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November's Thursday

a short story

by

James C. Schaap

When he awoke, Gary heard the silly wind chimes the neighbors had hung from their back porch in July—queer tinkling in an early winter wind. The shock of feeling her gone again had awakened him, his leg stretched uphill to the cold sheets on her side of the bed, just like October's Thursday, and September's before that. He pulled his hands back behind his head, running through a conversation he didn't want to have, his eyes following cracks in the ceiling that were barely visible in what light squeezed through the shades from the street outside.

The cracks had been there for years already. Nora had spotted them the first night they slept together in their new house. "Look at that," she had said, pointing. Back then, Nora had loved to whisper in those quiet moments when it was over. "Why didn't you see those when the realtor showed us through?"

He had pulled the sheet up so it half-covered his chest. "Right then I wasn't thinking about the ceiling," he had said.

"The realtor says 'master bedroom,' and you see visions—you turn into an animal," she had told him. Her old laugh was something like a naughty growl. "I guess I'm the one who would see it," she had said. "I'm usually the one awake when it's all finished."

Nora would never say anything like that anymore. That was the first night in the new house and the new bed, amid the sprawl of boxes and half-emptied wardrobes, no rugs on the floor and nothing but shades over the windows, one of those nights that seemed so long ago now, before the cancer and the treatments.

The ceiling cracks had opened only slightly in the years they had lived in the house; they still didn't amount to much more than a dollar can of spackling and new coat of paint. But everything was on hold now. Maybe they should take on a repair job together some Saturday, he thought, like the old days. That would be a great idea, something he might tell her tonight yet.

He lay there motionless, in the sound of the storm and the noisy smiling chimes. Nothing seemed so vacant as the empty bed she'd leave behind when she'd sneak away and sit downstairs, miles of stairway, like an open field of silence between them.

He couldn't sleep with her down there, and he couldn't lie awake and pretend he was—not even for her sake. But he couldn't move either. If she'd hear one

sound from the bedroom, her guilt for being gone would wither whatever strength she had. Down there over the Bible, she'd cry to hear that her weakness had awakened him.

But he had to go down. Nora was his wife, after all, and he was her husband. He had to. Some things had to be said.

He swung himself out and pulled on his robe, then walked past the kids' room, until he stopped at the windows overlooking the neighbors' back porch and the chimes. By now she knew he was coming down, so he waited, watching the northeast wind's cargo of wet snow fall heavy as manna on the driveway next door, melting on the cracks and piling up between in perfect rectangles.

He put his arms up on the window. Tomorrow the neighbors would know she was up, even though now the house next door was dark. "So, you had somebody up again last night, Gary," Ben would say when they'd be outside with shovels. "Got somebody sick?" The old couple knew it was Nora's day for treatments; they knew the whole story of Thursday nights.

The light from the kitchen glowed in the stairwell beneath him. Nora was bracing herself now, he thought. Maybe praying.

He drew his finger through the steam at the corner of the window. The storms needed caulking yet. There was still a lot of Saturday work before the real winter.

To go back now would only make her cry again. Once she'd heard his footsteps through the hall, she'd blame herself for everything, even his not coming down. They had to talk now.

"I wish I could take on what your Nora's got," Ben had told him one spring Saturday in late spring when the both of them were out spraying dandelions. "Nora's so very young yet. Me and Trudy really had our time already." That was no more than a month after diagnosis, and Ben meant it.

Cancer was something he wouldn't wish on anyone, of course. But he had thought a lot about surrogates since then, about horrible people in the news who maybe deserved what Nora had.

When Gregg was born, he and Nora had gone to pre-natal classes, where some stocky feminist nurse told them about some strange jungle rite in which the husband would writhe in pain while his wife was in labor. That night it seemed funny. But sharing seemed impossible when he stood beside her and watched and listened as Gregg was born. On treatment days that strange picture would return, him lying there in pain on her bed, while she could sit and watch. If only it could be done, he thought.

In an even cadence he marched down the steps and through the dining room and found her in the kitchen, the hanging lamp pulled low over the open Bible. She pretended not to hear him, her elbows spread over the edge of the table, her fingers pushing through her thinning hair, a habit of hers.

He used to joke about the hair thing. As long as she had to wear a wig, he said, she might as well start her life over as a platinum Hollywood starlet. Once her own hair would grow back in, she'd never have such glorious options. But Nora didn't want to think of the whole business being over. That was a big part of the problem.

He walked up behind her to the refrigerator and opened the door, and just like that she closed the Bible. "I put the cat out," she said quickly. "You know how she gets when she wants to go out. I woke up—I guess I've got this sixth sense about her."

The light from the refrigerator swept out over the linoleum that arched around the appliances, just the way she wanted it laid when they remodeled the kitchen. Baloney sat there on the shelf next to turkey in Saran Wrap. “Dagwood makes these huge sandwiches in the middle of the night, a foot thick at least,” he said. “You’ve seen them—mammoth things.”

“Gary, please—” she said.

The cold slid down over his feet. He hadn’t intended to talk about food. The Dagwood stuff was just something to say. “I’m sorry, Nora,” he said, turning to her. “I wasn’t thinking.” The lamplight drew a perfect circle over the grain of the table. He put his hand up against the freezer compartment to make sure the refrigerator closed quietly.

“I think there’s ice cream in the freezer,” she said. “Mint—your favorite.”

He knew it was hard for her even to mention food, and he wanted to hug her for her courage. It was a good sign. “I think I’ll have some,” he told her. “Maybe we’ll both have just a scoop—”

Her head dropped slightly from the square lines of her shoulders. She picked some tiny crumb off the table, flicked it off on the floor, and shook her head slowly, her face down. It was still too much to ask of her, he knew—even that small bit of food. The lamplight bathed her crown where the bald patches flashed just like they did in the dreams he never told her about.

“I’m not so hungry myself,” he said.

She turned to see him standing there, but she kept her fingers up around her eyes, as if she were looking into some brightness she couldn’t bring herself to face. “I’m sorry, honey, but I can’t even take the word *hunger*. Don’t even say the word, okay?” She tried to laugh at herself.

He couldn’t take silences because they fit him wrong somehow, so he came up behind her and took her shoulders in both hands, squeezing them hard, as if he were holding her down. “Think of yourself in a desert, honey. Nothing but sand and a thousand silly Arabs on camels. Some fat director’s out there with a cigarette in one of those fancy holders—” He let go her of shoulders and sat down beside her. “Like this—” He took a toothpick from the glass picnic basket on the table, and he stuck it between his teeth. “You know what I mean?—like those old pictures of FDR with a cigar—”

“Gary—” she said, like a scolding given to a child.

“But here comes this Buster Crabbe-type in a perfectly white uniform—”

“Ah, yes—the star!—”

“That Arab with the black goatee wants my wife for his harem, see—”

“I think I know the handsome hero—”

“You’ve seen the show?” he said.

“A thousand times, at least.”

“You recognized those rippling muscles I bet—”

She took his arm. “He’s going to get them, isn’t he?—every last one of those Arabs—”

“It’s a piece of cake. But, the whole time he’s got his eye on the babe, see?”

“Oh my, whatever happened to the great, old movies?” she said, leaning toward him.

“The hero pounds the bearded guy, scoops up the sweetheart, and the two of them drive off into the sunset in the shiek’s silver-plated Mercedes—”

“Nice touch. A silver-plated Mercedes—”

”—and they stop off at the Riviera where they make love all night long for about a hundred years—”

She turned her head away and raised both hands. “Too much sex,” she said. “Take me home this instant—it’s horrible and disgusting and absolutely sinful—”

“Nonsense. Sparkling clean stuff. Lights out the whole time—”

For a moment she tried to hide her laughter with her hands, but finally it came up free. She slid her hand beneath the table and dropped it to his thigh. “I can’t imagine going through this without you, honey,” she said. “It’s actually made us stronger, you know.”

She looked so healthy now.

“You and I, honey—we could sit here in the middle of this storm and have one little scoop of the most delicious mint ice cream ever made on earth. You know that?” He pretended to tip his hat like a circus barker. “Yessiree, this here ice cream’s guaranteed to be the world’s finest—now what you do you say, ma’am? You going to turn down this once-in-a-lifetime offer?”

Nora inhaled, the smile still there. Her eyes left his and scrambled over the table top as if to find something to steal her attention.

“Now as for me and my house, I could horse down a half gallon,” he said. “It’s so blame hot out there in the desert.”

He knew she wanted to. He could see desire push lines across her chin.

Finally, she shook her head hard, one hand over her eyes. “I can’t,” she said. “I’m sorry. I just can’t—”

He loved the softness of her arms. He moved both hands up and down from her wrist to her elbow, as if he had never taken the time to touch her before.

“I don’t need it,” he said. “Man gets to be forty and he’s got to cut down on calories—”

“You’re only thirty-eight, Gary,” she said.

“I’ve been lying to you for all these years.”

She pulled her hand back to the Bible and rubbed her fingernails against the leather grain. “You’re not really hungry either, are you? That isn’t why you got up—”

“So what? You didn’t get up to put out the cat.”

“So we’re both guilty, aren’t we?”

Only the wind chimes sang through the silence. He wondered how the sound could seep in through the storm windows. It seemed like such a dumb idea for Ben to put them up at the back door, not more than thirty feet from the neighbor’s kitchen. “I’d like to rip those chimes down,” he said. “You hear them? They drive me nuts.”

She was working her fingers through the thin hair at her temples again, looking away, as if she didn’t deserve his attention.

He wanted so badly to have her back the way she was. He dragged the chair over the floor to be able to look into her eyes. “How about this?” he said. “The jungle’s wild and there’s a woman swimming naked across this African lake. A herd of hippos spot her—”

“Hippos are vegetarians—”

”—and there’s this handsome guy in leopard skin—”

“Please, Gary—” She held the edge of the table with both hands. “You don’t have to—”

When he looked up at the clock, he thought it hadn’t moved since he came

down. He put his elbows up and felt the sting of his unshaven face in his hands. It embarrassed him to think of what he must look like.

“Just go back to bed, honey. I’ll be there in a minute—”

“Hey, I already caught you once in a lie,” he said. “Great white woman speaks with forked tongue—”

She pushed back her chair and stood, the Bible clutched to her chest. “We’ve been through this before, Gary. There’s five down, seven to go. Seven horrid Thursdays and seven awful Fridays, and seven awful Saturdays. Seven more. That’s all.”

He rubbed his sweaty hands against his pajamas.

“I’ve got to face it, Gary. Monday it’ll all be over. I’ve got to think of it that way.” She stood there leafing through the wall calendar. “Go on—say it. Go on—”

A thin sheet of cold lay over his skin, as if his thighs were sugared with light snow. He had to say it. Even she knew he had to. “It’s only because I’m trying to help, Nora. It’s not to hurt you.” He wished she would let him see her eyes more clearly. “Your being up like this only makes it worse. Try not to think about it. If you could just put it out of your mind—”

She looked up into the darkness as if there were someone standing in front of her. “I can feel the elevator lifting me up to that room,” she said, “and right now I can even smell the room.” She turned around to face him, holding the Bible with a balled fist. “The doctor says it’s not unusual—”

“I know that—”

“If it was just a matter of my mind, Gary, don’t you think I’d talk myself out of it?” She crossed both arms over her chest, her hands clutching her elbows. “I can’t help it. I lie there next to you and I hate myself for being awake.” She stared at the floor. “I try to settle my nerves, to make myself quiet and calm. I let my shoulders drop, let my head float—” She tried to hold back the thrusts in her breath.

He wished now there had been some way by which he could stay in bed and pretend to be asleep. Maybe he shouldn’t have come down at all, he thought.

“You’re angry at me, aren’t you?” she said.

“How can I be angry?—”

“Because for the life of me, I can’t control it!”

“Nora, I’m not angry with you.” He stood quickly. “It’s the cancer I hate—that blasted cancer.” He wanted to hold her now, but he didn’t know if he should. He didn’t know if instead she should stand there on her own.

What angered him was that in fact it was Friday already; the IV’s were already in her, her face blanched and distorted, and all around them the too-sweet smell of the flowers he’d brought threatened to choke him with his own lie—something pretty and bright and full of joy like the stupid windchimes—dumb flowers she never even saw. There they both were already, the two of them: he in the chair, Nora cramped up in bed. Sometimes he wished he could writhe like the savage.

“It’s like a nightmare you can’t bang your way out of,” he said. Every one of those damned cells—every single blasted one, Nora. I hate every last one of them—”

“Please don’t say it that way—”

“You want to know real sin, Nora? Cancer is sin—the word itself is obscene.”

“I won’t let you say it that way,” she said. Her arms dropped to her side when

she came back to the table and sat down. "I saw Alvin Fischer again today, Gary." Her hands begged him to sit again. "I've prayed for that man—you know how long—and God is hearing me now. For the first time in that man's life he sees a need for something he doesn't have. He's got faith, honey. Don't you see that?—"

He picked up the basket of toothpicks and turned it in his hand. Like soft rain, the snow pelted the storms outside.

"It was my cancer that brought me into his life. Without my cancer I would never have the courage to talk to him. He may have died without knowing God."

They'd been through all this before, he thought. All of it. "I know the whole story," he said. He had seen the feeble old man lying in a hospital bed, an old man ready to die. "I'm happy for you—and for him too, but that's not the point."

"I thank God for my cancer," she said. "I see things so much differently now. If I hadn't had cancer, I would never have met Alvin, and he would never have heard—"

"I know all that—"

"Then don't damn my cancer, Gary—"

"I'm sorry," he said. He stood again and went to the sink where the kid's ice cream dishes were stacked awkwardly, spoons still sitting in the bowls. The snow melted as clear as rain against the window outside.

"I'm scared that you're going to overinvest," he said. "You're sticking too much into this, and you're going to lose yourself, Nora. You're going to lose your own sense of reason."

"Losing yourself is what faith is all about, isn't it? You're as much a believer as I am, Gary. Look at me."

The pain was there in streaks coming right through the steel resolve she tried to hold.

"I'm sorry," he said. He wiped his cheek with his shoulder. "It's just that sometimes I can't take hearing you talk the way you do—I can't—" He put his hands behind him and leaned up against the counter. "Yesterday you said it again. 'Cancer has been such a blessing to me. It's changed my life.' Right in front of the kids, you said it—"

"It's true—"

"I don't care if it's true. How can I give thanks for some wretched disease eating away inside my wife's body?"

"It's brought me closer to Christ, Gary," she said. She crossed her legs and pulled her housecoat over her knees, smoothing it over her legs.

"Just don't ask me to paint halos on those damned cells," he said. He went back to her, took her shoulders, stiff as dried clay, in his hands. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I'm sorry—" He leaned over and kissed her cheek, but she held herself rigid.

He tried to think of working long days and night in piles of piles of lifeless papers, claims and policies lying there in the chatter of typewriters around his desk.

She wouldn't speak now, because she'd already said everything there was to say. But for her sake, he had to explain himself.

"You see all of this in such spiritual terms," he said. "I want to feel you here on earth next to me. I want you to feel close to God—of course I do. But I want you to feel close to me and the kids too."

“We’ve got to rely on God—don’t you see that, Gary? There’s some things we can’t do on our own. You know that—”

—And there are some things God gives us strength to fight,” he said.

She rose immediately. “You think I’m weak, don’t you? You think this talk about God is just a crutch—”

“Nora, please—”

“You don’t feel what I feel.” She rubbed her arms with both hands, then walked toward the dining room. “Last week—it was just like you to say what you did—you remember? Insurance on that car accident with the burned man? You remember that?”

“Of course—”

“You described it all—how they had to bathe him, what?—twice a day, three times, I don’t know—because the skin was gone over most of his body. ‘Man loses that much skin in a fire, and he can’t live,’ you said. So proud you were, so knowledgeable, everything down to a science. ‘Skin does all these things for us,’ you said. ‘Skin holds out infection. Man doesn’t have skin and the other organs work overtime to do the job. Ecology of the body,’ you said.”

Emotions—anger, fear, guilt—twisted her lips. “It was all so clinical: pancreas and kidneys and lungs and heart. Such perfect sense it all made: this one goes and that one; then the whole body—like a house of cards. ‘That man can’t live without skin—can’t live two weeks,’ you said.” She pointed at him. “You think you know everything, Gary. You don’t even believe that God could still save that man—”

“My God can do anything,” he said.

“Then can God save that man or not?”

“Of course he can—”

“Then how can you say it like that: ‘That man can’t live for two weeks’? What gives you the right to build walls in front of God’s own hands?”

He could lie or tell her the truth. The burned man couldn’t live, but he shouldn’t have told Nora that way.

“Answer the question, Gary. Can God still save him?”

The only place he could hide was behind the truth. “The man died, Nora,” he told her, “Tuesday morning”. He could feel right away the ripping through her soul. “I’m sorry,” he said. “Lord help me, I’m sorry.” He could feel it in his own ribs, slashing through like shards of a broken window pane. “All I’m trying to say, Nora, is don’t make this stuff we’re fighting holy.”

When her face lifted, her breath came audibly in anger and frustration. “You’re right, of course,” she said. She turned away from him completely, toward the darkness in the dining room. “You’re always so very right.”

She stood there alone with the Bible still held under her arm. Holes like yawns were worn into the elbows of the housecoat he bought her years ago at Christmas, a heavy cotton flowered pattern, high at the neckline, when she had expected some sexy nightgown. He had thought she would like it, admitting as it did the way their love had matured.

He heard the wind outside, and he wondered how thick the heavy snow was on the evergreens, whether or not he should go out and sweep the branches.

At the cupboard, he took out an orange tumbler, filled it with water and drank, then poured what was left quietly down the side of the sink. He knew he needed her back now. Even if she would go up, she wouldn’t sleep a moment after this.

He had to do something. “Nora, tell me,” he said, “tell me about Fischer?”

She tested him with her eyes. “Don’t condescend,” she said. “Do you really want to know?”

“Please,” he said.

Once again she came back to the table, because he knew, like she did, that this was simply no place for it all to end.

“He’s very weak, and he doesn’t talk well anymore.” She laid the Bible back on the table, and her hands dropped to her lap like a schoolgirl’s. “They’ve taken most of what he had inside him, I think. He’s done fighting now—I suppose that’s why I say he’s so close to accepting Christ.”

“What you’ve done for him is saintly, honey. I mean it.”

Fischer’s memory eased the tension from her face. “It’s so fulfilling—I’ve never talked to anyone about faith so easily before. He needs me too—”

“I know it,” Gary said. “We need you too—me and the kids.”

She sat there nodding. “There’s not much else to say,” she said, rubbing her fingers through her eyes. “It’s such a blessing to me.” She laid out both her arms across the table. “I think I want to go to bed. Big day tomorrow—right?” Her lips tightened and she looked up at the top edge of the curtains over the window.

He stared at her as closely as a sweetheart, as he used to, at the familiarity of her eyes and the lines across her forehead, at the way she held her lips. It had taken five years of married life for him to learn how to love her, five years for things to get strong enough so their marriage didn’t need guy wires. It took him five years to know how she wanted to be loved. Then it got so much better, he thought.

She reached for his arm. “Sometimes I think it would be much better if it was all over—for all of—”

“Nora! Don’t you dare say that.” Right then he could have hit her. “You’ve got to fight it. You aren’t Alvin Fischer.”

She tried to bring both hands up to her face, but he wouldn’t let her. He held her wrists, both his arms straining to keep her from hiding behind her hands, and they sat there wrestling, Nora’s face gone into storm again, him holding her, her wrists quivering, then slowly relenting, going limp and soft, her forehead flattened above the tears that squeezed from the corners of her eyes.

Maybe he could take her away. “Nora, listen,” he said. “Just listen to me. This is something. This guy with a long mustache grabs a beautiful woman in a blonde wig, see?—and he takes her off to this mountain pass where there’s a railroad—” He let her use the backs of her hands to get her tears.

“It’s been done—” she said.

“He’s got nothing but horrible thoughts about this babe—”

She jerked free from his arms and stood, staring angrily.

“In all of these cute little escapes of yours, I’m always half-naked, because it’s always only physical with you—isn’t it, Gary? Admit it. It’s always physical. What you fear is the loss of my body—”

“That’s not true—”

“I’m no sex goddess, Gary.” Her hands were clenched as if tied over her stomach. “I know that—”

“Nora, listen—when this is all over, you and I are going somewhere for a month at least—”

“Stop it,” she said.

“I’m just trying to—”

She came at him angrily and wrapped her fingers tightly around his arms. “When are you going to understand that right now I can’t see any farther than tomorrow afternoon?—”

He stood and faced her, holding her just as she held him. And he felt the truth of what she had said welling up like a giant fist and pounding away inside him. It was his own rotten needs that pushed him sometimes, his own pain. He pulled her tightly into him, her head against his chest, her fine hairs against his cheek, and they stood there together in one another’s arms.

Finally it was Nora who backed away, wiping her fingers through her eyes as she took him back once more to the table. “Sit here—” she said.

Steam rose from the open door when she took out the ice cream. With her back to him, she took a bowl from the cupboard and reached in the drawer for the scoop.

“I bought it because it’s your favorite,” she said. “Mint.”

She took everything to the table and set it before him—the carton, the bowl, the scoop—and she scooped out a dish full, the temper of her breathing rising.

“Nora, please—I know how you feel—”

“Go on,” she said. “Go on and eat it, Gary. I have to learn to take it. I can’t let it get me.”

Nothing stood before him but a wilderness of snow. He sliced a wedge from the side of the mound, put it quickly into his mouth and let it melt there, not moving his jaw, not giving her any sense of it being in him.

She watched him, holding herself stiff against her own weakness.

Each sharp mouthful seemed sour, rancid. It thickened in his chest as if it wanted to come up again in a ball, his stomach tense and shifting, so that it wouldn’t go down. He felt a rush of heat in his face, and a sudden chill over his skin. His heart quickened, and his hands felt light and shaky, as if every muscle in his body were tired from fighting.

When he looked down into the bowl, the ice cream seemed vile, repulsive. Simply to have it there seemed more than he could take, so he got up quickly and slammed what remained in the sink, then ran water to wash it away, closing his eyes and turning his head away as if to avoid even the smell.

And he stood there alone at the window, both arms braced beneath him on the counter, trying to regain his strength.

She came to him and held him so long that she turned soft in his arms, the tightness finally gone. He felt his arms sink slowly as his strength flowed into her, as hers had come into him, and together they stood in the silence.

Through the darkness they walked back to the stairs, then up into their bedroom, in the music of the windchimes and the rush of wet snow hitting and melting against the storms outside.