Robert Boucheron

The Dialtones

A report card for David Gooch from Hapsburg Elementary School bore this handwritten comment by Mrs. Lang:

> David is happy, intelligent, and well-developed for a boy his age. He reads at or above the fifth grade level. He refuses to apply himself in subjects he dislikes, such as spelling and arithmetic. Occasionally, he disrupts the class.

Where a harried teacher saw disruption, her students saw live theater. David made up songs and skits and performed during lulls in the school routine. He drew people and talking animals and gave the sketches to classmates. Mrs. Lang confiscated one of these, a caricature of the school principal. She shared it with a fellow teacher, and a copy got loose. Unsigned and all-too-recognizable, it prompted the subject to send a blistering memo to "All Staff and So-Called Artists."

When David was eleven years old, his father was struck down by a freak accident involving a golf cart. This loss, which his mother Winifred shared, may have reinforced a tendency to dote. The boy grew into a handsome young man careless of his appearance. Coasting through high school, he picked up more through casual reading than in class. Teachers were flummoxed by his range of knowledge and failure to parrot the assigned textbooks.

David's sister Jane struck everyone as a sensible girl. Two years younger, by the time she entered high school, she was a serious student, the best in her class. Brains repelled boys like an invisible shield, but Jane had a best friend, Emily, the daughter of a bank president. Her only fault was that she adored her wayward brother.

Winifred struggled to raise her brood with limited means. A life insurance policy paid a small pension. A brother-in-law gave generous advice and little financial help. When the children were older, Winifred took a job as secretary at the architectural firm of Banister and Picket. The wage was inadequate, but the crotchets of old Fletcher Banister provided inexhaustible material for grumbling.

David graduated from high school under the proud gaze of his mother. His grade average was high enough for college or university to be possible. Winifred considered it essential.

"You can attend a Virginia state school. You can apply for a scholarship and work part-time. You will have to buckle down and study."

Accepted at a campus some hours away, David enrolled, signed up for courses, got a job in the cafeteria, and bought the appropriate textbooks. Then,

away from home for the first time in his life, he tasted freedom. Temptation lay in the young man's way, and he followed it with zest. He overslept and missed classes. Sensing failure by mid-semester, he tried to study but was too far behind to catch up. He wrote papers and took exams as if filling in a questionnaire with silly answers.

Without waiting for the result, David crammed his belongings into a used car and drove back to Hapsburg. He arrived as Jane returned from school. She guessed the reason.

"Down in flames?"

"Crash and burn, with no survivors."

Thrilled to have her brother back, Jane helped him carry clothes, sketchbooks, and a guitar to his bedroom before their mother got home.

Winifred did not have the heart to throw David out, as Uncle Irwin said he deserved. She did insist that he find a job. The same uncle steered him to a place in the Hapsburg Iron Works, generally known as the foundry, where Irwin Gooch toiled in accounting. As unskilled labor, David lifted heavy boxes, swept floors, took out garbage, cleaned toilets, and sorted scrap metal. The routine was irksome. He amused coworkers with impressions, including some of company superiors, and got himself fired.

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When not in his room smoking cigarettes and noodling on guitar, David Gooch passed much of his time at the Catharsis Café on Main Street. Underage, he did not drink. He sat in a corner and scribbled in a sketchbook: poems, songs, jokes, skits, and sketches of people chatting with each other, leaning on the bar, and staring into space. He talked to them, men and women of all ages, with years of experience, successes and failures, bright dreams and bitter disappointments. Listening to them in the café was far more interesting than reading in a college library.

Lionel Small was the proprietor. A short, energetic man of color, Lionel had bought the moribund Rialto Lounge on Main Street and transformed the interior. Gone were the fishing nets hung from the ceiling, the candles stuck in wine bottles, and the stained wooden booths. The pressed tin ceiling was painted black, foreign film posters decorated the walls, and a tiny stage enabled live performance. With a bar, a menu of snacks and sandwiches, and music for all moods, the Catharsis Café won a reputation as the place to be, among those who wanted to be somewhere.

Always on hand like a master of ceremonies, Lionel dressed for success. He greeted each customer like a long-lost friend. Every man was his pal, and every woman was a special lady. He let it be known that he came from the big city, where he did artistic things including theater. What role he played was left to the imagination, but he picked up the vocabulary. Café conveyed the image of a swank nightclub. Catharsis suggested what might happen there.

Lionel wanted to discard the old jukebox, but former patrons protested. They wrote letters to the editor of the *Vindicator.* They lamented "the baleful

influence of outside money." But no one stepped forward to buy the jukebox. In good working order, the 1952 Seeburg M100C could play one hundred sides, or two times fifty records. Lionel understood that race resentment had as much to do with the protest as nostalgia. He cleaned the case and moved it to an alcove. Lit from inside, the jukebox glowed like an oversize jewel and touted its trove of forgotten classics. Now and then a college student or an out-of-town visitor inserted a coin, and it came to life.

When a vacancy developed in the wait staff, Lionel easily persuaded David to wear a white dress shirt and black bow tie. The young man remembered orders, he was courteous and prompt, and he gladly worked late and irregular hours as business demanded. Without a resume, without networking, and without even looking, David found a job that suited him.

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In no time, David revealed his gifts as an entertainer. He clowned between sets and before the regular program got underway. His humor was innocuous. Patrons listened politely and laughed without knowing why. The fresh material caught them off guard. No one expected spontaneity in Hapsburg.

One night, a man at the bar asked for a telephone. He dialed, listened intently for a minute, then slammed the handset down in disgust. David happened to be standing next to the man, holding a round tray. With his free hand, he picked up the phone. To the tune of "The Shadow of Your Smile," he sang:

> The number you have dialed no longer connects.
> Please hang up and consult your Rolodex.

David gave the impression he was making up the words as he went along, or he was repeating what he heard as he pressed the handset to his ear. His tenor voice quavered in a way that sounded authentic. Applause was as thunderous as the few on hand could manage. Lionel noticed and spoke to him at the end of the evening.

"Can you put together an act?" he asked. "Bring your guitar and ten minutes of material. You'll be the warm-up for the name performers."

David kept up the songs and patter, and word got around. To give the act more weight, Lionel asked a couple of musicians who were regulars at the café to play along. Slim Oliphaunt, a pale, skinny boy, played banjo and sang baritone. Gabby Brown, a tall black man who always wore a hat and dark glasses, played bass. Gabby seldom spoke. When he did, it was on point. The three jammed. Lionel booked them on a weeknight, and the audience was pleased.

"The Number You Have Dialed," arranged for the group, became their first hit. David followed it up with other telephone-related songs, such as "So Glad You Called," "Alone with My Cell," and their next hit, "Please Hold." The group had no name. Was it even a band? Lionel wanted to call them Dave and the Dialtones, or the Gooch Gang.

"I don't want top billing," David said. They agreed on the Dialtones.

A band without a drummer was unthinkable. But a band as unusual as the Dialtones needed an unusual drummer. Lionel put out feelers. A young Chinese-American with a savage manner surfaced, a demon on drums who went by the single name of Wu. Eyes closed, black hair tossing wildly, Wu improvised with brilliance, then dropped into synch with Gabby, Slim, and David. When Lionel heard them jam in the empty café, he erupted in glee.

"Paydirt! These boys are going to be paydirt in the right hands. Namely mine."

Lionel booked them in a regular Friday slot and paid them as a house band. David continued to work as a waiter, and the other musicians kept their day jobs. The gig was promising, but as Gabby said, "Can't eat no promise."

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Always on the lookout for upbeat stories, the local newspaper jumped at Lionel's suggestion of a weekend arts feature on the Dialtones. The *Vindicator* sent its sole reporter-photographer to the cafe one afternoon. Jimmy Kidd was a recent graduate of journalism school, eager to shine and apt to repeat whatever people told him. David provided good copy. The group photograph, with a Mickey Mouse telephone in the foreground, ran over the article, which burbled:

> It would be hard to imagine a more diverse foursome. But when they play, it sounds like they all grew up together on the same block. Dave Gooch plays lead guitar and sings his own songs as well as modern favorites in a reedy tenor. The talented nineteen year old is also an artist and a side-splitting comic. Slim Oliphaunt plays old-time banjo and sings harmony. These two white boys are joined by Gabby Brown on bass, a big black man with a big-band style. Chinese drummer Wu rounds out the group, with riffs seldom heard in this hemisphere.

The spread in the *Vindicator* resulted in calls to do charity events and benefit concerts. The fees barely covered the expense of travel. Lionel urged them to take advantage of the exposure, and he helped with small amounts of cash. He got in touch with club owners in nearby towns to arrange paying gigs. That spring, the band played up and down the Shenandoah Valley, with forays to Lynchburg and Charlottesville.

On college campuses, the Dialtones acquired a cult following. David struck students as one of them. His lyrics appealed to their sense of irreverent wit, as something they might have written in their spare time. The left hand held to the ear, with thumb and pinky extended, became the in-sign for the Tones. Pirated recordings from their concerts circulated. It was essential to bring a cell phone, the more antique the better.

Telephone paraphernalia appeared as a sight gag. In the course of a performance, an assistant ran onstage flourishing a handset with an absurdly long and tangled cord. One of the four pretended to take the call. David used

touchtone sounds in songs, along with a busy signal, electronic beeps, and computerized voices.

The Virginia Telephone Company got wind of the band's antics. Executives and their lawyers disapproved. A letter reached Hapsburg in care of the Catharsis Café. It ordered the band to cease and desist. Letter in hand, Lionel drove to Richmond, where he sweet-talked the marketing people in their sleek, glass tower overlooking the James River. He emerged with an offer to sponsor a statewide tour. The band met him at the café.

"I made it clear," Lionel said, "you are in no way selling the rights to your songs, your name, or the concept."

"Concept?" David asked. Slim stopped fussing with a banjo string, Wu opened his eyes wide in astonishment, and Gabby sat up.

"You know, this whole multicultural thing you got going."

"So that's what we got," Gabby said. "And I thought it was juice."

"I signed you up for a tour this summer, towns big and small, playing in memorial halls and high school auditoriums. Eight weeks, all expenses, and a modest stipend."

"Say what?" Gabby said.

"He means a paycheck," David said. "Can you get away from your regular job that long?"

"Maybe." He turned to the others. "What about you two? Oliphaunt? Wu?"

"Long as we stay in Virginia, I'm good," Slim said.

Wu nodded agreement, and the Virtelco Tour was on.

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David moved out of his mother's house to an apartment. He shared the rent with Slim and Wu. Winifred was torn by this development. She was relieved by David's success, but she had to release her son to the world. How would he survive without her?

She need not have worried. Food ran chronically short at the apartment, as did heat and hot water. In any case, it was only a brisk, ten-minute walk away. David popped in continually, as did the other band members. They adopted Winifred as a den mother.

Jane continued to do well in school. Toward the goal of becoming a responsible lawyer, she joined the debate club and competed with nerds. She wanted to attend a national university, a school with clout. She would need a scholarship, but with her grades she was in a good position to win one.

Meanwhile, Jane was her brother's biggest fan. She pasted press clippings in a scrapbook. She went to as many concerts as she could. She begged rides with friends who owned cars, and she bribed them with insider tidbits.

One Saturday morning, David lounged unshaven on the sofa. The Virtelco tour was a recent triumph, and he was inclined to bask.

"What about this trip to New York?" Jane asked.

"Mom told you?"

"In a confused way. She got the story from Slim and Gabby. Something

about an audition, a recording studio, and a demo."

"Lionel wants us to make a recording that he can peddle. It's called a demonstration tape or demo, and it has to be made in a sound studio for quality. You pay by the hour, and you pay through the nose. He thinks we're ready for the big time."

"Do you?"

"I don't know. The music is fun, but it's hard to take seriously. It happened so fast. One day, I'm a bum with no future. The next day, I'm the star of a band. Some days, I'd like to go back to drawing and writing poetry."

"What about college?"

"What about it?"

"Do you want to go back?"

"A college degree isn't very useful in this line of work. You're the smart one in the family."

"It's less than a year away. I'll miss you."

"For a week. Then you'll be caught up in the varsity whirl, like a varsity girl!" David tried to snap his fingers and missed. Jane made a face.

"What comes after the demo?" she asked.

"A contract, an album, and stardom. Or we fall apart. Gabby is making noises about too much time on the road. Did you know he's married? Slim is terrified of New York, of setting foot in it. He's a country boy. Richmond was a stretch, and New York might push him over the brink."

"Is Lionel capable of dealing with New York?"

"We'll see when we get there."

"Whatever happens, you're moving on."

"Who would have thunk? I met a lot of people in the past two years, and I learned how small this town is. I know what I want to do, and I can't do it here."

"So away we go." Jane remained slumped in an armchair.

"What about Mom? A year from now, she'll rattle around this old house. Will she clean obsessively, take in stray cats, talk back to the radio?"

"David, she has a job."

"With crusty old Mr. Banister. She can't wait to quit."

"So she says, but she never misses a day of work. And she might fill the aching void of your absence sooner than you imagine."

"Oh? This sounds interesting."

Jane realized that she had said too much and tried to wave it away.

"Tell!" David caught her arm. They wrestled, and he fell off the sofa. Jane got the upper hand as they rolled on the carpet. Panting, she kneeled on his chest and pinned his arms. He was weak with laughter.

"You know, David, you stink."

"The water heater at the apartment is busted. I came here to wash up."

Jane rose to her feet and brushed herself off. David lay on the floor. He straightened his legs and crossed his arms over his chest, like a mummy.

"I'm off," Jane said, "shopping with Emily Clough."
Staring upward, David began to hum.
"Toodles."
"Oodles." David resumed humming.
Jane lifted a seat cushion to search for spare change.
"I beat you to it," David said. "Two life savers and a peanut. I ate them."
Jane dropped the cushion on her brother and ran for the front door.

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