

Two Over Easy All Day Long

Shari Lane

Golden Antelope Press
715 E. McPherson
Kirksville, Missouri 63501
2024

Chapter 2

“I can’t do it,” she said, smacking her gum at him, chewing apparently a substitute for the words she couldn’t or wouldn’t say. “I can’t call you Giles.”

“Mr. Gibson, then?” he suggested hopefully.

More gum-smacking. “Not hardly. What’s your middle name?”

“I have two middle names,” he said. “Anthony and Maurice.”

“Tony it is,” she said. “You sure as hell ain’t no *Tuesdays with Morrie*, so we’re going with the Anthony one, only shorter, so it sounds more, I don’t know, normal.”

Nancy Marone was the owner of Sunnyside Up, a true diner (though she optimistically referred to it as a café). Nancy told Giles she knew he was in Motte and Bailey as a punishment for some crime, though she did not know the nature of his misdeeds. “I know you’re in trouble, *big time*,” she said, “and I don’t need to know no more.”

According to Nancy, nobody else in town was aware a criminal had been foisted upon them for reparations and, possibly, rehabilitation. The details were certainly not common knowledge, in spite of the presence of the media throughout the trial. It was New York media, after all, and everyone knows you can’t trust *that*. The judge had announced the community service portion of the sentence *in camera*, “To protect the privacy of the family, and the community,” he’d said, “not *your* privacy, Mr. Gibson.”

Libby’s parents had moved away, Giles was told, fleeing the memories. There would be no one waiting for him at the town’s entrance to tar and feather him, literally or figuratively, and he was grateful for that small mercy.

Judge McCormack’s clerk had called all the restaurants in and around town (there were six, including a McDonald’s and a coffee

truck) to find out who was hiring. Nobody was, it turned out, but the clerk talked Nancy into taking Giles on by explaining that the court would deduct and pay over to Sunnyside Up all of Giles's wages out of the fines collected by the court.

"Which was a relief, let me tell you," Nancy told Giles. "It's not like I have two nickels to rub together around here."

Also according to Nancy, the judge's clerk had indicated the matter was confidential, and inquired whether that would be an issue.

"I told her I can keep my mouth shut," Nancy said.

Standing in front of the cash register, Nancy looked at Giles as if he was a side of beef and she wasn't sure there was going to be enough of him to go around. "Too bad about your name," she said. "But I'm in the same boat. My middle name is Tautau. I'm named after a Cayuse Indian chief. The Cayuse lived around here a long time ago. Some of 'em still do. My mom says we have some Cayuse in us, and she wanted to honor that, you know? 'Giles Anthony Maurice Gibson' is kind of a mouthful compared to Tautau. But still, I bet they made fun of you when you were a kid, yeah?" She paused, apparently waiting for confirmation that Giles had been mercilessly bullied (perhaps by the other children the nanny brought over to play with him?). When he neither confirmed nor denied the facts as they had been presented to him, she pointed to a table.

"I don't suppose you know anything about waiting tables, or cooking?" she asked, and there really was a question mark at the end of the sentence, as if she thought there might be more than one possible answer.

"No," Giles said sadly, feeling truly apologetic and inadequate. Why hadn't anyone ever taught him to cook?

"Well, Tony, it's never too late to learn," she said.

She gestured around herself, as if taking in the sweep of a vast establishment. "Sunnyside Up's open Tuesday through Sunday, breakfast and lunch only," she said. "That means you have to be here early but you're generally done by two o'clock, three o'clock at the outside. After that, maybe you have your community service, I don't really know anything about that part, or if not, then you can do whatever you want." She looked at him expectantly, and he wondered what *whatever you want* could include, here in this tiny town.

"Follow me and I'll show you around the place," she said, when he failed to say hooray or something similarly appreciative of having

his afternoons off. She pointed to the kitchen, and as he headed in that direction she patted him on the behind. Giles was too surprised to say a word. Then he thought: Oh, was that sexual harassment? He felt like Lucy in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, like maybe he should be shouting *Help I've been smacked by a Nancy, get hot water, get some iodine!*

He wasn't sure which was more disturbing, being patted on the behind, or being renamed without his consent. He was going to be hard-pressed to remember to answer to Tony.

It was eight in the morning on the one day the café was closed (Monday), and Giles-cum-Tony suddenly realized he hadn't eaten anything substantive in over twenty-four hours, other than the lukewarm plastic tray of what was allegedly chicken cacciatore, served by a flight attendant with thick burgundy-colored lipstick. Maybe Nancy would teach him how to make an omelet, he thought.

No such luck.

As she showed him the workspace, Nancy made it clear he was going to start—and likely finish—as a dishwasher. The dishwashing station was a good fifteen feet long, with three deep stainless steel sinks and a monster of a machine for glasses and cups and plates and flatware. There was soap in giant tubs, for the dishwasher, and a walk-in pantry about the size of his closet at home. The shelves were lined with clean dishes and biscuit mix and Lowry's Seasoned Salt and beef broth and tabasco sauce and cans of Crisco. The combination made for a slightly sweet and strangely comforting odor.

Nancy talked and trying-to-remember-to-be-Tony listened, but mostly he looked. He noticed the gray scratches on the dull white plates, and the glasses cloudy with age. He looked at Nancy, and saw a woman who was short and just this side of plump, with dark hair obviously dyed to hide the creeping gray, a generous bosom, and small, capable hands. She had a bit of a frog-bottom, he noticed, derriere slightly flattened and splayed like a frog in the middle of leaping from one lily pad to the next, one safe space to another, which was surprising since she had a modest amount of padding elsewhere on her body. The overall effect was pleasant. No one would call her beautiful, sophisticated, or distinguished, but she made him *feel* what Caroline had said yesterday morning: he was going to be okay.

"Tony," she said. "That judge's girl didn't tell me what all hap-

pened, but she told me enough. She said you're the president of a company and you let your folks get away with something they shouldn't of. I don't know whether you're really a bad man or you just didn't know what was going on. Now I think about it, you *should've* known what was going on. I run this place, and I know enough to only hire somebody who can cook the eggs just right, and I know which of my servers can make Jems and Crackers leave a tip, though they're about as penny-pinching as it gets. I've never really been out of Motte and Bailey, except for a couple of volleyball tournaments and a 4-H show, and I went to Mexico a few times on vacation, but I was drunk the whole time and don't really remember it, so that don't count. But I read lots of books, and I watch movies, and I know you're from New York City," she said it like the old television advertisement for salsa, "and I'm telling you, if you haven't already figured it out, you're not in Kansas any more. Meaning you're not in the big city. We don't pass the buck here. Well, the mayor does, probably, but most of us poor piss-ants in town know what the rest of the poor piss-ants are up to, and the man what used to be sheriff eats breakfast here just about every day, so when he's trying to hide something I know that, too."

Giles hoped she wasn't expecting a response, because he hadn't followed anything after *as penny-pinching as it gets*.

"Just make sure the dishes are clean before you put them back on the shelf and keep up with the dirties so we can serve people. Wipe down the tables and fill the salt and pepper shakers and make sure there's enough sugar and Sweet 'N Low. I was going to say something about keeping your nose clean but I guess I don't really care what you do with your nose when you're not at Sunnyside Up."

"Thank you," Giles said. It seemed the safest thing to say.

"And Toni-o," Nancy added. "Don't ever let me smack you on the backside again. That was a test, and you failed."

"Okay," he said, even more uncertain.

"I don't smack you, and you don't smack me, and we'll all get along just fine."

The thought of all that smacking made him feel dizzy, or maybe that was just hunger, so he thanked her again, and wandered back to his room at the motel.

Chapter 3

Sleepy Time Motels are the same everywhere. That's their charm, if you like consistency and predictability. Giles would have said he liked consistency and predictability—he had two twelve-ounce low fat lattes every morning before heading to the office, for instance—but he found nothing reassuring about the dull blue carpet and the gray walls.

He caught himself counting the orange squares on the slippery polyester bedspread.

More than once.

He called home, using the bedside phone in his motel room, but no one answered. No cell phone, no laptop, no internet access, Judge McCormack had said. Cruel and unusual punishment, Martin had said when relaying that part of the sentence to Giles, and then he'd laughed, and brushed a couple of croissant crumbs from his lap.

Giles tried to turn on the television, but discovered it was not functioning. Do I have the right to tell them to fix the TV, he wondered, or is that part of my punishment?

Sleepy Time Motels don't have an attached restaurant and room service, or at least this Sleepy Time Motel didn't, so he wandered back out as soon as he'd checked with the front desk, to see if there were any messages for him. Perhaps the message light on his room phone wasn't working? But no, there were no messages.

Two blocks away, further down the town's main street, he found Tio Mio's Mexican Restaurant Lunch and Dinner Served Every Day. Giles had been to Spain (which, like Nancy's trips to Mexico, didn't count), and he'd seen Taco Bell ads, and of course when he was at Yale there was a hole-in-the-wall Mexican restaurant outside campus, as there is outside nearly every American campus, but he'd never eaten

at Taco Bell or the hole-in-the-wall restaurant outside campus. He had never learned Spanish (and therefore didn't realize "Tio Mio" was not, in fact, proper Spanish for anything). The end result of all that inexperience and ignorance was that after he was seated he had no idea what to order.

A rotund waiter emerged from the kitchen, puffing slightly, rivulets of sweat wending their way down his broad face, and Tony wondered what a waiter does in the kitchen that makes him out of breath. Lift weights? Slaughter the animals? He'd never been even a little curious about what goes on behind the scenes in a restaurant, or in his own kitchen for that matter.

Probably he'd find out, working at Sunnyside Up, he thought.

He asked the waiter what he recommended, and shortly after that a large platter swimming with melted cheese and red sauce arrived. There was some kind of shredded meat hiding under the cheese and sauce, and the waiter brought a cold beer, and warm salty tortilla chips.

It was, Giles decided, the most delicious food he had ever eaten in his entire life.

After he had eaten and paid for his meal and left what he hoped was a generous tip for the world's best Mexican food, and worried, briefly, whether whatever he made at Sunnyside Up was going to be enough to allow him to eat at Tio Mio's every day, he wandered aimlessly until he came to a Safeway. He went inside and picked up a newspaper, *The Umatilla News*. He asked the checkout person whether they carried *The New York Times*, but she shook her head. "We can order it for you, if you want," she offered. Suddenly, Giles was afraid. Wouldn't they know it was him, the child-killer, the toy-maker-monster, if he ordered a New York newspaper? He told her that was fine, he was just curious. He left *The Umatilla News* on the counter and went back to get a paperback (unsatisfactory, but at least it was on *The New York Times* bestseller list), and a box of chocolate covered raisins (he was the only person in the wide wide world who liked chocolate covered raisins, according to his father).

"You know those are made by Chase Chocolates," the checkout person said. She had freckles and strawberry-blonde hair and a pug nose, like a caricature of a little girl who'd grown up but never stopped living in the body of a chubby toddler. Her nametag said *Hi I'm Leesa*.

"They are?" Giles said.

"Yep," Leesa said. "I never eat anything made by Chase. They sell formula to moms in poor countries and the babies die because they're not getting breastfed."

Perfect, Giles thought. Even the candy I like is evil. He grabbed a generic chocolate bar instead.

"Child slave labor," the clerk said. "In Africa."

Giles had never been a conspiracy theorist, but he was beginning to feel just a wee bit paranoid. He gave up on the candy and bought the newspaper and the book, and went back to his room in the motel, plodding through the shimmering heat. It was mid-June, and although he knew it made no sense, Giles suddenly missed the oppressive humidity of home. He missed the terrible smell of the city in the summer—an odor like no other, as if the foundation of the island was slowly and not-so-subtly rotting away. He missed the sounds, the horns blaring, dogs barking, people yelling, babies crying, vendors shouting, brakes squealing, never-sleeping sounds.

Most of all he missed being known. "What can I get you, sir?" "Dinner will be served at seven, Mr. Gibson." "Have you seen the latest numbers, Boss?" "Pass the sugar, sweetheart." Being known here in the middle of the middle of nowhere would be disastrous. But that didn't make it any easier to be unknown.

* * *

"I saw you at Safeway yesterday."

Giles felt as if he'd been caught in a crime. Again.

It was the same strawberry-blond with the pug nose and the freckles who had warned him about the hidden injustice in his candy bars, only now she was standing in the diner wearing a Sunnyside Up apron.

"This is Tony," Nancy said to her. "He's going to wash dishes."

"Got tired of dishwater hands, Nance?" the young woman said.

Turning to Giles, she said, "I'm Leesa. That's L-E-E-S-A."

"Hello L-E-E-S-A," he said, thinking furiously *I'mTonyI'mTony-I'mTonyI'mTony*.

"I work part time at Safeway, and here part time. And I babysit." She looked him over, appearing to be assessing him. He hoped his wardrobe choices (or rather, the wardrobe choices Addy had

suggested)—khakis, a light blue polo shirt, and Sperry top-siders—were nondescript enough to avoid uncomfortable questions. “I have to pay the rent, you know,” she added. Tony nodded, as if he did know.

“I’m sorry I gave you a hard time about your candy yesterday,” Leesa said. “I just think, well, geez, I mean Jesus Christ, this town is so *narrow-minded* and *stifling*. I have to bring a little worldly wisdom around here.”

He nodded again, unsure what the proper protocol would be for this conversation, unsure what she wanted him to say or be or do.

“Did you ever find a New York newspaper?” she said.

Nancy rescued him from the question by steering him back into the kitchen, which was now a scene of chaos unlike any he’d ever experienced.

A tall, grizzled man was standing in front of one of the wide stainless steel counters, peeling onions and feeding them into a food processor. A giant bowl with an equally giant whisk held eggs ready for scrambling, a pool of golden eyeballs floating in egg-white goo. Broken shells were scattered like bones around the bowl, most of them oozing and dripping onto the counter. A dozen half-empty ketchup bottles stood open, and a large container of ketchup was upended into a funnel perched in the mouth of one of the smaller bottles, both precariously balanced against the wall. Another enormous bowl held the beginnings of biscuits, judging by the box of Mom’s Best Biscuit Mix standing beside the bowl, and the carcasses of what must have been fifty oranges were piled next to a massive juicer.

“I heard,” the man grunted, before Nancy could introduce them. “You’re Tony, you’re going to wash dishes. I’m Walt, and I don’t like chitchat.”

Walt’s long white hair was standing up in every direction, and his long yellow-white beard was bound into a sort of ponytail with kitchen twine. Walt had mean eyes, Giles decided. Walt was wearing ragged fatigues, and ancient army boots with the sole visibly coming apart from the shoe on the right foot.

“Hairnet,” Nancy said, staring into those mean eyes with the authority only the boss can wield, with a look that said I know you’re a cranky old fart and you hate rules, and I know you cook like nobody’s business, but I’ll fire your ass if you don’t do what I say. “And gloves.”

Walt dropped his gaze and put on a hairnet. And food service gloves.

Nancy spoke loudly, so Leesa could hear her from the kitchen. "First aid and CPR training Friday, after we've cleaned up from lunch. That means you, too, Tony," she said.

That means me, too, Tony, he thought.

And just like that, he was Tony. For the rest of the day, he only had to remind himself again once. When he called Caroline that night, it would be *Hi honey, it's Tony*. Giles was gone and there was only Tony.

It was a relief, really. Tony hadn't destroyed his career, Tony hadn't accidentally killed anyone, Tony didn't have to worry about anything except washing dishes and filling salt and pepper shakers and—apparently—taking a refresher course in first aid and CPR.

"Redemption at Sunnyside Up," he said, and then he realized he'd said it aloud. Nancy looked at him as if he was insane, and maybe contagious. Walt stopped beating the eggs, set the whisk down (on the counter, unfortunately), delicately, as if it was made of fine china, and slowly came around the counter toward Tony. Tony flinched, deeply afraid Walt was going to punch him.

Walt extended his hand, encased in a clear plastic food-service glove. "Welcome, brother," he said.

* * *

The first wave of people came into the diner, mostly old white men, Tony noticed, stoop-shouldered, wearing long shorts with wrinkled pale knees poking out, some of them wearing black socks and white bargain-store tennis shoes with their shorts. At first, Tony glanced up every time the door chime announced a new arrival, but soon, prodded by gentle and not-so-gentle reminders from Nancy, he was too busy to look.

Tony was responsible for filling the water glasses on the front end of every meal, filling and refilling coffee cups as needed, and clearing the table and wiping it down after guests left. When instructed, he set out fresh napkins, silverware, cups and glasses, and checked the levels of essentials like sugar and salt. And, of course, he washed dishes.

He couldn't help but compare the cheap paper napkins and dull stainless steel flatware to the linens and gleaming silverware he and

Caroline were accustomed to at home, and once he caught himself scrubbing a knife obsessively, trying to make it shine. But the frenetic pace and the monotony (strange how the two can co-exist, he thought) drove philosophical musings out of his mind.

"Gloves," he said, once again not realizing he had spoken aloud. The scalding water and harsh detergent were taking a toll on his smooth pink hands—the hands of a wealthy corporate executive who'd never had to wash a dish in his life.

"Under the sink," Walt grunted.

"I've always wondered why we're called white," Tony said, rummaging in the cupboard under the sink. "I'm more of a speckled peach color, normally, and now I'd say my hands are an angry red."

"Nancy says Table Two needs water," Walt said.

Apparently their brief kinship was over.

"You're new," said the old man at Table Two, inclining his head graciously as a king might acknowledge a young squire. A sparse ring of hair circled his head like a furry gray halo, and watery blue eyes smiled kindly through thick glasses.

"I'm—Tony," he said.

"Welcome, Tony. I'm Roj. That's short for Roger, in case you're wondering. Roger Lanyard. I just live down the road. Nancy can tell you, Sunnyside Up's my favorite place for lunch."

"And breakfast," Nancy said, giving him a strange, twisted smile.

"And breakfast," Roj agreed, patting her arm conspiratorially as she passed.

Tony wasn't sure, but he thought he saw Nancy flinch.

"I was the sheriff around here for years," Roj said, and it was clear he expected some sign of deference from Tony.

"Interesting," Tony said cautiously, unsure if that was sufficient.

"Table Four needs coffee," Walt shouted from the kitchen, and Tony was sure he wasn't just imagining it: there was definitely hostility in the shout, aimed not at him, necessarily, but in the general direction of Roj.

"Well, nice to meet you," he said to Roj.

* * *

In his first-ever shift as a dishwasher and busboy at a diner, *Tony* spilled coffee on a patron (he apologized profusely, and the old man

said it was all right, not to worry about it), nicked his thumb on a knife (Leesa showed him the first aid kit and told him to write it down on the Incident Log, in case it got infected and fell off and he was permanently disfigured and disabled and had to file a workers' compensation claim), knocked over a bucket of dirty dishes waiting to be stacked in the dishwasher (breaking four plates and two glasses), and stepped on Nancy's foot three times.

As he walked back to the motel that afternoon, he realized he had inadvertently managed to annoy or genuinely piss off almost everyone in the diner, all in one day. He wasn't used to being disliked, and it hurt, though he reminded himself these were not "his" people, he was only here for a year, and it was okay if nobody liked him, he'd soon be home to Caroline and Addy and all the others who were nice to him.

Except Caroline didn't answer the phone when he called that night, and he remembered belatedly that Addy had taken another job in anticipation of his employer being gone for a year.

The television was working now. Tony-who-used-to-be-Giles wasn't sure how it got fixed, but assumed it was some sort of electronic miracle. He slipped under the bedcover and watched a little of *The Colbert Show*, a dose of semi-erudite patter to counteract the hours spent side by side with the uncommunicative Walt. He decided to ask Caroline if she would order him some of that special salve from the Vermont Country Store for his hands, the kind with Bay Rum in it. And that made him think of rum, and he wondered where he could find a liquor store, and wondered again whether there was something in the judgment about not buying liquor. And whether he'd be able to afford it, once the meager amount of cash in his wallet was spent.

He probably should have read the court's order more closely.

On the show, a female guest talked about the disconnect between the wealthy few and the *hoi polloi*, and then he remembered that he was Giles Gibson, exiled from the life of "the wealthy few" because his carelessness had killed a child, and he felt simultaneously suffocated by guilt and bereft of all that was familiar, lying under an ugly polyester bedcover watching a television that was bolted to the wall so he wouldn't be tempted to steal it, and he wept.

About the Author



Shari Lane was reading voraciously by the time she entered kindergarten, and she has been writing for almost as long. (Her first full-length novel, hand-written at the age of ten and stapled together for her family, followed the adventures of magical guinea pigs.) Her adult bio is as multi-dimensional as the characters in her book. With an MA in Classics she taught Latin to middle school students and operated a Montessori preschool. Eventually she headed back to university for a Juris Doctor. In addition to her work as a lawyer advising employers about civil rights and related laws, she became a certified mediator, served on the board of a Head Start organization serving

primarily the children of migrant farmworkers, and volunteered with organizations serving houseless and food-insecure people. Seeing two sides, building bridges. Along the way she wrote *The UnFairY Tale* series for middle grade readers and began an adult novel titled *What the Dogs Know*. (A chapter is available at alaughingdog.com.)

Whenever and however possible, Shari surrounds herself with books, writers, and readers. In addition to being Managing Editor of *SHARK REEF Literary Magazine*, she is on the Lopez Island Library's Board of Trustees, and hosts WORD!, an open mic for local writers. It is her ardent belief that good writing can provide a much-needed escape, a chance for a cathartic cry, or a healing belly laugh. Just as importantly, in these divided and divisive times, she believes stories can build bridges, as we see through another's eyes, and feel through the beating of another's heart.

Her short stories have been published in *Evening Street Review*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, *Cape Magazine*, *Antithesis*, and other literary magazines. *Two Over Easy All Day Long* is her first traditionally-published novel for adults.

Find Shari online at sharilane.com, with links to follow her on Facebook and on Instagram (ReadWriteBreathe38).