

Roots by Sam Phelan

For the first time in her life, Andrea O'Brien was not going to be late. She simply refused. Today was too important, it meant too much to her. Amongst her small circle of friends, she was known as "About On-Time Andrea." Rachel Hannicker coined that in the 9th grade, when Andrea showed up two hours late to her own surprise party. By the time she arrived, all that remained of her birthday cake were a few crumbs. Regardless, Andrea was proud to be known for something in the small town of Dale other than the color of her skin. It was a nice change. But, today was the day she was going to shed that nickname for good. She had outgrown the cocoon of "About On-Time" and metamorphosed into an "Always On-Time" butterfly.

Today was special because Andrea O'Brien was going to see her mother. She had agreed on a rendez-vous time of 3 pm. Normally, from her apartment in Cherrydale, walking to Murray Park took only 15 minutes. But, considering the occasion, she decided to swing around onto Wilson Boulevard to stop at *Mimi's Bakery* first. Doing so would delay her trajectory by another 15 minutes. So, in order to make it in time she would need to lock the doors of her studio apartment by 2:30 and keep a steadily brisk pace of approximately 4.5 mph. On her way out she checked her watch. It was only 2:15.

It felt unreasonably cold for October. In the past, she would have described the Fall season in Dale as "brisk" or "chilly." Today transcended that. It was certainly cold, but Andrea didn't mind. She liked being bundled up and feeling the warmth of layer after layer of clothing brushing up against her skin. It was like being suffocated head to toe by a humongous blanket, in the nicest way possible. In her head, she could already hear her Mother's voice.

“Your coat is much too thin, Andrea. Just the other day a homeless man caught hypothermia and died in Lexington. His coat was probably thin like yours. Do you want to be like that homeless man, Andrea?” Mrs. Imelda O’Brien (formerly Imelda Rosalia) was always informing her daughter of the newest disease to look out for and the hottest trends that would help her shed a few pounds, maybe even add a few more years to her lifespan if she was lucky. Andrea never knew where her mother found any of this corporate brainwashing gobbledy gunk, or why every conversation she had with her focused on the easing of their impending doom. But, after 19 years of this, Andrea learned the best way to deal with her mother was to simply nod her head in approval and reply: “Yes, Mom. Of course.” That was her damage control.

Andrea was making great time. She had already passed Dover and Gottlieb and made it onto Stafford Street by 2:40. She could’ve sworn this was a new record. It had been so long since she had walked this way that the streets all felt fresh to her. It was like she was discovering every house, every bush, every street corner for the first time again. She almost even walked straight past Thomas Jefferson Elementary without notice. As soon as she caught sight of it, she found her feet glued to the beat-up pavement below her. It was impossible not to stop and stare, even just for a little bit. It must have been time for recess. Children of all ages were out on the playground, playing and running around like it was the last time they were ever going to get that chance. She missed that feeling. She missed the allowed ignorance of childhood that slowly stripped away with maturation.

When Andrea first started at Thomas Jefferson, her mother had only previously spoken to her in Filipino. At night they would stay up to unreasonable hours reading her Mother’s favorite childhood stories. During the day, they cemented themselves into their stained red velvet sofa,

burning their eyes from binge watching Philippine soap operas together. Whenever her daughter required disciplining of any degree, Mrs. O'Brien would always be sure to do so in authentic Filipino. That way, Mr. O'Brien could be spared the conflict. He didn't speak a lick of the language. He never found a need to. After all, he didn't marry his wife and bring her all the way to America just for him to learn Filipino.

The nonstop Filipino came to an abrupt stop during Andrea's first year of primary school. Mrs. O'Brien was out picking up groceries when she received the call from Mr. Kittner, Andrea's first-grade teacher. She had been called into school in the middle of the day to briefly discuss Andrea's "recent academic troubles." Mrs. O'Brien found herself petrified to enter the school. Her Baby Andrea was always so bright, and so full of life, what could she have possibly done wrong? She called her husband to see if he could go in instead of her for she still found herself embarrassed to speak english in public. 5 years of speaking a language wasn't as long as one might have thought, at least as far as Mrs. O'Brien was concerned. But, to no avail, she found herself walking through the doors of Thomas Jefferson that day, being greeted to the unwelcoming message that her daughter was falling grossly behind in class. Worst of all, in every subject. She struggled to understand Mr. Kittner's lectures and spoke little to no words each day. Most of her assignments were no more than a jumbled mesh of illiterate english and incomprehensible filipino. Mr. Kittner told Mrs. O'Brien that changes would need to be made, and that they would need to be made very soon. Otherwise, she would unfortunately be forced to disenroll in Thomas Jefferson Elementary.

Andrea had no clue what her mother and Mr. Kittner were discussing, or that she had done anything wrong. But, after that day, there was hardly a time when a Filipino word was

muttered in the O'Brien household. Andrea's mother began reading her "traditional" bedtime stories, such as *Hansel and Gretel* and *Sleeping Beauty*. The Filipino soap operas were replaced with Disney, Nickelodeon, and Sesame Street. Every Tuesday and Thursday, the mother and daughter pair took English lessons together at the Madison Community Center. Mrs. O'Brien did her best to speak to her child in English. When the occasional Filipino word popped out of her, she would put a quarter into a jar labelled "NO MORE FILIPINO" in giantly obnoxious capitalized letters. In Dale, Mrs. O'Brien had to remember that though her daughter was an Asian-American, the "Asian" half never came first. Most of the time, it never really even existed.

A few of the children stopped what they were doing to stare at Andrea. She hated being pointed at and scrutinized, even by harmless kids. When she looked down at herself, it all made sense. She had completely forgotten about her outfit. The children weren't used to seeing people dressed differently from them. They expected hooded sweatshirts and blue jeans, not embroidered black dresses and a hooded garment. Andrea's smile disappeared. She turned her body around and carried on her way. There was no time to be sidetracked by a few kids, at least not today.

If Andrea wanted to get to the bakery in time she would have to cut through Randolph, into the Everdales. She had not stepped foot in this neighborhood for over a decade or so. Andrea was shocked to find the Everdales in the exact conditions they were in as a child. The houses were just as pristine as she remembered: gorgeous two-story buildings, each freshly painted with a red oak door and a newly cut lawn to boot. It was like someone had taken the most cliché interpretation of the American Dream and made it into a housing community. Andrea

remembered when she would have done anything to be in one of those houses. Now, they made her want to vomit.

When she was 16, Andrea walked with her Mother on that very same path. Andrea audibly ooh'd and ah'd at each house they passed, each more beautiful than the next. They almost didn't feel real, like they were hand-painted by God himself. At the time, Andrea wondered why she couldn't live there, why her house had only one floor, why her house's paint looked like it hadn't been touched up since the 1980s. She could imagine herself bringing friends over everyday after school if she lived in one of these houses. Instead, she did everything she could to keep her friends away from her shack of a home, saving herself from complete embarrassment.

An especially nice house caught their eye. It was the largest on the block. Plus, it had a running fountain on its front lawn fit for Versailles itself. Andrea sprinted to it and gazed at her reflection. Only, it wasn't really her. She saw herself wearing a silver crown and a baby-blue gown so bright and beautiful that Cinderella herself would have been outdone at the Royal Ball. This was not one of those cheap raggedy Maria Clara gowns that her mother forced her into at church, but a real dress. If she came to school in this dress, everyone would fall in love with Andrea instantly. They would have to. Andrea tried time-after-time to convince her mother that no one wore Maria Clara gowns, that it made her different, that it made her a freak. They weren't in the Philippines anymore, so they should stop acting like they were.

"Isn't it good to be different?" Her mother would say. "Not when you're in high school, Mom." Andrea replied. In her reflection, Andrea saw everything she wanted to be. Her skin became fairer, her nose became less flat. People would stop giving her strange looks when she

and her father were out, asking her “Where are you from?” at every social gathering she went to and snickering in disbelief when she would say “Here.” The people’s tangible surprise when she or her mother would reveal their last name internally always gutted her. In the world of the fountain, she would bring a normal meal to lunch everyday. She would open her lunchbox and take out a pot-roast, or a meatloaf, rather than her mother’s *pansit* or *dinuguan*. She would be like everyone else. She would be normal.

When she told her mother all of this on their way home: the dress, the house, the lunch, the questions, her mother hardly replied. She walked straight and kept to herself for the rest of the night. Andrea made sure never to mention the Everglades again around her mother after that day.

Andrea had no idea that only a few years later she would step foot into that very same house, the house with the pompous audacity to put a fountain in its front yard in a city where half of its residents fell under the poverty line. It was the New Year’s Eve of Andrea’s senior year of high school. Becky McCallister lived in the dream house. Becky McCallister, the girl destined to be Prom Queen since she was in grade school. Becky McCallister, the girl who’s blue eyes tore into your soul if you stared at them for too long. Becky McCallister, whose long blonde hair was envied by every girl in the state. Becky McCallister invited Andrea to her annual New Year’s Party after four years of never once acknowledging her existence. Andrea couldn’t even begin to contain her excitement.

Mrs. O’Brien did not share this excitement. She told Andrea about how in the Philippines, New Years Eve was a time for family and for loved ones, about how she had prepared for their *noche buena* all week, about how it was their last New Years before she would

leave for university. Andrea told her that New Years was just another night, that she'd be back for dinner as soon as the next day, that she didn't need to worry about a thing. She wasn't and could never lose her daughter. This was her chance to finally be accepted, to be like her classmates. People were finally starting to look at her as if they didn't notice her skin color, her dark eyes, her flattened nose. As her daughter rushed out the door, Mrs. O'Brien spoke to her in Filipino, urging her to stop. Andrea didn't turn around. She had forgotten every word of her mother's language.

Andrea never understood why her mother hardly talked this way to her father. She never understood why she looked like her mother but thought like him. It was like Andrea made up two people, one that was brown and one that was white, but only the brown was ever visible. She hated that. She hated the way people looked at her. She was tired of living in two worlds, the fantasy one where she could act and look as she pleased, and the real one where she was bound to the color of her skin as if it were a prison cell. Andrea knew going to Becky McCallister's party would hurt her mother, but this was the only way she could get her to understand her pain.

The house was more than she could have ever expected. The interiors were furnished in a lavish art deco style that could only have been rivalled by the likes of Jay Gatsby's mansion. The house was filled to the brim with teenagers. While they danced and drank, Andrea found herself staring at the walls. All along them were imported artifacts from various other countries. By the door to the kitchen there was a black wooden Zulu mask. On the wall above the toilet in the master bathroom there was a Japanese hand fan made of bamboo. Andrea couldn't keep her eyes off these artifacts. She found each as appealing and wonderfully exotic as the next. She didn't understand why none of her classmates shared her interest, why they weren't all too busy gazing

at the walls to even feel the need to party and drink. Andrea didn't speak much that night. She probably muttered a sum of 5 words in total. But, she felt content. She felt fortunate enough just filling a space in such a fine home.

Andrea exited the Everglades onto the ever-bustling Wilson Boulevard. It was 2:45, she still had 15 minutes to spare. She could already smell an assortment of wonderful flavors permeating through the air like mustard gas from the bakery. The flavors were strange. They were exotic and uncommon to Dale. To most Dale-ians, Wilson Boulevard was the hardest part of the city to walk through. If you made the unenviable decision to make this trek, you were expected to do so with a sturdy clothespin pinched tightly around your nose. At least, that's what the general opinion of Wilson was. Andrea had a different opinion of the street. She loved it, even welcomed it. To her, it smelt like home.

Walking into *Mimi's Bakery*, the aroma always hit Andrea like a wave, submerging her in sweetness. A thousand different Filipino baked goods commanded her attention at once, filling each and every corner of the room. She didn't know where to start. It was heaven. Andrea could see *Tita Mimi* behind the counter, her skin looking as radiantly dark and smooth as ever. Andrea could swear she looked younger each time she saw her.

"Hello, Andrea. Do you understand me yet?" Mimi said to Andrea in fluent Filipino. *"I'm working on it."* Andrea replied timidly. Mimi couldn't help but smile. She enjoyed seeing progress in her favorite customer. Andrea began to sniffle, she could feel a burning sensation behind her eyelids. Her steps became heavy. She started to cry. Mimi's smile disappeared. She rushed from behind the counter and grasped onto Andrea, giving her a giant hug and plopping a

tender kiss on her cheek simultaneously, leading Andrea to fully break down into a full sob.

Mimi understood from the moment Andrea had walked in where she must be going. She knew from her outfit. A *filipina* only wears a black *cebuano* dress for one reason: grief.

The first time Andrea entered *Mimi's Bakery* was three months prior. The flavors didn't hit with a longing for home, but with a familiar nostalgic sensation that transported her back to her childhood. She scanned the aisles of baked goods: seeing *pan de sal*, *food of the gods*, *ube*, and row after row of *mango cakes*. They looked like they were fresh from her mother's oven. She knew she had come to the right place.

"Hello, Miss." She heard a bright voice say. Though slightly raspy from a clear history of smoking, the distinctly Filipino inflections shone through. Andrea turned to see a large Filipino woman, one whose age seemed impossible to decipher, wearing an apron dirtied with streaks of flower and *ube*. As they made eye contact, she sensed the woman's face brighten, her eyes widening with a familiar joy. "*Oh! A Filipina, what a surprise. What would you like today?*" Andrea stared at her blankly, searching through the archives of her brain to remember even just a singular word of Filipino.

Embarrassed, she responded "I'm sorry. I don't speak Filipino. I used to...see my mother is from the Philippines, from *Luzon*. But, my Father is American and doesn't speak a word of it, so they decided to raise me on English." Andrea didn't know why she was saying all of this to a woman she had just met, but her familiarity felt striking. She could feel a kinship growing just from her warm gaze.

“Ah, I see. Well, before you order I want you to promise me something,” The woman said, bringing her side of the conversation back to English. “The next time you come here, I don’t want a single word of English to come out of your mouth. Otherwise, I will not serve you. Understood?” Andrea nodded. She smiled. She knew she would be coming back soon.

“Now, what is it you would like?”

Andrea had only been in college for a few months when she received the call from her father. Though she was not far, she knew she had to come home immediately. It had already gotten serious. College could wait a few more months. She drove to Dale the next day and took up an apartment at the Sunrise Center. It wasn’t living in luxury, but it was affordable. Anything would be better than staying at the house. She couldn’t handle the sadness.

Andrea wanted to surprise her mother with something special, something from home. She wished as a child she had asked for just one of her recipes, that she had appreciated everything her mother was doing when she cooked for her. She had devoured each and every one of her mother’s dishes for 18 years of her life. And yet, she wouldn’t know where to start if told to recreate any one of them.

She remembered her mother mentioning a new filipino bakery opening on Wilson the previous month. Andrea wouldn’t be able to make Philippine food for her mother from scratch, but the least she could do was pick some up for her. She hadn’t seen her mother in-person for over 4 months. She didn’t know what she was going to say, or how she was going to react. How could you? How do you speak to someone in a hospital bed without letting that fact intrude on the conversation? Andrea grabbed her keys and opened her car door. She plugged the bakery’s

location into her GPS and was on her way. It was called *Mimi's*. It could never match her mother's cooking. But, it was the best she could do.

Andrea broke away from Mimi's arms with a strained sense of reality. She didn't plan time for any detours, and it was already 2:55 pm, five minutes before the rendez-vous. She didn't want to be late. She couldn't be late. She didn't want to leave either. Leaving meant acknowledging reality and engulfing herself in an insurmountable sorrow. If Andrea allowed herself to be taken over, she wasn't sure if she would ever have the strength to reach the other side.

Mimi looked at Andrea as if she were her own daughter. She couldn't imagine the pain she was going through. Mimi handed her a box of a dozen *pan de sal*. Andrea had ordered it everyday for the last three months on her way to the hospital. She was a dedicated daughter. She could sense that. Though she had never met Andrea's mother, she knew the two must have loved each other with every ounce of their beings. For Mrs. O'Brien, there were good days, and there were bad days. No matter, Andrea was always sure to be there, right by her mother's side. She found herself practically living in that hospital room, staying until 6 am most days. It was largely due to fear, fear of what would happen when she wasn't there. She worried that when her mother most needed her, Andrea would be nowhere to be found. Whether her mother was asleep, or eating her *pan de sal*, Andrea felt happy just to be there, blessed to take up space in her mother's rapidly decaying life. Andrea prayed each night for one more day, one more week, one more month, with her mother. To Mimi, it was a pity that cancer brought these two back together after

months of silence. But, in the end, she was happy for them. There wasn't much to life when you didn't have your loved ones, your culture, your identity.

Andrea left the store and walked into the Murray Park cemetery at 2:59. She made it, just in time. She saw her father in a black suit standing amongst the graves, his face in his hands. She trudged over to him, wrapping her arms around him. Crouching down, she got her first good look at her mother's gravestone. It read "*Amalia Rosario O'Brien - loving wife and mother. To her family, she was their world.*" Fighting through tears of her own now, she opened the box of *pan de sal*. Gently placing a warm piece in front of her mother's headstone, she took another out for herself, and took a bite. In the best Filipino she could muster, she said: "*I bought a new coat, Mom. You were right all along, my old one was way too thin. Do you like it?*"