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Stories 4 Spring 2024

Ronnie Goes to Law School

by *Matias Travieso-Diaz*

Great men burn bridges before they come to them.
~ e. e. cummings

At first, Ronnie was reluctant to open the letter that arrived in the mail. He read:

“Dear Mr. Davis: Welcome to the Underhand University Law School. It is my pleasure to inform you of your admission to the fall 2025 entering Juris Doctor class.

...

“I look forward to welcoming you in person in August during orientation.

Sincerely,”

Ronnie’s initial elation turned to panic: he needed to move cross-country in less than two months. He had to find a place to live, organize his move, dispose of whatever was non-essential, and say goodbye to his girlfriend. He needed the money, so he would probably have to work until the last possible day.

Ten days before the departure date, he was ready. His back was sore from the lifting and carrying, but the U-Haul was packed. He just had to endure one final week at the restaurant and then hit the road.

He loathed his job as a waiter. He could do the work competently, but heartily disliked the snobbish, nouveau riche clientèle. It would soon be over, though.

He was in a strange mood when he woke up on the final Friday. He made a quick decision: the only way he could live through his last two days of employment was to have some fun.

The first group of lunch customers came in: two well-dressed elderly women, a middle-aged one, and a teenager. The maître’ d unctuously greeted: “Good afternoon, Mrs. Everett. So nice to see you again.” Ronnie knew these customers. The elderly lady that went by Mrs. Everett was a frequent diner at the restaurant. He had waited on her and her husband a few times and they had been unvaryingly rude and condescending to him and the other waiters.

Andrew escorted them to one of Ronnie’s tables, assisted the ladies in sitting down, said “I’ll leave you in the capable hands of Mr. Davis,” and beat a stately retreat.

“Hi, guys, how are you on this beautiful day? My name is Ronnie and I’ll be your server!” Ronnie announced in a chipper tone. “Have you been to *La Bonne Table* before?”

Mrs. Everett, clearly the leader of the pack, responded haughtily: “Yes, a number of times.”

Ronnie ignored her. “Our Chef has created a four-course lunch tasting menu that will delight you! But you can also order a la carte. Would anyone care for a drink from the bar, or a selection from our wine list?”

Two of the ladies wanted white wine; Mrs. Everett asked for a very dry Tanqueray martini. The boy wanted a Coke. Ronnie nodded and fluttered away.

He was gone a good twenty-five minutes before returning with a basket of bread and a bottle of sparkling Evian, which he proceeded to empty into the water glasses in front of the guests. Someone was about to complain that she preferred still water, but Ronnie did not give her a chance. He announced: "Your beverages shall be here shortly."

In fact, the "shortly" became half an hour. By the time he brought the drinks, the bread basket was empty and the bottle of Evian rested, forlorn, in the middle of the table. Ronnie asked diffidently: "Did you guys have time to look at the menu?"

One of the ladies, with barely concealed annoyance, replied: "We certainly did!"

Ronnie broke into a beatific smile: "Oh, goood! May I take your order?" He crouched next to the table so he was at eye level with the diners.

Mrs. Everett opted for the four-course, hundred-and-fifty-dollar tasting lunch menu. She refused Ronnie's suggestion of another martini.

The other elderly lady asked for baked chicken; Ronnie scowled, but said nothing. The entire company was able to observe his disapproval.

The middle-aged lady hesitated for a moment before asking: "You said one of the specials was the stuffed guinea hen over wild rice, right?" Ronnie smiled condescendingly: "Yes, ma'am."

The lady hesitated again and stammered: "How much is that?" "Forty-eight dollars" replied Ronnie with a smirk. She was clearly embarrassed, not knowing whether to order the dish despite the outrageous price or turn it down and come across as a cheapskate. At the end, she bit the bullet: "I guess I'll have it."

The last to order was the teenager. Ronnie put his arm familiarly over his shoulder, squeezed it, and cooed: "And for you, my dear boy, what will it be?"

The boy stammered: "I'll... have a hamburger, please."

"Lovely!" enthused Ronnie, moving his hand down the boy's shoulder to squeeze his arm, rolling his eyes approvingly at the biceps. "What kind would you prefer? We can do chopped sirloin, brisket, or Kobe beef. The Kobe beef is superb – it'll melt in your mouth!"

The boy stammered again: "Whatever."

"Kobe beef it is!" chimed Ronnie. "And how about cheese? And maybe some bacon or mushrooms?" The middle-aged lady cut in: "My son will just have a plain hamburger with nothing else!"

Ronnie's takeoff was stopped by Mrs. Everett. "Aren't you going to write our order down?" Ronnie gave a dismissive shrug. "No need!" and waltzed away.

Fifteen minutes later he was back. "Pardon me, ma'am, just to confirm. You ordered the roast quail, right?" There was a collective groan, and the lady replied cuttingly: "No, sir. I asked for *baked chicken*."

"Ah, right" replied Ronnie, scowling again, and disappeared.

He returned half an hour later with the food, including roast quail for the elderly lady. With an effort, she held herself in check.

After the food was served, Ronnie took the serving tray to the kitchen and returned to the table one minute later. "Folks, how are you liking everything?" The diners nodded their heads.

Ronnie came back again after another couple of minutes. "How are we doing, guys? Everything OK?"

Mrs. Everett answered in a steely tone: "Yes, everything is fine. We will let you know if we need anything."

Ronnie returned five minutes later. The middle-aged woman had left the table, presumably gone to the powder room. Ronnie lunged, picked up the crumpled and soiled napkin the lady had left behind, folded it into a complex shape, and placed it back on the same spot.

Then, noticing that the woman's plate was empty, he removed it and carted it away. Mrs. Everett, who was still working on her fixed price lunch, fulminated Ronnie with a murderous glance, but he ignored her. Taking advantage of the empty seat, he leaned over and squeezed the boy's shoulder again: "Are you in college?"

The boy turned to him, surprised: "Yes, I'm a freshman. I just turned seventeen." He blushed.

"What major are you going for?"

"Political science, but I may change to economics."

"Sweet! I'm starting law school next week."

"Yeah? Where?"

Ronnie and the lad had their conversation cut short by the return of the middle-aged woman. She looked at Ronnie, anger flashing in her eyes, and reclaimed her seat.

"Would you please get us the check?" hissed Mrs. Everett.

Ronnie noticed that none were finished with their meals, but gathered their plates and silverware against a low hum of protests.

"Can I interest you in coffee or dessert, or an after-dinner drink?"

"NO!" shouted Mrs. Everett. "Just the check!"

Ronnie went back to the kitchen. While he was gone, Mrs. Everett waved at another waiter and asked her: "Can you get us the manager?"

The waiter noticed that Mrs. Everett was upset, and asked diplomatically: "He is in his office. Should I take you there, or have him come out to see you?"

"Perhaps it is best that I go see him."

Twenty minutes later Mrs. Everett and the manager returned to the table. The bill had not arrived. "On top of everything else, he has not even brought us the check!!" she exploded.

The manager's face turned pomegranate. "Madame, do not worry. Your dinner today is on us, with my most sincere apologies."

The four diners stormed out.

The manager burst into the kitchen, where Ronnie was describing his exploits to the cook and the sous-chef. "Davis, you are fired! I want you out of here right now!!"

Ronnie's drive east was uneventful, checking in at admissions went fine, moving into his apartment was just a chore. He went on campus and started getting acquainted with the members of the law school freshman class.

One morning towards the end of orientation week, he received a message to report to the Admissions office. He was ushered into the Dean's office, where the man greeted him with asperity.

"Mr. Davis, there is a complaint against you."

"What do you mean?"

"We received a letter reporting acts of moral turpitude you are alleged to have committed recently."

"I don't know what you are talking about."

"Judge Winston Everett, a generous donor to our university, has written us a letter forwarding statements from his wife and three other witnesses, charging you with heinous behavior while you were employed as a waiter. The alleged conduct includes, among other things, making sexual advances on a minor in front of his family. There will be an investigation, but the alleged conduct if corroborated could subject you to dismissal from the school."

"But that's preposterous. I'm innocent."

"You will have the opportunity to make your case. For now, you are on probation and remain subject to expulsion. But be aware that we deal harshly with moral turpitude cases."

Ronnie spent the weekend reflecting gloomily on the worsening outlook of his life. He would contest the charges,

of course. But he might not be able to sway the school. Moreover, at the bottom he had to acknowledge he had been petty and immature.

After much thinking, he concluded that, instead of fighting, he needed to find ways of mollifying Mrs. Everett and the rest of her party.

He found online the address and telephone number of Mrs. Everett. He spent a hefty portion of his remaining funds on a huge bouquet of flowers to send to her, including a note in which he groveled about his remorse, appealed to her Christian charity, and expressed his desire to give proper apologies. He provided his address, telephone number and email, ending with a plea: "I beg you to please let me know whether I can call or otherwise get in touch with you to set matters right between us."

Three days later, he received an email message:

Mr. Davis: Thank you for the flowers. As to your request to find a way to set matters right, you must understand that your abhorrent behavior disrupted an important event in our lives. That luncheon was to mark the reconciliation between myself, my sister Katherine, her daughter Bella, and Bella's son Brian. Katherine and I had been at odds for nearly two decades and we chose to celebrate her grandson's seventeenth birthday as a way to bring back unity to our family, a goal that because of you failed to be accomplished. You caused us a lot of grief, which cannot be cured with just flowers and sweet words.

I have consulted with Katherine. We are willing to forgive you but you must present yourself in person before us and make a formal apology. I also talked to Karl, the manager of *La Bonne Table*, who has agreed to let you return to serve us an apology lunch, for which you will pay. We are available on the first three Saturdays in October. If you are agreeable to this solution, please get back to me with the proposed date of this lunch and contact Karl so he can make the necessary arrangements.

Yours truly, Elvira Everett.

Ronnie was relieved that he might be able to make amends, but flabbergasted at the cost. He was already in big financial trouble; this frolic would make his situation even worse. But no matter: recovery of his future life prospects was worth the price.

Ronnie's call with the manager of *La Bonne Table* did not go well. Karl was antagonistic: "I'm letting this happen because Mr. and Mrs. Everett are among our best customers and have indicated that this apology luncheon is important to them. I'll let you come for that occasion but don't expect to be paid for working on that day." Ronnie agreed that his services would be rendered at no cost, and then Karl added: "By the way, I have kept the unpaid bill for the August luncheon. It came to \$378.50. You will be required to reimburse us."

Ronnie let out a small cry and surrendered: "Fine."

It was a crisp autumn day when Ronnie arrived at *La Bonne Table*. He was exhausted, having driven all night to arrive in town with enough time to check in at a motel, take a hot shower and shave, and change into clean clothes.

Upon entering the restaurant's dining room, he saw the unforgettable party of four approaching the welcoming stand to be greeted by Andrew. Ronnie dashed to the kitchen, grabbed two baskets of rolls, four small plates of butter, and two bottles of chilled mineral water – sparkling and still – and deposited everything on the table.

Ronnie then approached the group, bowing respectfully. "Good afternoon to all" he welcomed. "It's a pleasure to see you again."

"Hello, Mr. Davis. Are you doing well?" said Mrs. Everett stiffly.

"Yes, ma'am. Thanks for asking." He was shaking a bit. "May I serve you some still or sparkling water?"

Mrs. Everett and her niece Bella asked for sparkling. Katherine and Brian wanted plain water. Ronnie filled their glasses. "Some fresh bread, right out of the oven?"

As the guests were buttering their bread, Ronnie opened a menu and took a quick look. He recited the daily specials and took out a small notebook to write down the orders.

He needed not have bothered. Both sisters asked for the four-course lunch with a bottle of Sancerre, and Bella did not hesitate to order the cassoulet special. Ronnie nodded and suggested: "A glass of Shiraz would complement the cassoulet." Bella agreed.

Turning to Brian, Ronnie asked: "And for you, Sir, what would be your pleasure?"

"Today I'm in the mood for steak. Can I have one? I don't see steak in the menu."

Ronnie replied: "It's there, it is just called entrecôte, the French word for boneless rib-eye. You will never taste a better steak. It comes with pommes frites."

Brian glanced at the menu and replied: "I'll have that. Make it well done."

Ronnie forced a smile. "Very well. What would you like to drink?"

"I don't know. Coke doesn't taste good with steak."

"May I recommend cranberry juice? It cleanses the palate and cuts through the heavy meat taste."

"I never had that before, but I'll give it a try."

"You won't be sorry."

Ronnie made a big showing of entering all the orders in the notebook. "Please let me take your orders to the kitchen and get the drinks. It will be only a few minutes."

Five minutes later, he was back with the wines and the juice for Brian.

Five minutes after that, he brought out a salad for Bella and the first course for the sisters. He handed Brian a dish of French fries. "To get you started" he chuckled.

The main courses were brought without delay, and Ronnie retreated to the kitchen. A while later he returned and noticed that all but Brian had finished eating. He turned back to the kitchen.

When he came back to the table, everyone was done. He asked, "may I clear the table?" before taking everything away.

Everybody wanted coffee. He brought the pot and filled their cups. He was about to take his leave when Mrs. Leverett directed: "Please pull up a chair and sit down."

"Mr. Davis," started Mrs. Leverett. "We did not insist on bringing you back to serve us just out of meanness, but because you needed to be taught a lesson. We also wanted to finally have our reconciliation lunch and wanted to make sure everything would run smoothly. We knew that if you were here, you would ensure that we had good service to go with the excellent food. Indeed, your service today was impeccable."

Ronnie blushed and muttered thanks to the family for giving him a second chance. For this he, as a repentant sinner, was truly grateful. He was not finished with his speech when the door to the kitchen opened and Karl emerged with a bottle of champagne, with which he filled five glasses.

"I would propose a toast" started Mrs. Leverett "to our family and to my grand-nephew Brian, whose birthday we celebrate belatedly today." All glasses were raised and nobody seemed to notice that Brian, still underage, was consuming alcohol.

After the champagne was drunk, the guests said their farewells to Ronnie and thanked Karl for setting up the lunch. Ronnie watched them go and shuffled to Karl's office. The manager presented him with two pieces of paper. "Here is the bill for the August lunch. As I said, \$378.50." He handed the bill to Ronnie and inspected the other bill. "And this is for today. It comes to \$493 dollars exactly. So, you owe me \$871.50. How do you want to pay?"

Ronnie handed over his credit card. He hoped he had not gone over his credit limit. Mercifully, the charge went through.

Back in school, Ronnie had to sell his car to pay for his debts and lived like a pauper for the rest of the academic year. But he managed to make it through that year and the following two. He graduated with honors and joined a Chicago firm.

He went on to become a successful lawyer and a pillar of the community. He married his pre-law school girlfriend and bought a house in Wilmette. They eat out frequently, and when they do, he tips generously, provided service is as good as he knows it can and should be.

Bio: Born in Cuba, Matias Travieso-Diaz migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Over one hundred of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in anthologies and paying

magazines, blogs, audio books and podcasts. A collection of some of his stories, "The Satchel and Other Terrors" has been published recently.

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