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The Burning

Written by Jane Casey

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THE BURNING

Jane Casey



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The certainty of death is attended with uncertainties, in time, manner, places.

Sir Thomas Browne, *Urn Burial*

Bodies recovered from fires present similar problems of investigation to bodies recovered from water. In both instances the integration of information obtained from the examination of the scene, the examination of the body, and the history of the decedent, is particularly important.

Derrick J Pounder

She should have gone home with the others.

Kelly Staples stared at her reflection in the cracked and spotted mirror, trying to make sense of what she saw. Surely that wasn't her face squinting back. Mascara had smeared under her eyes, leaving shadowy smudges speckled with tiny flecks of black that wouldn't come off no matter how she rubbed at them. The remnants of her foundation were caked around her nose and across her forehead, where her skin looked dry. Her face was red and she had a spot on her chin that she was sure hadn't been there when she was getting ready to go out. Her mouth was slack and wet, and there was something on her top . . . With a huge effort Kelly bent her head to inspect the damage. Wine, she thought hazily. She had tipped red wine down her front. She vaguely remembered laughing hysterically, holding the wet material away from her, offering someone – a man she'd never met before – the chance to suck it, so as not to waste it, before Faye dragged her away from him, muttering crossly in her ear about behaving herself. But as Kelly had pointed out, or tried to, tonight was all about *not* behaving herself. Out with the girls for an evening of freedom, a pub crawl in Richmond. Dolled up, tanked up, ready for a laugh. It was getting near the end of term; they'd needed a break, all of them. Especially her, since she'd broken up with PJ three

weeks before. Or, to be precise, he'd broken up with her. Two years they'd been together, and he'd thrown it all away to chase after Vanessa Cobbet, the fat slapper. A tear slid down Kelly's face, gliding through what was left of her make-up.

They'd started with white wine at home, getting ready, and Kelly had had a few glasses. Giddy with nerves, she'd needed it. And it had got the evening off to a good start.

The room behind her rocked and swayed. Kelly shut her eyes, leaning heavily on the sink as she waited to feel better. She had been sick already; she had thought it might help if she was sick. Behind her, a cubicle door banged. A bony middle-aged woman slipped past her with a sidelong look that said *you're too young to be in that sort of state*. Kelly thought, but wasn't confident enough to say, *yeah, well you're too old to be in here in the first place.*

The toilets were cramped, two cubicles and two sinks squeezed into a narrow corner of the pub, reeking of aggressive air freshener and the sour-sweet smell of vomited wine – that was Kelly's contribution. The fixtures dated the last redesign to the eighties if not before: pink porcelain fittings and pink-and-brown floral curtains that hung limply at the frosted window. The rest of the pub wasn't much better, though the dim lighting hid most of the damage at night. The Jolly Boatman had seen better days, as had most of the clientele, but it was busy nonetheless, crowded with drinkers. The pubs by the river were all busy; it was Thursday night, the unofficial start to the weekend, and everyone was out to have a good time, including Kelly. But it had all gone wrong, somewhere along the way. The others had left, she remembered woozily, telling her to get a taxi when she was ready to come home. She'd been dancing with

someone, a lad she didn't know, and Faye had tried to persuade her to leave but she'd refused. It had seemed to make sense then. It was her turn, her chance to have fun. They'd taken her at her word and left her. Kelly couldn't understand why she'd let them.

'I'm pissed,' she said out loud, trying to make eye contact with the bleary figure in the mirror. 'I need to go home.'

The contents of her handbag had spilt into the basin in front of her. It seemed to take an extraordinarily long time to collect everything up again; her hands were clumsy and there were so many things – a pen, make-up, her keys, a bus ticket, some loose change – three cigarettes that had fallen out of their packet and were splotched with damp from the sink. The lid had come off a tube of lip gloss and as Kelly fumbled to pick it up sticky red goo smeared across the pink porcelain. It looked, for a moment, like blood.

The noise and heat hit her with a physical shock when she pulled open the door and she faltered a little, trying to remember which way she needed to go. The door to the outside world was to the left, she vaguely recalled, and set herself to push through the crowd. She was walking tall, acting sober, shoulders pulled well back and head up. It fooled no one except Kelly herself.

The crowd was thicker around the door, with smokers coming and going from the terrace that overlooked the water.

'Excuse me,' Kelly mumbled, trying and failing to shoulder past a heavyset man who didn't seem to hear her or notice her cannoning into his back.

'Need a minicab, love? Let me give you a hand,' said a voice in her ear as an arm snaked around her waist. 'Time to go home, young lady.'

Without consciously agreeing, she found herself making progress, guided skilfully and swiftly through the throng until they reached the chill of outside air. It was a clear night, still and cold, and the frost was already starting to bite.

She turned then, ready to thank her rescuer, and found herself looking at a stranger, a man her father's age or older. Kelly struggled to focus as the man's face swooped up and down in front of her. There were rimless glasses, and hair that was surely too dark to be natural, and a moustache over a mouth that smiled, that moved, that was saying *where do you live my cab is just around the corner why don't you come with me and I'll see you home it's no trouble it's not far I don't have anything better to do give me your bag that's the girl are these your keys I'll take care of you don't you worry. You don't want to be out on your own not at the moment not safe is it?*

Somehow, Kelly found herself following the man obediently. She wanted to take her bag back and find her own way home, but it seemed easier to go along with him. Her feet were hurting for one thing; the platform boots that had looked so glamorous before she left the house were pinching her toes and rubbing her heels, and the one on the right was squeezing her calf. They were far too high for a long walk home. And he was right; it probably wasn't safe to be out on her own.

The man was nice, Kelly thought hazily. He was polite, well mannered, thoughtful. Older men were, weren't they? They knew how to be gentlemen. PJ had never held her hand. PJ had never opened the car door for her and waited to close it after she sat down (a little heavily, truth be told, but then again he was a perfect gentleman and stared into the distance rather than at her skirt where it had ridden up).

She usually got into the back when she took a taxi, but he'd opened the front passenger door and she didn't want to be rude.

He got in and started the engine, then helped her with her seat belt before he drove off. He revved the engine unnecessarily so the sound bounced off the buildings either side of the road.

'Mind if I smoke?' Kelly asked, pushing her luck, and was surprised when he nodded. The car smelled of mint and pine air freshener, two strong scents that didn't quite manage to disguise the tang of petrol, as if he'd spilt some on his shoes the last time he'd filled up. He wasn't a smoker, she guessed. But he'd agreed to it; he couldn't mind *that* much.

The only dry fag in the packet was the lucky one, the last one, the one Kelly always turned upside down when she opened a new pack so it stood out, a little white soldier standing proud beside the light-brown filter tips of the others. She fitted it between her lips and cupped her hands around the flame of her lighter, shielding herself automatically from a wind that wasn't there. She had the lighter turned up too high; it nearly took her fringe off.

'Fuck.' She blinked a few times, dazzled, then shot a guilty look at the stranger. 'Sorry. Shouldn't swear.'

He shrugged. 'Doesn't bother me. What's your name?'

'Kelly.' She flipped down the visor and inspected herself in the mirror, fluffing her fringe. 'What's your name?'

He hesitated for a second. 'Dan.'

'Where are you from, Dan? Birmingham?' It was a Midlands accent, she'd thought, but he shook his head.

'Round here.'

'Oh yeah?'

He nodded, his eyes on the road. Kelly looked out too, peering at the shops they were passing. She frowned.

'This isn't the way.'

He didn't answer.

'This isn't the way,' she said again, embarrassed to be complaining when he was being so helpful. 'You've gone wrong. It was left back there, not straight on.'

'This is a better way.'

'It isn't,' Kelly said, nettled. 'I should know how to get to my own house.'

The only response she got was a change of gear as he accelerated.

'Hey,' she said, warning in her voice as she braced one hand against the dashboard, the surface gritty with accumulated dirt. 'Take it easy.'

The car bounced down the road, going a little bit too fast for her liking. He looked nervous, she thought, blinking hard, trying to focus. His lips were chapped, and every so often he passed his tongue over them. It made Kelly's lips feel dry and she had to stop herself from doing the same. All of a sudden she felt cold, and cold sober too, the fog of alcohol lifting but leaving fear in its place. What had she done? All the times her mother had warned her not to trust strangers and here she was in a car with a man she'd never met before, going who knows where on a dark Thursday night. There was someone killing young women, she'd seen the headline in her dad's paper. Four girls dead, dumped and burned. Girls like her. The police hadn't a clue who the killer was, or how to catch him. He was on the loose, preying on vulnerable women out on their own. Even Kelly, who never paid much attention to the news, had heard about him. It wasn't late; there were still

people out on the streets, but Kelly had never felt so alone.

'Listen, why don't you let me out here? I'd rather walk if it's all the same to you.'

'Just relax.'

The car purred to a stop at traffic lights. Kelly ran her hand over the door beside her, looking for the handle.

'It's broken,' he said without looking around. 'You can only open it from the outside. Now sit tight and stop making such a fuss.'

'I want to get out.' Her voice had risen, a raw edge of hysteria to it that made the driver wince.

'Calm down, would you. I'll stop and let you out if that's what you want.' He turned into a narrow residential street that was lined with parked cars. 'Nowhere to pull in. Let's see what's down here.'

'Down here' was an alley between gardens, a dead end that wasn't overlooked, Kelly realised, her heart thumping. She felt as if it was going to burst out of her chest. The car slowed to a stop.

'What's going on? Why are you stopping?'

'I thought you wanted to get out. I'll let you out.' He turned off the engine, then the lights, and the night closed in around them. Kelly could only see a silhouette beside her. Her nostrils flared, picking up the minty smell and the faintest whiff of petrol again, and she thought of the girls lying where they'd been dumped, of their bodies burning, of the newspaper headlines that talked about the Burning Man, and she heard him move and couldn't tell if he was reaching towards her in the dark car and without thinking, without even being aware that she'd moved, she reached down and slipped out the knife her little brother had given her, the one he took to school in case he got into a fight, the

one that had been digging into her ankle for hours, the flick knife with the narrow blade and the wicked sharp point, and there wasn't even enough light to catch the edge of the blade as she swung with it in her left hand, aiming low, aiming for the soft part below the ribcage but above the belt, and he didn't have time to react at all before the knife was in him and out again and slipping back into him though he tried to grab the blade that time when Kelly pulled it out and the knife was dark now, and wet, and the man was whimpering, and she could smell him and smell blood – it was like a butcher's shop on a hot day, that sweetish reek – and he'd pissed himself and she was screaming, she realised, her heart pounding as loud as a drum so she couldn't even hear what she was saying. But she was still saying it as she scrambled over the seat into the back of the car and fumbled for the door handle and flung herself out, acting on instinct, her hands, all covered with blood, smearing along the paintwork, her knees buckling as she tried to run in her stupid boots, her sore feet forgotten. She was still saying it under her breath as she hobbled down the alley towards the houses, towards help, her breath sawing in and out of her lungs as if it was edged with rusty teeth. It was what she said to the woman who came to the door and screamed at the sight of her, and what she said to the police who responded to the 999 call, and what she said to the doctors and nurses later on at the hospital, when she was being examined. It was the one thing she was sure of, the thing that had kept her alive.

'Not me. I don't want to be the next one. Not me. Not me.'

Chapter One

Maeve

I didn't know where I was or what I was doing when the phone rang; I didn't even know that it was the phone that had woken me. I came up from miles below the surface and opened an eye as one part of my brain tried to work out what had disturbed me and another part focused on how to make the noise stop. It resolved into a low rattle that was my phone vibrating crossly on the bedside table along with the high-pitched shrill of the most annoying ring tone I could have chosen. Fumbling for it in the dark, I sideswiped it and managed to push it off the table. It fell face down in the carpet, still ringing, the sound now slightly muffled. I'd winged it but not killed it. The bonus was that now it was a little bit harder to reach. I leaned out of bed at a dangerous angle, raking the carpet with my fingers, trying to get to it.

'Mmph!'

Most of the nuance was lost in the pillow, but I interpreted Ian's comment as 'answer the fucking phone', which was pretty much what I was thinking myself. Along with *what time is it?* and *what does this eejit want?*

I got it at last and stabbed at the buttons until it stopped making a noise, trying to read the screen. LANGTON. Rob. I squinted at the time and read 03.27. Half past three in the morning and Detective Constable Rob Langton was

calling me. I was waking up now, my brain starting to crank into gear, but my mouth hadn't caught up with the change of plans and was still slack with sleep. When I said hello, it sounded slurred, as if I'd been drinking for the last – I worked it out – three and a half hours instead of having some much-needed shut-eye. Three and a half hours. That made six hours of sleep in the last forty-eight. I squeezed my eyes closed and wished I hadn't added it up. Somehow, knowing the numbers made me feel worse.

'Did I wake you, Kerrigan?' I would have recognised the Manchester twang anywhere.

'You know you did. What do you want?'

I asked, but I already knew. There were only two reasons why Rob Langton would be ringing me at that hour of the morning sounding excited. One: there was another body. Two: they'd caught the killer. Either way, I wasn't going back to sleep any time soon.

'Got him.'

'No way.' I sat up in bed and put the light on, ignoring a groan from beside me and squinting as I tried to concentrate. 'Where? How?'

'We had a bit of help. Nice young lady out on the beers with a bladed article didn't take kindly to being next on the Burning Man's list.'

'He's not dead.' My heart was pounding. If he was dead, that was it. No answers. No trial.

No justice.

'Nah, he's clinging on. He's in hospital. In surgery, at the minute. Two stab wounds to the abdomen; she lacerated his bowel.'

'Ouch.'

'Yeah, couldn't happen to a nicer person.'

'Anyone we know?' I rubbed my eyes with the heel of my hand and tried not to yawn.

'Not known at all. Never been arrested before, and he hadn't come up in this enquiry.'

I sighed. That wasn't great news. We hadn't even been close to catching him, then. We'd just been lucky. Though the girl had been luckier still. I wasn't a fan of people wandering around carrying knives, but I'd seen enough dead women in the past few weeks to think it wasn't such a bad idea.

'His name's Vic Blackstaff. He had all his documents on him – driver's licence, work ID. He's in his mid-fifties, does shift work for a call centre in Epsom. Lives in Peckham. Drives through south-west London to get home in the small hours of the morning. Plenty of opportunity.'

'Older than we'd thought,' I commented. 'Shift work fits, though. Where did it happen?'

'Richmond.'

'That's quite a long way out of the usual area. Up to now he's stuck to Kennington, Stockwell – nowhere as far out as Richmond.' I was frowning.

'Yeah, but his usual area is flooded with uniforms. Makes sense that he would be hunting elsewhere, doesn't it?' Rob sounded confident and I gave a mental shrug; who was I to second-guess a serial killer?

'They're going through his car at the moment,' Rob went on. 'We're waiting at the hospital.'

'Who's we?'

'Me and the boss. And DI Judd, unfortunately. We'll be interviewing the young lady as soon as the doctors tell us we can talk to her. She's still being checked out.'

'How is she? Is she—'

I didn't want to fill in the rest of the sentence. Is she going to make it? Is she badly beaten? Is she burned? How far had he got?

'She's fine. Shaken up. Nothing wrong with her but we haven't been allowed in to see her yet. She says she's not ready.' Rob sounded impatient, which nettled me. Why shouldn't she take her time before speaking to the police? She'd had a shock. What she needed was a sympathetic ear. And I was the ideal person to provide it. Energy flooded through my limbs, adrenalin pushing fatigue into a corner, to be ignored until I had time to give in to it again. Three hours' sleep was plenty. I was already out of bed, making for the door, stumbling on rubbery legs that ached as if I'd run a marathon the day before.

'Well, I'll be there soon. Maybe they'll let me talk to her.' The perks of being the only woman in Superintendent Godley's inner circle were not legion, but now and then it came in handy.

'Why doesn't that surprise me? Nought to sixty in ten minutes, that's you.'

'That's why you phoned me, isn't it?' I was in the bathroom now, and debated whether I could risk peeing while on the phone. He'd hear. I'd have to wait.

'I knew you'd want to be here.' That was only half the story; it suited them all for me to be there. I could hear Rob grinning; he was a smug git sometimes, but I could forgive him, because when all was said and done, I did want to be there, and without a call from him, I wouldn't have known a thing about it until I'd seen it on the news.

'Which hospital?'

'Kingston.'

'I'll be there in half an hour,' I said before I'd thought

about it properly. It was a long way from Primrose Hill to Kingston and I desperately needed a shower. My hair was sticking to my head. There was no way I was leaving with dirty hair. Not again. 'Make that forty minutes.'

'We're in the ICU. Phones off, so ring the hospital if you need us.'

'Will do.'

I flicked the water on before going to the loo, but even so, it wasn't even close to warm enough when I forced myself to step into the slate-lined shower area, wincing as the spray hit my goose-pimpled skin. The showerhead was the size of a dinner plate and pumped out rain-forest levels of water; it was just a shame that it never got hot enough for me. Style over substance, as usual. But it wasn't my flat so I couldn't really complain. I was sharing it, officially, but I felt more like a guest. And not necessarily a welcome one, at times.

I had balled my hands together under my chin, hugging body heat to myself, and it was an effort to unknot my fingers and reach for the shampoo once the water started to approach tepidity. Haste made me fumble the shampoo cap and I swore as I heard it skitter around the sloping tiles that led to the drain. I left it there, hearing my mother's voice in my head, *sure, it can't fall any further* . . . Two minutes later, I stepped on it and had to muffle a yelp in the crook of my elbow as a sharp edge dug into the arch of my foot. Swearing was a help. I swore. A lot.

I scrubbed at my scalp until the muscles in my forearms complained and rinsed my hair for as long as I could allow myself to, eyes closed against the lather that slid down my face. Bliss to be clean again, joy to know that the case was coming to an end. I wanted to stay in there for ever with my eyes closed; I wanted to sleep – how I wanted to sleep.

But I couldn't. I had to get going. And by the time I got out of the shower, I was what passed for awake these days.

Back in the bedroom, I tried to be quiet, but I couldn't help rattling the hangers in the wardrobe when I was taking out a suit. I heard stirring behind me in the bed and bit my lip.

'What's up?'

I wouldn't have spoken to Ian if he hadn't spoken to me; that was the rule I observed about getting up and leaving in the middle of the night. Not that I was sure he'd ever noticed there was a rule.

'Going to meet a murderer.'

That earned me an opened eye. 'You got him. Well done.'

'It wasn't exactly all my own work, but thanks.'

He rolled over onto his back and threw an arm over his face, shielding his eyes from the light. He was in his natural position now, hogging the middle of the bed. I suppressed the impulse to push him back onto his own side and hauled the sheet up instead, tucking him in. *Look, I care about you. See how thoughtful I am.*

'Mmm,' was the response. He was on his way back to sleep. I slipped the dry-cleaner's bag off my suit and balled it up, squashing it into the bin. I should have taken it off sooner. The suit smelled of chemicals and I wrinkled my nose, reluctant to put it on. The forecast was for a cold day, and rain. I thought longingly of jeans tucked into boots, of chunky jumpers and long knitted scarves. God, dressing like a grown-up was a pain.

I sat on the edge of the bed to deal with my tights, coaxing them over damp skin, wary of ripping them. My hair dripped onto my shoulders, cold water running down

my back. I hadn't got time for this. I hadn't got time for immaculate. Slowly, infinitely slowly, I worked the material up over my thighs and stood to haul the tights the rest of the way. It was not the most elegant moment of getting dressed, and I wasn't pleased to turn and find Ian staring at me, an unreadable expression on his face.

'So is this it?'

'What do you mean?' I slipped on a shirt, then stepped into my skirt, zipping it up quickly and smoothing it over my hips. That was better. More dignified. The waistband was loose, I noticed, the skirt hanging from my hips rather than my waist. It took the hem from on the knee to over it, from flattering to frump. I needed to eat more. I needed to rest.

'I mean is this the end of it? Are you going to be around more?'

'Probably. Not for a little while – we've got to sort out the paperwork and get the case ready for the CPS. But after that, yeah.'

If there isn't another serial killer waiting to take over from where the Burning Man left off. If nothing else goes wrong between now and Christmas. If all the criminals in London take the rest of the year off.

I was looking for shoes, my medium-heeled courts that didn't so much as nod to fashion but hey, I could wear them from now until midnight without a twinge of complaint from my feet. I could even run in them if I had to. One was in the corner of the room, where I'd kicked it off. The other I eventually found under the bed, and had to sprawl inelegantly to retrieve it.

'I hate the way they whistle and you come running.' He sounded wide awake now, and cross. My heart sank.

'It's my job.'

'Oh, it's your *job*. Sorry. I didn't realise.'

'Don't do this now,' I said, stabbing my feet into my shoes and grabbing my towel. 'I've got to go. It's important and you know it.'

He'd sat up, leaning on one elbow, blue eyes hostile under thick eyebrows, his brown hair uncharacteristically untidy. 'What I know is that I haven't seen you for weeks. What I know is that I'll be ringing up Camilla to say you can't come to supper after all, and is that OK, and I'm really sorry if it's mucked up her seating arrangement. What I know is that your job always seems to come first.'

I let him rant, towelling most of the water out of my hair and then dragging a comb through it, trying to get it into some sort of order. No time to dry it; it would dry on the way to the hospital. A few wisps, a lighter brown than the rest, were already curling around my face.

'Camilla works in an art gallery. She has nothing to do all day but rearrange the seating plan for her little dinner parties. It'll be a challenge for her.'

He flopped back down and stared at the ceiling. 'You always do that.'

'What?' I shouldn't have asked.

'Put down my friends because their jobs aren't as important or as worthwhile as yours.'

'For God's sake . . .'

'Not everyone wants to save the world, Maeve.'

'Yeah, it's just as important to make it look nice,' I snapped, and regretted it as soon as I'd said it. Camilla was sweet, sincere, a wide-eyed innocent that brought out the protective instinct in everyone who knew her, including me. Usually. The sharpness in my voice had been partly

exhaustion and partly guilt; I *had* been thinking of skipping the dinner party she was throwing. It wasn't that I didn't like Ian's friends – it was just that I couldn't stand the questions. *Any interesting cases lately? Why haven't you caught the Burning Man yet? What's the most hideous thing you've ever seen on duty? Do you wish they still had capital punishment? Can you sort out this speeding ticket for me?* It was tedious and predictable and I found it acutely embarrassing to represent the Metropolitan Police to Ian's friends. I was just one person. And traffic tickets were definitely outside my purview.

'Ian . . .'

'Aren't you in a hurry?'

I checked my watch. 'Yes. Let's talk about this later, OK?'

'Can't wait.'

I wanted to point out that I hadn't brought it up in the first place. Instead, I leaned across the bed and planted a kiss on the bit of Ian's chin I could reach easily. There was no response. With a sigh, I headed to the kitchen to pick up a banana, then grabbed my bag and my coat and ran down the stairs. I closed the front door with the key in the lock so I didn't wake the neighbours, though if they'd slept through my shower and relationship issues, they probably wouldn't notice the door banging. If they were at home, and not on a pre-Christmas shopping trip to New York or a winter break in the Bahamas.

I stopped for a second on the doorstep, head down, my mind whirling.

'What am I doing? What the hell am I doing?'

I hadn't meant to say it out loud, and I wasn't talking about work. I could handle work. My boyfriend was another matter. We'd been together for eight months, lived together

for six, and from the moment I'd moved into Ian's place, the fighting had started. I'd fallen for a big smile, broad shoulders and a job that had nothing to do with crime. He'd told me he liked the dynamic, busy detective with long legs and no ulterior motives. I wasn't looking for a husband who could be the father to my children – yet. My eyes didn't light up with pound signs when I heard he was in banking. It was all so easy. We saw one another when we could, snatched hours in bed at his place or mine, managed dinner together every so often and when my lease came up for renewal, Ian had taken a chance, the sort of gamble that had made him rich, and invited me to move in with him in his ludicrously over-designed, expensive flat in Primrose Hill. It hadn't been a good idea. It had been a disaster. And I wasn't sure how to get out of it. After two months, we hadn't known one another, except in the biblical sense. We hadn't worked out what we had in common, or how we might spend long winter afternoons when the weather made going out an unappealing prospect. As it turned out, we stayed in bed or we fought. There was no middle ground. I started to stay longer at work, left earlier in the morning, popped into the nick over the weekend even if I wasn't on duty. The only silver lining was the overtime pay.

The night air was harsh and I shivered as I hurried down the road, my hair cold against my neck. I was glad of the coat Ian had bought me, full-length and caramel-coloured in fine wool that was really too nice for hacking about crime scenes, but he had insisted on it. Generosity was not one of his shortcomings – he was open-handed to a fault. Even allowing for the extra overtime cash, there was no way I could compete. We weren't equals, couldn't pretend to be. It was no way to live.