

I was shaking when I went back inside. Where had this venom come from? I had been ready to go to fist city with a stranger, for what? I wanted everything the way it was 10 minutes ago, but the smudge of stupidity wouldn't wash out. As I paced and ranted with the incident churning through my mind like a Class V rapids, I shoved a stool piled high with vinyl LPs, a stack of shellac we used to call records. I had culled the essentials from my collection to download to my hard drive and now they were scattered across the floor in a hap-hazard display of rash behavior.

I was slumped over, gazing dejectedly at the LPs, when I saw him staring up at me with an almost baleful look.

King Curtis.

The album cover for *Blues at Montreux* was at my feet. Recorded live at the jazz festival in Switzerland, it's an unrehearsed, once-in-a-lifetime session of King Curtis and Champion Jack Dupree. King was a monster sax player of his time and Champion Jack was a pure blues barrelhouse piano player. Their chance meeting produced some of the most exuberant, joyous music you'll ever hear.

It snapped me out of my funk and sent me back to the early '70s, when I lived in New York. The way I heard it, one night some guy relieved himself in front of a brownstone that King Curtis owned in the upper 80s on the Westside. An argument led to a stabbing that led to King's death. Some jerk was making a mess on his property and King took offense. King ended up bleeding out, dead at 37.

That night, not yet aware of the tragedy, I was standing on the corner of 90th and Amsterdam, a few blocks from where the stabbing had happened. I was waiting for the light to change when I heard a saxophone wailing away with loose abandon. I crossed the street, turned a corner, went down and back up, tried the other corner and crossed the street again, but the player remained elusive.

I read about King the next day in the *Herald Tribune*, and these many years later the memory echoed. Do I want to die over a parking space? Do I want to live in a world where my response to a personal affront is going to land me in jail, an emergency room or the morgue?

I laughed and it set me free—finally. I won't choose to live that way, or worse.

Now, long after the anger over the driveway affront has dissipated, it's something I strive to remember when some idiot swerves into my lane without signaling or an eager shopper jostles me in the grocery store. The obscene waste of King Curtis's life and my memory of his jubilant horn give me pause and, on a good day, a touch of grace. I have to thank the Russian deli customer for that.