

Story 5: The Pain of Time

“For you and I are past our dancing days.” – Shakespeare

Max Cadence had always known that love would end in grief. He just hadn't expected grief to start arriving in pieces.

It came quietly, like wind slipping under the doorframe, like light growing dim without warning. It came in pill bottles stacked like towers beside Connie's bed, in the smell of antiseptic in their home, in the nurses' polite nods as they passed him in the hallway, familiar now-too familiar.

He sat in the kitchen that morning, their wedding photo resting just beside his lukewarm cup of tea. Connie's smile was wide, young, glowing. He remembered that day like a photograph in motion, how she had laughed when the wind lifted her veil, how he had felt like the richest man alive.

Fifty-eight years ago.

Now, the house was too quiet.

No laughter floating from the living room. No records playing. No voice calling him “Maxie” from down the hall.

Connie was upstairs, asleep again. The new medication made her drowsy. Max hated it. Hated how pale she looked now, how thin her arms had become. Hated that the woman who once danced barefoot through their garden now struggled to climb a flight of stairs. He swirled the tea absently, untouched.

Some days, he still expected her to come bursting in with a new hat she found at the thrift shop, declaring it “too ugly not to wear.” Other days, he barely left her side, holding her hand like she was already disappearing.

He didn’t know how to say it out loud. What had begun haunting him in the spaces between sleep.

What happens when one of us goes first?

They’d always been together. From the moment they met at sixteen, Max all limbs and awkward jokes, Connie with her loud voice and unbrushed curls—they had been inseparable.

They got married at twenty-one in a borrowed church with secondhand lace and a chocolate cake that collapsed slightly on one side. It was perfect.

They never had kids. Not by choice, not really, but by timing and circumstance and then one missed appointment that turned into two decades of quiet acceptance. It never mattered to Max. He had Connie, and that had always been enough.

Their life had been filled with everything else: early morning walks, jazz records, years of late-night conversations, two golden retrievers over the years—both named Harold and Sunday pancakes whether or not it was Sunday.

They didn't fight much. When they did, it was over who left the tap running, or whether they should finally repaint the living room. Connie would go cold for an hour, Max would apologize with a burnt grilled cheese, and that would be the end of it.

Fifty-eight years.

He couldn't remember the last full day he'd spent without her.

She woke up around noon that day, coughing softly into her elbow. He was there in an instant, helping her sit up, brushing her hair back.

"Morning, love," she rasped, smiling.

He returned the smile, but it didn't reach his eyes.

“You’ve been sleeping half the day.”

“Guess I needed it.”

He helped her dress. Her hands trembled as she tried to button her cardigan. He covered them gently with his own.

“I can still do some things, you know,” she muttered.

“I know,” he said softly. “But I like helping you.”
She looked at him then. Long and searching.

“You look tired,” she said.

“I’m fine.”

“You’ve got that faraway look again, Maxie.”
He didn’t answer.

That evening, they sat on the back porch, wrapped in the same wool blanket, watching the sun set behind the trees. The same view they’d looked at for three decades. Connie rested her head against his shoulder.
“I ever tell you I regret not dying my hair purple in the ’70s?” she said out of nowhere.

Max chuckled. "I regret not letting you."

She looked up at him, her face lined and luminous in the golden light.

"We did alright, didn't we?"

"We did more than alright," he said. "We built a life out of dust and music."

Connie's eyes welled. "Don't get poetic on me, you old sap."

"I'm only poetic when I'm scared," he admitted.

That silenced her.

He didn't mean to say it. But it was out now. Floating between them like fog.

She gripped his hand.

"Are you scared of losing me?" she asked.

He didn't speak. Just nodded.

Connie leaned in and whispered, "Me too."

Max never cried in front of Connie.

He never did when she got her diagnosis, never when she started needing help to shower, never when the hospital called the first time to say she had fainted while

he was out buying milk. He cried at night, in the laundry room, where her cardigans still smelled like lavender and home. He cried in silence so she wouldn't hear, so she could believe-pretend-that he was still strong enough to carry both of them.

But lately, it had gotten harder to keep the dam from breaking.

It wasn't that she was dying—at least not outright. It was that she was disappearing. Little by little. Sleep taking up more of her day, food less of her appetite, her laughter less often, her stories half-told before they drifted into quiet.

He missed her. And she was still here.
Max began forgetting things.

Nothing urgent—at first. A missed call. A bill left unpaid. A cup of tea gone cold in the microwave. He brushed it off. Connie was the one who needed care, not him. He couldn't afford to break down now.
But the forgetting got worse.

He left the water running one morning and flooded the bathroom. Another time, he found himself staring at a box of crackers in the supermarket for ten full minutes,

no idea what he was supposed to be looking for. He started walking slower, sleeping longer, eating less. Grief was catching up to him before death did. One afternoon, Connie asked if he wanted to go through old boxes. Max was too tired, but he said yes anyway. They sat on the floor in the guest bedroom with a dusty collection of their life laid out like a museum exhibit—photo albums, postcards, ticket stubs from movies long shut down.

“Remember this?” she said, holding up a note he once passed her in high school. It read: If you don’t say yes to prom, I’ll die a sad and lonely man before 18.

“You were so dramatic,” she teased.

“You married me anyway.”

“Unfortunately,” she said, but her eyes were full of laughter.

Max traced the edge of a faded Polaroid of them at Niagara Falls. Young. Wet from mist. Laughing so hard they were almost out of frame.

“Would you do it all again?” he asked quietly.
Connie turned to him.

“In a heartbeat,” she said. “Even the hard parts.”
He didn’t answer. He couldn't.

Because in his chest, something was breaking. The kind of breaking that no one could hear but him. The knowledge that this wasn’t just a sickness or a hard season. This was the final stretch. The last chapter. She was turning 80 next week. And she might not live to see 81.

In the evenings, Max started staying up long after she fell asleep.

He’d sit in the living room with the lamp on low, flipping through books he never read, listening to the sound of her breathing from the baby monitor they kept on the end table. Every time it paused, he froze.

He lived in that pause.

Waiting to hear it return. Wondering when it wouldn’t. Some nights he thought about writing her a letter. Something to leave behind, just in case he went first. But every time he started one, it felt like tempting fate. Max had never been one to beg time for mercy.

But he found himself whispering into the walls: Just give us another year. Or another spring. Or one last birthday party.

Connie's 80th was a quiet affair.

Just them. A lemon cake from the bakery down the street. A string of lights Max had dug out from the garage and nearly electrocuted himself installing. She wore a silly paper crown and a scarf too warm for indoors.

He gave her a small box with a tiny gold locket.

Inside was a photo, grainy, black and white of them kissing in their first apartment. Young and poor and happy.

"I don't want you to forget me," he said.

Connie placed a trembling hand on his face. "You're the only thing I'll remember."

Two weeks later, she stopped waking up for full days. She'd stir, say a few words, smile faintly, and fall back into sleep. The doctor came. The nurse began staying through the night. Max never left her side, barely sleeping, eating only when they forced him to.

One evening, he kissed her forehead and whispered, "You can go, if you need to."

Connie opened her eyes.

“Not without you.”

He smiled through tears. “That’s not how it works, sweetheart.”

She stared at him for a long moment. Then smiled, soft and slow.

“It should be.”

Connie died three days later, just before dawn.

Max was holding her hand.

He didn’t say anything. Just watched her chest rise... then fall... and not rise again.

The nurse put a hand on his shoulder. He didn’t move.

He stayed in that room until the sun had fully risen, until her skin had gone cold, until the sounds of the outside world began to hum again like nothing had changed.

He buried her on a Tuesday.

And for the first time in fifty-eight years, Max Cadence was alone.

Weeks passed like molasses.

He didn't eat the same. Didn't turn on the radio. The house was too quiet. He didn't mind the silence anymore. He visited her grave every morning. Sometimes he brought flowers. Sometimes just stories.

"Do you remember the time we danced in the grocery aisle because our song came on?"

Or: "I wore that ugly scarf you bought me today. The one that makes me look like a bag of onions."

Or sometimes nothing at all.

Just: I miss you, Con.

And one day, he didn't show up.

The nurse found him in the armchair, dressed neatly, photo of Connie in his lap, the paper crown from her birthday still resting on the bookshelf nearby.

The doctor called it natural causes.

But maybe, just maybe, it was something else.

Maybe it was a heart that had given everything it could.

The obituary read:

Maxwell Cadence, 79, passed peacefully in his home beside photos of the love of his life, Connie Cadence. Married for 58 years, their love was the kind of story that most never get to live.

And if you visit their graves—side by side, under the willow tree, you’ll find a single quote etched into the shared stone:

“For you and I are past our dancing days.”
But the music never truly stopped.