

## Crystal

The woman had walked into Madame Cadabra's fortune chamber as the result, like oh so many, of an untimely death. Untimely, at any rate, to the mourners; they were fortunate enough to see time warped and misshapen, for 50 years of wedlock to fly on gold ringed wings, or for two hours of a foolish first date to plunge a person into an uncomfortable forever. To Madame Cadabra, a minute was a minute no matter what you did with it. Like all good charlatans, she had a clear and steely grip on what she insisted had a grip on her.

This woman was a mourner. That much was clear. Even with this goddamn hangover, it was easy for Cadabra to separate those looking to the future from those looking to the past, to distinguish between someone with forthcoming giggled queries about a certain young person, and someone on the verge of a breakdown—and this woman clearly fit into the latter, sadder bracket. She parted the red damask curtains of the chamber not with adolescent shyness, not with bullish skepticism or the bluster of a joker, but with the weighted tread of someone who feels that something, surely, is owed to them. We never truly give loved ones away, after all: they are taken from us. This was at least what Madame Cadabra had observed.

The woman fell rather than sat in a chair on the opposite side of the round, black baize table (there were other chairs, laid out for accomplices or spirits), on the opposite side of Cadabra's magnificent crystal ball, and gazed at the fortune teller from under heavy, hooded lids. Approaching 40, Cadabra guessed, and thus roughly her contemporary: trim, well-groomed, light brown hair falling in smart layers to her shoulders, green eyes that were currently Christmas-trimmed in red. She had been careful not to wear black, and had instead selected a

bright pink sweater set that it obviously pained her to wear. Of course, the mourners often did this; it was Cadabra's first test.

"Welcome, my child," Cadabra said solemnly. The woman gave a weak nod. Cadabra waited for a few crafted seconds, ticking to the mercenary metronome of her mind—just long enough to make the woman wonder with flowering doubt if she would have to reveal why she was here. Then Cadabra added, "I am sorry for your loss."

The woman looked over with the first sparks of real hope in her eyes, and her gaze rested on the spirit guide more steadily now. Her manicured right hand, which had been compulsively stroking the wedding ring on her left, stilled itself guiltily. Cadabra pretended quite beautifully not to have seen—driving the impression home by suddenly seeming to notice a lock of curly black hair which had somehow "escaped" from underneath her gypsy head scarf (deep purple with gold moons and stars). With a disarming air of absentmindedness she brushed the hair behind her ear, setting her gigantic gold earrings jingling; needless to say, they were not really gold, just like her hair was not really black. It was actually a curl-free ashen blonde, and in her natural state she looked like an anemic ballerina. The gobs of loud makeup had likewise been a challenge at first, but she was used to it now. Some nights, when she got home, she forgot to take it off.

Years ago, she had tried out a blander, saner costume—pastel sweaters, sensible khaki pants—but ironically enough, this had only earned her extra suspicion from her clientele. Fool that she was, she had thought that someone looking comparatively normal would be a comfort to them, reassuring, but the only rewards she had gotten for her pains were varyingly brazen looks of disappointment and vigilance. After a few vodkas (she was getting better though, really she was), she realized that this made perfect sense. Necessarily, anyone who came to see her was

absolutely aching for things not to be what they seemed—for an indifferent classmate to be pining in secret, for a dearly departed wife to be not 100% dead. By the time they parted those fraying curtains that were increasingly less red, like a dying heart being drained of blood, they were already half-willing to step into that teeming, gleaming world of opposites that rested directly underneath the skin of the frankly awful one they were currently faced with. And to hell with society. In such a state of penumbral madness, in such a need for everything they saw to be something else, only someone who looked like a total fake could give them any hope. When they stepped in to find someone who looked like a guidance counselor, they felt like nothing fantastic was possible here, that a humiliating let's-set-sensible-goals talk was imminent, and that between the two of them, they were the ones who looked pathetic and deluded. Which they were.

Having again waited the sufficient time, Cadabra remarked calmly, “You loved your husband very much.” With growing eagerness the woman nodded, edging unwittingly closer to the crystal ball. To her it held the glow of a rising mystic moon, but to Cadabra it was nothing but a melting chunk of ice. “Yes,” said the woman. “Will was everything to me.”

Cadabra's rotting heart took a tiny, scalded leap backwards. She had known a Will once, though she herself had rather grandly called him William. Sixteen years and two jettisoned husbands later she still hadn't recovered, and of course he had to have such a common name, damn him.

But that was neither here nor there. This was, according to Cadabra's calculations, the woman's seventh mistake; revealing a name was something you usually had to coax them into doing. Cadabra made another rapid scan of the woman—homemaker probably, PTA mother and Scrabble night wife, lacking the briskness that most career women have. Grief can erase a lot of

that but Cadabra could still usually tell. This did not look like the kind of woman who had done a day's work in her life (okay sure, raising kids was real work, or so she'd been told), not the kind of woman who had put off getting married to make some kind of a statement—she had tied the knot in her twenties for certain, probably the early half. Conclusion: they had been married around 15 years.

“I can see you and Will had many happy years together,” she said. “Many married couples don't make it past five years.” (Cadabra certainly hadn't. Neither of her marriages had staggered past three.) “And after ten, you know, only the really special ones are left.” Cadabra could have offered the statistics behind this particularly convoluted platitude, but that would have spoiled the mood.

The woman's posture relaxed more and more as she heaved a deep sigh, lamenting, “But sixteen years weren't nearly enough. I thought we'd have forty more.”

Cadabra nodded sympathetically as the woman snapped open a tasteful leather purse, blearily pulling out a handkerchief to wipe her eyes. Again Cadabra's throat shrank—oh, a handkerchief. William had, ridiculously, always had one on him. From a woman like this it might almost be expected but William was certainly the only man she'd ever known to carry one around (and then offer it to you, proudly, just after he broke your heart), and she had liked it so much; owing to the handkerchiefs, she was never in any doubt that he was gem-like and rare. And as if that weren't enough, the handkerchiefs themselves were unique in all the world; his doddering grandmother had embroidered them for him, with little blue sailboats (as a child he had wanted to be a sailor) and darker water beneath, made up of curvy waves that spelled out W-i-l-l-i-a-m. Come to think of it, Cadabra was glad she was hung over just now. If she'd been sober these memories would have been sharper.

Shaking herself internally, Cadabra glanced at the handkerchief again before the woman put it away. That was funny—it was embroidered with blue too...sky blue and navy. But it was almost back in the woman's purse—Cadabra had learned nothing—and also, also—

“That's a very lovely handkerchief,” she blurted out, sounding less even than usual though the woman didn't seem to notice. Instantly, all too readily, she stopped the burial process and, with new warmth in her eyes, pulled the handkerchief back out of its shroud. “Thank you,” she said. “Just look....” And for her own benefit as much as Cadabra's, she spread out the handkerchief, dabbed with just a few little raintears in one corner, onto the table.

Cadabra's insides gasped, contracted, and stalled for time. The air in her lungs and the thoughts in her head seemed to switch places. There—right *there*—was the little blue sailboat, and there were the needled waves spelling out the name of the boy she had loved. A gap of sixteen years, two wedding gowns, five black wigs and one worthless crystal ball was bridged in an instant, as if—as if?—by magic.

The widow was looking back at Cadabra, seeking a reaction. The seer gave a gulp, tears polishing her eyes before she understood why, and said breathlessly, “That was his.” Her client, hardly galvanized by this since her dead husband's name was emblazoned across it, gave a nod that was more impatient than impressed. Quickly Cadabra added, “His grandmother made it for him. When he was little he wanted to be a sailor.” Her vocal cords were cracking up.

The woman opened her mouth in astonishment, then closed it in reverence. She left the handkerchief where it was and Cadabra was both devastated and desperate to look at it.

“I—I can see him now,” she said. “Let us gaze into the crystal ball.”

Cadabra trained her eyes mechanically on the ball, which showed her nothing, and peered into her memory. There he was, her William, loping towards her across the college quad. He

came to a halt and towered up above where she sat against an oak tree, smiled as he clutched a football under his arm; it was the hour of the day just before the sun sets, when it glows rather than shines with a newfound maturity. It lit up the yellow leaves around him, warming them to something luscious, like the guts of a plum—pulled out the random copper strands in his otherwise black hair. There was his diamond face, his hazel childeyes, and his honest, wide mouth, grinning down at her.

“Have you finished that damn chapter yet?” he was saying. “No one’s reading it but you, you know. Come be on my team; I’m all alone out there.”

Cadabra could feel her eyes begin to really swell now as she looked back at the woman, who was still watching the meaningless orb devoutly; it only now occurred to Cadabra to wonder who she was. She studied the woman’s face intently—the face of William’s... wait, what?—and there was something about the nose that... oh Christ, of course! It was Kristin, THE Kristin, the girl he had gone on to after Cadabra. The girl she had always privately blamed for their breakup, though he had sworn at the time that there was no one else. It seemed inconceivable that Cadabra hadn’t recognized her at once but then Kristin had looked like such a whore back then. Always the tightest jeans she could find, so much makeup on her eyes that you couldn’t tell what color they were. Cadabra had only ever seen her weepily, from afar, but she was certain it was her.

“I can see him here, Kristin. Such a handsome boy!—so slender and tall, with that thick black hair. You were very young when you met him.” It was both flattering and frustrating that at this point the dreaded Kristin was taking it all in stride. Kristin, the girl he had married! This was not at all the way it was supposed to have gone. Kristin was supposed to have dumped him the following summer, right after graduation, so that he would come meekly back to Cadabra,

weeping to her about how wrong he had been. Either that, or he was supposed to have dumped Kristin the following summer, right after graduation, so that he would come meekly back to Cadabra, weeping to her about how wrong he had been. He was not supposed to have *married* Kristin instead. Sure, Cadabra had been known to grimly and sarcastically remark that it had clearly been true love with those two crazy kids, that now they must be wedded and blissful (which unfortunately had become less and less amusing to those in the dwindling circle around her), but she saw now just how little she had meant or expected it. Something about it made her feel sickeningly left out again, ridiculous looking and punched in the stomach, as though the two of them had been laughing at her all this time. Now how could he—now that he was married—

Cadabra's thoughts collapsed in the street as the realization finally hit her, taxi-like, that William was really dead. Her running, laughing, stealing, swearing charmer, her first Thanksgiving date, the first boy to walk her to her door (and, eventually, follow her in), was dead. Silent. Gone for good.

She stared at the crystal ball dully, bestially, not understanding. Until suddenly—oh dear mother of *God!* He was there! Right there! She saw him in the ball! Forgetting entirely where she was, she let out a bone-chilling shriek; Kristin jumped in her chair and voiced the first of many disoriented “What?”s.

“I SEE him!” Cadabra screamed at last, not daring to pull her eyes away from the ball. “Where?” cried Kristin, looking spooked. “Where?” But Cadabra ignored her. She saw him now as he'd looked to her on that final night—standing by the fireplace in the study lounge, of all places. He had doubtless lured her out of her room so that she'd be too embarrassed to make a public scene, but the joke was on him because they were the only two people there.

“I’m sorry,” he had said. The crackling flames were branding savage, tribal tattoos into the side of his face. “You know that I love you, but—”

“But what?” she interrupted, tears already streaming down her cheeks. “If you really loved me there’d be no ‘but’.” She knew that she had already lost but she couldn’t stop herself.

He let his head fall down on his chest and sighed.

“It just won’t work,” he said, flatly, as though he’d rehearsed it. The—the timing’s all off. You can love somebody but sometimes it just doesn’t work.” Even then she sensed that for however long she lived, she’d still be trying to figure out what that meant.

“I’ll never forget you,” he said miserably. To which she’d replied: “That just makes it worse.”

Cadabra flicked her eyes dangerously over at Kristin. What had this woman done to him? (Secondly, was Cadabra above tearing her hair out?) What had she done to make him...to make him....

“It must have been very hard for you towards the end,” Cadabra hazarded, breaking her cardinal rule against the construction “must have”. Kristin kept her eyes on the ball as she said vaguely, “Yes, it was...even if you know it’s coming, it’s hard. Maybe worse. When the doctor said that it had spread and he had a year left, I thought—maybe in a year—something will change by then, they’ll have a new drug. Because if he’s at Zach’s 15<sup>th</sup> birthday party, how could he not be there for the 16<sup>th</sup>?” She was crying openly now and Cadabra, jostled between pity and anger, tried to keep her appearance somewhere in the middle. As a rule, she actually attempted to cry with her clients—because what can you do? Sometimes you have to cry to keep from laughing—but perhaps for that very reason, she wanted terribly not to cry now. And



anyhow, she wanted to be tougher than this woman, this Kristin; she wanted to best her at something at last.

“He says that he misses you,” Cadabra said through tight and tortured teeth, steeling herself to fall into routine.

“He does?” Kristin chirped, like a bird that’s just learned to sing a new note. “I—Will? Are you there? I miss you too!”

“He asks if there’s something you wanted to tell him.”

“I—you can really see him?” said Kristin, squinting in desperation at the blank and brutal ball. Cadabra looked back and he was still there—looking at her as he used to do, wearing the thin, dark green T-shirt she liked and the wristwatch she had given him. So much was disappearing, swept away by this image—a veritable lifetime of checks that bounced, songs that were out of key, birthday presents that were socks and kettles of water that never seemed to boil. It was all canceled out, unmasked as just nothing, by that boyish, serious (really serious at the moment; he was breaking up with her) face.

Cadabra jolted her head back upwards. “I can see him, yes. Sometimes lookers can’t—”

“I see him too!” Kristin suddenly crowed. Her eyes were locked, frozen by crystal.

“There he is, just after Zach was born... I knitted that sweater myself.”

Cadabra looked over, blinked a few times, then heaved a sigh and looked back at her side of the ball. William was still there, now clutching his head in his hands.

“That’s amazing!” his widow babbled on, not noticing that her spirit guide, head resting defeated on her own spirit table, had apparently given up. Just as she went quiet Cadabra raised her face, so quickly transformed; long-outlawed tears had stabbed shards of mascara into her cheeks. She paused a moment before asking the terrible, insane and irreversible question:

“Did he ever mention me?”

There was a bloated, deathly silence as Kristin looked up from the ball at long last—gaping at Cadabra like she’d never seen her before. Cadabra was of more than two minds as to whether she should rephrase the question, laugh it all off (which, admittedly, would have been inappropriate), or wipe off her makeup and explain everything. But before she had managed to make a decision Kristin said to her, in whispered awe, “*How did you know that?*”

Cadabra blinked, fighting to lasso the composure that had been galloping so madly away.

“I—know all,” she said jerkily. “Almost all. Sometimes I need little details.”

Astonishingly, Kristin responded with an understanding nod. It seemed Cadabra was still sufficiently in her good books for a certain amount of faltering to be permissible. Though Cadabra knew all too well that this probably wouldn’t last.

“It’s—” Kristin sniffed—“—just so amazing that you should ask because of course, in a way he *did*.” Cadabra, no longer sure what the appropriate facial expression might be, just tried to keep her breathing steady.

“Even before he was gone,” Kristin continued, “I was thinking I might do this. I said to myself, what harm could it do? And one day in the hospital, towards the...end...I had this—this print-out of local fortune tellers with me, in my purse. I was stupid. I asked him to get me my—his—handkerchief from my purse, and he saw the list and he was angry at first, but then I started crying so he kind of calmed down, looked at the list, and then he laughed. He pointed at a name and said, ‘Madame Cadabra. That’s the one. If I’m feeling talkative, I will definitely go to her.’”

To this Cadabra seemed to have absolutely no reaction. She stared ahead of her blankly, as though she hadn’t heard a word, as though she’d just found she couldn’t talk but didn’t

particularly care. Kristin was staring, her trust beginning to fade; Cadabra suddenly snapped back into the present to ask one final, crucial question.

“William had a year to get his affairs in order,” she intoned, as if Kristin hadn’t just told her this—trying to regain some aura of omniscience, though at this point it was probably a wasted effort. She was pretty sure she’d lost Kristin back at the screaming, but with any luck the woman wouldn’t really get cynical till later that night, while she tried to make macaroni for her fatherless child. “But he’s telling me—” Cadabra cocked her head to one side like she was trying hard to hear—“—he’s telling me that he didn’t say goodbye to everyone. He says he can’t find peace.”

Kristin gaped across the table, glanced at the empty chair beside Cadabra, and frowned. She looked again to the crystal ball for confirmation of some kind. When she finally spoke, it was less as a mourner with faith in a clairvoyant, but more as a woman who, despite everything, was desperate to talk about her husband.

“No....” she said confusedly. “He said goodbye to everyone, I think.” Cadabra’s heart plunged like a future corpse in a defective parachute.

“Oh no wait,” Kristin added suddenly. “There *was* someone. Some ex-girlfriend that he couldn’t find. I told him, I said, she’s probably going by something else now. No one stays the same these days. But he was pretty far gone by then...God knows what he wanted to say to her.” She paused for a moment, bit her lip in shame. “Honestly, I wasn’t too anxious that he should find her—though that’s catty, I know. It’s incredible how silly grown people can be.”

There were a few seconds now of utterly despairing silence. Cadabra felt that if this woman asked her one more question, said one more word in fact, she would break down entirely. Luckily, Mrs. William Pardew seemed to sense this; she gathered her things almost

apologetically, sweeping up the handkerchief in unwitting cruelty, thanked Cadabra for her time, and left the money on the table.

Cadabra remained with the crystal for she knew not how long. It seemed to her now that she was living inside it. She knew that all of this may well have been caused by drink, by vodka and sorrow as they'd never met before—but here she was, leaning against an oak tree, with *Soothsayers of Ancient Greece* open on her lap, and there he was, standing above her. The evening air was sweeter than she'd ever felt before.

“Come on, Miss Cadabra,” he said. “That’s enough abra.”

She would have to get drunk again tonight.