



*FIFTH
SUNDAY*

stories

by

Rita Dove

CONTENTS

Fifth Sunday	3
The Zulus	10
The Spray Paint King	14
Second-Hand Man	23
Damon and Vandalia	30
The Vibraphone	40
Zabriah	55
Aunt Carrie	59

THE VIBRAPHONE

Christie Phillips was a student in musicology—concentration baroque. Her parents never knew what to make of this—to them, gospel was the only serious music, and whenever she went home to Toledo, they would try to drag her to their AME church to play the organ.

The requirement in college to master at least three instruments had led Christie to the harpsicord—and suddenly she was plunged into the narrow yet measureless world of early music, where embellishment rippled into formata, where time changed to suit one's mood.

When Jerry Murdon had his debut at Carnegie Hall, Christie managed to get a ticket, even though the concert was sold out. Murdon had all the promise of young genius—piano study with the best teachers at Berkeley and then Juilliard, first prize at the National Bach Competition for young performers, several years' experience as a soloist at Spoleto. Half of the female music students at the prominent music schools in the country were in love with him. "There is nothing," the critics were fond of saying, "to keep Murdon from becoming one of the greatest pianists of our time."

At Carnegie Hall he burst onstage, correct and handsome in tails, his reddish afro like an explosion under the spotlight, a tensed authority in the jagged face. He seated himself, long curved fingers poised for the Bach Sonata in D Major... there was silence. Silence that deepened and chilled the longer he played, for there was something different in this

familiar music when he played it—something pepped up, askew. Stunned silence, then, and finally, hissing. Husbands walked out; their wives, some actually in tears, followed more slowly. Jerry Murdon kept on playing; the concert was being recorded and the sound engineers let the tapes run, more from a morbid curiosity than any sense of duty.

Columbia refused to release the tapes; they bought themselves out of the contract, and Murdon used the money to produce his own record. He called his label Lunar Discs—a reference to the fact that Bach had milked his eyes blind copying music by moonlight. The album jacket showed Jerry Murdon at the piano, tails flying and afro exploding, in the far-right corner of a starthick sky a hovering full moon, and the man in the moon was Johann Sebastian Bach. The title spilled across the sky in cobalt script: "Recreation of the Soul. Murdon Plays Bach."

Of course Christie bought the album. The record became a hit. It was Bach of the twentieth century—industrialized, anonymous, defiant, the playing technically exquisite. She tried to duplicate certain passages on the conservatory pianos but always came away discouraged. When, on his next LP, Jerry Murdon switched to electric piano, she switched with him.

Five years Jerry Murdon dominated the jazz scene, his Bach interpretations growing more estranged. Then, quite suddenly, there were no more concerts, no more recordings. His rivals claimed he had run out of ideas; gossip columnists predicted yet another victim to drugs. *Billboard* magazine reported seeing him on a beach somewhere in Italy. No confirmations nor contradictions were made in this chaos of wild speculations; Murdon, wherever he was, kept silent and the public, disappointed and just a bit insulted, dropped him. Jerry Murdon, King of Bach, was soon one of the forgotten.

In the meantime Christie had started on the theoretical section of her dissertation, an analysis of her own transfiguration of an obscure seventeenth-century Italian instrumental "opera" for harpsichord, viola da gamba and baroque flute. The composer was very obscure indeed; most of the documents weren't available. She grew tired, discouraged, and humiliated; more from despair than the hope of finding any material, she finally applied for a summer scholarship to conduct research at the musical institute in Florence...and was accepted.

Florence was like walking through an oil painting, one of those thronging street scenes radiating with color and the

newly-discovered landscape of perspectives. She had more than enough time to decipher those manuscripts waiting for her; September was two weeks gone and the days still warm...what better time to take off for a weekend?

That Friday she took a train to Pisa, made the obligatory snapshots of the tower, then caught a local bus to Viareggio. Viareggio was like any Italian resort town—a beach littered with beer cans, tar and seaweed and—parallel to the beach—the promenade, a broad avenue lined on either side with expensive jewelry stores and bright boutiques.

It was too windy for swimming; the beach was deserted. She turned back towards town. Immediately behind the promenade, the city sprouted into a thicket of smaller, grimmer streets where the Italians lived and shopped. She wandered around, looking for an intimate cafe, something—when, about two blocks away, a black man with a dog stepped out into the street—his long head, the reddish afro, the silhouette so familiar from a distance....

He was gone. She quickened her pace; but the street she thought he must have turned into was empty. Perplexed, she returned to the corner and walked slowly to the spot where he had appeared. She was standing in front of a music store.

The small round man behind the counter looked at her with a patient, dubious smile. "L' americano?" he repeated, scratching his head.

"Si," she said. "He's a pianist, isn't he?"

"Paese," he replied. He took her to the door and pointed up the street energetically.

Several times she stopped to ask an old woman or a passing school child the way to Paese, for the street had a maddening habit of dissolving into spidery alleys. Finally the last stucco house was behind her and the streets curved upwards sharply, into the vineyards. There she stopped and put out her thumb.

A cherry red Alfa Romeo pulled over and a middle-aged man in a slinky shirt rolled down the window: "I'll take you wherever you want, signorina!" No other car stopped for a good fifteen minutes. Then she got lucky.

A battered, three-wheel pick-up halted, and a young man in baggy white overalls and paint-splattered boots opened the door. He was employed at the new villa going up outside the village of Paese, where he hauled plaster every day and once—about this time of day, three or four—the Black American with the dog....

The pavement was broken in places, and for a while they rode in silence, the pick-up slamming hard into the rutted path. Directly outside the village, they stopped.

"This is as far as I go, signorina."

"But—the American?" she stammered.

"This is as far as I took him, signorina. As far as Paese." He hesitated. "The signorina has been looking for the American for a long time?" His voice grew dark, solicitous.

"Not really. That is—"

The disappointment in his face surprised her—what had he been expecting? Then it hit her: in his head an elaborate melodrama, a scenario in the operatic mode, was brewing. She gasped and swallowed at the same time, bringing tears to her eyes.

"Signorinal!"

He held out a hand, checked himself. She buried her face in her hands.

"Signorina, don't cry! Please."

A hand on her arm, patting it as a child pats a doll.

"Don't cry," he repeated, his voice hardening. He put the pick-up in gear. "Don't worry, signorina. We will find him."

Pulling up in front of a crumbling pink church at the village square, he got out and walked over to the neighboring cafe where a group of old men were playing dominoes. The consultation was brief; he returned smiling. The path led through Paese and out the other side, where the road became a dirt trail twisting still higher into the mountains. After another ten minutes of hairpin curves and teeth-jarring potholes, they pulled up behind a rusty Fiat parked at a delapidated gate that seemed to hang in mid-air, suspended by a wilderness of overgrown vegetation.

There was no bell, no mailbox. The gate stood ajar, and beyond it she could just make out the flagstones of a walkway curving through the trees. Christie stepped through the gate. The air was heady with the mixed scents of rosemary and rotting olives. The path swerved to the left.

A bright, clipped lawn, as neat as a starched tablecloth. Rows of flowers, perfectly ordinary daisies and petunias. Dainty white picket fences encasing the plump beds and even a rose arbor.

The house was less spinsterish, two stories high, stone whitewashed to blinding perfection. It was abnormally long and its length was punctuated, from roof to foundation and from pole to pole, with windows.

Then it came, out of nowhere. Music. Sounds wrung from joy

and light and squeezed through voltage meters, a whine that twitched like electrocution and sobbed like a maniac; music that robbed the air it rode upon, vibrations that rattled her breath and shoved it back down her throat. It was a sound that made the garden, in its innocent stupidity, glow like a reprimand—a warning from a lost childhood or a lost love, or anything as long as it was lost, lost....

"If it bothers you, I can turn it off."

He looked older than forty—he had grown a beard, which was black, and the reddish afro, his trademark, straggled dully around the mistreated cowl of a speckled gray sweater. The beginnings of a paunch. Hips sunken in, lips full and somehow vulgar in the haggard brown face, dimples cutting along the sides of his cheeks like scars.

He went back inside. A moment later, the terror had stopped.

He reappeared. Wordless, he led her into the house.

The music, and the sight of him so suddenly near, so changed, had acted as an anesthetic. She didn't know what to think of the situation, though curiosity and the thrill of adventure helped placate the small anxieties trying to surface.

They entered a large room, airy and bright, an ideal studio. But it was full of reel to reel tape recorders and electronic devices—dubbing machines, splicing decks, amplifiers. Wa-wa pedals littered the floor like poisoned field mice, electrical cords squirming in a maze towards every corner.

Jerry Murdon moved through the room flicking switches, plugging in cords, adjusting tone levels, checking balances. He came to rest at a vibraphone in the center of the room.

"The motif," he said, picking up the mallets. She recognized it as the organ prelude to the fifty-second Cantata: *Falsche Welt, dir trau' ich nicht*.

"—And here it is again."

He flipped a switch and the melodic line, amplified, wailed from massive quadrophonic speakers. He flipped another switch and the same melody, shaken and broken down nearly beyond recognition, rose from the floor. Another switch, another—and a roar of sound, grace notes proliferating like bacteria, chords like a dying train, poured over her...and beneath it all the characteristic undulation of the vibraphone, its relentless throb taking over her pulse.

"There they are, twenty-four from one. A single source. Can you find the core again?"

"I've—I've lost it."

"But it's there. It's there, you can tell, can't you? Don't try to listen; feel for it."

She nodded, weakly. He went over to the back wall and pulled a lever. The music stopped.

"See that hatch?" He pointed to a small square in the ceiling directly above her. "That's where it all goes. Come on."

He led her upstairs. At first she couldn't make out anything; the shutters were drawn. Then she saw a bed, unmade, and an aluminum ladder hanging from hooks on the wall. She jumped—something growled. Red eyes glittered from the pillow.

"Quiet, Sebastian!"

The dog grew still. He walked over to the bed, knelt beside it and threw open the trapdoor. The light from the studio streamed up.

"At night," he said, softly, "I open the hatch and let my latest composition come up. Then I fall asleep and dream the variations." He smiled, his face suddenly very young.

Christie looked at the blazing hole; it seemed to spread towards her. "Don't you ever"—she searched for the right word—"get seasick?"

He laughed. "The throbbing, you mean? That's the beauty of it. To float on the lap of the sea, to move with the pitch and reel. To stand up in the center of things with no point of gravity but your own." He slammed the hatch shut.

"Would you like some tea?"

This room was much smaller. There was just enough space for a table—a hexagonal, carved mahogany piece of oriental design, and two tall leather chairs whose curved backs and armrests were covered with intricate tooling.

"Have a seat—be back in a sec."

She sat down; in the center of the table stood a shallow dish filled with black candy drops. Licorice. She counted the pieces.

There were exactly twenty-four.

Christie looked around, suddenly uneasy. The windows were covered. Panels of heavy dark red cloth were draped from floor to ceiling to create an illusion of a six-sided space, like the table. Brocade dragons scaled the cloth panels.

Jerry Murdon returned, tea things aloft.

"It's not so often I get visitors; I must take advantage of you."

"In what way?" she asked, lightly. She looked over the tray he had placed between them—smoked oysters skewered with toothpicks, black olives, sesame rounds, cheese cubes. A bottle of something clear and alcoholic. Cigarettes.

The tea pot exhaled an acrid perfume, Jasmine.

"You see," he said, pouring the tea, "I realize you didn't come all the way up here for nothing. Perhaps you came because you're a bored, spoiled little American who thought it would be a blast to see how old Murdon has degenerated...."

"I'm a music student," she said, lamely.

"So," he replied, leaning back, "a music student. Piano, I suppose."

"Harpichord. I play in a baroque consort."

"More than one way to get at the core," he said, nodding. "Bach, of course, was the purest of them all—but baroque was better than what came afterwards. That maniac Beethoven obscured vision for over a century. Would you like some vodka?"

"No, thank you."

He poured himself a drink. "So why don't you tell me what brings you here."

"I'm studying in Florence." Christie hesitated. "It wasn't easy to find you."

"I can imagine," he countered. "Therefore I won't let you get away unrewarded."

She reached for an oyster, not daring to look him in the eye. He waited, enjoying her discomfort. She thought of her dissertation, in a box in her room in Florence. She thought of the pale sandwiches at the Trattoria. She thought of her first violin, she thought of the first Murdon album with Bach as the man in the moon...but none of these thoughts stayed in her mind long enough to count as a full idea. He lifted his shot glass and tossed it off.

"Don't worry," he said, relenting. "You came for my story, didn't you—why I left, how I got here, the whole deal, right?"

She nodded.

"Now then—you might remember, being a fan of mine—" he threw a glance at her, testing—"my keyboard style changed three times during my career. First, of course, there was the classical perfection of Jerry Murdon, the best young pianist of a generation. Then the furor at Carnegie Hall, my real debut in more ways than one. You see, I knew what I wanted; I was just looking for the right break. Colleagues called me an opportunist, critics called me a confidence man. Remember this article?"

He opened one of the table's drawers and extracted a newspaper clipping. "First he encourages our outrage by his

circus antics at Carnegie Hall; now, assured of our attention, he has set out systematically to destroy all that Bach has created. Where, I ask you, in this cacaphony, this parodic bebop, is the spirit of that great man who said he composed "for the glory of God and the recreation of the soul?" What Jerry Murdon is doing amounts to blasphemy." He put the clipping away. "Fools," he muttered.

"My second change was in many ways more dramatic than the first. It came a year later, a scant three months after my smashing success at Newport." His dark eyes fixed her like a specimen moth. "My playing became—how shall I describe it?—less agitated, more melodic. One *Downbeat* critic dubbed it 'The Golden Age of Murdon.' The real story begins here. It begins with a woman, naturally.

"She had heard me at Carnegie Hall and was convinced I was a genius. She was tall, attractive, Italian-Jewish descent. She did textile prints for the big ones—Cardin and Blass. Her faith in me was exciting; indeed, her complete trust spurred me on in more than the musical sphere. I began to see other women, although Elizabeth satisfied me completely. It was an irresistible chain of events; her very submissiveness lured me into more affairs. I was unscrupulous; I wanted her to find out. But she never noticed anything—an intelligent woman, mind you—she chose never to notice anything. I would come home at seven in the morning, stinking of martinis and perfume, with some tale about a new piece I had been working up with the band, and she accepted my story—even if the drummer had phoned the night before to ask where I was.

"I shocked no one except, perhaps, myself. No reproaches, and the thrill fades. Betrayal became time-consuming and, eventually, boring...so I stopped. Enter the Golden Age."

He lit a cigarette. "Contrary to the rumors circulated by the press," he added, wryly, "I have never been very highly-sexed."

He pulled the smoke deep into his lungs, leaning back to let it drift down his throat before pushing it out again in a thin gray stream. "When I am making music, I have no time, no room, for anything else. My body disappears. You could call it a by-product of creation. I'm sure, in fact, that if someone investigated the matter, they would find out that God, the supreme artist, has no penis." He smiled. "What is creation after all but a godly act? And what do I need with the pitiful palpitations of human tissues and fluids when my music"—he sprang forward in his seat—"when my music will last forever?"

He leaned back, that youthful look on his face again. Innocent. A fawn.

"Cases of sexual disinterest are not so uncommon among artists. Dylan Thomas, for example, neglected his wife—and every other female of the two-legged species—whenever he was engrossed in a poem. And when he had finally written the last line, drunk and freezing in his drafty shack in the Welsh countryside, the rush of creation still glowing, that incredible derailed energy tingling in his groin—do you think he remembered Caitlin, fair and lonely in their farmhouse up the hill? Do you think he thought of a warm bed and the soft words of love?" He paused for effect. "No—he masturbated."

Determined not to give him the satisfaction of showing her shock, Christie held her face impassive. He turned aside abruptly and grimaced. She sipped her tea carefully.

"I finally had what every man or woman of genius needs—a wife."

"So you married her?" she asked, naively. The triumphant look he shot her made her wish she had kept her mouth shut.

"I don't mean marriage contracts and golden rings. I mean wife in all its philosophical implications—that circumstance in which another soul serves as a standard, a foil by which to measure one's progress—or, if you will, one's aberration. I mean the home one turns one's back on, the slippers one kicks aside. The person who believes in you unconditionally. In colloquial terms, a wife."

He paused. "Those were the *cantabile* years. Four years—a perfect quartet. The highest praise"—and he reached in the drawer again, spreading the clippings on the table, articles from *Jazz Monthly*, *Billboard*, *Village Voice*, *Downbeat*—"was written then. When things were almost over. Oh, there were signs. I was dissatisfied. My last record was listless, secondhand, and I knew it. The third stage flared up—a return to the *prestissimo* of my post-Carnegie days—but my technique had more style than...well, brilliance or profundity. I was afraid.

"Then without warning, a woman dies. Elizabeth finds a letter in her mailbox from the attorney in charge of the woman's estate. I didn't think she knew anyone west of the Alleghenies, but there it was, black on white—a sixty-five year old woman dead of asthma complications in Phoenix, Arizona. Elizabeth was an heiress—no considerable fortune but an interesting one nevertheless—namely to all the household and personal possessions of one Mrs. Aaron R. Rosenblatt."

"Her mother?"

He snorted. "Elizabeth was alone in the world. Her parents had died long ago. More tea?"

She shook her head. "I'm ready to try the vodka, please."

"Wise decision."

The room was very still. Was it soundproof?

"When I asked her, Elizabeth claimed she had been just an acquaintance, an old neighbor from Brooklyn for whom she bought groceries when she could no longer get around. 'O.K.' I thought, 'I'll go along with that.' It was my turn to believe unconditionally.

"We flew to Arizona. Elizabeth wanted to go alone, but I argued that there were certain business details—liquidating the condominium, for example, or deciding the fate of a six-month old diesel Mercedes—where two heads would be better than one. Besides, I had just finished my fifth record, 'Murdon's Requiem' and I needed a break. 'A little cactus juice will do me good,' I joked. Reluctantly, she agreed.

"I had never been to the Southwest before. It made a very powerful impression on me—a barbarous landscape, raw and beautiful as a baboon's ass."

He looked up, his eyes fierce, bloodshot. "Our great civilization, with its skyscrapers and automobiles"—he was smiling now—"seemed no more than a huge, complicated toy. Mrs. Rosenblatt's condominium complex looked like a battery of cereal boxes hastily set up to ward off a hurricane. We located the correct building, obtained the keys from the manager and let ourselves in. It was an apartment like any other—prefab walls, balcony, built-in shelves, dishwasher and freezer. Color T.V., glass coffee table. At first glance there was little we saw we could use ourselves—maybe the music box from Austria, shaped like a breadbox, with interchangeable melody rolls. Elizabeth discovered a camera with the film still in it....

"We moved on to the kitchen. Spotless formica, stainless steel sinks gleaming like sunken mirrors. A woman who kept things up, who would never be caught off guard by unexpected visitors. The kitchen yielded a few odds and ends—a very good old-fashioned meat grinder, like the one my grandmother used, a waffle iron which baked scalloped cakes imprinted with interlocking hearts.

"On to the bedroom, then. A dressing table with the usual assortment of talcs and perfumes, a jewelry box with a ring in it, a diamond in an overlaid setting. In the closet, tucked

behind polyester pantsuits and cotton sundresses, a very nice mink coat. Elizabeth didn't even want to try it on. 'What's wrong?' I asked, teasing. 'Don't tell me you're superstitious.' 'I don't like mink,' she snapped, walking out of the room. I had never known her to lose her temper before.

"But I was patient. You see"—he fixed Christie with his blood-shot eyes again—"it was my turn to play wife.

"I decided to explore the rest of the apartment. The bathroom was typical, pink tiles and the smell of bath salts and disinfectant. At the end of the hall a broom closet—nothing to see there—and next to it, opposite the bathroom, another room. The door was shut but the key stood in the lock, so I turned it and pushed the door open.

"The shades were drawn. A single bed, made up like an army cot, stood to the left, the blue blanket folded in a precision envelope and laid at the foot of the mattress. Next to the bed stood a night table, but no lamp. Likewise a bureau against the far wall, devoid of ornaments—no lamp, no knickknacks, no doilies. The very barrenness of the room, couched in the half light of a day turned dingy by window shades, made me realize how full of life this 'apartment like any other' had been so far. 'Strange,' I thought, 'a guest would hardly feel comfortable here'—and that's when I saw it, in a niche in the far right wall...."

His voice trailed off and his gaze, directed towards her but not seeing, was the gaze of the poodle on the bed, a reflected and opaque brilliance.

"The niche," he continued, softly, reverently, "was hidden by a heavy black cloth, with a fluorescent light fastened to the wall above it." His gaze focused briefly, slid away again.

"I went over and lifted the cloth. As with everything Mrs. Rosenblatt owned this, too, was in perfect condition; but there was a difference—for, although the keys' high sheen testified that they had been wiped every day, though the felt damper bar was free of dust, the mallets had not been placed in their holder but lay ready, both pairs, across the keys. As if someone had just left off playing. All this I saw and registered automatically; only much later, in my New York studio, did I put together the entire constellation.

"I found the cord and plugged it in. The discs in the pipes slowly began to turn. I released the damper pedal so that the keys could resonate, picked up the mallets, arranged them to strike perfect fourths. First a C scale—the fourths were nice,

and I liked the curious lurching tone of the vibraphone. I was just about to try a few chords when I heard Elizabeth scream in the living room....

"There was a freezing stillness, then the sound of running steps in the hall. She stopped at the door and hung there, holding on to the sides of the doorjamb with both hands. Haunted, face drained of color, she stared at me. Then she fainted.

"By the time she came to, I had carried her into the living room and begun to administer all the first aid one learns from the movies—a cold towel on the forehead, cognac at the lips. She came to and smiled. When she remembered she jumped up, hysterical, and demanded to leave the house. I complied. What else was there to do? We got into the car and drove out of the condominium village, into the desert. The endless vistas of scrubgrass, the wild, magic mountains, seemed to soothe her. I, too, was calm, but it was a calmness of despair. I had lost something—I was certain of it—but I couldn't put my finger on what. We drove for nearly an hour. I think we drove in circles; the same adobe ruin loomed up at rhythmic intervals, a caved-in hut with a spot of bright green—a scrap of cloth or a candy wrapper—wedged between two bricks. I said nothing; there was nothing for me to say.

"They had met at a jazz club—one of the countless smoky cellars in Manhattan where young musicians go to try out their wings. He played with a group that did commercial jazz; he was much better than the others. She went up to him afterwards and told him so. They talked. His name was Daniel Rosenblatt."

Christie shifted her position; the chair was very hard. Misreading her restlessness, Jerry Murdon sniffed and laughed shortly.

"I know. It sounds like the typical love affair. In a way, it was. They moved in together after a few months. He took her to meet his mother, who was upset until she learned that Elizabeth was technically Jewish. Then the mother began to hint marriage. She hinted for seven years. Seven years! Finally, they decided to get the license—but first, they said, we'll take the honeymoon. When we come back, we'll tell her....

"Where can a young couple go after seven years of blissful shacking up? Somewhere sunny, somewhere south—but not the Bahamas, not Capri, no—a place with a difference. That's when Elizabeth remembered the other half of her blood—

peasant blood, her father's, and her grandmother's tales of a life in the mountains, surviving from olives and wine. That's how they decided on Italy."

Tuscany, Christie thought. Paese. *Here.*

"Well, they left Mama in her mink on the airport observation deck, wringing her hands, and to Italy they went—on the beach in the morning, on the mountain paths in the afternoon, and at night in restaurants, wining and dining themselves silly—saltimbocca and fritto misto and canneloni, capuccino in the morning and espresso at night.

"One evening, Daniel decided to have a pear for dessert. There was no reason for either of them to suspect anything; the restaurant, listed with the tourist office, even boasted two stars. The service was swift and polite, the meal impeccable. Who would have suspected that the fruit had been washed too hastily that evening? Who would have thought a simple unwashed pear could breed on its blushing surface such a rare bacillus? Back in their room, Daniel complained of pains in his stomach. An hour later, he couldn't move his legs...."

Murdon lit another cigarette, flung the snuffed match on the floor. "She telephoned an ambulance and rushed him to the hospital. His stomach had stopped hurting; but he was numb up to his nipples. The doctors were helpless. 'A virus,' they said, throwing up their hands. 'Where can we start, there are a million of them in the air...' By morning, Daniel Rosenblatt was dead."

Christie watched the cigarette disintegrate, unnoticed, between Murdon's fingers. Was he lying—was the entire story merely invented, a noble allegory of his jumbled ambitions and private doubts? For all the pathos of the story there was also a coldness to it, something structured—as if he had gone over it many times, revising and ornamenting, lying on his bed in the dark with the amplified swell of twenty-four vibraphones frothing below him.

"Now that she had told me," Murdon resumed, the words issuing from his lips almost mechanically, "she felt better, almost cheerful. The energy with which she took charge was baffling. She contacted the lawyer and turned over the management of the remaining personal effects. She decided to keep the Mercedes. As for the vibraphone—Elizabeth's suggestion was to take it to New York with us, where it would bring a better price. I was put in charge of selling it.

"Back in Manhattan, it was as if nothing had happened. She never mentioned Daniel Rosenblatt again, and I never asked.

I put an ad in the *Times*, set up the vibraphone in my studio, and waited. But every time I opened the door and saw a prospective buyer's anxious, hopeful face, it was Elizabeth's face I saw, terrified and inscrutable—and I wouldn't sell. When I remembered that face I couldn't practise, either. Instead I sat and looked at the vibraphone, its thirty-six steel plates, those churning columns of sound. What I couldn't understand was why she had never talked about him before. We were an enlightened couple. There was no reason, no reason at all.

"After two weeks had passed, Elizabeth asked me if I had had any luck. I said I had someone coming in in the morning who seemed interested. The next morning I withdrew 3,000 bucks from the bank, gave her the money and told her the customer was satisfied. Then I went to a bar in Soho and got drunk. That night I slept in the studio."

Christie's head was pounding, a dull, wrenching pain to match the thump of her heart, a muffled yelp—but it wasn't her heart at all. It was the poodle, barking at the other end of the hall.

"Quiet, Sebastian!" Murdon yelled.

His hand trembled as he reached for the vodka bottle and his voice had an edge to it. "I taught myself to play vibraphone," he said. "I had to play; it was the only way out. I stayed in the studio. When I felt hungry, I heated up a can of soup; when exhaustion overwhelmed me I fell asleep as I was, the mallets in my hands.

"I was asleep when she knocked. I remember it was late afternoon, because the sun slanting through the windows struck the instrument and threw bars of light and shadow on the floor. She demanded an explanation. She began to cry. She said I had to sell it. She begged me to stop playing. 'I can't stop,' I said. I was telling the truth, but she didn't believe me."

Murdon reached for a drawer. A vicious tug sent packets of letters, bound with red string, spilling onto the rug.

"They're all the same," he said, pushing the letters together. "Variations on a theme. She can't leave me alone; but she can't come to me, either. So she writes to me. My fan mail," he whispered, gazing at the heap of envelopes.

He stood up abruptly. "If you'll excuse me, I have work to do."

He was kicking her out; shocked, disappointed, Christie picked up her purse and followed him downstairs. He opened the door and stood back to let her by, his face a contemptuous mask.

"They all go in the end, with their tails tucked under," he said. "Don't flatter yourself. You're not the first one to seek Murdon out in the wilds of Tuscany. Every summer someone shows up, sits still and listens."

Christie held out her hand to say goodbye but he stood transfixed, leaning against the door and staring at some point beyond the arbor. "It's the strangest thing," he whispered. "I talk and talk, and you listen. But you never tell anyone else, not a peep"—his face twisted suddenly—"his spell is that strong."

The door closed. Christie turned and began walking slowly down the path. Behind her, the music started up again, that surging, choking wail, a clamor against wasted innocence—she shivered looking over the garden—a search for the contentment lost long ago, without anyone knowing it.

FIFTH SUNDAY



Photo by Fred Viebahn

Collected in *FIFTH SUNDAY* are the accounts of Black people trying to assert their humanity in a world glibly operating on preconceptions. Whether surviving in the American Midwest with its landlocked dreams, or coming of age in a Europe grown past dreaming, Rita Dove's characters insist on being recognized as individuals. A German "brown baby" spray paints his art on public buildings, a concert pianist goes from Bach to jazz and beyond, a bag lady rages through an arcade in rainy Cleveland, an elderly woman confesses her one indiscretion to her niece.

FIFTH SUNDAY is the first collection of short fiction by Rita Dove, "one of the most original and exciting young poets writing in America today," as one critic has said. Of Ms. Dove, Roger Mitchell wrote in the *Ohio Review* that we "feel we are near a large mind—intelligent, sincere, compassionate—not because she strikes large poses or thinks abstractly but because she is, as it were, traveled in the mind."

CALLALOO FICTION SERIES
University of Kentucky
Lexington, Kentucky 40506-0027

Photo and Cover Design by Fred Viebahn
ISBN: 0-912759-06-2