

When an insidious secret becomes known, the lives of those working in a strip mall plaza are thrown into disarray. While some vie for control, weaponizing divisive anger, others stay true to their moral convictions, battling destruction.

Spectrum

By Anne Tarnishable

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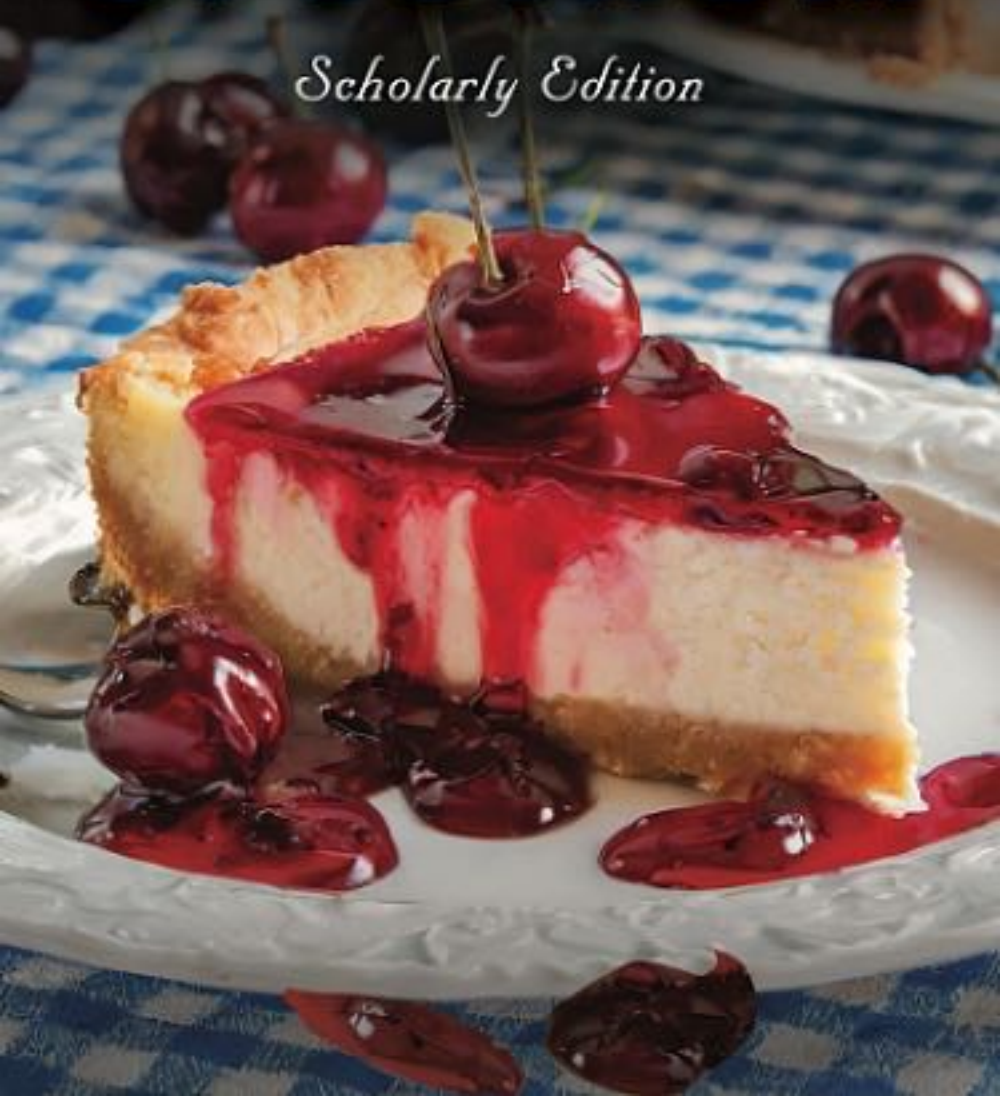
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Anne Tarnishable

SPECTRUM

Scholarly Edition



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First Edition

Todd was packaging a take-out order when something in the corner of his eye caught his attention. A man had emerged from behind *Garbage Row*, as Benny called it, and hurried to the sidewalk, making his way south and out of sight. He moved quickly, like he was late, but Todd could see a robust grin, even from his distant vantage point. Odd, he remarked to himself, as he closed the flimsy container.

The hum of the vintage blender started up as Benny readied a strawberry milkshake for Doug, seated at the counter. He was the owner of the used book store, a black man of average height, a goatee jet black with tips going grey, and a bald head, attractively rounded. He had a charming smile, particularly when waiting for a milkshake, his favourite. Benny lowered the metallic container from the slowing propeller and deposited two straws into the beverage, handing it to Doug. His phone pinged and he looked at it.

“Todd, would you mind running over to Guy’s? He’s loaning us a bag of romaine until the delivery comes on Monday.”

The two restaurant owners often borrowed if necessary. From the texts Benny had sent recently, he wondered if Guy was starting to tire of the trade. The

diner had been gracious in extending produce, ice and even meat when Guy ran short on busy days, but Benny wondered if he had been an imposition with this recent request of lettuce. He sensed a passive aggressive mood creeping into their text exchanges.

Todd took off his apron, placing it under the counter beneath the register and made his way out the door. It was a quick walk, under thirty paces Todd figured, to *Guy's*. Entering, he looked at the bar to his left, nodding at the bartender and then moved forward to the host station where parties waited to be seated, a slow tempo House music playing softly throughout the dining room.

Nadia, a student at the university working part-time at the restaurant, stood at the reception area behind a podium. Her curly, cascading dark hair had been tied tightly in a ponytail as Guy's policies required, allowing a display of her many tasteful ear piercing studs. Through the wide front window of the restaurant, she had seen Todd making his way over and had quickly reached up with a menu to fan out the flame of a candle atop a sconce next to the podium.

"Hello. I'm here for some romaine," Todd said.

"Sure," she said and walked quickly back to the salad station returning with a bag of lettuce. She put it on the top of the podium next to a book she had been sneakily reading during slow moments when Guy was

in his office. The weekend lunch rush had not yet descended upon the eating establishment.

“Todd,” she began, her voice rich and lively, “Would you mind helping me with something?”

He looked at her unsure as to what she meant. “Okay,” he offered tentatively.

She grabbed a wand lighter she knew to be low on butane and handed it to him.

“This stupid candle keeps going out. I can’t reach it. Would you mind?”

Todd looked up at the sconce, something resembling a horn or antler, he had never been able to tell. Whether it was a big game trophy or a fabrication, it looked almost real though he couldn’t be sure. Like the many jade, wood and metal decor in *Guy’s*, it was difficult to discern which were authentic. He reached for the wand and Nadia lingered a second still holding it, smiling at him. Todd reached up, flicking the lighter’s switch, the flame sputtering out several times.

“So, busy day?” Nadia asked, realizing her moment of opportunity to speak to him was limited; he was so hyper-focused on getting back to the diner when he came to pick up an item.

“Not too bad,” he returned. “How about you?”

She struggled to think of something to move the conversation further, but as she did, a flame finally sprouted and sustained itself as Todd adeptly gave the

candle illumination. He placed the wand lighter back in her hands as she slouched and he caught sight of a novel face down on the podium next to the lettuce. He wondered what she was reading but thought it might be an imposition to ask her. The lettuce in hand, he thanked Nadia and swiftly headed back to the diner. As he crossed the sidewalk, he envisioned the font and colour scheme of the back of the book trying to determine any familiarity that might lead him to a guess as to what she was reading. Maybe it was from Doug's shop.

Nadia fiddled with the lighter and she watched him leave. She turned her head to see Jimmy, the bartender, mixing two mimosas for a well-dressed couple at his counter. He was shaking his head and chuckling as he saw Nadia's failed attempt. She fidgeted, wondering why it was so difficult to puncture Todd's shell. Jimmy's posture snapped into an awkward rigidity and Nadia could sense Guy was emerging from his office near the back end of the dining area. She quickly stashed her novel under her bag at the bottom of the podium.

Guy savoured his promenade through the dining area. Though not a tall man, he moved with a measured gait, purposeful like a regal procession. Expensive, tailored suits and painstakingly-coiffed dark hair would draw in many looks of admiration overcoming

whatever he lacked in height or physical attractiveness. And although he never allowed so much as a five o'clock shadow from blighting his face, he chose to let his eyebrows flourish, fastidiously manscaped at the edges but abundantly thick throughout, the centerpiece of his face. One line cook, whose duration in his restaurant lasted three and a half shifts, made the mistake of referring to them as "rescue caterpillars." Guy had honed the skill of shifting his brows in subtle but unnerving ways and began to experience a strange thrill when the smallest raising or frowning could produce such dread in whomever was standing before him.

It was past noon and tables were being sat. He passed the faux marble tables under the industrial lighting, a network of copper pipes sprouting light bulbs. He saw the cooks were busy preparing quiche and the sweet smell of onion and wine marinade needed for the hasenpfeffer tickled his nose. Chef Notrevo was busy directing his underlings to make sure the day ran smoothly. He was a nondescript man with sickly skin and weak arms, but his small and hawkish eyes were piercing. He wore square-rimmed glasses that dominated his lacklustre face. It had taken some time to find a chef whose vision was harmonious with Guy's. As Chef Notrevo soon discovered, harmonious really meant compliant. After all, the name of the

restaurant spoke for itself. Chef Notrevo had made his peace with that. He reminded himself, on a daily basis, he should be proud to work for such a enterprising establishment.

Reaching the bar, Guy bowed to the couple, the Turners, who were downing oysters and sipping cocktails. They were regulars. Mrs. Turner wore a stylish floral dress, shades of fuchsia and cyan, her husband's shirt picking up on the green-blue of her ensemble, as per her suggestion when they were getting ready that morning. When she moved her head, her earrings, thin bronze shards resembling modernist bananas, tinkled gently.

"These oysters are divine, Guy," she said, greeting him cheerfully.

"Aren't they just?" he confirmed. He extended his left arm to expose his lustrous watch more prominently beyond his cuff-linked shirt and dark grey jacket sleeve.

"Bob was just saying how he couldn't tell the difference between East coast and West coast oysters, weren't you honey?"

Mr. Turner nodded. "Yes, I guess one is sort of--"

"Not that I can tell either," Mrs. Turner said, guffawing carefree. She was on her second mimosa.

Guy smiled. He looked to Jimmy and raised one heavy eyebrow slightly. Jimmy leaned over the bar and

Guy leaned in to whisper something in the bald man's ear. Jimmy departed to the food stations.

“Well, practice makes perfect.” The restaurateur liked to watch his loyal customers satiating themselves. He had noticed early on that Jimmy's mixed drinks were overly generous in his portioning of alcohol, a habit that could easily have cost him his job. When Guy audited a thorough examination of an increase of food ordered at the bar, he reconsidered.

Jimmy returned with an ice-filled tin dish, four oysters sitting atop which were angled to produce an “X,” placing it in front of the couple as he removed their depleted shells, trying his best not to drip melting ice from the metal container.

“We scour the seas for you,” Guy said, projecting his voice like an emcee. “Try these, on the house of course, and think along the lines of briny versus buttery.”

The two thanked him and he could instantly see the reverence in their eyes. They loved coming here; why wouldn't they? Aisha hurried in through the front door. Her shift started at 12:30 and it was ten minutes prior. Guy usually expected his employees to be ready to go fifteen minutes early. Seeing her try to slink past him at the bar, he raised his hand, like a crossing guard, and she stopped in her tracks.

“Have you met my floor manager, Aisha?” Guy asked of the Turners.

The woman’s dark eyes looked out apprehensively from an olive brown face to the couple trying not to drip mollusk meat on their dapper apparel. She couldn’t tell if this was a test Guy had devised because she hadn’t arrived early enough or if he was showing her off as he frequently did, a bizarre and unexpected spotlight Aisha had never understood.

“Very nice to meet you,” Aisha said forcing a grin.

“You must be an excellent worker,” Mrs. Turner said, leaning in to presumptuously place her hand on Aisha’s dark wrist. “Only the best at Guy’s!” She raised her glass toasting the air as her husband steadied her stool, preventing her from slipping off.

Aisha tilted her head shyly, embarrassed by the compliment and wondering if this was a trap. “Thank you, ma’am,” she offered.

Guy nudged his nose upward and Aisha awkwardly gave a half bow to the pair, knowing that was the sign she could take her leave. Mrs. Turner took another swig of golden yellow nectar and remembered there was something she had meant to share with Guy.

“Our son Damian is attending university up the road,” she explained.

“Oh. Very good. I make a *modest* contribution to the school each and every year.” Guy had leaned into

the word modest to let them imagine it was actually quite sizable. “He’s a promising student, your son, I’ve no doubt,” he offered.

“He really likes the diner next door,” she continued.

Guy slowly nodded, “Ah, I see.” His voice starting to chill. Mrs. Turner, still sober enough to catch the change in tone, worried she had said something gauche.

“He prefers burgers to oysters. You know how boys are.”

Guy held her gaze and her husband spotted a rare opening in which to speak. “What do you think of the diner?” Bob asked.

Looking upward to the suspended pipes as if he were weighing an incredibly important thought, he paused just long enough to make sure the Turners were granting him their undivided attention. The truth was the diner had been operating in this spot long before his own restaurant opened. At first, he could not have cared less about the greasy spoon; he serviced a more sophisticated clientele. Then one evening, as he was playing raconteur for a table of spellbound guests, he overheard the next table decide they would skip Guy’s dessert options. They wanted to go to the diner for their “amazing” lemon meringue pie. It was one of the many desserts Benny’s mother Helen made, a simple delicacy, but apparently quite good. Distracted, Guy could barely finish his precious anecdote and as the

table of four settled their tab and headed enthusiastically to the diner, he began to reassess this newly identified threat.

“Well, the devastation wrought by cattle ranchers to produce hamburger meat is one concern. Call me a progressive if you must,” Guy pronounced.

The well-dressed couple nodded in virtuous concord.

“However, there’s something more troubling,” he said solemnly to the Turners, “And far be it from me to judge, but I just feel terribly about that poor old woman in the diner.”

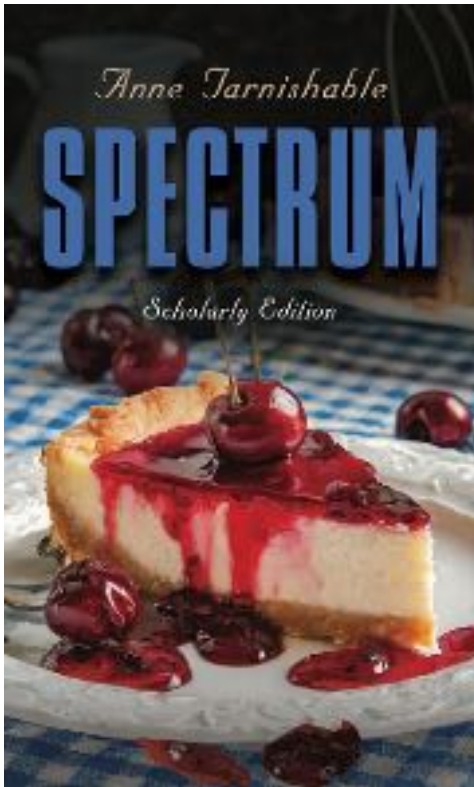
The couple perked up, unaware of this situation. Guy proceeded. “She must be in her seventies and Benny works her like a ... well it’s unfortunate.” He could see their eyes rapt with concern as he landed the final blow. “Heck of a way to treat his own mother.” He raised his hands as if to shove off the feigned disgust he was channelling.

“Oh, that’s awful,” Mrs. Turner bemoaned.

Mr. Turner moved his head compulsively up and down. “It is. It really is.”

“Like I said, I don’t mean to speak ill, but it gives me pause,” Guy offered nobly. Mrs. Turner looked to her husband, her earrings jangling daintily. “We’ll have to talk to Damian,” she said heavily. He concurred.

A few more words of small talk, Guy reviving their spirits with talk of the oysters he had so graciously bestowed and they departed not long thereafter, their stomachs full. They would be speaking to their son very soon. After all, they were funding his living expenses and the thought of their money supporting that harsh man and his downtrodden mother made them sick.



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