

The Potion Maker

by

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Raining... Hmm...

'Rain, rain go away. Come again another day... But not until it rains champagne.'

Not bad... If I could afford a mobile *and* pay for calls I could tweet it or maybe post it on YouTube. Viral overnight, fame and fortune by the weekend... If only I had a phone.

The Bible. I hate it; even more than the last time I thought of it... Especially the OT. Same reasons. Vengeful God, sacrifice, and real, good old-fashioned payback. An eye for an eye or two-for-one if you can get it. *Every day in every way, you've just got to love it more and more.* And despite myself I did.

Take the guy driving this bus. He's on drugs, crashes – me, the three kiddies upfront and the old lady in back killed. He's sorry; we're dead. Consequences? Worms or the blast furnace for the dear departed; shock management, counselling, rehab and a few months open prison for miladdo...

Champion! Catterick Garrison to Darlington town centre in under 30 minutes. A triumph! And there she blows – 50 metres dead ahead – the job centre: home away from home for the unemployed, unlucky and the great unwashed. What riveting opportunities lie in store for me today, I wonder? Sainsbury's? No, done that. Fired for handing out too many school coupons. Office assistant? Nope. Fired for reorganising the filing system so everyone could understand it. Warehouse picker? Nope. Fired for hacking into the orders database and giving all the over-60s a 50 percent discount. Then there's—

'Cath! Is that you? Come on, Cath, it's me, Jane... JD... Don't be a dick! Behind you!' (Dick..? Can't be.)

I turned just in time to glimpse a distraught female face just before it and all its attachments slammed into me like a half-drowned octopus.

'Oh, Cath,' a wavering voice continued, 'I've been searching everywhere. You've gotta help me. Dad's sick.'

'Thought you'd have OD'd by now.'

It was the best I could come up with at such short notice. Unkind, even for me: I almost regretted it.

'You *must* listen – *please*. Look, there's a coffee shop just around the corner. You've got time. Buy me a latte?'

Could have just said no I suppose, but then the words, 'Dad's sick,' slapped me on the back of the head.

'Okay, five minutes. Coffee but no cake.'

A turn up for the books. A blast from the past. Bad penny. Whatever! Jane Doric, my very own pint-sized pain-in-the-backside, train wreck of an ex. Living proof that all those inflicted by an early mid-life crisis should be euthanised.

I let Jane pull me along like a dog on a leash. It was one of her many trademark manoeuvres. This usually meant she wanted something, and historically it had proved remarkably successful. I caught her eye and there a desperate urgency caught me off-guard, rattling past my well-worn barrier of miserable indifference to assault my severely depleted reservoir of concern.

(Hmm, that sounds like an extract from one of Jane's 19th century romantic novels – certainly floral and just as meaningless. Seems the literary seed she partially succeeded in planting in me hasn't entirely rotted away, then.)

We joined the line of eager coffee drones, and while I started to complain Jane began to fidget – another trademark 'tell'. She was preparing for a hard sell and a tough one at that. Time was not her BFF in this endeavour: that was for certain. She was terrified: terrified that whatever her pitch, I'd reject it.

Tray of coffee – and yes, I caved on the cake – precariously balanced in one hand; Jane still gripping the other, we stumbled upstairs to the first floor.

Blatantly designed to 'Pied Piper' in the local student fraternity, the room was peppered with threadbare armchairs and chessboard-topped tables, all hemmed in by walls daubed in splashes of trendy artwork. Two groups of youthful intellectuals were already in residence. Serenaded by Bohemian pop music, the girls texted, the boys spouted rubbish, and I felt like Methuselah. I set up camp as far away from the hormonal turmoil as possible.

Jane Doric a.k.a. JD. We couldn't have been more of a cliché. Thirty-three-year-old man meets 19-year-old girl in bar. The girl is bright, radiant, full of life and, crucially, fascinated by the man. The man, who should have known better, and did know better, crumples like a beer can and, for the first time in his dour, brooding existence is swept kicking and screaming into the path of joy.

You'd be forgiven if you thought, 'Hey, that's cool, awesome, great, magic.' Old guy gets young chick – pleases the men. Elizabeth Bennett conquers Mr Darcy – enthralls the ladies. The tragedy is that it so very nearly could have been as billed. Just one tiny hiccup transformed a fledgling fairy tale into a horror flick. Princess Jane did drugs...

'You're definitely up there with Lord Lucan when it comes to dropping off the grid.'

Shaky, but we're off, I thought.

'Still like all that "spy, spooks" stuff, then,' I murmured, my not too subtle signal that it was okay to parlay under an unconditional yet temporary flag of truce. For now the past could be assigned to that place where most people value and appreciate it most – the past.

Jane managed an understanding smile. 'That disgusting mate of yours, Simon something or other. I've already forgotten his name. He told me you'd left for Scotland after Giles and Strom politely asked you to leave. Didn't quite fit in, he said. There's a shocker.' She paused, demolished half the cake then launched into a *Hercule Poirot* routine. 'I don't like to think about it now, but I'd never have tracked you down if I hadn't been chasing up leads today and spotted you.'

'Leads?' I queried.

'Yes... Your fatal flaw.'

I groaned. 'Bloody news reports. "Local man wows young audience with the magic of household chemistry at military families' party in Darlington Town Hall."'

Jane raised an eyebrow. 'No doubt some 18-year-old squaddie with inflated speed bumps and tight camouflage pants accosted you in Tesco. "Hi, my name's Corporal Samantha Pennington-Jones. (You're cute.) Our clown, the CO, has been posted overseas and can't do the kiddies' Christmas show. What are we going to do?'"

(Christ, the girl's all but nailed it – well sort of...)

I thought of responding with some smart comment, but I'd already excelled at being a prat. Jane was worried sick and her detective narrative was about all the small talk she could stomach.

Thankfully the 'future of Britain' departed in a whirlwind of chair scraping and mobile phone worship.

'Tell me about your Dad,' I said softly.

Jane pulled out a fag, fiddled with it then stuffed it back into its packet.

‘Six months ago,’ she began hesitantly, ‘the old man caught flu or so I thought. Went to the GP – got nowhere. A month later he wasn’t any better; worse in fact. Then on the Saturday – no Sunday night – he had some kind of fit. Lucky I was there. Got a locum to take a look, and after much umming and ahing he called an ambulance.’

‘And he’s still in hospital?’

Jane nodded. ‘Keeps drifting in and out of a coma. The doctors haven’t got a clue what’s wrong. Then about three weeks ago they started with the gloomy looks. “Prognosis not hopeful.” “Prepare for the worst.” Bastards.’

‘Details?’ I enquired.

Jane flashed another smile. ‘Thanks, I knew you’d at least give me a fair hearing. After all you are “The Crystal Whisperer”.’

(Huh. Haven’t heard that piece of nonsense since we split, or more accurately *I* split. JD’s nickname for her beloved Cath, the wonder-boy chemist. The guy who could make reactions work that no one else could. The man who could force white crystals out of the blackest tar – however long it took. “The Crystal Whisperer.” Great movie trailer but crap film.)

Jane’s account was good – precise, factual and to the point. I’d been involved with pharmaceutical research chemistry since I was 16 and if I’d learned anything about medicine it was this. Humans know bugger all about illness – well not much anyway. Although I’m no medic – thank God – to get on in my former line of work you had to pretend you knew everything about nature’s little malfunctions. That way, all you had to do was select a disease, postulate a causal mechanism then design and synthesise a side effect-free cure. Easy... As for Jane’s dad, it really didn’t sound promising. The poor sod had probably contracted one of today’s countless mystery viruses – the kind no one can identify or trace to a specific source – the kind that causes systemic or neurological ‘complications’ – the kind that kills.

After all the explanations and complex answers – silence. I didn’t need to be Madam Francesca to know what was coming next.

‘You’ve worked on anti-viral drugs, Cath. You told me. I remember. Dad’s just on a basic NHS cocktail. It isn’t working. I’ve asked, pleaded, with the “*physician-in-charge*”, but he refuses to try anything new. I know I’m always calling Dad “the old man”, but he’s not, he’s only 47 and he’s... He’s my Dad.’

Jane choked then the sluice gates opened.

I’m not big on skriking females as a rule: in fact I’m not big on anything these days. This, however, was different. I’d actually cared for Jane in my own twisted, noncommittal way, and Chris, her dad, was a ‘decent chap’ as they used to say. Not many fathers would calmly take on board the fact that their only daughter had hooked up with a loser more than 10 years her senior and only 10 years *his* junior. The message was clear enough. Could the legendary ‘Crystal Whisperer’ beg, borrow or just simply create a magic potion? And although it pained even me to say it, the answer was no.

I never made it to the job centre that grey and gloomy morning. The prospect of jawing with another gung-ho youngster telling me about all the great job opportunities he or she had to offer was less than thrilling. Jane and I had parted well enough. Surprising, I thought, given the circumstances, but she was a smart girl. No contacts, no supply source and no lab to perform ‘a foreigner’ in meant no drugs. She walked with me back towards the bus stop then suddenly pulled a vanishing act when I got waylaid by an old lady asking for change. No recriminations, no goodbyes.

I’m not usually affected by this kind of human drama, but for two days after that I couldn’t shake the image of Jane’s dad lying in a hospital bed with a set of plastic tubes

sticking out of him. It gave me a headache. Uncharacteristically I actively wanted to do something to help – but what? *Characteristically* I'd forgotten to ask Jane how to get in touch, and of course it never crossed my mind to give her my address – assuming of course she didn't secretly have it anyway...

Day three and I was royally pissed. Armed with a jiffy bag full of coins poached from my long-suffering piggybank I hit the nearest BT phone box. Christopher P Doric, native of Newcastle upon Tyne, turned out to be a special care patient at the Freeman Hospital located in High Heaton to the north of that same great city. Thirty minutes later I'd cadged a taxi ride with a couple of Gurkha recruits heading for Northallerton. Lucky, I thought, and in more ways than one. I craved silence to think: quiet time to decide what the hell I was doing, going to see Chris, and what the hell I hoped to achieve. And the gods heard me. Hallelujah! The cabbie, a young lad, had clearly fried his iPhone and was brain dead while the Army lads were, to my surprise, bamboozled. Truth be told I hadn't actually hitched a lift with them, more like commandeered one. I'd seen the pair waiting at a taxi stand just outside one of the military compounds. They were smart, orderly and stoic: just as their team always are. Fortunately neither could quite catch what I was on about when, after crashing out of the phone box, I raced up to them: me panting like a bulldog and 'gesticulating' in my best Nepalese; them trying to respond with stock, unrelated English sentences. It was a real crowd pleaser.

I thought... Time passed... The taxi reached our destination and the Gurkhas kindly forwent slitting my throat in favour of a shopping trip to Marks & Spencer. Lucky... Very lucky. I managed to catch the 13:19 train by a whisker, and 47 minutes later, as promised, we arrived in Novocastria.

So far my thinking session in the taxi followed by a second but very poor effort during the train journey had led me to only one conclusion – I wasn't well.

It was past three p.m. when I finally rolled up at the Freeman after a torturous trip by bus and on foot, but although a tad bedraggled, fortune continued to mope along beside me. Afternoon visiting hours were two to four p.m. and despite Chris's condition I was allowed to see him. As a coma patient not expected to be a hospital guest for long, he was set up in a secluded room off from one of the main wards. I bought some chocs and a couple of magazines for him on the way in – on the off-chance.

'Not well' was a definite understatement. I drew up a chair alongside the bed and found myself staring at his face. Flat – the ubiquitous term surgeons use to describe the appearance of patients under anaesthetic. Right on the money in Chris's case – *and* some.

How do you 'visit' someone in a coma? It was a fair question. I didn't know, so I referred back to my limited knowledge of TV hospital dramas for an answer. 'Talk normally and don't eat any of their food' – bad karma, I guess.

Things didn't go well. I couldn't think of anything to say and I couldn't leave the chocolates alone...

'Glad you came.'

I jumped, bit my tongue and nearly fell off the seat – all in the same instant.

'Jane,' I coughed, swivelling round, trying not to wince or be caught eating.

'He looks peaceful,' she commented, largely ignoring me. 'As if there's nothing wrong at all. What do you think, Cath?'

A trick question? Does she mean do I agree that he looks peaceful... Or do I think anything more could be done for him? I opted for an incoherent mumble and a few short strides to reach a small glass medical trolley parked beneath the window. On its second shelf, partially concealed by equipment, an official folder was poking out invitingly.

'Someone's been naughty,' I whispered affectatiously. I scanned each page carefully. 'Well, to be fair, your Dad's being treated with the best stuff available.'

Jane was immediately crestfallen. She flopped down in my vacated chair, head bowed, her hand touching his.

I cringed. Another major foot-in-the-mouth moment.

When Jane finally raised her head, all the crazy memories of our 12-month fling came flooding back to me in a single concentrated slug. I was powerless to stop them. It must have been over three years since it ended and I still didn't know what I felt. Looking at her now, she'd certainly grown up a deal, but not all to the good. Her beautiful auburn hair was dry and faded from over-dying, her complexion pale. Sure, a heavy layer of make-up was there to disguise the fact, but I could tell; just as I could tell that the mild case of acne she'd always fretted about had turned nasty... Perhaps the most disturbing change, though, was in her eyes. Bright and lively when we first met, they were now painfully dull and jaded. All this and more, the precious gift of drug abuse.

'If you've any ideas, Cath, anything at all. I can get things for you. I can.'

(Okay, this was bloody awful. Maybe I could—)

Jane's face lit up like an Egyptian sunrise.

(Impressive. Instant recharge and reboot. It seemed the inter-cranial Wi-Fi reception in here lacked for naught. No sooner had I rustled up the thread of an idea and she was already tuned in!)

After visiting Chris I agreed to another 'coffee and cake' session. The hospital canteen wasn't at all bad and thankfully a damn sight cheaper than the Darlington gig. I found myself growing increasingly at ease in Jane's company; then, halfway through chomping on a more than passable bacon bap, I had an epiphany. I wasn't here by random chance; neither was she. The damned girl knew full well that if, or more accurately when, she ran me to ground I wouldn't be able to formulate an instant 'off the shelf' solution to her crisis. It was all about planting a seed. I'd start cogitating as I always did. I'd obsess as I always did, and sooner or later I'd tease out the odd option, however outlandish. Once hooked I'd reel myself in; and so here I was. How she'd know when I was ready who knows; who would ever know? Maybe the Gurkas were on the payroll from the beginning...

Be that as it may, it was time to bag and tag the past. Jane was seriously messed up, but then who wasn't these days? I for one most certainly was. We had a history and a not insignificant one at that. Despite our differences in age and character we were prime candidates for the exclusive order of soulmates. I'd never publicly admit it of course – not to Jane, her dad or anyone else – but... Prevarication was no longer an option. I had to come clean. I did have an idea – ridiculous, improbable and likely extremely dangerous. Nonetheless it was an idea, and Jane... Well Jane was just sitting there waiting for me to explain.

'About five years ago,' I set the scene, 'we started working on a new series of injectable anti-viral agents. This you know. They were based on the old acyclovir structure but with a couple of genius twists – or so I believed. Needless to say, theory and practice fell out as usual and I got nothing. However... Another Friday afternoon and another clear-out led to the discovery of an unlabelled vial.'

Jane grabbed my arm. 'You tested it. It worked. How do we get some?'

I had to smile. 'Yes, yes and difficult.'

'But not impossible?'

I'd feared that however cautiously I tried to present my thoughts Jane would overreact just like this.

'Look, kiddo,' I said firmly. 'Listen and listen good. The vial *did* turn out to be one of my overlooked samples and initial testing *did* look promising. In the end it went on to Phase IIb clinical trials, but then the project got canned.'

'Why?' Jane exclaimed.

‘Why? Curse of the drugmaker, what else. The marketing guys decided it wasn’t commercially viable. Sure it was a highly potent anti-viral but it wasn’t effective across the board. Added to that it had one or two undesirable side-effects and its efficacy was too short lived. I argued that with the odd structural tweak we could be looking at a breakthrough on a par with penicillin—’

‘Money talks and you know what walks.’

(Right on sister! Business in a nutshell.)

Somewhat to my surprise Jane suddenly fell silent. I was fully expecting a tirade of irrefutable reasons why my anti-viral project should not have been cancelled, but it was not to be. Instead I was left once again contemplating JD: the force, the enigma.

Educated, well spoken, socially adept, attractive, vibrant – what on earth had she seen in me? I didn’t know, I’d never know – just like I’d never know or understand her drug addiction. Too depressing; better to remember something positive about my ‘bright young thing’, I decided. JD and Cath – a classic.

‘What’s your name?’ she’d asked, breezing up to me in our bar of first meeting.

‘Not interested,’ I’d snapped, mistaking her for a ‘working lass’.

‘Not interested, eh. Are you per chance related to one of the ‘Could be Interesteds’ of York or the ‘Maybe Interesteds’ of Reading?’

It was a smart enough response to merit a reply. So I told her, and in exchange for another pint I gave her the full documentary half-hour.

Carl Anders Thomas Hardy: so named because my Mum was another arty type. She liked obscure artists like Carl Anders, a minimalist, from the 1930s and Thomas Hardy who we all know and love so much. She was also attracted to losers like the idiot she gave up Uni for to bear me.

Throughout my droning account Jane appeared genuinely interested. So much so that I couldn’t stop myself from finishing with one of my famous alcohol-induced trademark traits – the summary. Mother born Myrna Pratt, June 1956. University English lit. major – no degree. One child – me, born December 1976. Married 1977. Died 2005 – pancreatic cancer. Father, Charles Hardy, born April 1950. Poorly educated but liked to write short stories. No irony there... Factory worker, amateur footballer. Tall, dark and handsome – like me. Left wife and son in the lurch, 1980, current whereabouts unknown. Don’t give a...

Jane loved it and from that moment on I guess I began to fall in love.

A week later we met again – same venue. And that’s when it really started. Jane christened us JD and Cath, delighted by the idea that anyone who didn’t know us would think I was JD and she Cath. When I then told her that, for whatever reason, no one had ever called me Cath before – to my face that is – she was ecstatic... Crazy girl. Crazy, crazy girl.

I’d become so engrossed in nostalgia I hadn’t noticed that Jane was standing.

‘You could make this stuff again,’ she blurted out, more in the form of a statement of fact than a question in need of an answer. ‘Yes of course,’ she concluded. ‘Come on, I want to show you something.’

One or two important questions that *did* beg equally important answers occurred to me in a rash. However, it was perhaps not the most appropriate time to say or do anything other than go with the flow.

We ventured out into the cold late afternoon air. It was dark, so we must have been further into December than I’d realised. Yet another set of parameters that didn’t always interest me: time, dates, seasons. I followed Jane out of the hospital grounds, across the main road and into an overflow car park. There was little in the way of illumination, but I had no doubts as to our destination.

‘My God, you’re not actually still driving that—’

Jane stopped dead, delivered a not especially playful thump to my stomach and glared. In that same moment two squirrels racing toward a nearby tree inadvertently swerved into her line of sight. Petrification. Instant. Terrible...

'Sorry,' I apologised, head bowed. 'Great ride, one-of-a-kind.'

I was back in the doghouse, a not unfamiliar location for me from our past together. This time, though, I deserved it. Jane's car, a 1967 Ford Anglia 105E, was in truth a masterpiece. Bodywork, engine, electrics: the lot – built up from scrap by her dad. Apart from his beloved daughter, his one great passion in life – anything with pistons.

Despite the cold, dank conditions the car started first time. The engine ticked over like a new Mercedes and after a few seconds the rhythmical hum nudged me into a sort of trance. One bacon bap and a coffee weren't really enough to keep a strapping lad like me going. My mind wandered.

The car in pristine condition, older than Jane's dad, imaginary stone squirrels, a deadbeat chemist, Jane apparently stabilised...

Yes – but I'd seen the Jekyll & Hyde routine too many times when the drugs wore off to treat that last image with anything other than extreme caution. I needed sugar – fast.

'Here, eat this and try not to say anything else stupid.'

Jane's command and the Kit Kat she was waving knocked me back on track. This mind reading trick of hers was really starting to bug me. But at least I'd been forgiven – for now, I thought.

I ate the chocolate bar, avoided saying 'anything else stupid' and contemplated where we might be headed. Unfortunately I knew little of Newcastle and its environs. My knowledge extended only as far as the football ground, St James's Park, a couple of rough boozers and the Tyne Bridge. I'd probably seen the Angel of the North but couldn't tell you exactly where it stood even with a couple of 'monkeys' at stake. One thing was certain, though, Jane clearly wasn't in the mood to play tour guide, so I had no chance of learning anything new. An opportunity, then, to sit back and marvel at all the pretty colours flashing by from street lamps to cars to shops.

Thirty minutes of peaceful reflection ended with a poke in my side – presumably to signal our imminent arrival. I sat up straight and paid attention. We crossed a railway line – the Metro, I assumed – immediately turned left then slowed to little more than a crawl. Again on the left, a small shopping centre presented itself for inspection. It had seen better days and had obviously not benefited from the swathes of blue paint daubed everywhere by the Council. Another left turn took us down a narrow access road and into a parking area to the rear of the complex.

'Fawdon Metro Station car park,' Jane advised.

We stopped, Jane retrieved a large torch from the boot and told me to stay quiet. She then conducted a prolonged visual survey of our surroundings before ushering me to the base of a four or five story building – the centrepiece of the folly, I surmised.

'This entire block's derelict,' she explained in a muffled tone. 'A fire some years back: second-floor, I think. It's been scheduled for renovation several times but nothing's ever happened.'

'Jane,' I touched her shoulder lightly. 'What exactly are we doing here? We're only going to get nicked for suspicious loitering or worse. Come on, spill or I'm not playing.'

'Yes, you will,' she smiled. 'You know how much you like to play.'

As a dear departed comedian once said, 'There's no answer to that.'

Having lost the opening gambit, I decided on a different tack.

'Look, Jane, I'm freezing my marbles off here. You have to give me something.'

Jane nodded, undid her coat and produced a small screwdriver from an inside pocket.

‘Here, I’m giving you this. See that door next to the one marked “Bombay Curry”? Get us inside fast and don’t make a noise. I’ll keep a lookout.’

Not happy. It was time to completely reassess the situation. On the one hand I really was cold, still hungry and peeved. On the other I was intrigued – hawkishly intrigued. Well, we’d come this far, Commander Jane clearly had a purpose and, if the ‘plods’ didn’t nab us, there must be a fair chance of a curry afterwards.

I shrugged, snatched the screwdriver and set upon the first of two Yale locks barring our way.

It didn’t take long before an urgent reality check clicked into place. I’d no idea what I was doing or even trying to do. The screwdriver blade was too big to fit into the keyhole and too weak to effectively brutalise anything. Champion! I’d been entrusted with a ‘man’s job’ and immediately come up short.

‘Sorry, boss, no can do,’ I admitted.

Jane gave a dramatic sigh. ‘Had your chance... Give me that! You take the torch and shine it on the door handle.’

We traded places.

Without hesitation Jane jabbed the screwdriver blade between the door and frame close to the catch. A combo twist, turn then push and the deed was done.

‘Not the first time, then,’ I observed, still smarting from the realisation that not only had my manhood been called into question, but also I was a dummy. The Yales were both fake...

Once inside Jane carefully closed the door and repossessed the lamp. From what I could tell we were entombed in some kind of stairwell-cum-lift entrance. The place stank of piss and stale beer. Old newspapers and soiled cardboard covered the floor while the walls, damp and mouldy, still bore the ‘wisdom’ of all those who’d sought refuge there. What remained of the lift was a sorry sight. The doors were buckled as if it had been used to corral cattle, while its interior betrayed its true fate – ensuite facilities to the inebriated masses.

I was tempted to say, ‘Is this it, then?’ but stifled the urge. Orders is orders. *Don’t say anything else stupid.*

Jane shone her torch beam onto a flight of partially concealed concrete stairs off to the right. Evidently her great secret lay somewhere up above – a relief and no mistake...

The mystery in question just had to be on the top floor, but at least the access stairs were, for the most part, clear and sturdy enough.

Before exiting the stairwell, Jane halted my progress, her palms on my chest.

‘Now then,’ she said intently, ‘take the torch. Look around... And no snap judgements. All the windows are boarded up, so no one will see the light.’

I did as I was told.

The design was open plan with workbenches and a few office cubicles laid out in parallel rows. Devastation reigned. Fire had clearly been the primary cause, but piles of shattered glass and debris screamed vandalism.

An impression started to form at the back of my mind. I didn’t like it. I didn’t like it at all. My God. An old food testing lab.

‘What do you think, Cath?’ Jane’s raised voice startled me. ‘A fixer-upper with potential?’

I couldn’t reply. All I could see before me was an imaginary archway, smouldering. And words: words scrawled in blood across its curved expanse. The one literary quote I’d never forgotten. Dante, the Divine Comedies, the Gates of Hell.

All hope abandon, ye who enter here.