

The Roadside Eyeman



The False Mirror by René Magritte, 1929

by [Peter Glassman](#) (January 2022)

Dr. Paul Norman reminisced about his first published novel as he did every Christmas Holiday Season. He had felt compelled to publish his story based on one of the most disturbing experiences in his life. During the Vietnam War, fallen US soldiers were sometimes found missing their eyes. They were removed by the Vietcong (VC) guerrillas of the North Vietnamese Army who held that the South Vietnamese, and the rest of the world, believed that entry into their concept of heaven would be denied if their eyes were removed during violence. Norman was on duty at Queens Naval Hospital in Long Island on Thanksgiving Day when a 32-man air-evac of

recovering wounded warriors arrived. As the Junior Medical Officer of the Day (JM00D) Norman's job was to triage each patient and admit them to appropriate specialty wards in the 2100-patient Navy Hospital. On this cold wintry day Norman, as JM00D, had to do the initial admission history and physical examination of all psychiatric admissions. He had only one—Marine Lance Corporal Julio Marco.

Marco arrived in his forest green fatigue uniform like the rest of the casualties. He looked physically fit upon arrival and questioned his need for admission to the locked psyche unit.

“Look Lieutenant Norman, I'm just a Marine grunt doing my duty. I don't think I was over zealous in my job over there. I mean they murdered my best friend and cut up his face.”

Norman looked at Marco in the B-2 psychiatric intake room. He appeared in no distress. “In this hospital Corporal, we're informal as to addressing each other. You can call me Doctor, Doc, or even Norman if it makes you feel more relaxed.”

Marco responded without emotion. “Okay Doc, you can call me Marco. Everyone does.”

“Good, Marco, now for my initial work-up I really need to know more about the large number of the enemy you killed and mostly, the two civilians in Thailand—in Bangkok—that you're accused of killing.”

“My job as a Marine, Doc, is to kill the enemy. I didn't murder anyone. It's well known that the VC infiltrates R&R places like Bangkok. I was attacked by those two Orientals who were trying to rob me. They became the enemy. I'm a Marine, after all.”

“Marco, it says by your doctor in the Philippines that you are pathologically obsessed with striking out against any Asian during presumed threatening confrontations.”

Marco was silent.

Norman wrote admission orders and had to get back to the rest of the Air-evac. "I'll talk to you again, Marco. You'll be seen by the Chief of Psychiatry for further intake. I get called, for anything physical."

Two weeks later, Norman received a frantic call from the senior corpsman on B-2, Chauncey Crumbett.

"Dr. Norman, you have to come to B-2 right away. Julio Marco attacked the ward nurse when she tried to commandeer a bottle from Vietnam he had sequestered in his duffle bag, which arrived just today. It took three Marine MPs to get him into a straight jacket and into the pink padded cell."

"Crumbett, is the nurse okay?"

"I think so. You have to check both the nurse and Marco. The CO is not going to like this, Sir."

"What's the big deal about a bottle? Was it a bottle of booze?"

"No Sir, it was a bottle of human eyes."

Queens Naval's CO, Captain Foaming, had them whisk Marco out of the hospital before anyone leaked Marco's Asian eye collection mania. The press loved anything negative about the Vietnam War. Norman's big question was, "What indeed did happen to Lance Corporal Julio Marco after Foaming prioritized Marco into the Veterans Administration Hospital system?"

For his novel, Norman researched and tracked Marco's Medical Discharge as much as he could and made up the rest. His manuscript of the novel, entitled *The Eyeman*, was published in 1999. At first it sold only a few dozen copies a month. Sales went much higher after he went on weekend book-signings. Reader responses and reviews also helped sales. Most of his reader mail verified the story about the VC and the cutting

out of US soldiers' eyes. One reader from Atlanta send him a large jar of rubber eyeballs floating in crystal clear water. Another sent a zombie mask with both eyeballs hanging from the eye socket by a thick white rubber simulated optic nerve. It made him jump when he opened the package. However, it was Halloween and provided good publicity for the book. The most unexpected situation occurred with his son Michael.

Thanksgiving Day in 2000 brought light snow and Michael's family to his home in Connecticut. They lived five hours away in Rochester, NY and he disliked the long drive to Danbury. Michael, therefore, had his wife drive while he entertained his children or got caught up in his reading. He was a 30-year old career medical researcher and always read his father's medical fiction. He decided to read *The Eyeman* on his way to Danbury. When he arrived at their house and everyone was settled amidst the greetings and smells of the wonderful cooking, Michael approached his dad.

"I'm almost finished with *The Eyeman*, Dad. You make the story sound real with some scary parts and some funny stuff. One thing though, is it really that easy to cut out a person's eyes?"

"Michael, I've given anesthesia for eyeball removals and the surgeon makes it look easy. First he cuts the eye muscles, then a few ligaments, and finally the optic nerve. He does it in a circular rotation around the eye with a scalpel and ties off appropriate blood vessels as he goes along. In a dead person you should be able to do this whole sequence with a double edge Ranger boot knife like I described in *The Eyeman*—the way my real patient told me he did it."

"Is there anyway you can prove it. I mean, I saw a few roadside dead deer on my way here along the state highway near your house."

"Michael, what are you implying?"

“Look Dad, we have a few hours to wait for Thanksgiving dinner. Why not test your eye removal technique on a roadkill deer? You said you have one of those Ranger boot knives from your Navy service.”

Norman and Michael left the family's busy feast preparation and drove the speed limit on the Interstate highway. They spotted a fallen deer a few feet from the breakdown lane only five miles from their house. Norman pulled his SUV to the breakdown lane and they examined the deer.”

Michael spoke first, “Not this one, Dad. It must have died a few days ago. The eyes look sunken and rotted. The flies are having a feast.”

They cruised a few more miles before they came upon a large blood stain leading to another roadkill. Norman examined the corpse, “This one looks like it happened a few hours ago. The head and eyes are still well preserved.”

Michael smiled, “Yeah, and no flies yet. Okay, you do the right eye first and I have the second one. Let's see if this is as easy as you say in the book.”

Norman put on a pair of disposable rubber gloves and unsheathed the double-edge boot knife.

“Wow Dad, the knife looks like it means business.”

“It's razor sharp. Be careful when it's your turn.” Norman positioned the head with both hands on the antlers. He first inserted the blade point under the eye starting at the bone above the cheek. Back-and-forth motions cut the ligaments and eye muscle. Next he pictured the eye like the face of a clock. At 4-o'clock, then 2, 12, 11 and 8 and he was done with the rest of the eye muscles. Once around clockwise made the eyeball loose. Now, the blade goes under the eye and advances about 3-inches touching bone. The optic nerve is just above the tip. One push until he felt a 'PoP'.” Norman stepped back

and put a gloved finger under the eye at the 6-o'clock position where the blade had been. The eye came out intact with it's trailed eye muscles and white optic nerve tail."

"Damn, Dad, your dead on in your book." Michael put on his rubber gloves and began his cadaveric surgery.

Both Norman and Michael were unaware that a pickup truck had pulled off the highway and parked two car lengths behind their SUV. A burly man in a red-and-black checkered winter coat and pulled down orange toque came up to them just as Michael had cut the optic nerve."

The man coughed to get their attention. Norman turned around. The man looked at the deer and clotted blood pooled around it's rear quarters. "Is this a fresh kill?" He looked closer at the deer. "That's a lot of good meat. I know you got to him first, but if your not going to take him, I'd like to get butcherin' him before the end of the day."

Michael ignored the man and popped out the deer's eye. He looked at his father. "You know, I can believe a guy could cut the eyes out from over 20-people this way."

The checkered coat man stopped his further examination of the deer carcass. "What? Human eyes?"

Michael smiled and held up his deer eye by the optic nerve stem. "You want the deer, you can have him. We just want the eyes."

Norman nudged Michael to stand up. He placed the eyes, the rubber gloves, and the wiped re-sheathed boot knife in a plastic bag. "Have a Happy Thanksgiving, Sir."

The man ran to his pickup and left with his rear wheels churning up the wet ground as he left the breakdown pavement. The wheels were still spinning when his truck entered the highway leaving a trail and smell of blue tire smoke."

Once in the car Michael started laughing, "Dad, I don't think that guy ever read *The Eyeman*."

"My thoughts, Michael, are different. The poor guy is either running scared or heading for the State Police Station twenty miles ahead. We better beat it home."

"What do we tell mom and the family...about where we've been?"

"First, we stop at the Seven Eleven Store and buy some snacks. We can toss the eyes in the outside trash bag there. When we get home, we tell them the truth, which they won't believe. They'll make disgusted faces, then laugh and ask where we really went."

Michael smiled, "Yeah, they'll believe the Seven Eleven story."

Norman smiled at his recall of that Thanksgiving Day. Not so much for what they did but that the family reacted exactly as he expected.

Norman's purpose for writing the book was to reveal how war can affect the front line soldier. It's not uncommon for some war returnees to be unable to turn off their combat mode. Marco was real. His book was merely a writer's projection as to what might have happened to him. In Norman's writer's mind, Marco became a serial killer targeting only Asians. He had only one chilling thought, "I wonder how many will believe *The Eyeman* story is based on a real mentally impaired soldier."

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thrillers *Cotter; The Helios Rain* *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](#).

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