



Nicki Chen

The Housesitters

The day is breezy and warm, clouds forming and reforming, dropping a little rain and moving on. A typical day in the South Pacific. Julie has opened all the windows in the Zhangs' living room and is dancing across the shiny tile floor to the sound of Chinese drum music. The songs are intricate and provocative, suggesting movements she's never done before—lunges and finger-flutters and *tai-chi*-like leg raises. She beats an imaginary drum. Then, as the song changes, she raises her arms and twists at the waist, clapping like a flamenco dancer.

She found the Chinese drum music in Dr. Zhang's cupboard among the Western orchestral music and the Peking Opera and Gansu mountain songs. The album cover is black with a proud drummer scowling out of darkness. *The Chat, Rolling a Walnut*, the songs are called. *Fight Between Bull and Tiger, Marriage of the Mice*.

Stopping to catch her breath, she leans on the carved nesting tables. Already the sun is out again, streaming through the dining room window. It floods the pure white walls and floors with its light. This is the way the whole house is: white. "Blank walls inviting us to the ten thousand possibilities," Julie said to Riley their first day there, bending her speech to suit the Chinese character of the house.

Of course, the walls aren't actually blank. Shu-hua, the young beautiful wife of Dr. Zhang, is an artist. She has paintings to display: oils and Chinese brush work, the oils peopled

with sensuous blue and green shapes and dabs of Chinese red, the scrolls brushed with branches and wings and mountains in the clouds, everything suggesting something beyond landscape. Like the walls, Shu-hua's paintings invite one's imagination to the ten thousand possibilities.

Perhaps Julie is more sensitive to the houses now than she was three years ago when they started housesitting. She is, perhaps, more ready to bend to their identities, to let each one show her exactly what it has to offer. The Zhangs' house with its beauty and energy is particularly affecting. Mornings it wakes her early, sends her scampering down the cliff to walk on the beach before breakfast. It reminds her to wear sky blue ribbons in her honey blond hair, invites her to sit on the veranda and sketch shadow patterns and papaya trees and flower petals.

Suddenly the drums stop. Julie cocks her head and waits. When they start up again, it's softly, as though at a great distance, tapping, slowly approaching. It is Emperor Qin calling his soldiers to assemble, song number five. And when Julie stands, it can only be with her back straight and head held high. She beats the air like a drummer and turns, a snappy about-face.

"*Misis?*"

"Yes, Mary."

The Zhangs' housegirl is standing in the kitchen doorway crumpling her apron with both hands. "*Misis,*" she says, half-shouting over the drums, "time two woman they come, you want I give them lemonade with cubes of ice?"

"Yes, please."

Mary drops her apron.

It seems to Julie that the housegirl's neck is particularly long and graceful today. She has pulled her hair up from her nape, weaving it cleverly over and under, tying it finally in a plump knot. "The little Chinese cups. And Mary, I like your hair today."

The housegirl giggles and turns away.

It's Julie's turn this afternoon to host the Scrabble group, a simple matter that involves serving a cold drink when the ladies arrive and a snack before they leave. At Kate's house they usually have lemon squash and crustless cucumber sandwiches and streusel-topped coffeecake. Shaila serves curry puffs and *samosas*. And Evelyn, before she moved back to New Zealand, invariably brought out fruit and McAllisters shortbread cookies. Only Julie varies her menu. But then, only Julie lives in a different house each time she entertains them.

Today she has chosen a snack of shrimp dumplings and date-filled *shaobao*. Mary will warm them in Shu-hua's double-deck steamer.

Ever since Julie and Riley came to Port Vila, honeymooning, expecting to stay a mere ten days, Julie has had only one long-term commitment, this Scrabble group. It's a small thing. They meet only twice a month. Even so, she might have quit long ago if Shaila weren't so enthusiastic about it, and if Shaila weren't the wife of Riley's boss.

Colin Gallagher is a small-time contractor who builds mainly houses, but also the occasional small school or warehouse. Neither he nor Riley is getting rich, but Riley has surprised himself by how much he likes being a carpenter. Every weekend he takes Julie to see what they've accomplished. He guides her around the mounds of dirt and stacks of lumber, the steel rods and concrete blocks so he can show her a new gutter or the gravel and pipes of a

drainage system. He takes her by the hand and leads her up planks to second floor bedrooms where they look through the window openings and imagine how the view will look when the landscaping is done. And each time before they go home, he looks around for problems: loose tiles or some rough surface that will need re-sanding on Monday.

It's this interest in fixing things that has made him and Julie so popular as housesitters for Port Vila's expatriate community. People like returning from vacation to find all the little repair jobs they've been putting off taken care of.

Today after work Riley is planning to take her to Tebakor Hill to see a piece of property they've looked at before. It's a lot they could build on. A place where they could have their own little house, including, she supposes, children and papaya trees and a patch of sweet potatoes. They can't afford it yet. Besides, Julie doesn't know what to think of a life like that. It's only one of so many other possibilities.

* * *

By mid-afternoon another squall has come and gone. The sun is hot now; its heat steams up from the grass and radiates out from the stone frogs on either side of the porch.

Kate arrives as in a time-lag, her windshield wipers still going, water dripping from the sides of her car. Watching her climb the stone steps, Julie pictures the rain that must still be falling on the other side of town.

Halfway up, Kate pauses to catch her breath. The steps are steep and irregular—rough, natural-looking slabs of basalt fringed with moss which look as though they could lead to a Chinese monastery rather than to a house.

"These people," she huffs as she approaches the porch. "They might at least have cut a proper driveway." Little ringlets stick to her forehead. A drop of sweat threatens to fall from the tip of her nose. "And such an elegant house too." She catches the drip with the back of her hand.

"Come on," Julie says, "let's get out of the sun."

Kate stops at the threshold, reaching down to pull off her shoe. "Darn pebble."

"Let's see." Julie extends her hand, and Kate shakes the sharp creamy-colored stone into her palm. "Coral rock," Julie notes.

"Yeah. This island's nothing but rocks, rocks, and more rocks."

The Zhangs' entry is an oasis of gray-green tile and hanging ferns separated from the living room by a screen inset with jade and mother-of-pearl.

"Whoa." Kate gasps as they enter the living room, startled as the designer intended she be by the sudden expansion of space—the high ceiling, the vast white walls, the windows facing the Pacific. "I thought you said this fellow was a band leader. How does he afford all this?"

"He's an orchestra conductor. And he has businesses in Shanghai. That's where they are now." Julie motions to a leather chair with a footstool. "Have a seat."

"Lordy!" Kate says as she settles back. "It's soft as a baby's bottom. And red leather! Can you beat that? I swear, if I had a house like this one, I'd not be trippin' around the world. Leastways, not if the house was in Sydney or Melbourne."

She takes a glass of lemonade from the tray offered by the housegirl and sips, waiting for Mary to arrange coasters on the coffee table. When Mary is gone, Kate leans close to Julie. “How do they know you won’t leave rings on their tables or that you won’t steal one of these modern paintings here. They must be worth something, don’t you reckon?”

“I’m sure they are.”

Kate shakes her head. “I don’t see how you do it, Julie, keeping all these houses up. And none of them belonging to you. You’re a wonder, you are.”

Julie shrugs. “It’s fun.”

Kate is the only one who sees things this way. Everyone else thinks Julie and Riley have a real deal going, one big fully furnished house after the other, and never having to pay a cent for the privilege. Most people think the real wonder is that when their honeymoon was over, they didn’t have to go back to the States and look for work and a place to live, that they could sample life a little first. And Julie agrees. After all, what could be better?

Shaila arrives late. And changed. When Julie opens the door, she scarcely recognizes her. She’s cut a foot off her long thick black hair leaving a blunt cut with straight bangs and the sides curving toward the corners of her mouth. It makes her look like a French teenager. Julie opens her mouth to comment, but Shaila is looking past her.

“Warm, isn’t it,” Shaila says, although her skin is perfectly dry. She’s wearing a sleeveless tunic and patterned turquoise and pink leggings instead of her usual slacks and blouse.

“Shaila!” Kate shouts when she sees her. “What’ve you done?”

Shaila raises her eyebrows. “The haircut?” She passes Kate and stops in front of one of Shu-hua’s landscapes. Pulling a lock of hair to the corner of her mouth, she touches it with her tongue. “The young, struggling artist.” She drops her hair and turns away from the painting. “And her millionaire husband.”

Julie tenses on Shu-hua’s behalf. Dr. Zhang *is* rich and nearly twice Shu-hua’s age. “Soon to be parents,” she says, defending their marriage.

The housegirl brings another lemonade, and after a few sips the three women adjourn to the sunroom where a Scrabble board awaits them on a small teak table.

They pull out their chairs and sit down. Then, together, as though on cue, each one picks a tile and turns it over to see who will start. It’s Shaila, who rolls her eyes at her bad luck. Shaila has ideas about Scrabble strategy. Sometimes she carries a Scrabble dictionary in her purse. It has long lists of acceptable two- and three-letter words in the back.

They return their tiles face-down, and as Julie stirs to mix them up, she notices Shaila looking around the sunroom at the canvases stacked against the wall and the easel that holds a half-finished painting. The sunroom is long and narrow with windows all along one side. Hanging plants provide shade for the table. Shaila seldom comments on the houses, but she always looks.

She spells her opening word back-to-front, her silver bangles jingling softly as she moves her arm. Today her nails are painted strawberry pink instead of the usual red.

“JIMMY?” Kate asks.

“The verb.”

Shaila has placed it off-center to take advantage of a double-letter square. It earns her forty-six points.

Kate leans over her tray, thinking. She sighs and squints, bites her lip, rearranges her tiles. In the end she can only come up with JOKE: a fifteen-pointer.

Julie usually does better than Kate, but she's a slow thinker. It doesn't help to fret about it though. She sits back in her chair and gazes lightly at her tiles, waiting for the letters to suggest a word. She tries not to look at Shaila, but she can't help being aware of the other woman's intensity, the way Shaila seems always to be willing words to form, weighing their value, discarding, choosing.

She touches her index fingers to the ends of her tray, framing the seven letters she has to work with. It takes a while, but eventually the word takes shape in her mind. SHRIMP. She spells it vertically using Shaila's "M," and then counts up her score: twenty-six points. Not bad.

Shaila hums as she turns JIMMY into JIMMYING. The tune she's humming is from the musical comedy presented last month by the Port Vila amateur theater group and sung by the tall Frenchman who was her co-star. JIMMYING stretches all the way to the red triple-word square. It earns Shaila sixty-nine points.

They play for another hour-and-a-half without Julie and Kate ever catching up. After tallying the scores, Shaila pushes her chair back. "Which way to the bathroom?" she asks, smoothing the strap of her pink leather handbag over her shoulder.

"Through the living room," Julie tells her, "and then down the hall." It occurs to Julie that Shaila will be tempted to peek in the bedrooms as she passes, and though Julie never shows the women around her houses, she doesn't object to Shaila's curiosity. Knowing things is a passion for Shaila, something, it seems to Julie, that borders on anger, or resentment, as though she—whose grandparents were spirited out of India by the British to work in the Fijian cane fields—deserves to see everything in the wide world to make up for the limitations her grandparents experienced.

Mary brings Chinese tea and the *shaobao* and shrimp dumplings. After waiting a few minutes Julie tells Kate to go ahead and start. The little handle-less cups are too hot to hold, and as they lean down blowing on their tea, Julie imagines Shaila peering into the bedroom from the doorways, maybe even tiptoeing over the blue-gray sculptured carpet in the master bedroom to get a closer look at the embroidered duvet with its tatted lace edge or at the rosewood chest's carved lid or the inlaid mother-of-pearl designs on the lacquer jewelry boxes. Kate and Julie are halfway through their second cup of tea before Shaila rejoins them. She doesn't mention what she's seen, and Julie doesn't ask.

When the women are gone, as she and Mary are clearing the dirty dishes off the coffee table—Mary kneeling, Julie bending at the waist—she remembers the planned trip with Riley to Tebakor Hill. He'll want her to be ready when he gets home from work so they can get to the property while it's still light. She pinches up a crumb of steamed dumpling from the table and brushes it onto the stack of dirty dishes.

The whole idea of building a house on Tebakor Hill smacks of something hard and forced. It was Riley who taught Julie how to let things happen naturally. And it works for her,

better than she ever could have imagined. Their honeymoon, for example. She and Riley had no idea his uncle would offer to let them stay in his house or that his parents would pay their airfare to Vanuatu. Julie had never even heard of Riley's Uncle William, or for that matter of Vanuatu.

"Thank you, Mary," she says, leaving the housegirl in the kitchen to finish the dishes. This of course is another detail she couldn't have imagined: housegirls who cook and clean and call her *misis*, a different one in each house.

But now, ironically, Riley seems to have lost faith in the method he taught her of simply letting life flow.

She switches on the bedroom light, and as she steps inside, she notices a strange dust on the dresser top: fine like talcum powder but glittering. She pulls out a tissue and wipes it into her hand. *What in the world?* She tilts her palm back and forth watching it glint under the ceiling light. Shaking her head, she brushes it into the wastebasket. Then she opens the closet door and takes out a cotton sweater.

Last year when they were in the Holloways' house, Riley started talking about moving back to the States, maybe applying to graduate school to study history and eventually teach it. He was reading books from the Holloways' bookcase then, all those histories of Fiji and Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu. He wanted Julie to decide on something too—a job maybe, or another degree, something more serious than her undergraduate English degree. It made her nervous. But then, after they moved from the Holloways' to the Bonets' house, he stopped talking about moving back. He played darts on their patio, and on the weekends, they explored the lagoon together in the Bonets' canoe.

Julie drapes the sweater over her arm and turns out the bedroom light. As she passes the stereo in the living room, she considers putting on some music. Instead, she kicks off her sandals, puts her feet up on the sofa, closes her eyes, and listens to the surf and the rustling of palmera leaves.

The property on Tebakor Hill is different from other places they've stayed in Port Vila. It doesn't face the bay or either of the lagoons. It looks across a ravine into a steep-sided green mountain. Julie remembers it as a fragrant place, quiet except for the birds.

The first time they looked at it, rainbow lorries flew over their heads—three pairs of them, flying high and fast and squawking as they cut across the ravine to the tangle of green on the side of the mountain. Their bodies were the bright green of a field of newly planted alfalfa, their heads bright red. After they passed, Riley cut a branch and drew a floor plan in the dirt—two bedrooms, a bathroom, an L-shaped living/dining room, a small kitchen along the side. It was the kind of house that would suit a young couple like them, the kind of house Colin and Shaila lived in.

She couldn't imagine it though. When she tried to picture building a house and actually settling here, it just seemed crazy. For her, their three years of housesitting was like reading a stack of novels in which she imagines herself living one kind of life after another. Vanuatu was for fun, but it wasn't their real home.

As she waits for Riley, Julie thinks of home—not her parents' house or any particular school or freeway or shopping center—but of the United States of America, as though she is

looking down on it, high enough up to see both oceans. She sees the Rockies and the Mississippi and the Great Lakes, New York City and LA and Washington, D.C.

The sound of tires on the gravel interrupts her reverie, and she slips on her sandals and heads out the door and down the hill.

“How was Scrabble?” Riley asks as she climbs in beside him.

“Fine. Shaila won.”

“As usual,” they add in unison, laughing.

“You must have been stingy with the snacks today.” Riley pokes her in the side. “I saw Shaila’s car parked in front of the Waterfront Café when I drove past.”

Julie shrugs. “Thin people have big appetites.”

The road to town doesn’t go past Uncle William’s house, but it passes many of the houses they’ve lived in. Most aren’t visible from the road, but Julie remembers all the turns that lead to them. She has only to glance at the gravel road on the left to follow it in her mind past a scruffy pink mansion, through potholes, around a sharp curve and up to the road’s end where the Banerjees’ house sits on a high point overlooking Vila Bay. Farther, on the right, is the cutoff to the Holloways’ and Bonets’ houses—another bumpy road that leads through a field and then onto the ridge above Erakor Lagoon. Only the Vivarellis’ house shows from the road, its low brick walls and magenta bougainvillea partially hiding the white-washed stucco.

She can conjure up the feel of each of the houses. How the Banerjees’ house smelled of incense and cumin in the morning when the drapes were still closed, and how—even when they were opened—it still seemed closed off from the rest of the world. She could picture the sunset from their deck, the bay with a cruise ship’s lights disappearing behind Iririki Island. She could do the same with each of the houses—the Holloways’ with its dark carved masks and nose flutes and penis wrappers hanging on the walls beside bookshelves stuffed with works of history and anthropology, or the Bonets’ where bikes and sailboards adorned the carport, and dartboards and well-stocked bars stood beside the swimming pool and the dining room table, or the Vivarellis’ with its mobiles and hanging crystals and stuffed animals on all the children’s beds. She could imagine herself back in any of those houses. And sometimes she does. Mostly though, she gives herself over to the house they’re living in at the moment. And this week, that’s the Zhangs’ house.

Bringing herself back to this moment, riding with Riley in his pickup truck, she continues their conversation.

“Shaila cut her hair,” she says. “You should see. She looks like a different person.”

“Really.”

“Well, no, come to think of it. She looks exactly like herself, like the person she was meant to be or always wanted to be.”

“How’s that?”

“Smart. You know Shaila: sophisticated, world-wise.”

As they head down the hill toward town, Julie reaches over to brush sawdust out of Riley’s dark hair. It’s a pale, fine dust, soft on her fingers. Dull, she thinks, not at all like the

glittering, metallic dust on the bedroom dresser. Suddenly she realizes, fear flaring in her head, that it wasn't dust. What she saw was filings, powdery little bits of bronze.

Shaila!

Kate was right to wonder why the Zhangs would trust her and Riley with so much, not only their tabletops and the paintings, but also the Ming vases and the carved jewel-encrusted screen, the silk dresses and the jewelry.

The big mistake, both hers and Shu-hua's, was the jewelry. Undoubtedly, it was real: twenty-four karat gold, rubies and jade. That's what Chinese women liked. Julie should have been more careful. And Shu-hua shouldn't have trusted the little brass, fish-shaped locks on her jewelry boxes. Julie is almost certain the locks were in place when she got her sweater, which only means they were cut—or filed—and then propped back in place.

She waits for the view of the Waterfront Café to present itself. Descending the hill, she finds herself looking not only for Shaila's car in the parking lot uphill from the café, but also beyond the café to the dock, where the yacht of a certain Frenchman, Shaila's co-star, should be tied. As Julie feared, the car is there; the yacht is gone. And with it, if Julie's suspicion is correct, Shu-hua's jewelry.

"We have to go back," she says quietly. "There's something I have to check on."

* * *

Later that evening, when Henri Ho—the only person they know with a speedboat—has given up searching for Shaila and her Frenchman, Julie and Riley drive Colin home to the neat, white house with square windows he built for himself and Shaila. The house has a solar water heater on the roof and no view at all.

Shaila has ended it for Julie and Riley. Along with Shu-hua's jewelry, she has taken the spotless reputation that made full-time housesitting possible.

Riley looks as deflated as she feels. They watch Colin unlock the door and silently follow him in.

"Bitch!" Colin shouts to the silent house. Then he turns to them, spreading his arms. "Well," he says, his face a sad mask of forced joviality, "how 'bout a beer?"

In Shaila's cozy little kitchen Julie pours beer into glass mugs. The counter has a backsplash of hand-painted tiles—sheep and milkmaids and weeping willow trees.

"Vanuatu wasn't good enough for her," Colin says. He stares at the checkered placemat Julie has slipped under his beer watching the moisture spread around the edges of his mug. Moths are gathering on the outside of the mosquito screen. "She wanted to live someplace posh like London or Paris."

A pot of rice and another of chicken curry are waiting on the stove. Julie lights the gas, turns it to medium-low and stirs. The housegirl must have cooked the curry using a recipe Shaila taught her.

"Who would have thought?" Riley says. He has been quiet all evening, embarrassed for his friend.

“Ah, who needs her. I’ll get another woman in Sydney. Hell, I’ll get a woman here.”

* * *

It’s late when they leave Colin’s house. The roads are deserted, the houses and shops along the way silent. Only an occasional porch light is left on. Moonlight falls on the surfaces of roofs and trees and picket fences like a fine, shimmering dust. And the town, perched on its lacey rocks, seems as weightless as the moon’s reflection in Vila Bay. As light as a sailboat suspended on the great, black ocean.

“I never want to forget this island,” Julie says, stretching her arm out the open window. Riley nods. “It was great while it lasted.”

He lifts his foot off the brake, and as the pickup coasts downhill, Julie opens her fingers, letting the cool night air slip ever so sweetly through them.

Nicki Chen has been published in *SORTES Magazine*, *Tidepools Magazine*, *Confrontation Magazine*, and *City Primeval*. She won a bronze medal in Best Regional Fiction in the Independent Publisher Book Awards (2021) for her novel *When in Vanuatu* and was a finalist in the Indie Excellence Book Awards for *Tiger Tail Soup*, a novel of China at War. Nicki received an MFA in Creative Writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts and a BA in Elementary Education from Seattle University. For twenty years she lived in Asia and the South Pacific with her husband and their three daughters. She now lives in Edmonds, WA, a sometimes rainy, often beautiful little city overlooking the Salish Sea. You can learn more at <https://nickichenwrites.com/>.