

**LESLEY ARCA**

## **The Chicago Filipino Experience**

I walked through the door of the restaurant with my parents, and immediately felt this wave of nostalgia wash over me like a heart warming dream. The sights and sounds were so familiar: two Filipino women at a booth eating breakfast and being cheerily "chismosa", the old lolo reading a Philippine Weekly, giving a gentle nod hello to my mom and I, and the man at register with the smooth, clear, pale, and Asian beautiful skin with an accent that could only say he was "bakla."

I felt such warmth when I looked at the signs. "Tapsilog, 3 turon for \$1, buffet for \$6.95." They were words you never thought would go together, bridging a transnational gap spanning leagues of ocean to come together in a motley array of Tagalog and English. I stared at the large bamboo plants as I obtained three sets of the only utensils they carried: plastic forks and spoons.

Three boys and a girl walked through the door, grabbing a Philippine newspaper and laughing in tagalog over a breakfast of ube, sweet sticky rice, singangag, and longanisa. I shoveled my rice over my plate, bangus then singangag, bangus and singangag over and over while talking about college in my oh so American English. At first, I thought the sound of my voice echoed as a dissonant chord unaccompanied by the harmony of rich Philippine language. But then I realized, they are American. I am American. We all sat in a restaurant occasionally glancing at the television with the Filipino boy rockstars while John Mayer played over

the stereo system, almost drowning out the sexy eyes of Lea Salonga's picture on the wall.

"Isang tapsilog, at saka isang..." the cashier said while I stood there waiting to pay for the bill. One of the boys kept glancing at me in the shy Filipino boy manner of someone mildly intrigued yet not armed with the proper tools of ancient Spanish era Philippine courtship, especially in the presence of my parents. A Filipino-African American boy walked in with his mother with a deep craving for fried bananas and breakfast. I paid in dollars, at one point said "wala" and "thank you" to the cashier, while staring intently at the Santo Niño and picture of the cashier's mother on the ledge above the front counter.

The sun was out, filling the yellow painted room like a sunrise on a halfway around the world horizon, while I stared out of the windows onto the slushy city streets. Combined, we all wore colors of the illuminated flag.

This is Filipino America. This is Chicago's Filipino America.

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