**Delete.**

Ella Rachel Kerr

“You need to choose which memories you want to delete,” the doctor said as she clasped her hands behind her head and tried to appear calm and confident; the very thing she was not. But the woman sitting in the exam room would not meet her gaze. She sat on the table, in freshly ironed jeans and the lipstick she had found near the sink at home. Jimmy had promised the lipstick was hers.

The doctor made eye contact with Jimmy, a plea for help to explain to his wife one more time, and maybe this time she would comprehend. He understood the look, “Ruby, do you hear what the doctor is saying, my love? Your brain is too full, and we need to free up space. The best way to do that is to choose a few memories to delete…”

The woman on the table looked down at her fingernails, painted light blue. She had asked Jimmy, “Do women my age paint their nails this color?” She couldn’t remember, and he didn’t know so he had told her yes. Suddenly, she did remember, and the nail polish felt childish.

Ruby held her husband's hand and squeezed it tight, tight, just as she always did. “Can you please ask the doctor to explain one more time?”

The doctor bit her lip and tried to remain patient. She nodded slowly to calm her own frustration, “You have Alzheimer’s, Ruby. We recently found that one of the best ways to treat Alzheimer’s is to take a look at all of the memories that are stored in your head and delete the ones that aren’t serving you. Over these past months, we have deleted the memories that were small and insignificant because we thought that would free up some room. But the Alzheimer's is progressing, Ruby, so we are going to have to delete some memories that hold a bigger space in your brain. And then, when those are deleted, your brain will have enough space to remember things that are important to you now. Like where your keys are. And what you need to buy at the grocery store.”

“The doctor said your brain is like a phone full of pictures,” Ruby’s husband knelt down close to her face and saw the freckles on top of her nose. How strange that those freckles could outlast 58 years of life, but her brain could not. “We deleted all of the junk photos. But we need to delete some of the bigger, higher quality photos and allow that extra room to be filled with memories we will use.”

Ruby smiled a little, remembering this conversation now. Her dimples pressed into the sides of her cheeks. She looked young.

The doctor laid out what looked like a scrapbook of laminated pages, each with a strange and vague photo. “There are just about 700 photos we have chosen here,” the doctor had explained, “Approximately one photo from every month of life. The treatment team has already deleted vague memories that have seemed to have left her mind already. You know, the useless stuff, like the route to walk to elementary school, or song lyrics from your childhood. Now, our job is to delete some of the memories that are clearer and take up more space.”

“It’s inefficient storage space, that’s what Alzheimer’s is,” the doctor explained, smiling pleasantly and trying to fill the thick silence in the room. She looked at Jimmy, “You just need to help her figure out which ones to delete. Today, let’s just focus on deleting 25.” Her voice slipped, and she smiled even more tightly to hide the emotion.

The young doctor prayed hollowly to the ceiling that she would never experience a strangeness like this: choosing with her love what parts of their life to erase. Eventually, as the disease progressed, all of the photos would have to go. Would Jimmy be offended if Ruby deleted that sleepy photo of his shoulders in the morning while he stretched? Would she choose the memory of her and her young sisters twirling in the grass over a road trip with him, the one where he fell in love? Were their child’s first steps worth more than the night he proposed? Did it even really matter?

The doctor had seen it before, habitually, actually, where one person’s mundane memory was a turning point for a loved one. It was the dull memory of the way rain fell on the childhood roof that gave a person peace at night. It was an insignificant scraped knee one summer that made their partner fall in love. The danger in the game was that the importance of shared experiences rarely aligned.

The doctor looked for Ruby’s eyes tracing the images in the laminated pages. There was one photo of her holding dandelions in one hand, a kitten in the other. Her hair was lighter then. Another photo showed Ruby, looking down at intertwined fingers, much darker than Jimmy’s hands: evidence of a past love.

Ruby closed the book, reached up for Jimmy’s cheeks, and rubbed her forehead on the stubble that grew on his chin. She whispered, and the doctor held her breath and waited for the decisions that would change the way she remembered her whole life; and the way that Jimmy would live the rest of his.

“I don’t remember any of these photos, my love,” Ruby closed her eyes and spoke softly. “Go ahead and choose whichever pictures you think I will want to remember. I trust that.”

The doctor stood and handed a copy of the laminated pages to Jimmy, who accepted with two hands. Tears caught on the edge of the doctor’s eyelids as she watched him stare intently at his wife’s life. He would decide. There would be no dissent.

“I’ll leave you two alone,” the doctor whispered. Jimmy nodded, but Ruby caught the doctor’s eye and gave her a tear brimmed wink. She remembered. Every page and every photo was clear in her mind. But nothing so clear as the man who sat next to her that day. Nothing was more evident than the peace of knowing that at night, her mind would be filled with the memories he loved best.