



Final Analysis

Peter Dench considers... Studio portrait of Juning, Cebu City, 1953, from the book, *Someone Else's Mother*, by Caroline Irby

The photographers I tend to admire most are the ones who do what I don't and shoot what I can't. British photographer Caroline Irby is one. Her work came to my attention in 2010 with her first book, *A Child From Everywhere*, in which she photographed and interviewed children from 185 countries who had migrated to the UK. The images were intimate and humane.

This image wasn't taken by Caroline but is the linchpin of her second book, *Someone Else's Mother* (published by Schilt). The studio portrait is Juning, a Filipina woman who lived with Caroline's family in Hong Kong and London for 22 years working as nanny to her and her elder brother. My childhood impression of nannies was shaped by Julie Andrews. They were white western women and could sing. Nannies were for posh families and posh was as far removed from my family as the thousands of miles that separated Juning from hers.

Juning was 13 when this portrait was taken on her first trip away from Bantayan Island where she lived. The eighth of 15 children, she had already put in years of hard work. The tinted cheeks and slender shoulders belie the toil spent working with her fisherman father before school. She wears a Catholic cross – a faith that would guide her to friendships and husbands on the other side of the globe. Her eyes invite you to look straight into her past and hint at the woman she would become.

When leaving home for better-paid work abroad became a necessity, with their father absent, Juning left her four children in the care of her mother. Juning would only see them every second year when she returned for holiday. On her first visit home, her youngest child didn't recognise her.

The notion that Juning lived apart from her children is painful for Caroline to imagine. *Someone Else's Mother* is her response. It's not a judgement on her parents' choice to employ Juning. It tells Juning's story, those of the children she left behind and Caroline's own recollections of a childhood spent with their mother. The stories interweave with photographs taken by Caroline on a Rolleiflex during three



visits to Juning's island, pictures from her father's albums in which Juning features mainly in the role of nanny, and pictures from Juning's own albums.

'I coordinated my most recent visit with her four children, all in their 40s and 50s. Two of them now work abroad themselves. I also took my children and we all spent time together, talked about the childhood

that Juning's children spent apart from their mother, their experience of her occasional visits home, and the effect of her absence on their lives,' says Caroline.

The resolute portrait of Juning stands framed on Caroline's desk. The face of one compelling story among millions of Filipinas who've had to work abroad to support their families.

Peter Dench is a photographer, writer, curator and presenter based in London. He is one of the co-curators of Photo North in Harrogate and has been exhibited dozens of times. He has published a number of books including *The Dench Dozen: Great Britons of Photography Vol 1*; *Dench Does Dallas*; *The British Abroad*; *A&E: Alcohol & England* and *England Uncensored*. Visit petardench.com