



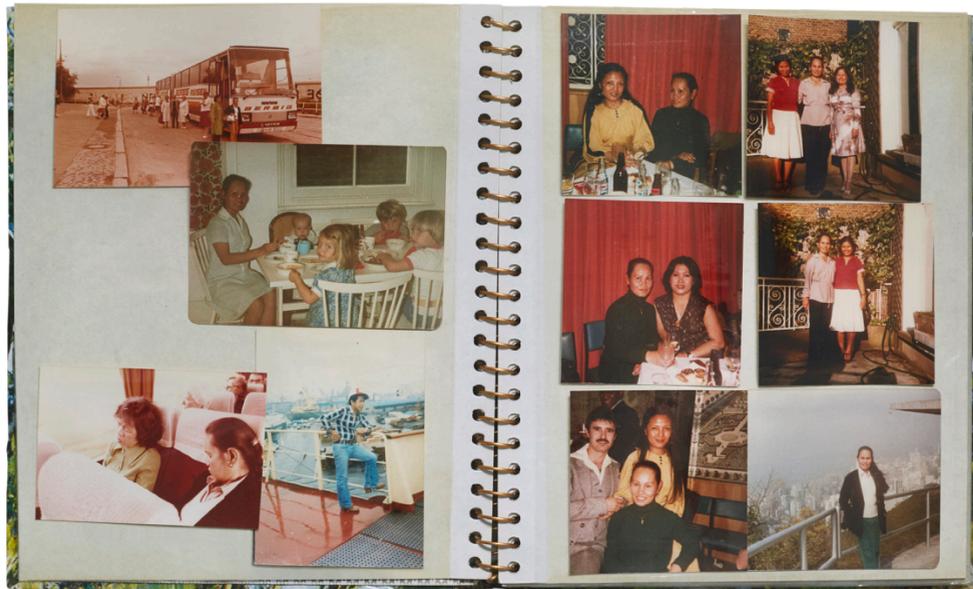
The lives of others

Juning was *Caroline Irby's* loving nanny, living with her family in Hong Kong and London for 22 years. Meanwhile, she seldom saw her own children back home in the Philippines. So when the adult Irby, now a photographer and mother, sought out Juning's family, it raised bittersweet questions of separation and inequality

I grew up in London with a Filipina woman called Juning, who had four children of her own living on a small island in the Philippines 7,000 miles away. Juning's husband left her when their children were young and all financial responsibility for the family fell to her. For several years, Juning worked as a nanny in the capital, Manila, while her children were looked after by her mother and sister on her native island, Bantayan. In 1974, knowing that a local income could not stretch to cover education fees, Juning decided to look for work abroad. Her youngest child was two years old when she left for Hong Kong.

In 1976, my parents and brother Nico, who was then one year old, moved from London to Hong Kong for my father's work with a bank. My mother soon became pregnant with me and in the spring of 1977, a few weeks before I was born, she advertised for a "mother's help" - someone to look after her children and home alongside her - at the local supermarket. Juning was one of four women who responded to the post.

Every day, 5,000 Filipinos leave their country in search of work abroad. For decades, this movement has been female-dominated: more than 70 per cent of Filipino emigrants currently are women. There is no figure for how many are mothers leaving children behind. I grew up with and deeply love one of these women and, having always known, obliquely at first, that she had children of her own, I want now to tell Juning's story and to bring into focus the lives of the sons and daughter she left. ▶



Clockwise from top: one of Juning's albums, including photos of her taking time off in London and Hong Kong; Juning does a Filipino folk dance in Hong Kong, 1977, from Caroline's parents' albums; Nico and Caroline, right, with their cousins and Juning near London, 1982; Juning's children in the Philippines, 1976; Juning with the Irbys and friends on Tioman Island, Malaysia, 1978



◀ Every second year, over Easter, Juning would return to her island to spend a month with her children. As a child I had no concept of what this trip home meant to her; I missed her, and was always excited when she walked back through the front door after what felt like a long absence, tanned and laden with mangoes from her family farm. She would greet us enthusiastically, but through conversations I have now had with Juning and her children, I know how fraught her departure from the island a few days earlier would have been, and can only imagine how she may have felt on returning to our home, knowing it would be two years before she would see her children again.

I heard fragments about Juning's children's lives as they grew up, graduated, became nurses, engineers and IT experts, had children of their own. Their absence was a kind of presence in our lives: airmail letters containing their photographs were propped against the mirror on her dressing table; the suitcases next to her bed filled gradually with clothes passed on to her by friends in London, or by my mother, until they were so full that I used to sit on them so Juning could zip them shut and send them back to her island.

JUNING, CONVERSATIONS 2004-2007

"In 1977, I came with your family to London for a holiday, just for a month. I was introduced to a Filipina friend, Priscilla, who worked for your grandparents. She took me around, showed me the tourist spots and I enjoyed it. I thought: I can live here, I'd like to stay. When your parents decided to come back to England in 1979, they took me with them.

"When the children were young, we didn't have telecom on the island, so I couldn't ring, only write. I used to send letters telling them what to do and explaining what I was doing here, so that they would understand why I was in London. I didn't see their first communion or their confirmation because I was in London, and I didn't see them growing because I used to come home for a holiday every two years, so I was really sorry that they were growing up without me.

"When I look back on all the years of my life that I've been working so hard just to support my family, I feel happy because I have achieved everything I worked for and dreamt of for my children and my family: they're all educated and have a nice job, they stand on their

own feet, so it's really a good time now to retire."

As a mother myself now, the notion that Juning lived apart from her children for three decades is painful to imagine. I can't shake off a feeling of strangeness that their lives and mine carried on in parallel for all those years, mine with their mother, theirs without. I wanted to understand how this all happened and what the effect on the people involved had been. I decided to go to the Philippines to talk with Juning's children.

JUNING'S CHILDREN, SUMMER 2018

Roly: Juning's eldest child, Roly, is married to Marley. They live on a farm on Bantayan, bought by Juning in the 1980s, and have four grown-up children. They foster two young girls whose Filipina mother lives and works in South Korea.

You were seven when your mother left. What do you remember of that time?

"I was so lonely. Everywhere I was looking for her care. You were lucky, Caroline: you had her care for so many years. I had no one to talk to when I had a problem. If you don't have time with the mother, you don't have the relationship.

"The worst bit was each time she left. All of us were waving Juning off at the port one time. Erma [Roly's younger sister] cried out, 'I want to go with you!' and ran towards the boat. Juning shouted back, 'No, you don't, you don't want to go where I am going.' But I don't think she meant it - it was just a reaction."

Roy: Juning's youngest child, Roy, is an IT specialist on a cruise ship in the Caribbean. He has two young children who live on Bantayan with their mother.

You used to call your grandmother "Mama". How did you see Juning when she visited?

"Because I'm the youngest one, I was a baby when she left. Then one time there was a stranger in my grandma's house. My grandma said, 'This is your mum.' I said, 'No!' It was only when I was about 10 years old that I really acknowledged that she was our mum."

When were you first able to speak with your mother on the phone?

"I started calling my mum when I was 15. Mama told me, 'Just call this number, this time on a Sunday, and charge me.'"

What did you talk about?

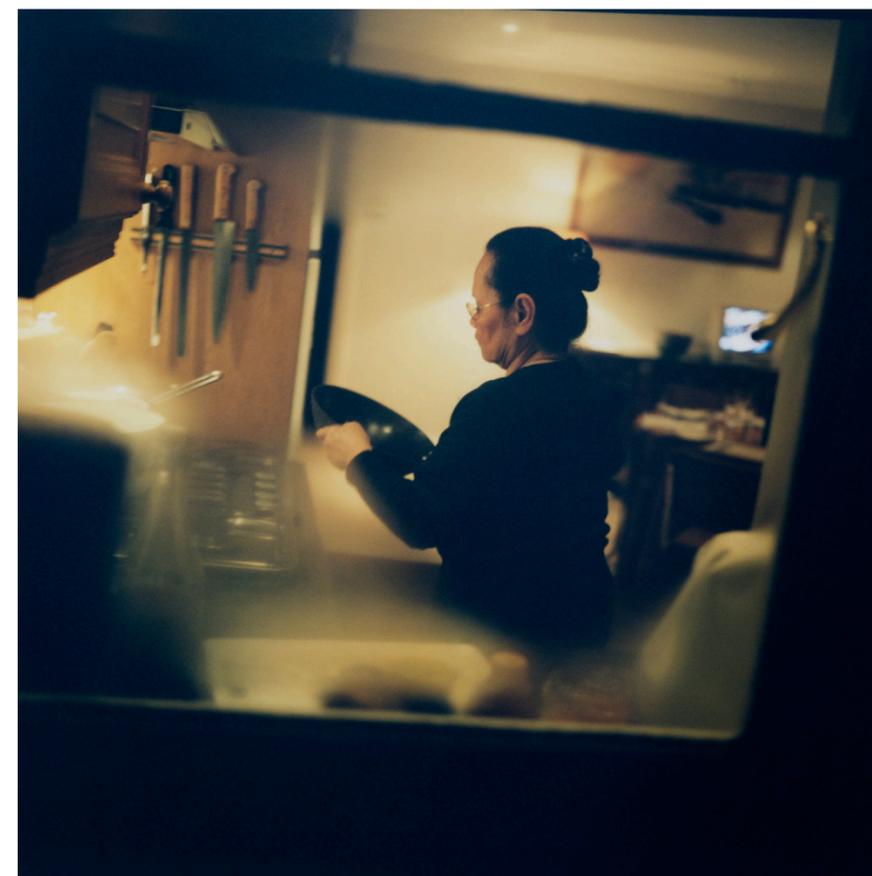
"Only how's our studying, if we have some food, school dinners, tuition, everything." ▶



Clockwise from left: Juning outside the Irbys' London home, 2007; plants growing on Juning's kitchen window sill; Juning at work in the Irbys' home, 2007



'I can't shake off a feeling of strangeness that their lives and mine carried on in parallel for all those years, mine with their mother, theirs without' Caroline Irby





‘The worst bit was when Juning left. All of us were waving her off at the port one time. My sister cried out, “I want to go with you!” and ran towards the boat’ Roly, Juning’s eldest child



Clockwise from top: Fishermen off Bantayan, 2005 (Juning grew up helping her father, a fisherman); Juning with old friends, Bantayan, 2005; Juning making plans, Bantayan, 2005

◀ *Was the money that your mother sent enough?*

“It was not enough. We divided it in half: one part for school, one part for our everyday living expenses. Then the everyday living budget we cut in half again, so that if the next month my mum couldn’t send us money, we would have savings.”

Roel: Juning’s second child, Roel, works on a fish-processing ship off the coast of Alaska, on a cycle of four months on the boat, then two months off. Home is with his wife, Geralyn, and two children on Bohol, another island in the Visayan region of the Philippines.

What do you remember about your mother’s visits home?

“She always brought a photo album with her and told stories about the pictures: this is the family I live with. This is Caroline, this is Nicholas [Nico, Caroline’s brother].”

As the month went by, did you grow closer to your mother?

“Yes, that’s the problem. After two weeks of being at home, my mum would start to say, ‘Next week I’ll be leaving.’ It was hard for us, when we had already got close, to realise that all of a sudden she would leave us behind and be gone again.”

What do you see in this picture of your mother on holiday with us? (See the main image on page 30: on Tioman Island, Malaysia, 1978.)

“There is a sense of longing. It’s like that for me now too: when I go to the airport and my son is crying, I just say to my wife, ‘Go, because I can’t handle it. I don’t want you to see me here, going inside the airport.’ When they stay there... my heart. I cannot describe the feeling when you leave your family to go and work.”

Erma: Juning’s only daughter and third child, Erma, lives in Manila with her son, Bryan (born in 2007), and works as a geriatric nurse.

Your mother told me she used to cry a lot in England, missing you.

“Here with us, she just controlled her emotions. She just kept smiling, no tears: she didn’t want us to see her crying.”

If you had a problem, if you were upset, did you communicate that?

“No! No – we don’t talk about it, because we don’t want Mama to have difficulty in her emotions.”

Did all the years you were apart create a distance?

“Sometimes I forgot her, because she stayed in London for three years before she came for her first

vacation. So what we did is just study, study, so we forget.”

Do you think you’d be a nurse now if your mother hadn’t gone abroad?

“No, because tuition in a nursing school is expensive. You have to pay the dormitory, allowance, projects, tuition. If she’s not abroad, I think I wouldn’t have become a nurse.”

Can you imagine leaving Bryan with family here and working abroad yourself?

“Yeah, I’m planning to! I already trained Bryan to wash clothes, how to prepare his things. But I’ll come back often.”

Where would you like to go?

“London! Hire me! I want to work in a home for the aged.”

Each of Juning’s children responded, initially, to my questions about their mother’s years away with a smile and some version of “it was all OK”. But each conversation passed through a moment where we were both sat in tears, sadness and anger, frustration and guilt mingled together. When Roy said Juning used to ask, in her letters home, whether they had food to eat, I was shocked to think that while she was living with us and feeding us amply, she was also wondering whether her own children had food on their plates.

JUNING, 2018

If you had your life again, would you still have gone overseas to work?

“Yes, I’d still be with you. If only I’m still young, I’d like to buy a little house in Notting Hill, because I’m near the church and everybody knows me.”

Do you miss London?

“A lot. I miss everything. Your family first.”

Do you think you changed, through all the years you spent in England?

“I didn’t change myself, but the environment is different there. There you are independent, no one will ask you any questions. Here, when I go shopping, they will look at my basket to see what’s in there. They will ask where you are going.”

Are you glad you came back to Bantayan?

“I regret coming back here, I should have stayed [in London]. My children are not close to me because they grew up with my sister. I thought when I came back here, we would be close together, but they hardly see me, I hardly see them.” **FI**

This is an edited extract from “Someone Else’s Mother” by Caroline Irby (Schilt Publishing, £35)



Left: Caroline’s daughter with Juning’s son Roel in 2018 on the farm that Juning bought for her children in the 1980s; Below: Cockerrels on the farm



Below: Juning’s son Roly on the family farm with Caroline’s children and Jiin, one of two girls Roly and his wife look after while the girls’ parents are away working in South Korea

