



her last  
cigarette  
yesterday

ALLENE  
ALLANIGUE

*For the people we've lost.  
For the people we were.  
Yesterday.*

## Her Last Cigarette Yesterday

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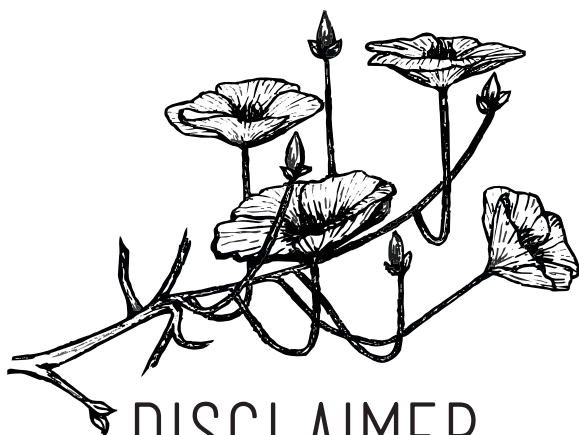
*Allene Allanigue*

“I know there’s only so much we can do, but in that little space, we must do the best we can.

We need to soldier on because the world  
needs more people like us.

It needs all the help it can get.”

- *Dr. Carlos*



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**This is a work of fiction.** Any resemblance to actual people, living or dead, whether through original characters or otherwise, is purely coincidental. The professions, groups, businesses, corporations, or brands mentioned in this book are in no way represented by the author. Although carefully researched, the author makes no claims of being an expert on the scientific information based on emerging neuroscience and psychology practices used fictitiously in the story. All viewpoints presented in this book are those of the author or have been included purely for narrative purposes.

**This story touches on delicate subjects such as sexual assault, suicide, death, and mental illness.** Although the author made every effort to deal with these themes in a reflective and emphatic way, some readers may still find it troubling. Readers should read with caution.





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## YLANG

**I**t was a rainy night in late June. A blinking white dot emerged through the layers of dark clouds and smog covering south of Metro Manila. Closer, it revealed the outline of a commercial plane braving the pouring skies. The plane took a few unhurried rounds, hovering above Pasay City, waiting for the congested runway to free up to make its landing. One of the passengers who were on board was Ylona.

The tanned, petite woman was in her mid-thirties. She had mid-length, blonde-dyed wavy hair. Its black roots had grown an inch, waiting to be bleached. Oversized sunglasses concealed her big, intimidating eyes. She was dressed in faded khakis shorts, a dry-fit plain white V-neck shirt, and brown ankle strap sandals. One would think she would hike a mountain or trail through the desert. Nobody would think she worked in a university neuroscience lab.

She appeared through the sea of arrivals pushing a trolley cart, carrying two big suitcases, and looking like any other *balikbayan*. She

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could talk like them too if she made enough effort to neutralize her accent and fit in. Except that she never identified herself as a *balikbayan*. Born and raised in Australia, her parents' homeland was a place that never felt home to her.

On top of her baggage rested a 2x3 feet black hardcase box with a FRAGILE label taped on it. As she continued to push the cart with caution while heading to the exit, a callous little boy dashed right in front of her, running after his younger sister. She stopped the cart with a sudden jolt, making the fragile box jerk. Thankfully, the box did not fall. A sigh of relief was quickly followed by her muttering curses that only she could hear, swearing that their parents were better off without kids. She adjusted the box in place securely, thanking the heavens she was able to let it pass the airport security without arousing suspicions. It was good judgment to take it in the most disassembled form possible before flying to the Philippines.

Reaching the airport's glass sliding exit doors, she was welcomed by a humid whiff, thickly scented by earth and cement drenched in the rain, sticking on the skin of her face and neck.

*Welcome to the Philippines*, she grumbled to herself in annoyance, as if just by entering the country, her energy was completely depleted. Time dawdled as she stood there outside in the suffocating air with her cart, watching the cars in queue, waiting for a white Isuzu Sportivo. Ylona turned her head around in all dizzying directions from time to time. It took about 15 minutes until she finally saw the car slowly pulling over.

Ylona had been to Manila several times before, but this was her first solo flight. It was also the first time when she would not roll in the sand under the sun and taste the salt water, or meet relatives who were

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constantly pestering her for *pasalubong*. But this was an escape from the lab, a break from what she had spent the previous five years of her life devoted to. Even though she dreaded going to Manila, she felt compelled to follow love.

Ylona's love was a woman named Poppy. Her girlfriend drove the white shiny vehicle that was a spare car borrowed from a cousin. Poppy flew in two weeks ahead to start settling in a rented condo apartment owned by another well-off relative. Unlike Ylona who was born to Filipino parents, Poppy was a half-Filipino, half-Australian born and raised in the Philippines.

Poppy's mother was serving a marginalized community in the outskirts of Cebu City as a doctor-to-the-*barrio* when she met her soon-to-be husband, Poppy's father, who was then a religious missionary. She got an equal genetic inheritance from her parents—from physical attributes to temperament. With a decent height of five-foot-five, light brown hair that was the color of her parents' hair combined, and a complexion that was neither too tan for a Filipino nor too white for a Caucasian, it could be said that she had a perfect balance of both worlds.

Their parked car was not supposed to take too long because there were already many cars and taxis forming a line. Poppy got out of the car, removed the baggage from the trolley, and stuffed them into the trunk. Ylona opened the backseat door and slid the box inside, fastening it with the seat belt. They hopped into the driver and passenger seats. Ylona kissed Poppy on the cheek, and Poppy smiled at that intimate gesture from Ylang, her Ylona's nickname. They clicked the seat belts, and drove away.

Ylona's eyes blurred from exhaustion as she watched the

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streetlights cast shadows; the hazy red taillights lulled her to a half-sleep. The flow of traffic slowed. Due to road reconstruction, the four-lane road was reduced to two lanes. It didn't help that there was a crossing right ahead of them.

Ylona was jerked awake by the aggressive blowing of horns from the cars behind them and the rough construction noise of road excavation. She exclaimed, "Oh my goodness, this road is still not repaired. Didn't they fix it when I was here four years ago?"

"Doesn't matter whether roads require repair or not," Poppy replied. "The local government would excavate it and reconstruct it again for funds. More project funds, more kickbacks. That's the way it is. Happens all the time."

Ylona sighed in resignation.

"Did they inquire about the box?" Poppy asked.

"It's just a laptop and a bunch of wires, that's what's inside."

"And that was it?"

"How can they possibly know?"

Poppy noticed slight irritability in Ylona, which she attributed to fatigue and energy depletion from the 10-hour flight.

"What it is, what it does, doesn't matter," Ylona dismissed the subject at hand and leaned back in her seat. "Pop, I'm really tired, I might doze off."

Poppy reached for the neck pillow she always kept ready from the back seat and handed it to Ylona. Hooking the pillow on her neck, Ylona adjusted herself in the seat more comfortably and closed her eyes.

"Radio?"

Ylona opened one eye and asked, "What?"

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“Want me to turn on the radio?”

“Radio? Do people still listen to the radio these days?” she continued to mumble her contemptuous disgust. “And listen to what, nonsense blabbering and laughing of your local DJs on air? Like, who pays for this shit? No, thank you. I’d rather listen to you talk.”

“What do you want me to talk about?”

“I don’t know. Anything. Just anything. I missed your voice. Your voice is comforting,” Ylona said it softly this time and closed her eyes.

“But we call each other every day.”

Every day they talked on a long-distance call, but it did not always go smoothly. Arguing over the phone often led to Poppy dropping the call. The distance complicated things between them, following what happened back in Brisbane that had put them in a frustrating situation.

“I know we call each other every day. But technology distorts your voice, it’s weird. I like your voice like this.”

“You’re sweet.”

“Ugh, no,” Ylona groaned. “I smell sour, and I need a bath.”

Poppy sniffed Ylona’s shoulder to confirm. “Yes, you do. You really do.”

“I love you too, Pop,” Ylona said as she rolled her eyes. This was the first time that Ylona felt like she was coming back home. Because her home wasn’t a place anymore, it was Poppy that had become her home.

“The last time I was here, Ane was still alive,” Poppy spoke, and she looked at Ylona. “Her car stopped suddenly in the middle of a road. She forgot to refill her fuel.”

To avoid the conversation, Ylona looked out the window.

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“Does talking about her make you feel uncomfortable?”

“It doesn’t make me uncomfortable,” Ylona answered softly, her tone stripped of irritation. “It just makes my heart ache, and I don’t know what to do about it.”

\* \* \*

Ylona was beautiful. She used to be that pretty kid that her Filipino parents proudly paraded to friends and relatives. She hated it growing up, being forced to join pageants in schools and Filipino communities in Sydney. She never wanted to be a beauty queen. Nobody takes beauty queens seriously, that was what she thought. And she wanted to be taken seriously. So, she took pre-med in college and later, attended med school.

She only realized how big and serious of a responsibility being a doctor was after she earned her license. She had just started her residency when a kid died on her watch. She only lasted six months and realized this was not the career that she could commit to. She quit the practice and moved to Queensland after getting an employment offer to work in a university neuroscience lab as a researcher. Working in the lab, tinkering on rodents’ brains, she had finally found her place in the world. This was what she wanted to do. Working there, she was required to pursue and complete a Ph.D. in cognitive neuroscience. She continued her postdoc work at the same university.

Ylona and Poppy first met at a Friday BBQ night at Poppy’s parents’ place. As hosts, they set up a long wooden table in the middle of the yard with a small pool. Ylona came with a Filipino friend who was a neighbor of the family. She found herself in the crowd of

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strangers drinking wine and beer over some chips, dips, crackers, and cheese.

Ylona first noticed Poppy when she approached the table carrying a tray of barbecued lamb chops and snags. When she returned the second time, she was carrying plates of rump steak and T-bone with onions. She was assisting her dad in manning the grill and arranging kebabs. When her dad excused himself to attend to a guest's query, that was when Ylona approached Poppy, pretending to inspect the wooden skewers with chunks of meat, capsicum, and red onions on the grill.

"It's not gonna take long," Poppy said without looking, thinking Ylona was getting impatient to put a kebab on her plate.

"No, don't worry, it's fine. Besides, I'll give all this for the capital of the Philippines."

Poppy looked at her this time, seemingly confused, and asked, "Manila?"

"No, Jollibee."

Ylona lacked the height, but her presence was disarming. With her big eyes, she often looked intimidating. A stark contrast when she smiled, she looked charming. It was not her looks that made Poppy fall for her. Despite her moody temperament and jarring sense of humor, Ylona had a big heart. What was left of Poppy's heart she owed to Ylona.

When Poppy left the Philippines over three years ago, she was drifting halfway from reality. Meeting Ylona was what saved her sanity. They started meeting frequently. Ylona would never forget how Poppy came to her and told her the reason why she left Manila. Poppy broke into tears, it was the first time she had told anyone about it.



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Ylona held her hands and squeezed them together. She looked into Poppy's eyes as she spoke, "It will never define who you are or who you are yet to be."

Ylona felt terrible that Poppy was suffering, but how she chose to respond encouraged Poppy to face the days yet to come. Poppy found freedom from letting someone know, someone who made her feel safe and accepted unconditionally. Ylona was the reason why she did not lose the last string of hope for humanity. Ylona became her anchor and sparked the hope that ignited her will to live. And she recovered. She began to feel better and more alive, as if she could do anything she desired again.

Ylona would tell Poppy about her work in the lab, knowing that she was a doctor in the Philippines who had quit her neurosurgery training. Ylona eventually invited Poppy to the university and introduced to her the kind of research her team was working on. For Ylona's postdoc, she was working with a mentor who was pioneering experimentations in the integration of several theoretical and working models of memory in developing technology.

The prototype of the technology was developed a decade ago by her mentor, Professor Carl Young, and was first tested in lab mice. For the brain to store memory, the memory must be first created. They taught the mice to run a maze and they identified the brain cells that were activated during the learning process. The same brain cells were activated when the mice were placed in the maze for the succeeding trials. They developed a technology that is similar to the existing optogenetics technique, which controls a neuron's activity using light, and by changing the information in the genetic code. The process involves inducing depolarization and action potentials, allowing the

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turning on and off of brain cells like a light switch, helping them identify the brain cells allocated to the memory trace of the mice's learning experience of the maze. This memory trace is known to the neuroscience research community as *engrams*.

However, optogenetic procedures are typically invasive. Neuroscientists are finding ways to move towards ultrasound treatments and red light exposures to minimize harm and ethical concerns related to these experiments. This led Prof. Young's team to devise a new technology in the form of non-invasive neuro sensors that will be attached to specific points of a rodent's head. The sensors would then record a limited series of engrams while rodents run the maze, and store these cloned engrams on a device unit with touch-screens. Then, they would take another rodent that had never run the maze before and implant the cloned engrams on its brain from the device through the neuro sensors. The new rodent would then be able to run the maze successfully on its first trial.

Their experiment findings were published in an academic journal and became the talk of the neuroscience community in recent years. It laid the groundwork for future research into memory cloning and the development of new working theoretical models for memory engrams.

When Ylona joined them, Prof. Young's team had further modified the neuro sensor technology into a helm that could fit well on the human head. They were now looking into the possibility of cloning engrams of specific memories in humans. In identifying an engram, the same neurons fire when the same memory is retrieved. But to find a memory, first, you must make one.

A person's identity can be largely shaped by personal experiences

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that are stored in the brain as episodic memories. The brain will then pick a bunch of brain cells to store the memory of this thing you just experienced, and it will activate them all at the same time. They investigated memory localization—how memories are created and stored—using three different scales. First, the regional scale, which involves various brain regions, primarily the hippocampus and amygdala. Memories are processed in the hippocampus and converge to the different regions in the brain that specialize in different areas. The brain would pick cells across regions to store all the different aspects of a memory. For example, the occipital lobe where the visual cortex is located, will process the visual stimulus like in watching a movie. And the small bean-sized part in the middle of the brain called the amygdala, will process the ensuing emotions related to the movie. With episodic memories, it could be way more complicated than that.

Second, they examined the unique pattern of brain cells activating together across brain regions allocated to engrams, as well as how these brain cells change over time as a result of environmental exposure. Third, they investigated how brain cells form stronger connections with each other than with other cells via synapses, developing more dendritic spines that allow neurons to communicate with one another, thereby strengthening memory traces.

When Poppy listened to Ylona the first time, it sounded like complete science fiction. With her medical training, for Poppy, learning about engrams does not bear significance when conducting surgical procedures on the human brain. Like in removing blood clots from a stroke patient, knowing about the engrams wouldn't address the vascular dementia they might develop. But she later agreed to join them, knowing this could be her ticket to resume her life and

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contribute something to the world.

With Ylona's recommendation, Poppy was hired by the university lab as a research assistant. A new secret research team was formed, and Ylona was transferred to that team to lead the classified clinical trials that would be carried out. Their team was now testing the memory cloning technology on human brains that integrated the three scales in cloning engrams with all their multisensory dimensions.

\* \* \*

When they arrived at the apartment, Poppy turned the lights on revealing a white-painted minimalist living space. Ylona's eyes scanned the space, it was too empty for her taste, and too bright that it reminded her of the neuroscience lab where clinical trials were conducted. The apartment was immaculately clean. Poppy had an obsessive need to arrange and rearrange things, so everything was in its proper place and tidy.

"Put that box there," Poppy pointed to the small space on the floor between the white leather couch and the wall.

Ylona darted her a look, there was absolutely no way she would do that. "This is my child, which I brought into the world. You want me to abandon it on the floor?"

"What? Do you need to assemble and test it now?"

"No, just not on the floor," Ylona ignored her and placed the box in the middle of the wooden center table.

"Okay. But no testing here please."

"This isn't a lab. I get it."

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They dragged the suitcases to the bedroom. A neatly made queen-sized bed was so tempting to jump on as if it was calling for Ylona. The weariness from the hours of flight became more palpable than ever. It stripped her of self-control, and she slumped on the bed, face pressed against the soft comforter.

“No, no, no,” Poppy caught her just in time and pulled her by her hand back to her feet. “No dirty clothes in bed, please.”

“I’m spent.”

“Come on, Ylang,” Poppy took a clean bath towel out of the closet and tossed it to her.

“I’m really tired,” Ylona whined, but being with Poppy for the last three years, Ylona knew she had no choice but to oblige.

With the towel in hand, Ylona entered the bathroom to take a shower. Outside, she knew Poppy was already dusting off the comforter that her clothes made contact with, and probably spraying disinfectant too. She shook her head and focused instead on the feeling of the warm water crawling down from her face to her toes. It eased the tension in her muscles as she listened to the sound of water against the tiled floor akin to the sound of light rain.

That night, Ylona tossed and turned in bed, interfering with Poppy’s sleep. But Poppy understood this. Ylona had not been able to sleep well since that incident at the lab that compelled them both to leave. She got out of bed and left the room to let Poppy sleep.

Ylona sat on the white faux leather couch and removed the *fragile* tape on the box. The box was a secure case made of metal and wood. The lock clicked open and Ylona lifted the lid. She removed the pieces of foam cushions protecting the items inside. It revealed wires with labels, and smaller boxes containing tinier, more sensitive wires. She

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removed them from the box and carefully transferred them to the couch beside her.

Beneath, covered with thicker cushion packaging, was a rectangular device that expanded, revealing two screens when turned on. This device unit was the latest update of the memory cloning technology her research team named Memento 1101. She had read somewhere that the number 1101 means that something is bound for greatness, and she believed that this technology held promise for the future of our memories.

She wore special anti-static gloves before she opened the box of delicate, sensitive wires. With her tools, she started assembling them into a helm net of wires. Tiny and sophisticated neuro sensors were attached to the wires. These sensors were not implanted but were only required to be tightly pressed against the forehead and scalp of a human head. These wires with neuro sensors would be attached to the helm, and the helm would be connected to the expanding twin screens, each showing 3D images of brains. They could be zoomed in to the cellular level, as if looking through a microscope. But instead of a specimen, it showed memory-related neural activities in the brain represented by lights.

It still amazed Ylona how her research team was able to compress the function of gigantic brain scan machines and technology in the lab into a helm, a bunch of wires, and screens, solely for memory cloning purposes.

When Ylona returned to the bedroom, she took measured steps inside and quietly closed the door, only to find Poppy awake. Her skin was pale in the dim light of her phone. The parted window curtains let in the light from the brightening sky.

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She gave Poppy a peck on her crown and greeted her, “Morning.”

“Morning, Ylang.”

“You’re awake early.”

“Achi’s text woke me up. Forgot to turn my phone on silent. You haven’t slept yet?”

“I assembled the helm. What did he say?”

“He would visit his mom before he heads to the venue at the hospital.” She typed in a reply: *Looking forward to seeing you again.*

Poppy placed the phone back on the nightstand and turned to Ylona, “I’m not sure if you’ll like him, but he’s the only person I know right now who can be of help.”

“What sort of person is he? Why won’t I like him?”

“Because he’s my ex-girlfriend’s younger brother.”

“Which ex-girlfriend?”

“Ane.”

“Oh...” Ylona trailed off and averted her gaze. Hearing her name in this manner caused an awkward silence between them. Then she returned to her original question. “But why do you assume I wouldn’t like him?”

“Because I don’t like him that much.”

“Because it’s a *him*?”

“No, he’s different. He can be trusted though. I can persuade him to help us with this project. And he *needs* this.”

“Tell me.”

“Long story.” Instead, Poppy drew Ylona closer and kissed her on the cheek.

Ylona moved in closer, tilting her head sideways for a kiss on the lips. When their lips parted, Ylona looked her in the eyes and said,

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“When this is all over, promise me we’ll go back to Brisbane together.”

Poppy remained silent, just looking at her face. She stroked Ylona’s cheeks, sweeping hair strands away from her face and tucking them behind her ear. Poppy’s eyes expressed pain and guilt in a way she could not quite understand. And Ylona felt that familiar ache in her chest again.

“Pop, promise me,” Ylona repeated.

“Okay, I promise.”

Ylona gave her another kiss before removing her shirt, revealing a lean frame and outlines of her ribcage. Poppy let Ylona move on top of her as she lay flat on the bed. Ylona was lifting her leg to remove her underwear when she abruptly lost her balance and struck Poppy’s left thigh with her knee.

“Oh, fuck! Fuck!” Poppy jerked up. She yelped in pain, and of something else. She burst into violent tears. That part of Poppy’s thigh had an extremely sensitive part that had to be avoided. Even the slightest contact could be very painful.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry,” Ylona panicked and checked Poppy’s left thigh. She quickly wrapped Poppy in her arms, as if doing so would pull Poppy back to the present. This had happened a couple of times before. “That’s not happening, that’s not happening,” she kept repeating to reassure Poppy. “I’m here. I’m with you. That’s not happening.”

Poppy was trembling, sobbing violently while laboriously gasping for air.

“Breathe,” Ylona encouraged her.

Poppy struggled to take deeper breaths, but she tried her best to focus on Ylona’s voice giving the instructions.



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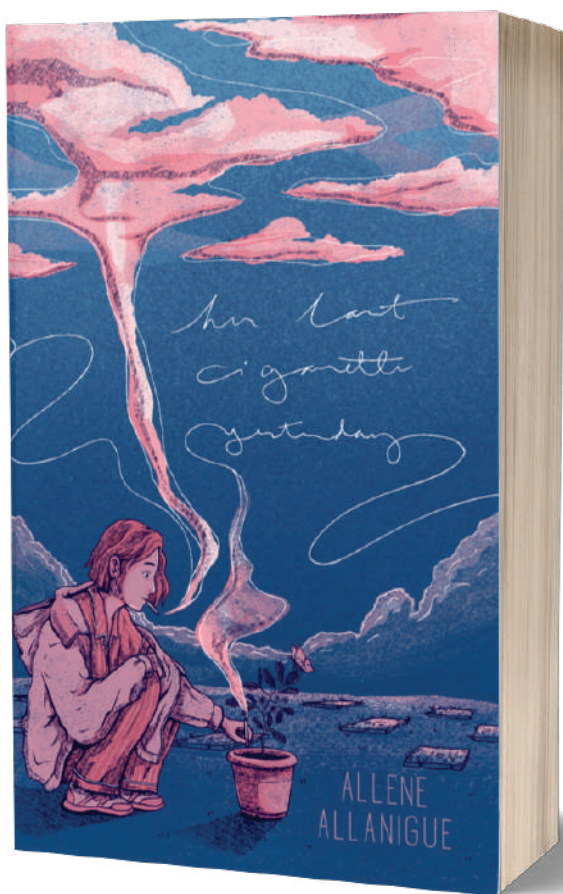
“Breathe, Pop. A little more. Just like that. Again, breathe.” Ylona kept whispering reassuring words in between saying, “Breathe again.” She would breathe together with Poppy, urging her to follow. “Okay, that’s good. That’s good. One more, breathe.”

Poppy followed, taking another deep breath, and sighing heavily. Ylona put on her shirt. She guided Poppy to lie and calm down.

“That fucking nightmare won’t leave me alone,” Poppy said.

“I’m here. I got you. I’m here.”





# END OF TEASER

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