.

Do you feel comfortable telling me about the scar?

I have a big scar -- it looks like the Mercedes emblem. That has to heal before I can go swimming and stuff.

Do you have huge swollen testicles from retention of fluid?

No. My testicles are the same as they always were -- hanging low.

Will you participate in any programs to increase the number of organ donations?

I think about it all the time: Why was I saved? What am I going to do when I feel better? I would like to help John Fung somehow. He desperately needs more organs. Fung is a very great man and the Starzl Transplantation Institute is a very great transplant center. I count my blessings every second that Mt. Sinai turned me down.

Many people have prayed for you, cared about you and feared that if you didn't make it, something bigger would also die.

Oh, Sean, saying things like that makes me cry. I cannot tell you how many e-mails and cards I get from all over the world. I had no idea I mean so much to so many, and it is very moving -- and a huge responsibility to me to get better. There have been a few days when I lost sight of this. But David reminds me. This ordeal has also brought us closer together. I see how hard it is for him. When I'm in pain, he positively cringes.

When did you learn about the mistaken "Larry Kramer Is Dead" AP headline?I was in intensive care and vaguely in hallucinations, and Rodger barged in and said, "The wire services are announcing you're dead!" I was thinking, Why the fuck is he telling me this *now*? And I yelled, "We'll deal with it!" And he said, "I am dealing with it," and left.

You and Mark Twain. One last question: You've never been more in pain and more in love. True or False?

Sounds good. I haven't been in great pain since the post-op shit, but I certainly have never been so much in love.

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