



NORMAL / A NOVEL / BOOK 1

**WARREN ELLIS**

# **Table of Contents**

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Notice](#)

[Part 1](#)

[Also by Warren Ellis](#)

[A Note About the Author](#)

[Newsletter Sign-up](#)

[Copyright](#)

# NORMAL: BOOK 1

WARREN ELLIS



[Begin Reading](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

**Thank you for buying this  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux ebook.**

To receive special offers, bonus content,  
and info on new releases and other great reads,  
sign up for our newsletters.

**Sign Up**

Or visit us online at  
[us.macmillan.com/newslettersignup](http://us.macmillan.com/newslettersignup)

For email updates on the author, click [here](#).

The author and publisher have provided this e-book to you for your personal use only. You may not make this e-book publicly available in any way. **Copyright infringement is against the law. If you believe the copy of this e-book you are reading infringes on the author's copyright, please notify the publisher at:**  
[us.macmillanusa.com/piracy](http://us.macmillanusa.com/piracy).

## Part One

“Hand over the entire internet now and nobody gets hurt,” she said, aiming the toothbrush at the nurse like an evil magic wand. The end of the toothbrush had been inexpertly whittled into what someone who’d only ever heard of a shank would think a shank looked like. Her hair was wire-brush gray, secured at the back by old brown rubber bands, and her left eye was twitching enough that she occasionally pointed the supposed weapon at a ghost image over the nurse’s shoulder.

“Professor,” the nurse said, head bobbing, working hard to make direct visual contact with at least one of her eyes.

The Professor was in her fifties, with the build and posture of an imperious bird, and spoke with a reedy voice most often used to control children and dogs. “I mean it,” she said. “This is outrageous. Conditions here are medieval. I haven’t seen a picture of a cat in six weeks and it is simply too much.”

The nurse was a stubby stump of a man, with thick eyebrows, oaken muscles, and those middle-aged men’s pores that gave him a permanent five-o’clock shadow. He bounced and glowered, looking to Adam Dearden like nothing so much as a cartoon gangster from children’s television. Behind the countertop of the intake hall desk, another nurse, wearing what were evidently staff-uniform gray scrubs, weaved nervously. Adam felt panic squirm under the tarpaulin of medications in his system. He never expected the arrival at Normal to be the most stressful part of his day. “Professor,” the stocky nurse growled again, “if you don’t put that down right now, then we’re going to have to take it from you. And that didn’t work out so well for you last time, did it?”

“If you would just give me the internet I wouldn’t have to keep making weapons. You are sorely trying my patience,

young man. I agreed to none of this.”

“Now, we both know that’s not true, Professor. You agreed to it, your employer agreed to it, you signed the intake forms.”

“What does it matter if I signed the intake forms? They wouldn’t stand up in court. I’m clearly insane. I’m threatening your life with a toothbrush, for God’s sake. A *ten-dollar* toothbrush.”

The Professor looked at her own hand holding her own toothbrush. Adam Dearden’s own nurse, a copper-headed strongman who’d said perhaps eight words to him on the trip, quietly took Adam’s arm and pulled him away from the scene by a meter.

“I’ve quite ruined the damned thing,” the Professor said, turning the toothbrush around in her fingers. “If you hadn’t stolen my death ray I would never have had to resort to such extremity.”

She sagged in her skin a little, and handed it over to the nurse. “I only wanted to see some pictures of cats. A GIF or two. That’s all.”

“We’ll have you over to the Staging post in just a little while,” said the nurse, who was a terrible liar and didn’t realize that everyone he’d ever met knew it. “Let’s go on down to the recovery station now, get you feeling better.”

He gently took her wrist and began to lead her down the wood-paneled eastern corridor, away from the latex-paint greens of the intake hall.

“Can I have all of the drugs?” Dearden heard her ask.

“This way,” said Dearden’s nurse, bringing the number of times he’d heard that since the beginning of his journey up to a nice round ten. At PDX, the nurse had met him on the runway, Dearden having been transported by private jet, and said, “Adam Dearden? This way.” Dearden didn’t know what the staff here at Normal Head had been told about him, for them to arrange his collection by a giant capable of circumcising redwoods with his teeth, but he had shuffled



along meekly. It didn't seem productive to argue, and also he'd been shot full of so many sedatives and antipsychotics before he'd been stuffed onto the plane that he could not in any case have raised a persuasive enough argument to his legs to get them to do anything but shuffle. He felt like he might have to manually restart his own lungs at any moment, because relying on his body's autonomic functions was seeming more and more dangerous.

Perhaps unwisely, he had voiced this concern while being helped up into a ridiculous SUV with the footprint of a tank and a front fender apparently designed to atomize houses on impact, and was told to "shut up" in a tone that strongly suggested the nurse knew how to murder people really well. Adam shut up, and watched Portland scroll by, detached from the view to the point where he could have been sitting in a stationary vehicle on a set watching a back projection, or two people frantically cranking a roll of painted landscape to simulate motion. None of it seemed real. He laughed at Mount Hood, capped with silvered white in the middle of summer. Who paints a frosted mountaintop into a summer scene? What a ridiculous failure of reality.

He stopped laughing when he remembered it was a failure of reality that put him in this car in the first place, and was quiet for a long time.

The oaks and firs stood up as they reached the interstate and pushed on through the South West Pacific Highway to the Salmon River Highway, past places with names like Falling Creek, Tualatin, Joe Dancer Park, and Erratic Rock. Places you could walk out into and die and never be found. He could imagine them seared by sun in summer and shrouded in snow in winter. Hammered by hail the size of coins in spring and autumn, pounding flesh and smashing bone, processed to be carried off chunk by speck in the guts of birds.

He had had a friend, a thin man with soft eyes and a tight jaw who ground his teeth whenever he was thinking, who'd

walked out one day in a spare place like these. He'd left a note by the front left wheel of the pickup truck parked outside his cabin, pinned to the dirt by an old can of dog food. He was one of the generations who typed all day, and his handwriting had lost the fluency of daily practice. The note read, "You won't find me. I am returning to the cycle of nature while I still can. I don't want to see the end of the future. Tell my father I'm glad he has cancer. Goodbye." He had scrawled a drawing of an empty hourglass at the bottom of the note. Adam remembered flipping the note, and finding that it was scrawled on the back of a pharmacy receipt for a great many painkillers and four bottles of expensive mineral water, the stuff with extra vitamins in it. They never found him. Adam presumed that the empty plastic bottles of pills and water were still bobbing around in a creek somewhere, as a final fuck-you to the littering world his friend despised, while he circled overhead, riding legion in the bellies of birds.

It was after Erratic Rock—grassy floodplain that didn't look even a bit as interesting as the name—when Adam childishly asked if they were there yet. The nurse, who wasn't driving and was instead sitting and watching Adam like a cop guarding some heinous criminal during a prison transfer, said, "Not long," and that was the whole eight words done. He wasn't telling the truth, either, because it took another hour before they reached the eastern gate of the Normal Head Experimental Forest, out amid the coastal wilds of Oregon in the United States, where no one was watching.

The Normal Headlands were a conservation site, denoted both as a United States Forest Service Experimental Forest and as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. Inside the boundary of Normal Head Experimental Forest's thirteen thousand acres lay, over the bones of a ghost town called Normal Station, the Normal Head Research Station. Adam, like many of the people in his field, had heard of Normal Head—knew roughly

where it was, had listened to all the stories about what happened there from friends of friends and the occasional fragile, wistful outpatient—but this was the first time he'd seen it. Seeing Normal Head up close was not a good thing for persons sharing his profession. Knowing what he knew, and having some awareness left regarding his own condition, he wondered if he'd see this gate again. He knew that there was a fair chance that he might never leave the forest. He knew that some people don't come back.

Adam was given to understand by the two guards at the eastern gate's checkpoint that he was causing them to miss the start of *Bonanza* on the television, and that he was therefore not their friend. Adam was a little sad about this, but only because he found he really liked the notion of sitting and watching an episode of *Bonanza*. There was something oddly soothing about the idea. His nurse growled at the guards. Adam suspected they weren't supposed to interact with him even that much. The two men grudgingly took Adam's photo, claimed that their various other items of security equipment weren't working, took a signature off Adam's nurse, and waved them through. It was difficult even to conceive of them as "guards," but Adam had taken direct and nervous notice of the large handguns in duty holsters on their hips.

The car drove on, down a long and winding track lined by unbroken curtains of vast trees that he supposed he would have time to learn the names of. He could pick out an oak, and had had Douglas firs pointed out to him during a previous trip to Portland, but otherwise trees in Adam Dearden's life went by the name "tree." There didn't seem to be much other than trees here, and he briefly toyed with the notion that he might be forced to live in one as part of his therapy. He didn't broach the subject with his nurse, partly because his nurse wouldn't be amused and partly because all communication since Windhoek seemed fraught with danger. He'd felt for days that he somehow wasn't

making sense to anybody, and that everybody seemed to get angry or threatening whenever he spoke. So he looked out the window and invented names for the species of tree that he could discern.

That stopped being funny or distracting long before they eventually reached the Station compound. A Brutalist horseshoe of a building squatting on one side of a big square of bark-dressed dirt, opposite a stand of raised huts surrounded by odd little modular buildings that looked like they'd been parachuted in from five years in the future. The car stopped at the top of the horseshoe—its long arms turned away from the square and disappearing off into woodland—and Adam was caused to understand by one large nurse's hand that he was required to leave the car. Adam was oddly proud that it took the nurse a further five minutes to pry him from the car, and forgave himself the high-pitched screaming that accompanied the performance.

Of course, on being produced through the doors and into the intake hall, Adam was no longer the star of his own show. An older woman was demanding internet access at the point of a poorly sharpened toothbrush. The air crackled with nervous energy. Adam felt the stress headache start in his neck, and his eyes prickled with tears. Someone was asking him a question, he knew, but he couldn't quite make the words make sense. He recognized the tone of voice that defined the string of sounds as a question, which pleased him—not too far gone, eh?—but otherwise he felt like someone had stolen the internal dictionary that normal people used to match sounds to ideas. His chest went tight, and his chin bunched involuntarily. He shook his head, violently, and pain firecracked up his neck and into the base of his skull. His brain reconnected long enough to hear the woman ask brokenly for drugs, and then, for no good reason he could find, he started crying. And couldn't stop.

\* \* \*

When Adam came back to himself, he was outside, sitting down, with no memory of having gotten there. He was seated on a plastic chair, at a plastic table, with a plastic tumbler of something green in front of him. There was a woman seated opposite him, with cruel eyes and a kind smile. "You should drink that," she said.

The awful sorrowful fugues tended to strip him of anything but "Where am I?" Which was a stupid question, but it was the only one he had, and it helped to level him.

"That's a big question," the woman said. "Technically, it's the Normal Head Research Station, but in 1910 it was Normal Station, founded by a realtor from Coggon, Iowa. They have a baseball team called the Rockets. Town motto, 'The One and Only.' Six hundred and fifty people live there, but they have an opera house. Imagine that. Well, the realtor bought this whole great big parcel of dirt, with the plan to turn it into a resort. He moved out here with his wife. There was a hotel here, housing, a small grocery store, even a printing press for a newspaper of record. In which it was reported, in 1913, that the realtor had gone, I quote, 'violently insane,' and had fled from what he described as, quote, 'the terrible lights of Normal' into the forest, never to be seen again. Between the wars, when the ocean began to eat into the shoreline, it was said that the sea came in at the point where the poor man left the land. By then, of course, Normal Station was empty. After World War Two, Normal Station became Normal Head again, the headlands were designated a forest reserve, this facility was opened in 1974, and we're sitting on the bones of a town founded by a madman whose last recorded words were about its terrible lights. That's where you are."

Adam reached for the glass. The woman talked in a flat and affectless style that unsettled him in ways hard to define. She was somewhere deep in the basement of the Uncanny Valley of faux-human speech. "I'm glad I asked," he said, and took a drink. Juiced shrubbery cut with lemon,

cucumber, three millimeters of raw ginger, and some tinned fruit without properties beyond sugar. It tasted bad enough to bring him closer to the world.

He looked up at the woman again. "I know you. I recognize you."

"Ah!" she said, her smile widened yet never getting within shouting distance of her eyes.

She wore an expensive, oddly asymmetrical jacket, with zippered hidey-holes for gadgets and shades, and special gravity pockets in the sleeves that allowed the owner to slide her phone out of them into her hands like Robert De Niro's trick gun in *Taxi Driver*. She also wore steel-blue jogging pants, faded to white at the knees, and bulbous pink plastic clogs.

"We met at the Uplift conference in Brussels a couple of years ago. You're an urbanist. Lela Charron."

"That's right," she said, with a tiny hint of surprise. "And your name's Adam."

Suddenly feeling awkward, he stuck out his hand. "Adam Dearden. Pleased to meet you. Again."

She looked at his hand with eyes like a panther. "I don't really do touching of other people yet," she said.

"Sorry," Adam said, trying to yank his whole arm back into his body.

"It's all right," she said. "We all have our issues here."

"Here," he said, looking around. "Normal Head. I don't remember a lot about the trip at the moment. But I guess I made it. Will I see a doctor soon?"

"Oh, yes," Lela said. "They just like you to sit down with a long-term inmate and find your feet before they get into all that with you. They think it's best you see a nonauthoritarian face first."

"Inmate?" It made him smile a little.

"Patient, then. I've been here six months. I'm in Staging now."

"What's that?"

"When we're most of the way better, we get moved to Staging. You saw the micro-homes on the way in?"

"Those weird modular things?" Adam found he remembered that. That was good.

"Right. We live in some of those, use others as communal work areas. They have computers and internet. We're allowed to work there. Beginning the process of reconnecting to the world. Staging for a return to the outside."

"Have you been Staging long?"

"A couple of months," she said, turning and looking out over the grounds. They were on a wide patio area, filled with plastic tables and chairs. All injection-molded, cheap, and nothing but rounded edges. Beyond the patio, a scabby lawn, and then the treeline. Adam imagined running screaming toward it.

"That seems like a long time," he said.

"No," she said. "There have been people in Staging for years. Sane enough to be useful, never quite safe to leave. For some people, it's not a bad arrangement. Working from concealment, as it were. Me, I'm feeling ready to go back. Nearly ready. Do you know why you're here, Adam?"

He took another sip of the horrible green shit.

"Bad case of abyss gaze," he said. "You?"

Lela frowned. A small wet sound came from her mouth. She smacked her lips, and swallowed something. She wiped a scant escape of saliva from the corner of her mouth. "Poor culinary choices," she said.

There were people at most of the tables. Like the outdoor furniture, they slowly resolved in his perception, as if a contrast control was being turned up on the screen of his Cartesian theater. He also became aware of a wide gap that bisected the patio, an aisle between the tables.

Lela followed his eyes. "Professional demarcation," she said. "Foresight strategists on this side. Nonprofits, charitable institutions, universities, design companies, the

civil stuff. On the other side? Strategic forecasters. Global security groups, corporate think tanks, spook stuff. You know the score.”

Dearden did. He was a futurist. They were all futurists. Everyone here gazed into the abyss for a living. Do it long enough, and the abyss would gaze back into you. If the abyss did that for long enough, the people who paid you for your eyes would send you to Normal Head. The place was paid for by foundations and multinationals alike, together. Most of their human probes needed it, one way or another, in the end. His first thought, in fact, that night in Windhoek, was that he was going to end up in Normal if he couldn’t keep his shit together.

His neck pain came back.

He looked out toward the treeline again. There was a figure out there, moving among the trees, wrapped in a heavy black coat. Adam realized that he must have made an expression while looking, because Lela turned to see. “Oh,” she said. “That guy. He’s either in his room or wandering around the edges. He’s on the other side. Strategic. No idea who employs him. I don’t think I’ve ever even seen him speak to anybody. There are always one or two like him. You’re probably one of the healthier specimens, as new intake goes.”

“He’s new here too?” Adam had the sudden aching feeling of no friends, an endless emptiness of childhood loneliness, and that perhaps someone else who was new to Normal Head might be a friend for him. It made him want to cry again, but just for himself and the ache and his childhood.

“Arrived a few days back, I think?” Lela said. “God knows what’s wrong with him. Maybe he’s checking out the trees for cameras. It happens.”

“Checking out the trees happens, or cameras happen?” Adam felt the fuse light in the top of his spine. He blinked hard, a few times.



“Oh, there are cameras here. I mean, many of your fellow inmates are humans with significant dollar value attached to them. But not in the rooms. And the ones out here are pretty discreet. The video files they generate are on a forty-eight-hour deletion cycle. Their wireless is disabled, they don’t have a hard line off-site, airgaps and high security and all that. They kind of have to. Working in and around surveillance culture for too long put a lot of these people in here, after all.”

Nothing but true, Adam knew, especially for urbanists like Lela Charron. He’d seen them counting off every single networked object on city street corners, like botanists identifying every single obscure poisonous plant in sight. Staring into the abyss of the future while being acutely aware of being watched by every device, every piece of street furniture and every strand of modern infrastructure.

The trees sighed under a cold breeze, and the man in the heavy coat dissolved into the forest.

“Well,” Lela said. “My work here is done. Finish your drink, it’ll help you feel better. An orderly will come by in a little bit to take you to your doctor for your induction interview. Word of advice: don’t try to be a big strong man. Or,” and she cast him over with that raptor look again, “a little big man. Just be whoever you are right now. Don’t be afraid to show them where you’re broken. You’ll get fixed quicker if they can see the breaks up front.”

“That’s it?”

“Yes, that’s it. What did you want? A hug?”

A voice came from over Adam’s shoulder, a deep and sooty sound choked up from the base of a tired throat. “She doesn’t touch people because she ate one once.”

Dearden twisted in his seat. The speaker was a man from the north of England, by his accent, with a face like a mallet and skin like a map of Yorkshire scratched out in gin-broken veins. He wore a gray suit that might even have been gray when he first put it on, which Adam judged to have been a

couple of years ago. The man's great head, inflicted with a bootneck haircut that Adam thought had been made illegal for reasons of cruelty by 1958, had the permanent inclination of a man too used to explaining to colliery housewives that their husbands and children had been eaten by a mine shaft. But a grin split it like a spade through clay.

"How do," the man said, sticking a sweaty hand out to be shaken. "My name's Clough and I'm fucking mental. So's she. Don't trust a word out of her cakehole."

Lela started hiccupping.

"Oh, here we bloody go," said Clough. "Did she start dribbling at the mention of food yet?"

She outright murdered Clough with her eyes.

"Don't listen to her, lad. She went straight-up batshit in Mongolia and they're never going to let her out of here because she's fucking mental and she's got a taste for human flesh."

Lela snatched the plastic tumbler out of Adam's hand, threw the juice out of it, and smacked it down on the edge of the table, all in one smooth and terrible motion. If the tumbler had been glass and the table had been wood, it would have instantly produced a fine makeshift weapon. But instead the tumbler made a dull thud on the side of the table, which tipped and rocked a little.

"Fu-UCK," Lela hiccupped, and threw the tumbler at Clough. She missed and hit Adam in the center of his forehead.

"That's quite enough of that, Ms. Charron," said a soft young man in a 4XL short-sleeved white shirt. His small hand rubbed agitatedly at the arrangement that covered his early-onset male pattern baldness. "You were specifically asked to leave the new patient in peace to drink his green juice and calm down."

Lela swallowed hard and looked away. "I was just practicing, she said. "Practicing for when I go to Staging."

"I'm sure you were. You walk away too, Mr. Clough. It's cartoon time in screen room two soon."

"Ooh," said Clough, bouncing on the balls of his feet. "Is *Danger Mouse* on? We haven't watched all of that DVD set yet. Will it be *Danger Mouse* again?"

"Only," the younger man said, "if you promise not to launch another critique on the realism of the treatment of the British Security Service in *Danger Mouse*. Off you go now."

Clough gave Adam's shoulder a quick squeeze. "Chin up, lad. The food's fair, they've got a shitload of DVDs, and no bastard can fucking phone you here. It's not so bad."

It was a bizarre thing to see Clough scamper off into the main building singing the theme tune to *Danger Mouse*.

"My name's Dickson," the young orderly said. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Dearden. Your doctor's ready to see you now. Do you feel up to talking to a doctor for a little while? We prefer to do it on intake day, but if you'd rather sleep and do it tomorrow, we can do that too. What do you say?"

Dearden thought the back of his head was going to explode. "I'm not even sure I can stand up," he said.

Dickson put his hand, too small for its owner but very clean and dry, under Adam's arm. "Let me help," he said, quietly. "It's what I'm here for."

\* \* \*

The room was very yellow. In a northern country, the color would have been called "sunshine yellow," because they weren't very sure what color sunshine really was. Adam supposed it could in fact have said "happy pus" on the tin. The walls had been painted within the year, the armchairs and sofas were relatively new, and the thick carpet had been both vacuumed and shampooed recently enough that he could still detect the scent of the soap.

Doctor Murgu was in substantially worse repair. A cut was delicately taped closed over her bushy right eyebrow, and a bruise on her left cheek was blooming like mandragora. She'd changed her white coat, but hadn't had time to change the blouse underneath. The loop of blood spatter had been smeared and reduced by wet tissue paper, but not erased. She looked at her clipboard—Adam had yet to see a networked object here—and then up at him, straightening her back as she perched on the edge of the sofa and pulling up a smile from somewhere under whatever had happened to her earlier in the day.

"Adam," she said. "Can I call you Adam?"

He just nodded. This is how the cycle went. Emotional incontinence, and then hyperfocused on the environment but drained of words. No sensory input/output. Human-shaped camera. Two facets of terminal panic, he supposed.

"I imagine the whole process of getting here has been both exhausting and confusing. So I'm going to start by telling you what's been happening. You got very ill in Rotterdam, and your institute got in touch with us. We had you transported to Schiphol, which has a direct flight to Portland. We drove you straight here from PDX. Do you remember anything about Rotterdam?"

Adam shook his head. It was a bit of a lie. He knew he'd been at a conference about coveillance. Some happy solutionist idiot with banana-yellow glasses and hair like a startled badger talking about how watching the watchers makes for a balanced and benign social substrate. Yellow glasses like this yellow room. Yellow is supposed to make people feel good. He wanted to make people feel good about a surveillance arms race between the state and the populace. Adam remembered losing his temper. He didn't remember much about what he said, except that it seemed to upset a lot of people.

He remembered beginning to cry afterward. He wasn't sure where he was when it happened, but he figured it must

have been a public space. He remembered hands, arms, being lifted.

"Okay," she said, making a note with a propelling pencil. "Do you know how it started? Your illness. The thing that upset you?"

"Windhoek," he said, almost choking on the word. "Namibia."

"Were you there during the riot?"

He nodded. Her pencil scratched across the paper. Without looking up from what seemed to be a very detailed note, she asked, "How are you sleeping?"

"I don't even know," he said. Her eyes snapped up. "I'm being honest," he said. "I was given a lot of medication yesterday. I think it was yesterday."

Doctor Murgu flicked the top sheet of paper on her clipboard up, skimmed the sheet below. "Yes. It looks like you had three separate episodes."

Adam took a deep breath, pushing the bases of his thumbs into his eyes. "I am trying to be honest because I know that the more information you have, the better you'll be able to help me, and I must need help because I've been shipped to Normal. That means I have to tell you that I've been seeing things that aren't there and sometimes I'm not completely sure what's real. Hell, I saw a man earlier by the trees here and I'm not sure he was there. Lela may have just been humoring me during a hallucination."

"What man?"

"Dark hair, big heavy coat? I think he saw me looking at him and he walked into the forest."

The doctor smiled. "It's all right, Adam. I think you saw Mister Mansfield. He never takes that coat off."

"He was really there?"

"He certainly was. As much as he ever is. He's been here a few days, but we haven't even been able to do his intake interview yet. He hates to be looked at, hides in that coat, won't communicate, and spends most of his time wandering

the grounds. I'm not sure anyone's even seen him eat. So what I want you to understand from this, Adam, is that you are far from the most wounded person ever to enter Normal. And I note that you met Lela. Lela has issues with things like permission, and time. She'll be a good friend, but I need you to carry with you the knowledge that everyone is here for the same reason, Adam."

Adam shook his head. "Doctor, are you telling me not to trust anyone here because they're crazy?"

"Absolutely," she said. "You're all batshit."

Adam looked at her with total focus. She smiled. He gave a sudden burst of laughter.

"There you are," Doctor Murgu said.

It was like all the air rushed back into him. His chest filled and his heart started beating again. His skin stung.

She leaned forward, keeping the eye contact. "Adam, you've had a nervous breakdown. I know it's been a tough couple of days. But you're here now, and things start getting better for you right this minute. You're going to have some bad moments, because your mind is wounded. But they are going to get less and less frequent. This is a safe place. No prying eyes, no pressure, no eavesdropping, no agenda. You can start looking away from the abyss now."

Even he was tired of crying again. It didn't feel better. It was just exhausting and boring.

\* \* \*

Dickson led him to his room. It had a window with a strong mesh over it, a single bed, and an armchair. There was a partition, with a toilet, sink, and shower packed into it. No desk. No expectation of work. The armchair suggested peaceful hours of quiet reading. There was a television and a soundbar mounted on the wall, and a heavy-looking remote control on the bedside cabinet.

Dickson saw him see it. "Music," Dickson said. "You can't get actual television. The remote has a slide-out keyboard, and the television shows the selection menu. Just music. No movies, no shows. No web access, of course. We got a ton of music, though. Lot of relaxing stuff."

"Any books?" Adam asked, eyeing the chair.

"Doctor Murgu will evaluate you for library access at your next interview. Over here."

Dickson directed Adam's attention to the door. On the back of it, a key hung by a yellow loop from a hook.

"That's your room key. You can lock yourself in. Please don't leave the key in the lock."

"Okay," Adam said. He was tired now. His eyesight was juddering.

Dickson produced a small plastic bottle from his chest pocket. It contained three capsules. "You need water?"

He did, and was made to stand in the doorway to the mini-bathroom while Dickson drew a plastic cup of water from the sink. The capsules were red, yellow, and green. Adam studied them on his upturned palm, where Dickson had laid them, and looked askance at Dickson.

"I know, man," Dickson said. "Stop, wait, go. Don't read anything into it. It's just the colors they come in."

Dickson observed Adam take the capsules, so closely that Adam felt he needed to swallow as ostentatiously as possible to satisfy the orderly's invigilation.

"Okay," Dickson said. "You need to eat?"

"I think I just want to sleep. Is that okay?"

"That's fine, Mr. Dearden. How are you with phones?"

"Um. I know how to use them...?"

Dickson stepped to the bedside cabinet. "It's a real question. Some of our guests come in with a serious aversion to phones. They can be like a huge symbol of everything that's weighing on them? Someone told me once that it's hard to talk when you don't know how many people

are listening. Like phones are half-trained demons always ready to betray you.”

He opened the front of the bedside cabinet, where a cordless phone sat on a cradle. “It’s a closed system, you can’t dial out. And no one can dial in, obviously. Just hit ‘0’ to get the front desk if you need anything. If you can’t face that, press the green button on the TV remote. No audio recording.”

“That’s it?”

“Well, there’s a whole menu, but you look dead on your feet and the front desk will take care of anything you need tonight. I can walk you through the other stuff tomorrow. Get some rest. I hear you had a long journey.”

Adam’s entire life felt like lead in his bones right now. He couldn’t manage more than a nod. Dickson smiled, with genuine and gentle kindness, and let himself out of the room.

Adam sat down and surveyed the room in silence. He supposed it was as close to a hermit’s cell as you got these days, without disappearing into the frozen wastes with a spoon for digging yourself a cave with. Except that you had to pick your frozen wastes carefully these days, as you could probably get 3G service in chunks of Antarctica and the Arctic was full of drunken Scandinavians in headbands and television hosts in SUVs.

He took it in for a moment. No internet. No phone service beyond the front desk. No television. No news. No information flow at all. Just a music collection and, somewhere, a library he evidently had to be medically fit to browse. It was quiet. It was actually quiet. He couldn’t even hear other people. This little room was as close to sensory deprivation as he’d experienced since ... when? Childhood?

He sat there for a little while, feeling like he was waiting for his ears to pop from the change in pressure. It came to him that he didn’t even know where his cell phone was. He wasn’t able to tend the eight different messaging apps on it.



He couldn't clear the email from either of his accounts (one open to anyone, one that was nominally private but which suffered significant bleed-through from the other). No Twitter, no Instagram, none of the public-facing services he farmed hourly. No podcasts! He was subscribed to a hundred podcasts. He winced at the gigabyte load that would be waiting for him when he retrieved his phone and reached some signal. The news apps would spin and churn away, kicking out notifications until the phone's battery was sucked dry. His quant band was gone, he noticed: he wouldn't be tracking his steps, his blood oxygen, heart rate, local EF field activity, or the five other things it automagically quantified and uploaded and shared. Digitally, he would actually appear dead. A few of his services would send updates to social media daily. The weather report in his last recorded location would post to his Tumblr every day on an automatic basis. After a while, it'd look like an arrow pointed at the spot where he'd vanished or been murdered.

He didn't know where his laptop was. He didn't know when it'd last been backed up to his three off-site storage services. Christ. He was cut off, really cut off. It was an amputation. He realized he had no idea what to do with that. He was a cauterized stump of a human, dropped in a small room and left to rot.

A small room that bore the weathering of human presence as a slow tide lapping a beach of stones, rather than the marks of occupation. It was the sort of experience he had in low-budget hotels outside airports. He wondered if, in times past, there were caves in nowhere places that travelers used for only one night, on the way to somewhere of consequence. On their way home.

He sat there and thought about what home meant. "Home," in his life, was the word given to the house his parents had lived in. Adam didn't get to have one of those.

Where they were was “home,” and where he was was always somehow somewhere else.

Adam remembered the first time he’d been in a room like this. The first time he’d ever stayed in a hotel. Remembered lying there on the weary bed, atop a tired brown counterpane, thinking he’d made it. Finally staying in a real hotel. No more hostels and sofas and floors. A real hotel room, bought without pain with his own money. He remembered feeling like he was a big man now, on his way up. Things were just going to get better.

The capsules woke up in his gut and told the stump of Adam Dearden to go to bed, and so he did. They even took care of the shaking, even though he would have sworn that his bones were vibrating inside the dead meat of him, desperately trying to generate enough electricity to capture a radio broadcast from somewhere.

\* \* \*

It was the banging that woke him up screaming. It sounded like the percussion of explosives in the street. Something was going on outside. Adam leapt to the window. Pale daylight. Early morning, maybe. Nothing else. The banging was coming from the corridor. Adam had nothing that might constitute a weapon, except possibly the soundbar on the wall. His instinct was to yank it off the wall and use it as a club. He swallowed the instinct down. Adam pulled on his pants, as quickly as he could. His hands were shaking. He stepped to the door, quickly and silently, and took the key off the hook. He unlocked his door as quietly as he could, and wrapped the key loop around his wrist.

Adam cracked the door open. Two orderlies ran past. Whatever was happening, it wasn’t about Adam.

Adam left his room and followed them. They had already stopped running. There were three more orderlies at the end of the hall, banging on a door. One of them turned to the

new arrivals, and said, "You bring the persuader? Asshole left his key in the lock and he's not answering."

"You sure he's not out in the fucking woods again?"

"We already checked the corridor cameras. He went in there at curfew and never came out."

The smaller of the two orderlies who ran past Adam produced something like a shorter version of the old spiral ratchet screwdriver his dad used to use when he was building things in the garage. Adam walked up to watch. They were all too busy to pay any attention to him.

The orderly put the device, which Adam presumed was the "persuader," to the lock, grasped the handle, and pumped it. Its mechanism clicked and spun and the lock barrel was kicked clean out of the door. He pulled a thin, pick-like tool out of the top of the persuader's handle and applied it inside the hole left by the lock. There was a loud snap. The orderly looked at his colleagues, and then gave the door a gentle push. It opened soundlessly.

He said, "Mister Mansfield?" The door swung wide.

The orderly said, "Jesus *fuck*," and backed off. Adam stepped in to see.

The bed was host to a black and heaving mass of insect life. So was the floor around it. So were the walls, and the window. There was no sign of anything human in the room. The mound on the bed was just a horde of bugs.

Behind Adam, Clough coughed, squinted, and glumly observed, "I've fucked worse than that."

Also by [Warren Ellis](#)

*Gun Machine*

*Global Frequency*

*Red*

## A Note About the Author



Ellen Rogers

[Warren Ellis](#) is the author of FSG's first digital original, *Dead Pig Collector*; the New York Times bestselling novel *Gun Machine*; and the underground classic *Crooked Little Vein*. He is also the award-winning creator of a number of iconic, bestselling original graphic novels, including *Red*, *Ministry of Space*, *Planetary*, and *Transmetropolitan*, and has been behind some of the most successful reimaginings of mainstream comic superheroes, including *Iron Man*. He has written extensively for *Vice*, *Wired*, and *Reuters* on technological and cultural matters, and is working on a nonfiction book about the future of cities for FSG Originals. He lives on the southeast coast of England. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).



**Thank you for buying this  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux ebook.**

To receive special offers, bonus content,  
and info on new releases and other great reads,  
sign up for our newsletters.

**Sign Up**

Or visit us online at  
[us.macmillan.com/newslettersignup](https://us.macmillan.com/newslettersignup)

For email updates on the author, click [here](#).

# Contents

[Title Page](#)  
[Copyright Notice](#)

## **[Part 1](#)**

[Also by Warren Ellis](#)  
[A Note About the Author](#)  
[Copyright](#)



Farrar, Straus and Giroux  
18 West 18th Street, New York 10011

Copyright © 2016 by Warren Ellis  
All rights reserved  
First edition, 2016

Our e-books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use. Please contact the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at (800) 221-7945, extension 5442, or by e-mail at [MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com](mailto:MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com).

[www.fsgbooks.com](http://www.fsgbooks.com) • [www.fsgoriginals.com](http://www.fsgoriginals.com)  
[www.twitter.com/fsgbooks](https://www.twitter.com/fsgbooks) • [www.facebook.com/fsgbooks](https://www.facebook.com/fsgbooks)

eISBN 9781466896000

First eBook edition: July 2016