

Norman and the Demon  
Deek Rhew

# Norman and the Demon

By Deek Rhew



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## Dedication

For the tenacious: **Never** give up.

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Norman sat on the chair, snuggling up the laces of his all-weather boots—a task made more difficult by his ever decreasing flexibility and his ever increasing mid-section. He could just make out the words of the news report over the drumming of the rain. Not that there had been any change in the last hour. The anchor droned on in an ominous end-of-the-world tone, though the twinkle in the man's eyes belayed his excitement. Not much happened this close to the equator weather-wise, so when a major “event” occurred, the news reporter couldn't hide the smile on his lips and the five-year-old-on-Christmas-morning sparkle in his eyes as he doled out the details on the destruction of homes and property.

Footwear secure, Norman started to pull his pant leg over the top of his boot when he paused. An insignia had been indented into the heavy leather, and he inspected it as he had a thousand times before. He had been delivering the mail for almost thirty years, and in all that time, he'd never tired of tracing his finger over the sleek eagle's head and around the sharp lines surrounding it.

A huge crack of thunder shook the windows and rattled the teacup collection in the china hutch on the far side of the room. The noise brought Norman out of his reverie, and he focused once again on the task at hand. The house creaked and groaned as the pounding coastal winds tried to rip it off its foundation.

The news reports during the week had warned of the impending disaster. This morning, the spring tropical storm, just shy of hurricane intensity, struck the coast with all the anger of a constipated god fresh out of laxatives.

“Norman Philip Templeton the Third.” Hands on hips, Owen, Norman's partner, blocked the door. “You will not be leaving this house today.”

Norman stared out the window, blurry with thunderous rain and screaming winds. Maybe he should stay home. Though not listed in the USPS Official Rules and Regulations Field Guide, perhaps extenuating circumstances did exist, for safety reasons, in which he could miss a day of delivering the mail? Owen stepped forward and took one of Norman's hands between his two strong ones, his gaze softening.

Those sad eyes almost tipped it. Norman almost took off his monogrammed, official blue USPS rain gear. Almost followed the man he loved back to the bedroom. No one would blame him. His grandfather would have called the storm a “real doozy, not fit for man nor beast.”

Almost.

But the deliveryman had sworn another oath, this one to his country, and it superseded all others. He shook his head. “I'm sorry, I have to.”

“Norman, no!” Owen grabbed his arm.

Norman pulled free, shouldered his waterproof bag, and opened the front door.

Before him stood a two-inch-thick, steel and shatterproof glass security screen door. Norman knew that if the communists ever attacked, they would shut down the essential services of the city: water, electricity, and communications. The most essential of these essential services: the communication provided by the United States Postal Office.

Despite being a target and in constant peril, he would never succumb to potential threats to his country—terrorists both local and abroad, anarchists, and especially, the weather. So he had created an off-the-grid fortress out of their house—bars on the windows, a month's supply of food in the basement, security cameras, a gun and taser in the desk drawer, and reinforced entrances.

The civil servant grasp the handle on the heavy security screen, took a deep breath, and twisted. The door did not open. He pushed, but it refused to budge. He looked at Owen, who watched with a mixture of apprehension and sadness.

Norman tried again. Still nothing. Shoving harder, he threw his appreciable bulk against the door. One second, Norman Philip Templeton the Third, USPS delivery man and essential service provider for the government of the United States of America, stood red-faced and grunting. A heartbeat later, he had vanished as if a magician had commanded him to do so. Except no magician's assistant ever squealed like a little girl who'd just found a spider in her shoe.

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Caught in the guaranteed unbreakable glass, the gale force winds yanked the security door open. The screen's hydraulic failed, disintegrated into a cloud of metal and rivets, and allowed the handle to smash through the bungalow's siding. It hurled the dandy of a man, his cry becoming the primary soloist in the choir of winds, while he sailed over front yard as graceful as a flying manatee. Momentum and air pressure no longer capable of supporting such bulk, his impromptu trip ended, and he splatted unceremoniously in the middle of the rain-sodden lawn. The impact drove the breath from his lungs, removing his falsetto soprano from the choir at the crescendo of the concert.

Norman stared up into the dark, angry sky. Leaves and debris swirled and dove overhead like roving gangs of demented birds. The end had come. He would die here. Another soldier fallen while serving his country. The broken-hearted would weep during "Taps" as Marines lowered his casket into the frozen ground of Arlington Cemetery. He required no accolades, no statues or monuments. He only wished to leave his country a little safer—the children, women, and citizens of his great nation more secure—than when he joined it.

Norman shed a tear in sympathy as the scene continued and his partner fell to his knees—sobbing into the folded United States flag clutched to his breast. I'll miss you too, honey.

His dolorous mental screenplay abruptly ended when strong hands grabbed him under the armpits. Owen. The real life Owen—not crying but looking both frightened and angry at the same time—towered over him and dragged the sodden freedom fighter towards the safety of their bunker. The large man forded the civil servant across the lakes and rivers of their lawn and through the ruined threshold of the house. Owen dumped his life partner against the wall and leaned against the door, forcing it closed one small step at a time until he snicked the latch in place.

Owen stripped off his partner's muddy clothes, clucking and muttering incoherent curses under his breath—something about the stupidity of blindly following orders and battling terrorists and space aliens that don't actually exist. Owen hauled Norman into the steaming shower, washing—and in some cases using vigorous scrubbing—and removing every speck of dirt from the postman's pallid, white skin until it gleamed as red as a Macintosh apple. Norman kept his eyes downcast and bit his lip as the wash rag gave him rug burn in places he'd rather not have rug burn, as harsh and raw as any schoolyard bully could dish out.

After Owen snapped off the water, he dried, dressed, and deposited the big man into their bed. Owen glared down, eyes flashing as though he were Thor and Norman had broken his favorite hammer. "I've had enough of this nonsense, Norman. You will not move from this spot for the rest of the day. Do I make myself clear?"

Norman cowered, grateful he could hide under the blankets. "Yes, dear."

But as his life partner stormed from the room, Norman vowed he would never again allow another blemish on his otherwise pristine service record, no matter the cost.

The next morning, no storm threatened. The sun, coming up over the mountains, confirmed another gorgeous day of perfect weather. In spite of the clear blue sky and abundant sunshine, dark and petulant clouds loomed inside of Norman.

While sorting the mail in preparation for the route, he saw it. 116 South Lancaster Drive had a catalog and a come-on from the local cable company. Junk. Anyone else, given what awaited at 116 South Lancaster Drive, would have thrown the mail in the trash or let it accumulate for later delivery. But not Norman. Not sleet, nor snow, nor rain. He had an obligation to fight the communists, and that meant carrying out every essential detail of his essential service. They wanted chaos. They wanted the system to break down. They wanted to see America fail.

Not on his watch. Never. Even if that meant he had to face...Demon Dog.

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Norman rounded the corner heading north on South Lancaster Drive. Carrying the mail up the walkway of 102, he verified the correct delivery of each item and poked it through the slot of the front door. He did the same for 104, 106, and 108. But as he completed each delivery, his feet grew more laden, as though a menacing troll added sand to his boots with every step.

110, 112, 114. He closed the gate on the final house, turned, and plodded down the sidewalk—the troll had added liquid lead, turning the sand to a metal-concrete hybrid. He stopped at 116 and pivoted to face the property. Scanning the yard, his eyes searched for any signs of danger.

Ms. Brooks had brought the Spawn of Satan with her when she moved in. The first time he had met the two of them, Ms. Brooks—Polly, she had asked him to call her Polly—had been sitting in the huge two-person swing on her front porch reading a book. The terror from down under lay in her lap.

He and Ms. Brooks had exchanged greetings and introductions, continuing in pleasant small-town small talk. But as the trifled conversation went on, Norman had found it more and more difficult to concentrate. The dog watched the civil servant. It sat up and stared at him, black eyes assessing and appraising. Norman hadn't been able to take his own eyes off the intelligent, evil irises. Though the sun blazed bright overhead, he had nevertheless seen a flash of night shine in their glowing, red depths. Somehow the dog housed the spirit of a malevolent demon.

A shudder ran through Norman's body. A thick drop of sweat, as icy and foreboding as a serpent's forked tongue, weaved down the vertebrae of his spine.

Enough pleasantries had been exchanged, so he attempted to deliver Ms. Brooks' mail. But he had only begun to extend his hand when The Demon snapped at him.

Ms. Brooks scolded, "Saundy! Bad girl! Mr. Templeton is a nice man."

The dog looked at her for a minute then turned its hawk-like glare back to Norman. To his horror, the dog bared her teeth at him and licked her chops, never once breaking eye contact.

With quaking fingers, Norman flung the mail into his new acquaintance's lap and stepped away. The dog looked at her mistress as if to say, "What's gotten into him?" Polly gave Norman a bewildered smile as he backed off the porch.

Forgetting all elements of propriety and dignity, Norman beat feet to the entrance of the yard as fast as his stubby legs would carry him and slammed the gate as he exited the property.

Since that day, Demon Dog haunted Norman's dreams and made the days he had to deliver to 116 South Lancaster Drive a nightmare.

Though he bore no external scars on his wrists, ankles, or hands—the dog had never once touched him—Norman could have used a baggage cart to tote the emotional traveler's trunks he lugged around with him.

For the first few deliveries, the dog sat on the porch staring at him, its eyes never leaving his. Sometimes when she watched him, a low, Cujo-like growl—more befitting of a much larger animal—emanated from deep in her throat.

Then, as if to throw him off, she started sitting in the middle of the yard, so for part of his trip to the house, his back remained exposed and vulnerable. Her eyes always watched him.

As the deliveries continued, Demon Dog had begun to hide. Last month, Norman had stopped outside the fence and searched everywhere. Not seeing the canine, he'd unlatched the gate and made a break for the house. He hadn't run, but his cadence had been much faster than his usual, purposeful chubby-man's amble.

He'd speed-walked the thirty feet or so up the sidewalk, past the huge tree in the yard, to the steps of the house when the awful low growling had frozen him mid-stride. Norman could have been playing a one-person version of the child's game of Red Light, Green Light.

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From where the sound emanated, he hadn't known. His head had shot right then darted left. He'd peered into the bushes but seen nothing out of the ordinary. As he'd turned, looking deeper into the hedge, the tendons in his neck had creaked and popped like an old screen door on a haunted house.

What he'd seen when his head completed the pivot had nearly made him lose what little control he'd had over his bladder. In the brush, not five feet away, two red orbs from the pit of Hell glowed and simmered. Lucifer himself pulled the strings of this evil puppet, coaxing Norman with blazing fingers to follow it to the dark fires of ember and soot.

In a sudden burst of adrenaline, Norman had sailed forward, flying over the steps, slammed the mail half through the slot, and bolted back down the sidewalk—arms pumping, official USPS mail bag banging against his hip. He'd yanked the gate shut behind him as he blasted through it. Momentum had taken him into the middle of the street where he spun around, holding his hands up as though he were Jackie Chan ready to fight a brigade of pissed off ninjas.

Nothing. Saundy hadn't followed him. She never did. She never barked. Never ran at him. But she always growled. Hungry and predatory. If she had actually sprung at him, he could have kicked back or called the sheriff, but the attack never came.

Norman's gaze had roamed the yard, seeking signs of danger while he straightened his uniform and tried to control the trip-hammering of his heart. He'd tucked in his now sweat-soaked official USPS shirt, picked up the mail that had spilled as he eluded the beast and her evil intentions, and trudged to the next house on the block.

When he'd gotten home that night, Norman lain his head in Owen's lap. The whole story spilled out while tears plummeted down his chubby cheeks and soaked his partner's work pants, which still smelled of bread and bagels.

But Norman's partner had little sympathy and admonished him. "You're being ridiculous. First of all, I've met both Polly and her little dog, Saundy—her name, by the way, is Saundy, not Demon Dog, and it's short for Cassandra—and both are as sweet as chilled honey in August. Second, dogs don't stalk people, and they certainly don't play mental games."

"But—"

Owen cut him off, raising a finger. "And third, even if the dog did attack, it weighs all of ten pounds. Twelve tops. I put up with the bars on the windows and the guns in the drawers, but this is too much. Seriously, Norman, get a hold of yourself!"

"The dog loves you because you always smell like food." Norman crossed his arms and pouted.

Owen owned and operated Baker's Dozen, the small pastry shop on the south side of town. After an afternoon in the store, he wore the scent of muffins and cookies as heavy and thick as a 15 year-old boy wears cologne on his first date.

When his partner hadn't replied, Norman said in a timid little voice, "Maybe you could come with me one day..."

But Owen had just looked at him with that pitying expressing Norman hated. It was just a little mutt. Come on old boy, pull yourself together. After all, who's at the top of the food chain here? Once, he'd had a dog that would eat out of the litterbox, and since Norman himself had never felt so obliged, he could conclude, with relative certainty, that he— Norman Phillip Templeton the Third—sat squarely at the top of the species hierarchical pyramid.

From then on, Norman had never shared the details of these little incidents. But no matter what pep talks he gave himself, things at 116 South Lancaster Drive continued to devolve.

On this delivery morning, though sunny and bright, the nip of the cool night air still lingered. In spite of the chill, the armpits on his otherwise clean and crisp uniform had tear-drop-shaped sweat stains under

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them. He stopped at the precipice and scanned the yard over the greying fence but could detect no threat. This cursory examination offered little comfort, however. He knew the demon lingered. Somewhere. He sensed it.

Silence crowded around him. Suffocating and stifling. No cars trundled up the street. No birds sang. No crickets chirped. He stood alone in the universe, and all creatures held their collective breaths in anticipation of the upcoming showdown.

While his heart thudded like a stampede of scared cattle, his numb, sweaty fingers grasp the hook and unlatched the gate. He pushed it open. Rusty hinges squeaked on their arched journey until the gate bumped against the picket teeth of the wooden border. He took a step off the safety of the sidewalk, past the fence, and entered the perimeter. He waited. Nothing. Norman took a deep breath and, by sheer will, forced himself to take another step, crossing the threshold as open and exposed and heroic as the first invaders of Normandy. One step, then another. Again and again. His eyes darted this way and that as he tried to look everywhere and at everything at the same time.

Nothing.

She watched. Her coldness penetrated the depths of his bones. “Where are you, Demon?” Then, above the hammering of his heart, he heard it—the low menacing growl answering his question.

I am here.

But where? No telltale glowing eyes in the bushes. He bent down and looked, but nothing lingered under the porch, one of her favorite spots that emphasized the self-illuminating amber of her hellish gaze. She didn’t sit in the yard or next to the door, or, god-forbid, in front of the mail slot as she had before. The stains under his pits grew heavier.

Oh my god, where is it?

As he proceeded, the sound grew near, so near. Like angry hornets swooping and diving around his ears, trying to get in and break through the fragile, cracking surface of his mind. He waved a hand as if to ward off the insects. Then he froze.

Looking up, he found himself staring into the cold, hateful eyes of the Demon Dog. Somehow it had made its way to the top of the small roof that overhung the porch. It looked down on him like a stone gargoye from an ancient Transylvanian cathedral.

Norman froze, rooted in place until he became a statue himself. Then something fundamental in him broke, and his body went limp. His hunched shoulders went slack, and his eyes dropped as he bowed his head. He acquiesced to a higher power he understood he could never defeat. His body wrote a story of complete and utter surrender, which even the thickest tomes could never capture.

An inevitability had come to pass, and now an odd sort of peace came over the stubby little mailman. He no longer fought the current in an attempt to make his way upstream but let the natural flow of the river carry him. He wondered if torture victims—subjected to hot lights and wicked sharp tools—succumbed in this manner when they at last snapped and gave the enemy that final, crucial piece of information.

On leaded feet, he made his way to the porch, pushed the catalog and come-on through the front slot, and trudged down the steps and sidewalk. At the gate, he stopped and turned around, metaphorically—and literally as two of his shirt buttons had popped during the confrontation—exposing the white of his belly. Head still bowed and not making eye contact, he backed out of the yard, drawing the gate closed in his wake. His heart had slowed to its regular rhythm, and his body temperature and blood pressure had returned to normal. He slumped away.

Saundy watched as the Blue Man left her field of vision. He was her bitch now. The true and rightful hierarchy has been established, with her squarely at the top. She stood and stretched a long doggy yawn. Turning, she padded her way across the roof to the side of the house. She jumped on top of a large stack of



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firewood leaning against the wall, back down to the lawn, and then up onto the porch. She circled three times before lying down in a tight little ball in a ray of cool morning sunshine.

She sighed and fell asleep.

Thank you for taking the time to visit my little corner of the world. For more of Deek Rhew's stories, go to [www.DeekRhewBooks.com](http://www.DeekRhewBooks.com).

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