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A Reluctant Transplant Patient Discovers That the Force Is Still With Him

Most great drama pivots around the role of the hearts and minds in people's lives, but thanks to modern medicine, another body part has spawned its own subset of reliably moving narrative: the kidney.

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Just as many great love stories follow the same basic plot — boy gets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets her back — many kidney stories have a familiar arc. Someone is at death's door, someone, maybe even a stranger, goes under the knife to donate a kidney that will save a life.

Somehow, just as those tales of the heart never really get old, the kidney stories usually deliver; they may even be more moving in the context of their collectivity, as it becomes clear that those tales of extreme altruism are far from unique.

David S. Ware, a 59-year-old acclaimed avant-garde jazz saxophonist who learned his craft at the knee of Sonny Rollins, originally did not want anything to do with someone else's kidney. "I didn't want someone else's life force in me," said Mr. Ware, whose own kidneys started failing 12 years ago. "I couldn't come to terms with it."

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That philosophical resistance changed in January, when dialysis, which Mr. Ware had chosen as an alternative to a transplant, stopped working and his condition turned dire. Mr. Ware was preparing for the long wait for a stranger's kidney — it usually takes at least a year in New Jersey, where he lives — when his longtime record producer, Steven Joerg, sent out an urgent e-mail message, informing fans that Mr. Ware's survival depended on his receiving a healthy kidney.

Mr. Ware had agreed to let Mr. Joerg send the message, but he was certain it was a waste of time. Instead, a handful of fans stepped up right away, the kind of response Mr. Joerg might have expected if he had asked for contributions of cash, not a vital organ.

Steve Holtje, a jazz critic in Brooklyn, volunteered as soon as he realized he had the right blood type. "I have to admit," he said in an interview, "if David were not a very important musician, I probably wouldn't have instantly agreed to that. It's a combination of that and the feeling that I have gotten so much from his music, I owe him, in a way."

Mr. Holtje's wife had some reservations, but the couple never had to make a decision. Laura Mehr, a resident of



Port St. Lucie, Florida, was undergoing psychological evaluation to donate a kidney to a friend when that friend called her to say his turn had come on the state's list so he would not need hers. Two days later, Ms. Mehr, 57, received the entreaty from Mr. Joerg and realized she was a match for Mr. Ware, as well.

It was not just lucky timing. Ms. Mehr's husband, Maurice David Mehr, a painter and composer who died in 2007, had often played Mr. Ware's music in their home, and the two men had

David S. Ware, the saxophonist, performed this week for the first time after a kidney transplant in May. The donor, Laura Mehr, was with him backstage at the Abrons Arts Center in Manhattan.

ality and philosophy and God." By February, Ms. Mehr was staying at the home of Mr. Ware and his wife in Scotch Plains, N.J., as she underwent preliminary testing; in May, the transplant was successfully done. Ms. Mehr stayed in New Jersey for three weeks, with Mr. Ware's wife looking after both her husband and his kidney donor.

"She doted," said Ms. Mehr, who added that she had lived through dental procedures that were harder on her than donating the kidney.

Mr. Ware's recovery has not been painless — he developed diabetes, and experiences tremors in his hands when he writes. On Thursday night, for the first time in more than a year, he performed live, at the Abrons Arts Center on Grand Street in Manhattan.

Just after 8 p.m., he appeared onstage, gray-bearded, in a purple tunic and a cap, walking slowly and unsteadily with his cane. He looked like a frail, aging king, until he lifted his instrument to his mouth and let loose, for close to an hour, a torrent of wailing, soaring and trilling sounds, every one of them defiant and unexpected. Ms. Mehr was in the audience, reveling in the performance. But the life force onstage, Mr. Ware could rest assured, was clearly all his.

bonded briefly through a mutual friend in 1975.

Even if Mr. Mehr and Mr. Ware had not formed that friendship over their mutual passion for transcendental meditation, Ms. Mehr and Mr. Ware might have been inclined to see something profound in the circumstances connecting them so many years later. Ms. Mehr, a jewelry designer, and Mr. Ware, the renowned experimental virtuoso, started talking over the phone — about the logistics of moving forward, but mostly, said Ms. Mehr, "about the nature of re-

