

The Restaurant

by [Peter Glassman](#) (December 2023)



Christmas Still Life– Gabriele Münter, 1937

Dr. Paul Norman tended to ignore the fine print in most contracts unless he signed it after a lawyer's review. As an MD and PhD, he tried to divide his medical activities between private practice and medical research. Norman's certified specialty was anesthesiology. His doctoral training was in pharmaceutical drug development. It was the week before Christmas in 1985 when he found himself admiring the Christmas decor along the Rhine River in Mainz Germany. The contract he had agreed to was to provide motivational lectures to US

medical centers distributed in a fan-like spread across the country. The results of his touting the benefits of Forman Pharmaceuticals' anesthetic agent had fine print he ignored and was unaffected by for three years. He now had to extend his speaking commitment to European countries. This year he was bundled against a cold night wind and light snow on Christmas Eve in Mainz.

Before departing his Connecticut home, he put children's gifts beneath the six-foot tree. "I'll be back two days after Christmas. You can open Mom and Dad's gifts on Christmas Eve night." He gave everyone goodbye kisses. His twelve-year-old daughter Tracy hugged him the longest and showed him Dickens' Christmas Carol she was reading at night.

"Daddy, there are ghosts in this book that visit Scrooge on Christmas Eve. Are there ghosts where you're going?"

"I'm going to Germany. Scrooge lived in England." he paused, "I don't think that ghosts are real, but if they are it's probably just memories of people who have died. They might appear in their dreams."

"What if you meet a ghost? What would you do?"

"I'd probably just talk with it about Christmas and missing my family."

Norman had already been to Frankfurt and Ulm delivering his lectures on the benefits of the new anesthetic agent. Mainz was next. Piped-in Christmas music along the Rhine walkway in vernacular German and twinkling Christmas lights made him think of home and his wife Barbara. She was unhappy with him leaving her to weather the domestic responsibilities this last week before Kris Kringle, Santa Claus, or, whatever the Germans called him, would appear.

The Heiler (Holy) Geist (Ghost) Restaurant in Mainz was recommended to him by the Chief of Anesthesiology at Ulm Medical Center. He had never spent Christmas Eve away from home before and experienced feelings of loneliness, sadness, and guilt. Christmas was a family holiday and he had left them. It was easy to point blame to his job but to do so would put his workplace ahead of his family. Norman saw the bright blinking lights spelling out the Holy Ghost's name. A slight wind sent the slow falling snowflakes into his face. They felt like icy pinpricks and he pulled his scarf higher on his face. He stopped walking. He whispered his thoughts to the beautiful scene around him. "What if I'm the only solo diner at the restaurant? Other patrons will feel sorry for me. Maybe I should just turn around and call room service at the Hyatt."

Norman bumped into a man in a brown Army uniform blowing cold breath breaking his reverie. The soldier looked up and spoke in a low tone, "Oops, sorry sir. I had my head down away from the biting snow." The man's brown uniform winter coat seemed to almost touch the ground."

Norman stopped and tried to focus on the soldier's appearance, "That's okay, I'm glad there's someone else besides me walking alone on Christmas Eve."

"I'm Lieutenant Elgin Almand of the 16th Fusiliers. I walk alone every Christmas Eve."

Norman raised his snowflaked eyebrows, "Every Christmas Eve, I don't understand. Do you live here in Mainz?"

"No, I'm from London. I walk this same path to the Holy Ghost building. I'm hopeful that I'll find a few of my comrades there."

Norman brushed some accumulated snow from his coat's shoulders. "Well, I'm Paul Norman and I'm headed there for

dinner. To be honest, I don't want to be alone, away from my family in the US. Can I offer you tonight's dinner on me?"

Almand moved to Norman's side, "I would like that very much, sir. I've been tasked to seek out stragglers or those without companions on this Holy night."

They moved slowly to the Holy Ghost entrance. Norman held the entry door for the soldier and could now see him more clearly under the restaurant's bright lights. Something was not right about this warrior. His uniform accessories included a canteen, a gas mask canister, and a Webley holstered pistol—not in keeping with a peacetime outfit.

They were escorted to a table with four chairs. Almand forced a claylike smile. "This is good. We have two empty chairs for maybe others like us."

Menus and recommendations by the red and green-attired plump waitress included their specialty of Weinershnitzel and spaetzel, which Almand ordered.

Norman preferred the sauerbraten and red cabbage. They accepted the free cinnamon rum punch from the rotund young waitress, "Gentlemen, this punch is made only on Christmas Eve."

Almand reached into the helmet attached to his belt and showed Norman pictures of his family. "I miss them more this day than any other day."

Norman displayed his family photos from his wallet. "I know the feeling. This is my first Christmas away from them."

After finishing their meal, Almand folded his hands on the table, "You should make this the only Christmas you'll be away. Unfortunately, telephone connections are never working on this Holiday Eve or you could talk to them. "

Norman stared at his guest. "But surely the internet will be

the best mode of contact. I talked with my family online this morning, and I'll connect again tonight to wish them a Merry Christmas. The Hyatt's modems are working fine."

The soldier continued his stare, "I do not understand you, sir. What are these 'internet,' 'modem,' and 'online' things you talk of? What is the Hyatt?"

Before Norman could reply, Almand put his hand up, "Wait, be silent. I think I can hear some of my comrades singing in the next room."

Norman watched as the young Lieutenant disappeared into the adjacent section of the Holy Ghost.

After what seemed like a long five minutes, Almand had not returned. Norman summoned the waitress over. "My friend, the soldier, went into that room and hasn't come back. Could you please check for me that he's all right?"

The rosy-cheeked woman seemed puzzled. "Room?" She pointed to the area in question. "But that place is our museum from when the Holy Ghost was a hospital for soldiers of the First World War." She glanced at the room and back to Norman. "Some patrons claim they can hear the soldiers singing on special days like now, but I have never heard any music or singing."

LT Almand never returned. Norman made haste back to the Hyatt and turned on his laptop computer.

Barbara answered with a slow foggy voice, "Merry Christmas to you too. Did you forget the five-hour time difference between us? Wait a minute Tracy is up. She's dying to ask you a question about Germany."

"Hi, Daddy. What's it like over there?"

"Well, we have snow and it's real cold. I miss all of you. I

promise I'll never be away another Christmas Eve or Day."

Tracy giggled with delight, "Oh, that's wonderful. Tell me, Daddy, did you see any ghosts?"

Norman caught his breath and answered in a slow delivery, "Yes ... I did ... and he was like in your Dickens' story. I'll tell you all about it. He was a good ghost and not scary." After telling of his experience with LT Almand, he said his goodbyes and lay back in his bed looking up at the ceiling. He wanted to shout his real feelings to Tracy but only a whisper directed to the emptiness of his hotel room emerged, "I wasn't scared until I realized he was a ghost. I still get the shakes and sweats when I recall our meeting. My Scrooge-like vision and its message were successfully delivered."

[Table of Contents](#)

Peter Glassman is a retired physician living in Texas, who devotes his time to writing novels and memoir-based fiction. He is the author of 14 novels including the medical thrillers *Cotter*; *The Helios Rain* and *Who Will Weep for Me*. Some of his short stories were written for presentation at the San Antonio Writers Group Meetup. You can read more about him and his books [here](#).

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](#)