



LITERATURE FROM ASIA:

Differently Coloured Lights

Erwin Cabucos

Hong Kong - highlighting the kaleidoscope from the lights at night over Kowloon Bay. Source: Andy Leung

CHRISTY dabs her eyes to dry her tears with the flannelette sheet as she pulls it up to her neck, tucking herself in tightly against the creeping chill of Hong Kong's winter. From her space under the laundry bench, between the washing machine and the refrigerator, she can see the kaleidoscopic glow reflected on Kowloon Bay, especially if she tilts her head up from her pillow. She inhales the peace of the moment, disturbed only by the intermittent whirring of the refrigerator motor, but she has learned to love the noise as a symbol of where she is and what she is doing for her family.

When she started work five years ago as a maid for the Chen Family, on the twenty-ninth floor of a building in Admiralty, the refrigerator noise used to rob her feed her family back in the Philippines, to send her daughter to study nursing at the Davao Doctors College, and to save money so she can send her son to a university soon. She has learned to accept the things she used to hate.

She yawns and rubs her feet together for warmth as she does every night before she falls asleep. Then she makes the sign of the cross – something she's done all her life as she thinks of the people she loves and prays for their safety.

Finally, she looks at the picture of her family on her iPhone. It is the last image she wants imprinted on her mind as she closes her eyes. As she outlines the faces of her loved ones with a finger, the latest FaceTime messages from her daughter Melody pop up: 'I love you, Mang. *Indi lang magkabalaka sa amon dire, kay okay lang kami*, don't worry about us, we are fine here. *Mag capping na ako sa sunod bulan*, I'll start my work experience next month. *Love you man daw siling ni Papang kag ni Jun-Jun. Didto ko kaina sa Carmen*, Papang and Jun-Jun say "I Love You", I was at home with them earlier today.'

'I love you too, Melody,' Christy whispers. She

feels her eyes start to water again. But before the flood of tears can come she stands to get some cold water from the fridge and gulps the liquid down, staring at the shimmering lights that filter between the buildings and the bay. The colours that pierce the darkness give her a sense of triumph, knowing that, despite their poverty and her having to work as a domestic helper far from home, she is able to pay the expensive tuition fees and textbooks needed for her daughter's education – which only the well-to-dos can afford in her home town. Holding the glass, Christy leans on the washing machine and stares at the City, hoping that one day her hard work will pay off and Melody will be the one to send her brother to college. Then, at last, she and her husband will be able to retire with a little help from their two children.

She sighs at the thought that behind the array of buildings, a two-hour flight from this island-city, her family is also going to sleep. She wishes she were there now to advise Jun-Jun, her sixteen-year-old son, to stay away from bad influences, especially drugs.

The knock at the door jolts her. Christy puts on her slippers and slides her jumper over her shoulders as she walks through the kitchen and lounge room to get to the front door. She thinks it must be Kwok Wei, the Chen's only child, who always ignores his parents' instruction to study hard and to come home on time. He's always been a concern for Mr and Mrs Chen, and was even suspected of having been involved in illegal drugs last year, at the age of only fifteen.

The teenager's body rolls on the floor as Christy swings the door open. 'Kwok Wei, are you okay?'

His eyes are half-open. He struggles to stand, then he braces himself with one hand as he sits on the floor.

Before Christy finishes her sentence a pinkish goo escapes from his mouth, spilling on his shirt

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and onto the carpet. Christy's eyes go wide. 'Ay, *yudiputa nga bata ni a, pa kuskusun pa gid ko sang carpet*', cursing the prospect of de-staining and deodorising the carpet one of many things she hates about this job.

'Sorry, Auntie Christy.' He grabs the side of the door to pull himself upright and wobbles towards his bedroom.

Mrs Chen appears, trembling in anger. 'Could you be any more stupid? Drinking at fifteen is not only illegal but extremely dangerous. You could have died!' Her high-pitched voice pierces Christy's ears. Mrs Chen's hand flies onto her son's head; his face twists from the impact. 'Clean yourself. You are grounded! No more Internet. No more games. No more pocket money ...'

Christy starts to sweep up the slime, trying not to gag from the smell.

'M-ma, it was only because of my friend's request. I couldn't reject him. He only turns eighteen once,' the teen mumbles. He slips to the floor, leaning on the side of his bed.

Mr Chen comes out in his boxer shorts. 'Alright, listen,' he says, pointing at his son. 'This should be the last time I see you drunk. None of this stupid thing from now on, do you understand?'

Kwok Wei nods while looking down.

Mr Chen shakes his head. 'It's probably bad influences from those friends of yours. Stop hanging out with them – kids. They don't do you any good.'

'It's not about his friends, *lóuhgùng*. I know their families.' Mrs Chen scuttles towards the teenager, avoiding the spot Christy is trying to clean. She stabs his head with her forefinger. 'It's from his stupid head!' She crosses her arms and breathes rapidly. 'Christy, can you also help him clean himself? She asks in a way that makes it an order. 'He's a mess!' Mrs Chen hurries back to their bedroom, muttering and cursing at why, despite the other things she has to worry about, what with the budgeting and forecasting she has to submit to her company tomorrow, the heavens also saw fit to give her a child that brings hell into her life.

'Get your act together, son!' Mr Chen says as he follows his wife to their bedroom.

After drying the floor, Christy now sprays the spot with a carpet deodoriser. She hurries to the bathroom and turns on the water before going to the teenager's bedroom to undress him. She pinches the hem of his shirt, pulls it up and throws it in the washing basket. Kwok Wei stands up, holding on to the side of his bedroom door, and pushes his jeans and underpants down. She hasn't helped him undress or change for years but tonight is different, confirming the fact that parenting teenagers does bring unpleasant surprises at times. She cannot help but notice his uncircumcised penis on the patch of black pubic hair he has grown since she last saw him naked, and she hands him a towel to cover himself. When he was young she would wrap him with the towel, but now the teenager snatches it from her fingers, realising the awkwardness of exposing himself to her. As she follows him to the bath, Christy recalls her son and the time she has lost in not being there to care for him, and perhaps to get angry with him when she needs to, like most parents do when their children misbehave. Why, she asks herself, does she have to lease her love to others to show its genuineness?

Kwok Wei hands the towel to her and dunks himself in the bath. He stretches his legs while resting his head on the tiles, letting out a groan as the warm water soothes him. He closes his eyes and cups some water in his hands to pour on himself. Steam bellows to the ceiling. Christy lets some air in, conscious not to open the window widely. She squirts liquid soap onto a sponge and hands it to the boy. He simply dangles it, dripping soap over the edge of the bath. She takes it and rubs it on his chest, neck and face. He closes his eyes and moves his chin as she scrubs his skin.

'Thank you, Auntie Christy,' Kwok Wei's voice is still slurred. He lifts his hands and wraps them around Christy's shoulders, wetting her blouse as he pulls her close. 'Thank you very much; you're always here for me, more so than my mother.'

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Christy sees the redness and the brimming of tears in his half-closed eyes. She is touched by the words of her employers' son who she feels could easily be her own after the years she has spent helping bring him up. 'Don't cry, Kwok Wei. That's what I'm here for. Your parents pay me to do this. Wipe your tears.' She stands up to get his toothbrush and squirts some toothpaste on it before handing it to him. C'mon, brush your teeth before going to bed.'

'You may just be doing your job here for money but what you do goes far beyond what Ma's and Pa's money could buy.' He pours some more water on his chest. 'You're more than that. A-and, thanks for being here.'

'That's okay, Kwok Wei. I guess your parents are right. Don't drink, you're too young for that.'

'You know my friends didn't really force me to drink. You have no idea how much I hate my stupid life! I don't think there is any purpose to it.'

'Don't say that.'

'I left the party and walked and walked, feeling sorry for myself and thinking about ending everything. You know...'

'Oh, Kwok Wei.'

'I called my friends but they were busy.' He splashes some water on his face and sweeps it down with his palm. 'I didn't realise I was walking along the busway at Harcourt Road. I was beeped at. I thought I was going to get run over.'

'Really?'

'I was pulled over by the police near Admiralty. Luckily they didn't arrest me. Then I paid someone to buy me some beer and I sculled a few more bottles of San Miguel on my way home.'

'You know my son is roughly the same age as you. He wants to be a police officer after hearing that our new president will increase the salaries of the police.' She wipes the boy's feet but looks at his face. 'If you want, you can come with me to the Philippines during my next holiday. But it's very hot there.'

'I like being in warm places.'

'Not only that; we are also poor. Our house is very poor. You know – no flush toilets, no hot water. We only have hard beds made of bamboo.'

'My teacher said it doesn't matter whether you are rich or poor. What matters is you're happy. Are you happy, Auntie Christy?'

'Yes, Kwok Wei, I'm generally happy. I feel sad too, but more happy than sad. I'm happy because I can support my family in the Philippines. At least they have something to eat.'

'That's really good. I'm sure your kids are really proud of you, and your husband, too.'

'Yep.'

'And you shouldn't worry about being poor then. You know what you ought to do in our life. You make others happy. Really, you are doing things that make you happy.'

'I guess so. I guess, that's life.' Christy smiles and breathes in deeply.

'I don't know what I want, Auntie Christy. What do you think I should do? I am pretty good at Math.'

'You have plenty of opportunities, Kwok Wei. Your parents have money, your country is rich and you have access to good education. Use these things to your advantage, to make good future. Stop thinking of negative, nonsense things.'

Christy mentions about possible courses he should consider, and she makes him agree to see his school counsellor the following day. Eventually, she tucks him into bed and turns the lights off before walking back to her narrow mattress.

She hears the tell-tale moans of pleasure from Mr and Mrs Chen's room at the far end of the apartment and thinks about her husband, and how she wishes she could be with him right now. She wraps herself once more with the flannelette sheet before spreading the quilt on top of her, and ducks her head under the covers before checking the photograph of her family one last time on her iPhone. It's 1:50 am; in four hours she has to get up again to make her employers' breakfast before they go to work. She thinks about what she will

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wear to take Kwok Wei to the school counsellor. Perhaps she shouldn't go for a motherly look, just jeans and a white top – the one with 'Undeclared' printed on it that Melody sent her last Christmas. Kwok Wei's words to her tonight are like balm that massages her aching back and feet, giving her warmth and strength in the isolation from those she loves.

Unexpectedly her phone vibrates softly and a text comes up. It is her husband, Lando: 'I miss you, Chris. I love you, palangga.'

She presses the auto response button that returns her usual message to him – her love. She hugs the phone to her chest and closes her eyes.

She is already asleep as the image of her family fades from the screen. Streaks of Kowloon light reflect on her face from the side of the fridge as its motor runs once more, unnoticed in the night.

Cabucos, E. (2017). 'Differently Coloured Lights', from *Crossroads: an Anthology*, Fowler, L. (Ed). ISBN 978-0-9942770-8-4. Birdcatcher Books, Churchill VIC.

The Differently Coloured Lights is a short story set in Hong Kong that explores the domestic influences of the Asian labour industry and the effects of the changing cultures and economies of the region. Featuring a character – a maid from the Philippines – the intercultural and political crossroads in the plot can be a rich platform for English students and teachers to discuss different perspectives, attitudes, values and assumptions in the contemporary cultural landscape of Asia.

Birdcatcher Books has included this short story in its latest anthology, *Crossroads*, along with 27 other short fictions, available for purchase as an ebook from Smashwords.

Author Erwin Cabucos received a high commendation award in the 2016 QIEU-ETAQ Literary Prize in 2016 for another story – Requeim for Pasig River. Writing from his Philippine background, Cabucos explores themes and characters from Asia. His latest book, *Does It Matter What the Dead Think?* is a reprint of stories published in the Philippine Graphic Magazine, the Philippine Free Press, Growing

Up Filipino, Ala Carte Food and Fiction and Salu-Salu: Anthology of Philippine-Australian Writings.

The suggested classroom activities consist of pre-reading and post-reading exercises for students from Years 10 through to 12, including comprehension and analytical questions to engage students in the context and meanings of the text. The final activity may work as an opportunity for assessment: analyse the concept of 'crossroads' in the short story, *Differently Coloured Lights*.

Activities:

Pre-reading

1. View <https://youtu.be/VJNd3ild9fQ>, and list 8 new pieces of information you have acquired about the Philippines.
2. View <https://youtu.be/dfGzx5zY6C0>, and list 8 new pieces of information you have gained about Hong Kong.
3. Differentiate the Philippines from Hong Kong in terms of population, size and system of government. Use the following links:
Philippines: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-15521300>
Hong Kong: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-16517764>
4. Why do Filipinos work as domestic helpers in Hong Kong?
5. Why do Hong Kong residents need maids from the Philippines?

Post-reading

1. Why is there a need for Christy to leave her family in the Philippines and work in Hong Kong?
2. Why does the Chen family employ Christy?
3. What difficulties does Christy experience as a maid in the Chen family?
4. How does Christy's religion or faith influence the way she handles her situation?

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5. To what extent does technology solve Christy's difficulties?
6. Why does Kwok Wei hide his personal issues from his parents?
7. Christy and Kwok Wei come from two different life situations. Explain their circumstances.
8. To what extent do they share common life situations?
9. What differences in parenting can you detect between Christy's family and the Chen's?
10. How does the setting highlight the plot and the themes of the story?
11. This story is one of 28 pieces in the anthology, *Crossroads*. Explore the definition of 'crossroads' and evaluate the suitability of Cabucos' story in the anthology.
12. Does the ending of the story offer a satisfying conclusion to the issues explored? Why?
13. Analyse the concept of 'crossroads' in the short story *Differently Coloured Lights*.



Maids' Day in Hong Kong. Source: Wikimedia Commons