
Book Description

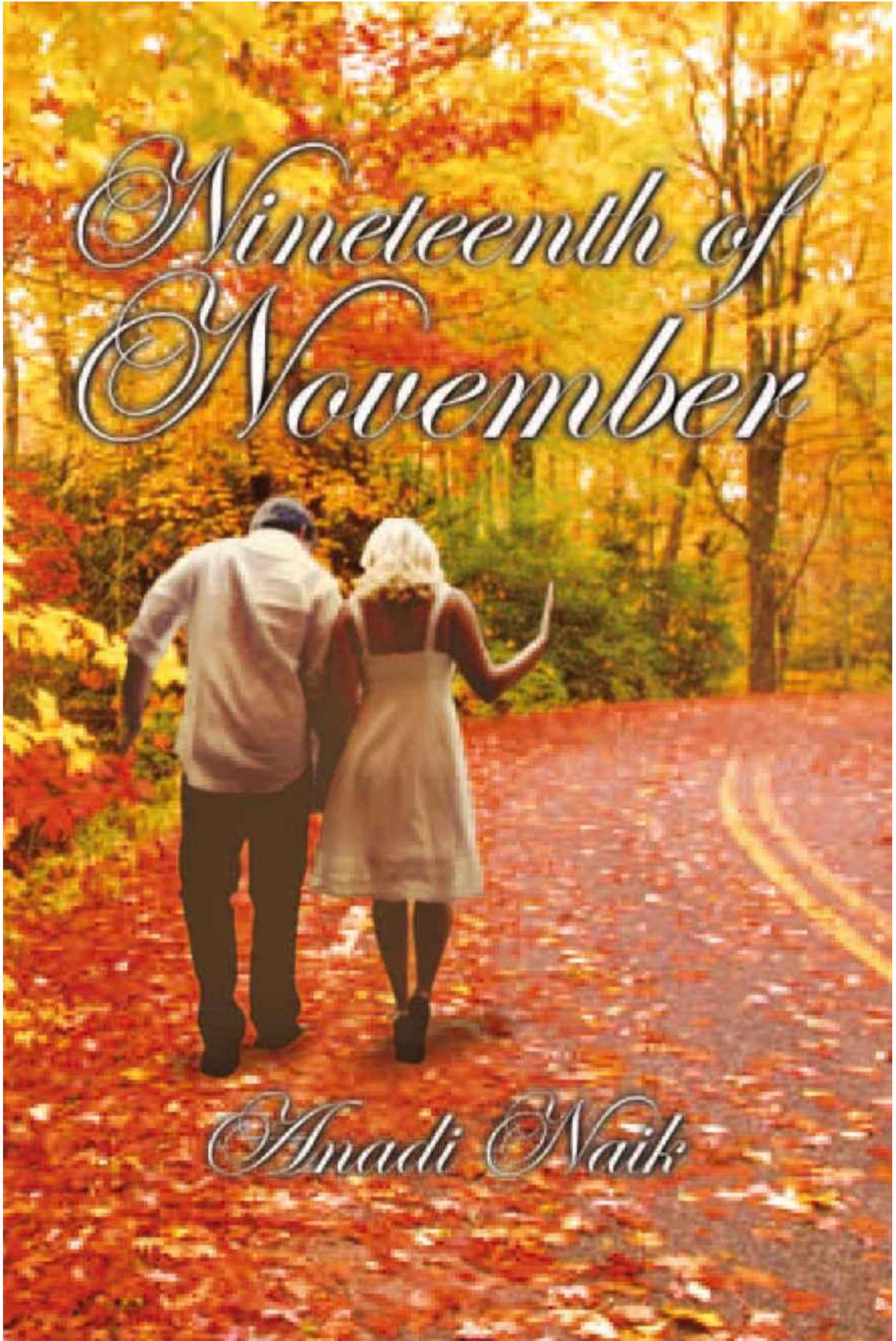
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Barbara and Don were happily married for fifteen years until he died of colon cancer. Ever since his death, her heart has felt empty. But she has made an effort to move on with the help of her sister Rhoda and her work as a schoolteacher. She has slowly opened herself to new possibilities. And then she meets Sam a relatively younger man. They spend times together and love each other without committing to marriage. They are content with what they have at the moment just keeping their feelings for each other in check until Sam is lured to the unknown opportunities offered by the cold state of Alaska. Reality sinks in: Sam is moving away. But they are both matured enough to accept it—even if it hurts. *Nineteenth of November* is a poignant story of life and love.

Editorial Reviews

About the Author

Anadi Naik is a keen observer of people ,places and ideas. He continues to write articles about social issues. *Nineteenth of November* is a fiction about hope, perseverance and the desire to love and be loved. After *Song of Satan*, this is his second book of fiction. Naik was born and raised in India. He came to the US as a young student. Over the years he has involved himself with many challenging ideas and activities. Presently he and his wife Carroll live in Maryland.

A photograph of a man and a woman walking away from the camera on a road covered in fallen autumn leaves. The man is on the left, wearing a light-colored shirt and dark pants. The woman is on the right, wearing a white dress. The road has a double yellow line on the right side. The background is filled with trees with vibrant yellow and orange autumn foliage.

*Nineteenth of
November*

Anadi Naik

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Chapter 1

WHEN BARBARA WOKE up in her king-size bed, it was already daylight. She could feel the sun through the parting curtains of her bedroom window. On the one hand, she did not want to leave the comfort of her bed on a cold and windy day like this. On the other hand, she felt guilty to lie there and do nothing. Her conscience, rooted in her stern upbringing, pinched her. "Don't waste time," she heard her inner voice say. Even if the sun was out and she was debating whether or not to continue to lie on her bed, at this very moment she preferred to feel guilty by not listening to her inner voice.

While lying on her back, snuggling under layers of blankets, and resting her head on a pillow filled with bushels of chicken feathers, she looked at the bureau that stood on the east side of her room. Her wristwatch, jewelry, and toiletries lay on the top of it, along with a few store receipts of various things she had purchased over a period of time. However, her eyes got stuck on the picture that was so prominently displayed on the bureau: Don and she. It was taken when both of them went on a cruise to the Bahamas. For the last two years, ever since Don died, she had been looking at this

picture every day. That is all she has of him now. The picture brought back many memories. Nostalgia, melancholy, and sadness filled her heart. Ever since Don died, her heart always felt empty. On a cold day it felt more so because she could not snuggle with him under the covers anymore.

They were married for fifteen years. They loved each other. And there was perfect compatibility between them. In a sense, Don and she were each other's best friends. Don died of colon cancer. The disease spread so quickly to his organs that he had no time to recuperate. Barbara's eyes became moist now. Her mind went back to those days when she saw Don lying in a hospital bed, unable to get up or speak, excruciating pain eating away at his body and Don losing his desire to live. Not only was he in pain, but anyone who looked at him felt it. His was the sight of a dying man wasting away rapidly.

By the time death finally came to him, everyone around him knew that it was only a matter of time. Barbara was ready. But she was ready in a theoretical way. When Don's death actually happened, she felt like the earth was moving from under her feet. She no longer had a husband. For months, since he was admitted to the hospital, she had been living alone without him. Yet his presence in her life was reassuring. It was something she could look into or hope for. But his death brought a finality that was hard to bear and painful to accept. In a situation like this, no matter how much one tried, one always fell short to cope.

In a terrible way, Barbara felt lonely. Her bedroom felt too big and empty. The bed on which she had awoke and the pillow on which she had rested her head felt too hard. Even the blankets that were supposed to keep her body warm felt like thorns. She felt uncomfortable and tragically overwhelmed. She wished for a panacea. But there was none. At least, she could not find any. Her inability to find a solution to her present and existing condition made her feel restless and frustrated.

Barbara was not ready for such a feeling so early in the morning, although she had been feeling this way quite often. Therefore, this morning's miserable feeling did not surprise her. It rather reinforced the belief within her that she must look forward to having feelings like this forever. The future looked to her very dark and very scary. She wished Don were there to give her hope and strength. But he had been dead for two years. All this time, every day she has been thinking about him. It has become a habit. Out of habit, once again she thought about him. She thought about them together. Once more, she looked at the picture. "Don looks so handsome!" she told herself. The picture was taken on the ship. They were attending the captain's ball, and one of the photographers on the cruise ship took their picture. She even remembered the gown she wore in the picture. It was from Saks Fifth Avenue. She had bought it on a trip to New York. She remembered asking Don, "Do you like it?"

"It looks wonderful," he had replied.

It was before he fell ill. The past came alive. She could feel Don's touch; she could hear the twang of his voice. They made her feel good.

She remembered things they did together. There was plenty of trust between them, and they loved each other. It was the love that lubricated their entire relationship. They were compatible. Like couples everywhere, they used to have sex, often and uninhibited. Now, in a nostalgic way, she wished to have all of that again. Under the blanket, she ran her hand on her body to recreate some of that experience once again and imagined as if Don was there. But all of that seemed to be the shadow of the real thing. A sense of helplessness came over her.

While lying in bed, Barbara realized that she had been thinking about her dead husband far too long. "This is not the way to start the day," she thought. So she forced herself to get up and face the challenges of the day, whatever they may be. Before she did anything, she had to wash her face, and eat breakfast. Those were mundane things. But without them life could not function. In an unhurried way, she completed her boring yet necessary chores.

November is a tricky month whose days could be sunny and mild and also could be snowy. They could be pleasantly warm, and they could be bone-shatteringly chilly. Outside, most of the trees looked barren. Their leaves lay on the ground. Occasionally, the wind blew them in different directions. A thick layer of dried leaves covered the front yard. "I need to rake," she thought. At the moment, it felt cold. In order to work outside, Barbara put on some warm clothes.

It was a Saturday, and she needed some exercise. "Raking leaves will do me some good. The cold burns up calories," she thought. In her own mind, Barbara always felt that she could lose a few more pounds. Burning calories through work was a good idea, and it appealed to her. She hated cold weather. But in the prospect of burning calories, raking leaves outside kind of appealed to her.

Each tree seemed to have a history of its own. Now they looked big and sprawling. But every one of those trees was planted by Don. When they moved into their newly built home, there was nothing around. It was just a big field of grass. Like all the houses in the neighborhood, their house sat in the middle of a piece of land that in its previous life was used as a cornfield. Years of farming had made the land fertile, and with Don's caring the newly planted saplings took root quickly. It was impossible to imagine then that such an insignificant piece of twig would become such a big tree of today.

When Barbara, with a rake in hand, stepped outside to collect leaves, once again the thought of her late husband filled her mind. The very presence of those trees was enough to trigger those thoughts. She could not help but feel Don's presence all around the yard. She remembered Don watering the trees in the summer and putting mulch around them in the fall and spring and clipping their low-lying branches throughout the year. On summer afternoons, on many occasions, she had spent with him sipping iced tea under some of those trees. She looked at the spots where they used to sit. She remembered the exact location where they used to put their chairs.

Through those memories she felt nostalgic and sad. But she was determined to rake the fallen leaves.

The leaves were of many different colors – yellow, orange, red, and deeply red. Their rich, vibrant colors a week or so earlier glowed the entire surrounding. Now they lay on the ground. A whiff of wind could blow them in any direction. Rich, vibrant colors of the past had to gather dust now. Working outside in the cold air was refreshing, at least momentarily. She took a deep breath and looked around her trees and her yard. A sense of exhilaration came upon her. She gathered the leaves and put them in large, forty-gallon plastic bags. After packing a few bags, she felt tired. Working outside on a windy and cold day seemed fun for a short while. But it wore off very quickly. She decided to come inside, where it was warm and cozy. She felt like spending the entire day inside doing nothing. But it was not possible. In her mind, she figured that she had a whole lot of things that needed her attention. After pouring a cup of hot coffee for herself, she settled down in her favorite chair by her kitchen table and started writing bills. While her hand was working on the bills, she was watching television and her mind was moving from one end of the world to the other to people and places she had never met or seen who came with different languages, clothes, and ways of life. Yet, some way or the other, she remained connected to them. She did not feel anything unusual about it. Her body and mind kept working in harmony. It was her soul that was restive, and she had no peace.

Barbara lived in a big spacious house that had ample land around it. Because of the trees and the shrubs, there was a lot of privacy. She loved her privacy. But lately, the sense of privacy that she used to enjoy so much in the past has been disturbing her. Privacy had turned into a kind of isolation and loneliness. She felt a need to get connected and to be with and among people. She wanted to overcome her loneliness. The reality that Don was gone kept making that feeling increasingly acute.

Barbara tried to keep herself busy. She tried to engage herself in different activities. When at her job as a schoolteacher, she was fine. The workload becomes a place to take refuge. She sees children with all kinds of problems. Some of them come to school, unkempt and hungry. Some of the children in her class lack any kind of parental guidance. A few of them from a very early age learn to steal. In the school, there are teenage prostitutes and pimps and they break her heart. She wishes she could mold those kids in a different direction. She tries. But each of those kids live in a very different world. And she is only a teacher, and her scope beyond the role of being an advisor and instructor is limited. She tries to engage her pupils to do their homework, classwork, and understand about living ethically. Yet she knows that the reality of life for many of her students is different. And no matter how much she may try to influence them, individually or collectively, it is the environment of their homes and neighborhoods that determines their behavior. Still, she tries and that gives her satisfaction.

More often than not, Barbara tries to put herself in the position of her students. She feels sad and inadequate. When she thinks about their problems, her own problems stop hurting her. However, the process stays only for a short period. The hurt and the sorrow that affects her personal life is quite different from theirs. She is a woman who used to be someone's wife. But now she is a widow. Don was too young to die, and she was too young to be a widow. She was not prepared for it. Yet it happened. She could blame no one for her misfortune, if it could be interpreted that way. At an intellectual level, Barbara knew that people die, and in millions of cases they die young and they leave their loved ones behind. For many, life ends without notice, and it leaves a lot of work unfinished. The dead do not have to be concerned with what happens after they are gone. It is the living people, left behind, who suffer and keep on remembering things from their common past. The living ones become sad and overwhelmed and miserable. A continuous feeling of such a state of mind gives way to a kind of numbness, which when developed slowly, saves the ones left behind and helps them to face life in a very real way.

Barbara was no different. In spite of all the miseries that she felt in her heart, she was ready to face each of her problems. She missed Don every day and night; 24/7. But she was not ready to give up hope for herself. She wanted to make her "life" work for her. In a way, she was determined to accept the reality while working for change. In her thinking, change just does not come by itself. One has to work at it. On her part, she was trying to do so.

Barbara does not like deep thinking. It hurts her head. When problems and issues come before her, she looks at them and tries to understand them. If possible, she tries to find a solution. If she cannot find a resolution in her own way, then she just moves away from the problem or the issue altogether. It avoids having an argument, and she hates arguments. She likes everything to be simple and uncomplicated. But things do not happen that way all the time. This at times bothers her.

For whatever reason, at this moment, Barbara found herself to be in a thinking mood, even if she did not want to think about anything. But thoughts kept pouring into her head. She saw pictures of people and places she had seen in the past. She remembered things that had happened to her or around her a long time ago or in the recent past. In a strange way, she felt as if her entire past came alive before her eyes. The thoughts she had about her pupils and their respective families, once again, became hazy in her mind. She could not trust her own thoughts anymore. Thank God, her telephone rang. It was Rhoda, her sister.

As soon as she said "hello," she could hear Rhoda's uncontrollable sobbing. She was trying to say something, but it was hard to decipher from her voice. She was talking on a cordless phone. But it felt like the earth was shaking. Finally, she had the courage to ask Rhoda to calm down. "Tell me, what happened?"

Through her sobbing, Rhoda told her story. It was personal and tragic. Rhoda's husband Steve wants a divorce.

Apparently, Rhoda was heartbroken. She was not ready for a blow like this. While listening to her voice, Barbara was thinking in her own mind about a lot of things. They ranged from amazement to relief to sadness. Rhoda was seven years younger. She and Steve had been married for eighteen years. Their only son Noah graduated from high school last year. With a degree in comparative religion, Rhoda works for an agency that serves emotionally challenged people; Steve works for the city. Rumor has it that Steve is on a very friendly terms with one of the women in his office. Everybody seems to know about it except Rhoda. Maybe, she knew it all along but was not ready to admit it to herself. Now that Steve has finally declared an end to their marriage, the realization has finally come and devastated her. Barbara felt as bad for Rhoda as a sister could feel. She wanted to empathize with Rhoda and console her. At the same time, she could not help but feel sorry for Rhoda's ostrich-like attitude, where she did not want to face the fact and wanted to hide her head in the sand. Finally, the situation caught up with her. Maybe, she became a victim of her own avoidance. Either way, she is a loser now. There was nothing she or anyone could do to undo what has happened – the meltdown of a marriage.

“How long has he been planning this, do you know?” Barbara asked in a matter-of-fact way.

“He must have been for some time. I don't know,” Rhoda replied through her sobbing.

“How is Noah taking it?”

“He does not know yet. I am sure he will find out.” Barbara felt concerned about him. From her experience with kids from divorced families she knew that children take it very hard when their parents separate, even if their sense of resilience helps them eventually.

“I am sure, he will find out sooner or later. Make sure he is okay. It will hurt him badly,” advised Barbara. She wished she could do something to help her sister. But the pain was Rhoda's. There was no way for her to take it away. All she could do at the time was to stand by her.

Over the years, Barbara and Rhoda had shared each other's secrets as sisters. They had laughed and cried together on many occasions. Both sisters talked to each other often. Not a week went by when they did not touch base with one another. They were from the same parents. Yet each of them landed in life at different angles. Having been the younger of the two girls of Martha and Harry Blowcamp, Rhoda in many ways was idealistic and impractical. She was demanding and moody and developed a keen sense of how to take advantage of people and places. To some extent, she was manipulative. In any conversation, she talked incessantly without showing any desire to listen to others. Among strangers she moved dexterously, but those who knew her felt Rhoda was as weighty as a feather. Friends nicknamed her “flighty.” Things came to her easily because she was smart and persuasive. On the other hand, Barbara suffered from a protector's mentality. She was hardnosed about facts that happened

around her and did not get carried away so easily. Having been a schoolteacher and being used to controlling a class full of teenagers for years, she now carried an aura of confidence, authority, and purpose.

Barbara felt she needed to be with her sister. This was Rhoda's time of need, and she wanted to be with her. She drove to her house, which was a few miles away.

Rhoda lived on a cul-de-sac. A tall birch tree stood prominently in her front yard that was well groomed all the time. The back yard had many flowering trees and plants – the likes of dogwood, magnolia, weeping cherry, butterfly, and crape myrtle. The end of Rhoda and Steve's property was marked with poplar trees that stood very tall. Barbara always enjoyed looking at the trees on Rhoda's property. Not today. She did not even notice them. Very concerned and very upset, she drove her car up to the house. There was a kind of deathly silence. Once by the door, she rang her sister's doorbell. Rhoda opened the door. She was not crying, but Barbara could see the marks of dried tears on Rhoda's cheeks. On seeing Barbara, she broke down once more. Barbara held her in her arms and let her emotion take its own course.

"You need to get hold of yourself," Barbara said. Her voice was strong and exuded the authority that can only come from an older sister. But today's conversation was different. Rhoda needed to face her problem, for which she was not prepared. And Barbara wanted to provide strength, her own strength. Over coffee, they talked and talked a lot about things from the past. Rhoda said that she had no clue of Steve's intentions. Over and over, and in many different ways, she tried to make this point. Barbara played the role of a good listener and provided empathy. All the time, while listening to her, she was thinking, "What can a woman do when her man falls in love with another woman? Is there anything Rhoda could have done to prevent Steve from falling in love with, whosoever that woman's name may be?" No logical answer came to her mind.

Barbara knew her sister well. From outside, she may look vulnerable and weak, but Rhoda possessed a very strong will. "When push comes to shove, she can face any challenge," she told herself. While at her sister's side, Barbara gave her advice and listened to her. Together, they analyzed many of the incidents that may have had some indication about Steve's state of mind. But none of that was relevant anymore. He left and that was a fact. Rhoda had to deal with that. Barbara's presence made her feel good. And a feeling like that she needed badly.

Late into the evening, Barbara finally left for home. It had been a long day. All kinds of thoughts passed through her head while driving home. She realized that her morning started with worries about herself, her present condition and her future. Now she was worrying about her sister and the uncertain future she has to face.

Barbara loved her sister. She knew her younger sister had a lot of weaknesses; still, she was her sister. Anyone putting her through a difficult period in life was unacceptable to her. On that note, she was angry and upset. "Steve is an asshole," she muttered to herself silently, and it felt good when she said that. But the anger she felt

inside could not be washed away so easily. “Why does he have to do this? Why does he have to leave her?” she asked herself repeatedly. She could find no viable answer.

Rhoda was pretty – tall, slim, and round-faced. She kept a very clean house. She could have been anybody’s prized catch before she and Steve got married. And that was a long time ago. All that seemed to her now as a very bad dream. She felt sorry – sorry for Steve because of his profound stupidity; and for Rhoda for all her futile effort to hang on to a marriage that was destined to be doomed.
