

The Transplant

By Crit Minster

Over the course of a typical day, I might see rapists, murderers, mad bombers, child molesters, crooked judges and cops, burglars and arsonists. I even worked with two men who were notorious cannibals. All of these men were twisted, wicked, evil in their own way. But I never feared them, except for one: Jean-Louis Dubois.

Working as a prison doctor is a thankless job, and I lasted longer than most: eleven years at Iroquois State Prison in western New York. "Injun State," as it was affectionately referred to by the cons, was, then as now, a dumping ground for the vilest human refuse that the State of New York can produce. Which, I might add, is considerable.

ISP was divided into three basic wings. On the southern side of the complex was death row, referred to as the "Green Mile" since that Stephen King book came out a few years back. In the same building, but kept strictly separated, was the protective wing, referred to as "candyland," because many of the inmates were child molesters. This wing also housed ex-judges and policemen, high-profile inmates such as a famous but moronically stupid professional boxer who killed a paparazzi photographer with a single punch on a balmy Gotham summer night and a well-known rap star that half of the prison's black population revered as a God and the other half would shank in a matter of seconds if he ever set foot in general population.

All of the other prisoners were kept in "the longhouse," or general population. One clever inmate, familiar with the Iroquois, had given it that nickname long before I ever got there. The longhouse was for all of the murderers, gangbangers, arsonists and other hardened criminals. It was the end of the line for most of them: Iroquois State specialized in lifers, losers and three-strikes mandatory sentencing felons.

Growing up dirt poor in Buffalo, I thought I had seen it all – friends losing their minds to crystal meth, gangs that owned the streets I used to take to walk to school, crackheads that hassled you for a dime, a quarter, anything. But I was unprepared for the depths of depravity and violence I saw at Injun State. Every day, inmates were brought in stabbed, beaten, raped. The HIV-positive inmates occasionally flung blood and feces at the guards. One inmate drowned another in a toilet. His face and hair were still covered in shit when they brought him in. At the time, I thought I could never think of a worse way to go.

Now I think differently.

But I really didn't have anything to fear. There were always guards in the infirmary, and the cons didn't really see me as part of the establishment. They were usually happy for a trip to the infirmary, because the doctors there (myself included) tended to be fairly liberal with the amount of high-strength painkillers we gave out. If there were no other cons in the room, they could even be quite pleasant and friendly - civilized, almost. In eleven years, no one attacked me or even threatened me seriously: most altercations between myself and the inmates involved dosage levels of the stronger meds.

But I was always aware of how thin the line was between me and their madness, their anger, their lunacy, their peril. The older nurses still told the story of the riot of 1988, when inmates had captured part of the prison for four days. They broke into the infirmary to loot it - and while they were there, they raped three nurses and killed Dr. Rodriguez, a young doctor that everyone, inmates included, had loved.

If you worry about riots, you'll never get your job done, so I didn't. On the whole, I felt safe most of the time. I didn't think the inmates could harm me...

Except for one.

Jean-Louis Dubois was born in Haiti. Six feet tall, polished ebony skin, a melodious voice, well-built, Jean-Louis was in for the bloody slaying of three fellow Haitians in a New York City slum. He had apparently come into their apartment, subdued them, tied them up, and cut them to pieces with a machete. He then drew voodoo symbols on the walls in their blood, and had devised some sort of makeshift altar in the bathroom. The internal organs of the three victims - two men, one woman - were on the altar, surrounded by candles, bones and bizarre trinkets. He had been apprehended the next day. It was whispered that some fellow voodoo master, considering him a rival, had sold him out.

I knew a lot about Jean-Louis, although he rarely came into the infirmary. The other inmates left him alone, so he avoided the beatings and stabbings, and in eleven years I never saw him sick. What I knew about him came from the guards: although most of them were burly sociopaths, they gossiped like little old ladies at church.

It was said that Jean-Louis was still a voodoo warlock. One of his cellmates, a lanky white drifter with long, greasy hair who had stolen one car too many, came into the infirmary one day complaining of stomach pains. An x-ray revealed some sort of mass inside him: surgery was called for, and a three and a half pound hunk of granite with jagged edges was removed. He could never have swallowed it. He believed (and more than one of the guards also believed) that Jean-Louis had somehow done it, and his request to change cells was granted.

On another occasion, a certain Officer Thomas, a heavysset, brawny man with eyes that were a little too close-set, came into the infirmary a few times complaining of pain in different parts of his body. It might be his neck, abdomen, back, ankle, eyes and quite frequently his groin. He would be examined by myself or one of the other doctors, we'd take blood samples, run tests, whatever - we always made sure to take VERY good care of the guards, if you know what I mean - but we never found anything wrong with him.

None of the guards was exactly popular with the cons, but Officer Thomas was more despised than most. He had a tendency to use excessive force, and he kept us busy in the infirmary, sewing up cons that had pissed him off and covering his ass in the paperwork. Rumor had it - now I'm starting to sound like a little old lady - that he carved a notch into his nightstick for every bone he broke.

Anyway, I was beginning to think Officer Thomas was a hypochondriac, when one day a routine search turned up something interesting in Jean-Louis' cell. Behind some stacked books on a shelf was a small altar, upon which were two dead rats that had been eviscerated, a coffee cup, and a small doll. The coffee cup belonged to Officer Thomas: it had been missing for weeks. The small doll was grayish-blue, like the uniforms the officers wore, and had drawn-on receding hair and a moustache like Officer Thomas. When it was discovered, there was a lone pin stuck into its groin.

Of course, no one could prove that the doll represented the guard and that Jean-Louis Dubois had somehow hexed him. To a modern, trained medical professional like myself, the very notion was nonsense. But the guards believed it, and Jean-Louis was thrown into solitary for a while, for "keeping contraband," even though more dangerous and sinister contraband was routinely found in other cells whose occupants were punished more lightly. Oddly, the guards did not work Jean-Louis over: even Officer Thomas' nightstick did not get an extra notch. By the time Jean-Louis was out of solitary, Officer Thomas had requested and received a transfer to another state prison downstate.

It was about that time that Sammy Guinn began having kidney trouble. Sammy was an old-school loser, a broken white guy of forty-six who had never caught a break in his life. Orphaned at seven, raised by the state when he couldn't behave in foster care, Sammy turned to petty crime early in life, but never had the smarts to make it work. On his record, his I.Q. was listed as 71, which I thought was generous. Sammy had been in and out of prison his whole adult life, and was currently serving five to seven for a breaking and entering.

Perhaps you heard about it: the case was famous for being one of the stupidest crimes in modern history. Sammy wanted to break into a pharmacy in a strip mall in Rochester to steal some drugs to use and sell, so he went around back and jimmed the door. Unfortunately, he had selected the wrong door, and found himself in an Army recruitment office.

Making the best of it, he looked around for anything good to steal. He found little - some office supplies, a somewhat-new cordless phone and a few bucks in change in some recruitment officer's coffee cup. But then he found a day-old box of donuts and, realizing that he was hungry, ate them all. The donuts made him sleepy, and he stretched out on the carpet behind one of the desks to nap before his getaway, and it was there that two marine sergeants found him when they opened the office early the next morning. They gave him a good stomping before calling the police and the rest is history. The whole "crime" was famous for a while: Jay Leno even made fun of him one night on TV.

When Sammy started coming into the infirmary complaining of nausea, fatigue, headaches and blood in his stools, it wasn't hard to diagnose him with chronic kidney failure. Although we could give him dialysis and treated him as best we could, he got worse. Sammy was placed on the waiting list for a kidney transplant, but we all knew it was futile. The list was long enough that Sammy would likely die before his name came up, and no one was going to volunteer a kidney for a loser like Sammy. He had no friends, no family, and when I asked one of the death row inmates (who was coming due), he said, "Shit, Doc, I'd rather take both of my kidneys down into hell with me than give one to that walking turd."

Just when it looked like Sammy's luck was running true to form - that is to say, remarkably bad - an offer came from the most unlikely of places. Jean-Louis Dubois came into the infirmary one day and offered up one of his kidneys.

It was peculiar that he would do so, blacks and whites didn't mix under the best of circumstances at Iroquois State, and Jean-Louis and Sammy had nothing in common except that they were both loners. To the best of my knowledge, they had never even spoken. Still, a kidney is a kidney.

As the preparations were made, I spent a lot of time with Jean-Louis, examining him, taking blood samples, and discussing the details of the surgery. One day, I asked him why he was doing it.

"Why am I giving my kidney, Doctor Mac?" He called me Doctor Mac: my surname is MacKean. "Oh, that's easy, don't you see. I'm a lifer here, I'll never know freedom no more. But my kidney, oh yes. My kidney will be free. Sammy only has about a year left, don't you know. Maybe I can send my whole body out that way and put myself together again later on the outside."

"You want to get out that badly?" I asked, smiling.

"Oh yes, Doctor Mac. Yes indeed."

As the preparations went on, Jean-Louis and Sammy became friends of sorts. They started eating their meals together, and would spend hours chatting during recreation time. Sammy did most of the talking. He seemed happy to share his life

story with someone who wanted to listen. A kidney transplant is a very unpleasant procedure, but both men seemed to be looking forward to it.

On the night before the transplant was to take place, something horrible happened which almost put an end to the whole deal. In the middle of the night, Jean-Louis horribly murdered his cellmate, a three-strikes and you're out felony arsonist from Syracuse. When the two men didn't answer morning roll call, the guards went to their cell to find the arsonist spread-eagled on the bed, eviscerated, with his organs strewn about. Jean-Louis, naked, was on his knees in front of the bed, rocking and chanting. Somehow, Jean-Louis had gotten about a half-dozen candles, which were placed at the corners of the bed and in the empty eye sockets of his cellmate.

At the investigation, which took place over the next couple of weeks, the night guards swore that they had made their rounds as usual and had neither seen nor heard anything unusual. The videotapes corroborated their story: they could be seen doing their usual rounds, but never pausing in front of Jean-Louis' cell. The cons on either side swore that they had heard nothing during the night. It was generally accepted by the rumor mill that Jean-Louis had somehow bought the guards as well as the neighboring cons, although there was never any evidence to support this conclusion.

Jean-Louis was marched off to solitary, and there began a big debate over whether or not to allow the transplant to go ahead. Eventually the warden, chief physician and even the governor of New York agreed that since Sammy had done nothing wrong, it was unfair to cancel the operation. Jean-Louis was sedated and brought in.

It was up to me to prep him. The guards had given him a heavy dose of narcotics to subdue him, and he was smiling and delirious on the gurney.

"What got into you, Jean-Louis?" I asked him.

"It's okay now, Doctor Mac," he said hazily. "It's all ready. Give that man my kidney."

The operation went smoothly: both men were in recovery by the afternoon. Within a week they were able to return to their cells. Of course, Jean-Louis went back to solitary confinement.

A crime committed by an inmate in prison - even if he's already been put away for life without parole - is still a crime and there must be a trial. Jean-Louis was charged with first-degree murder in the death of his cellmate. As the legal wheels turned, Jean-Louis surprised everyone by not only acting as his own attorney, but also by pleading guilty to every charge and requesting the death penalty, further demanding that it be carried out as soon as possible.

When the judge asked him why, Jean-Louis simply said, "I have taken the lives of four people. I am an evil, evil man. If you let me live I will do it again. I'm telling you, you better do for me, or else we'll be right back here before you know it."

The judge, a law-and-order type who was up for re-election, was only too glad to grant Jean-Louis' request and the Haitian was on death row in record time.

With Jean-Louis on death row and Sammy recovering, things got back to normal at Injun State. I forgot about the two of them as I got back to my usual routine of treating my daily quota of stabbing and beating victims.

In the end, Jean-Louis gained his freedom before his kidney did. The Haitian was executed at midnight on a dreary day in March and the state buried him in a no-frills grave in a section of a local cemetery reserved for such cases. Sammy was released a week later, his time done, a free man.

Life went back to normal at Injun State. Inmates came and went, nurses and doctors came and went, injured men came into my infirmary, and most of them made

it back to longhouse in one piece, ready for more. I never heard anything more about Sammy until about two years later.

It was sort of roundabout way to hear about him. I had been talking to one of the corrections officers, who had been close friends with Officer Thomas before his transfer. He mentioned to me in passing that Officer Thomas had died while on duty, working at the downstate prison to which he had been transferred.

“That’s terrible,” I said. “What happened?”

“He fell down a flight of stairs. Dead on arrival,” the guard replied sadly.

“Any idea what happened?”

“No, there was no one around when it happened. But you’ll never guess who was in holding at the time.”

“Who?”

“Sammy Guinn. He’s back in...murder this time.”

Most of the inmates at Injun State, once released, were back in the system within a year or two, so it didn’t surprise me that Sammy had gotten into trouble again. But murder didn’t sound like Sammy, so I went on the prison database and looked up the details of his case.

After his release, Sammy had gone back home to Rochester, and had checked in with his parole officer regularly for about the first two months before vanishing. The parole officer went to his apartment, but found that Sammy had moved out some time before. A bench warrant was issued, but no one ever found him, and as Sammy was more of a petty loser than a hardened criminal, no one looked very hard.

But about two years later, Sammy had been arrested again. He had brutally murdered a Haitian man and his wife in a run-down tenement in a part of New York City rarely visited by white people like Sammy. The bodies had been eviscerated, splayed open in gruesome poses. There were bones, candles and ritualistic markings at the scene.

Due to the gory nature of the crime, the trial was a bit of a sensation, even in jaded New York. Sammy was convicted largely on the testimony of two eyewitnesses who placed him near the scene, as well as some forensic evidence found on his clothes when he was apprehended. Prosecutors, initially baffled as to what a white dopehead from Rochester was doing murdering blacks in Haitian New York soon found their motive: the victim was none other than the man who had ratted out Jean-Louis Dubois years earlier. The theory, in court as well as in our prison, was that Jean-Louis had asked Sammy to kill the Haitian and his wife, in retribution. Perhaps it was even discussed as being the “price” of the kidney.

Sammy pleaded innocent, and the trial lasted several months. In the end, Sammy was convicted and received the death penalty, no doubt because of the gory nature of the crimes.

Sammy returned to Injun State almost exactly three years to the day after he left it. This time, he was sent to death row instead of the longhouse, but that wasn’t the only difference. Sammy had changed. His first day in the yard, he seriously beat one of his fellow inmates, sending him to the infirmary. In the six years that Sammy had been with us before, he had never been on the winning end of a scuffle. Before long, he had intimidated the others enough so that they left him alone in the rec yard and at mealtimes.

I didn’t see Sammy: a downstate doc had given him his admittance physical, and he never complained of anything once he arrived.

Time flies when you’re working hard: I didn’t really notice the years slip past. But the time went by and before I knew it, the time had come for Sammy’s execution.

He was brought into my office for a routine pre-execution physical, one of the more ridiculous rituals we practice.

Although I recognized him right away, Sammy had changed. He had cut his hair, he stood up straight and looked you in the eye when he spoke to you. He sat down on the infirmary bed like he owned the place, and glared at the guard to unshackle him.

“You don’t need to worry about me here,” he said. “Doc here and I got things to discuss.”

The guard looked from Sammy to me, and I nodded. I had nothing to fear from Sammy. The guard unshackled Sammy and moved a respectful distance away: they knew I liked to keep many of my conversations with the inmates private.

Sammy smiled at me. “Long time no see, Doc.”

“That’s right, Sammy. I guess you went and got into trouble again.”

“Yeah, I guess. I’d a got away if it wasn’t for them bastards peeking down the hall. I had a plan.”

“I’m sure you did.” I began taking Sammy’s routine signs: blood pressure, temperature, etc.

“I still got me a plan, Doctor Mac.”

I froze. I looked at Sammy and saw in his eyes that the change in him had been more profound - more elemental - than I had thought. The Sammy I had known before was gone, replaced. Only one person had ever called me that. Recognition dawned on me...but it couldn’t be!

“Jean-Louis?”

“Shhhh! It’s a secret, Doc.” His eyes locked with mine, now full of menace. “I can do you before that guard gets here. My magic is stronger now than ever. And I got nothing to lose.”

Unsteady, I continued taking measurements. “How...?”

“You wouldn’t understand, Doctor Mac. I need something from you, and you better understand, that if I don’t get it, you gonna be very sorry.”

“What is it?”

“This body is rotting. I think it’s his liver. But I need you to give me a clean bill of health and put me on the organ transplant list. I need you to find something healthy in this body and put it out there. Do you understand?”

“I understand.”

“And don’t you be getting any ideas. I can strike you down anywhere, anytime. That fat bastard Thomas thought he was smart. He thought he was safe. You do this for me, I forget all about Doctor Mac. You screw me over, I don’t care how many lifetimes it takes me, I’ll find you and make you pay.”

I collected myself, not looking him in the face. “If you want to be on the organ donor’s list, I have to take some blood, run some tests. X-rays. There must be something worth salvaging in that body.”

He paused for a moment. “Very good, Doctor Mac. I always knew you were a smart man. Run your tests.”

We spoke no more. I gave him a few tests, put him on the treadmill machine, took x-rays of all the appropriate areas of his body, drew blood. It was all I could do to not bolt for the safety of the guard, but what would I say? I remained firm, trying to buy time. He didn’t speak any more, but his glares at me told me in no uncertain terms that he was not bluffing about revenge should I cross him.

But I knew I could not let Jean-Louis continue to roam unchecked in this world: he had caused enough mayhem. As I wondered what to do, I passed through

the critical care unit. It was empty except for one man, Michael Linder. Michael had AIDS and he was dying. He was unlikely to last more than a month or two.

Michael smiled at me wanly. "Hey Doc. You look like you got a lot on your mind. Anything I can help you with?"

I looked at him for a long moment. "Yes, Michael, I think you can."

A moment later, I was done. I went back into the room where Sammy/Jean-Louis was still sitting up on the hospital gurney. "One more blood test," I said.

He looked at me suspiciously. "You already took blood."

I have never been more terrified in my life, but I steeled my nerve and tried to act cool. "It just occurred to me that your eyes are in good shape. We can probably find a match for one or both. But there are several eye databases. They're private, you see. I need to send some blood to each of them." It was a lie, but it sounded good. I held my breath.

He looked at me for a long moment. "Okay, Doc. Take your blood."

I removed the syringe from the pocket of my lab coat. It was a normal syringe in every way, except for the single drop of blood - Michael Linder's blood, fatally tainted by the HIV virus - that was invisibly hidden in the hollow needle. Controlling my shakes, I stuck the needle into Sammy's arm, and felt a hand clasp mine.

Sammy/Jean-Louis's eyes locked onto mine. "Not thinking of pulling a fast one, are you, Doctor Mac?"

My nerve almost failed. But I knew that the man only respected strength: I had to go on the offensive. "We have a deal," I growled. "I take care of you, and you forget about Doctor Mac. Your own words. I keep my deals. Do you?"

His cold eyes appraised me. He relented. "Okay, Doctor Mac. You're right. A deal is a deal. Take your blood."

A tiny squeeze of the plunger and one drop of HIV positive blood flowed into his vein. A quick pull back and the syringe was full. It didn't occur to me until later that perhaps this was murder, but I didn't think of it that way. I was saving lives.

I replaced the blood I had taken before with the contents of the new syringe. It would test out HIV positive: no organ donation program in the world would touch anything in Sammy's body now. The electric chair would kill Sammy/Jean-Louis long before the AIDS would, but even if he demanded to be re-tested, his organs would stay put and his body would be cremated after his execution.

I called in sick to work the next day, and the day after that I called into say I was taking some vacation time to tend to a family emergency in Buffalo. I did go to Buffalo, and from there I sent in my two week's notice electronically. I called my supervisor and told him that I was sorry, but I had to stay to care for an elderly parent and that I had accepted a position at the local hospital. He seemed sorry to see me go, but was very understanding.

Once I was free of my job at Injun State, I left New York and moved to Denver. I stayed there for two years, and then moved to Des Moines. It's been about a year and a half, and I think I had better move again. I selected those two cities because I had never been there and did not know a soul in either one. For my next move, I'm considering Alamos, Mexico. They say it's lovely and no one would ever think to look for me there: I don't even speak Spanish and I don't think either Jean-Louis or Sammy (was Sammy still in there somewhere?) did either.

I saw on the internet that Sammy was executed as scheduled. Without calling my old colleagues at Iroquois State Prison, there is no way to determine if my ruse was ever discovered and if Sammy/Jean-Louis ever managed to get into the organ donor program. And I don't want to call.

I don't know who would answer the phone.

Crit Minster holds a PhD in Latin American literature from Ohio State, but is currently working as a travel writer in Latin America. He has co-authored three travel books: if you're interested, you can find them easily on Amazon if you search under his last name. He enjoys writing fiction but has never published any.