

SCARLETT

by Chris Rose

Here's Scarlett, in the garden of a friend's house in London on a sunny summer morning, the kind of mornings that are unusual in England. Scarlett is twelve years old ("thirteen in November" she tells me), and is trying to understand the world around her. She asks questions about everything, all the time.

I tell her that I want to ask her a question, and I ask her why she's called "Scarlett", and what the name means, and if it comes from anywhere in particular, and she says, "No it's just a stupid name my parents chose because they liked it. It doesn't mean anything." I wonder if her parents named her after the heroine of a favourite film, perhaps, but then again, I know her dad and this sounds unlikely. I think they probably chose it just because they liked the sound of it.

Scarlett is worried about changing school after the summer, she worries that she's too short for her age and that the other children at the school will make fun of her. She shows me some pictures of the school she is at now, and her classmates. I look at the picture and it shows children of all heights and shapes and sizes. Some are tall, some are short, some are fat and some are thin. Some are black and some are white, and most of them are somewhere inbetween, some have red hair and some have blond hair, some have long hair and some have short hair.

I tell her not to worry about the new school, tell her that she'll be ok, and ask her about the new subjects she'll be studying. She tells me that she's worried about learning French, and I tell her not to worry, that it isn't a very difficult language. She tells me that she already knows five languages.

"Five languages!" I shout. "That's impossible! How do you already know five languages?"

"Because I've got five languages in my body" she says.

I ask her what she means, and she starts to tell me the story of her family. Some of the story I already know. I've already heard stories about her grandfather. He was from Scotland, he was a sailor, but not a very good sailor, so he only got as far as Portsmouth, a big navy town on the south coast of England, not very far from Scotland at all. When he got to Portsmouth, he stopped there, left the navy and became a boxer. He lost fights and drank a lot. However, he still managed to see the world by meeting a woman who came from Laos. Nobody really knows how this woman had ended up in Portsmouth, but she still lives there, and I tell Scarlett that she should try and find out her grandmother's story.

"No, she's too old now" says Scarlett, "and anyway, she's lived in Portsmouth nearly all her life." Scarlett's grandparents were only together long enough to produce a son, probably one of the only Scottish-Laotians in the world. They called him Bill, which is usually short for "William", but his name was just "Bill". Bill inherited his father's personality and his mother's looks, so the only thing he thought he could do was become a rockstar. He never really managed to become a rockstar, though, so now he works as a graphic designer.

I don't know Scarlett's mum, so I ask her to tell me about her mum.

"My mum's Polish" she says, "Well, not really, because she was born in Brighton, but her mum and dad are from Poland. But they've lived there, like, for always. But I know that her mum was from somewhere that was Germany, and then became Poland, so she's really German, I suppose. So that's another language that I've got in my body."

I ask Scarlett if she can actually speak all the languages that she says she has "in her body", and she looks at me like I'm stupid.

"Of course not" she says. "But I've still got them in me!"

We count up her "languages" – Scottish, Laotian, German, Polish.

"That's only four!" I tell her.

"No, there's English too!"

"Of course there is" I say. And then I look at Scottish-Laotian-German-Polish-English Scarlett, with her name that comes from nowhere and I ask her,

"And you Scarlett, where are you from?"

She thinks for a long time, such a long time that I think perhaps she hasn't heard my question. But then before I can repeat it she looks up and at me.

"I'm from here", she said. "I'm from London".