

A GLASSHOUSE of STARS *



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SHIRLEY MARR



USBORNE



CHAPTER ONE

HOUSE

You have arrived for a better life at the New House in the New Land. It has been a long journey, the first time you've ever been on an aeroplane. It was nerve-racking when they checked the suitcases at the airport, even though your family have next to no possessions, let alone anything to hide. You didn't know what big meant until you saw the city with the glass towers that touched the sky; the suburbs with houses so close together. You tell yourself everything is going to be fine. The hardest part is over. You made it.

You're all too scared to go inside. First Uncle could be in there. He insisted on a funeral as per the local customs of this land – one that possibly didn't include the ritual of

telling him he was now *dead*, so he might have come home unaware.

Ma Ma's knuckles are white from grasping the yellow protective talisman with both hands. Ba Ba pretends superstitions are for ignorant people. He inserts the key into the door. He doesn't turn the handle.

The rag doll that Ma Ma made out of an old rice sack is clasped tightly in your arms – you are much too old for her any more, but she's all you have. You stare up at the huge white columns propping up the crumbly tofu triangle of a roof. The long drop down to earth from the winding stone staircase you have climbed is the same scary feeling in your stomach.

You turn instinctively towards Ma Ma's side as you used to do, to bury your face inside the folds of her dress. But now that she is huge with child, she has taken to gently nudging you away, so you pull back before she does.

"I didn't expect it to be...a mansion," says Ma Ma.

"Houses in the New Land are all supposed to be big. I have been warned," replies Ba Ba.

You stare up, disorientated. You don't know if the house is truly too big or if it's only big because you're used to living in a cramped space.

Long fingers of cactus reach all the way up to the second floor, covering the walls like hands on a face. Balanced on the roof at the very top is a third storey, a single room with a semicircular window like an open eye.

A light inside the window flickers on and then off again. A wink. No, it is just your imagination. But what a strange thing to imagine. You look over at your parents, but they don't seem to have noticed.

The cold winter wind blows, an icy chill that none of you have ever felt before. The amber pane in the middle of the front door is frosted and blind. Ba Ba rattles at the handle, which appears to be stuck. Suddenly, it gives way and you all tumble into a musty darkness.

It takes your eyes a while to adjust. Soon you realize you are staring at a world made completely out of dark brown wood and motes of dust that float past your nose like magic.

Ba Ba turns the hallway light on and everything is a yellow glow. He takes the talisman off Ma Ma and sticks it outside, above the front doorframe, where the wind flaps it all about. You think the protection spell written on it is for babies, because magic is childish, but you are relieved all the same.

Inside the house, on the brown brick wall facing the entrance, Ba Ba places an octagon with a piece of mirror in the middle called a bagua. To reflect bad luck away. Later, he will go outside, light incense sticks and thank First Uncle for your new home.

Ma Ma is told to go straight to the bedroom and have a lie-down even though she protests. She says she will have time enough to rest after the baby is born, because for a whole month Ma Ma will not be allowed to do anything. Not even have a shower, even if she complains her hair is oily or her armpits are stinky, not one.

The only thing she will be allowed to do after the birth is rest. Your Aunties told you that there is nothing more important than looking after the baby – and why would Ma Ma want to be doing anything else, anyway? That, and the fact that Ma Ma has to eat lots of stewed pork knuckle. Ginger and sweet black vinegar too, but mostly pork knuckle.

This is how things are. Like the bagua on the wall. Like the fact your parents seem much more relieved now that the bagua is up. Like the fact you have come to this New Land to start a new and better life. You don't question it.

You have to be a good girl.

Free to explore by yourself, you find the kitchen is

completely orange. The bathroom is lime green. The rest of the house, though, is that dark wooden brown. You don't think these are the prettiest colours in the world, but they're the colours New House is, and you are determined to get along. Because when you look down at your skin you know it is darker than the people in this New Land, and when you see the plait of hair over your shoulder, you know nobody here has coarse black hair like yours. Maybe you look frightening and different.

"I'm sorry you didn't get to meet First Uncle," says Ba Ba. "It would have been nice to all live together. There's definitely the space for it."

He has a newspaper open and is struggling to read beyond the meagre handful of words he knows.

"Can you understand this?" he asks.

LABOURER NEEDED NO EXPERIENCE REQUIRED

You shake your head. You become aware that you haven't said anything since this morning, when you realized it was the day to get onto the plane and leave your old home for ever. You get the sinking feeling you're going to find it hard to talk much again.

The words are too big anyway, and the only word you can read (which is “no”) doesn’t help at all. Ba Ba rubs his chin. You are both in the same boat. Ba Ba gives up and turns the page to see if anything makes more sense on the other side, but it is the same story.

Now that you have seen everything down here, you are determined to go upstairs.

You think of that window.

It blinked once at you.

Perhaps if you find the room you might find the eye and the face of the giant behind it, looking through the entire house like a camera. Maybe this house was built by giants. That would explain why it’s so big; otherwise why would First Uncle have all this space for one person?

“Don’t wander too far, Meixing,” your father calls. “I might need you for something else.”

New House has lots of different tiles – small multicoloured patchwork in the toilet, white with yellow daisies in the bathroom and brown and orange circles in the kitchen. Everywhere else, uneven squares the colour of baked earth undulate and shift like sand. The house wears all of them like scales.

Tiles are something you are used to. The tiny flat you

lived in had white uniform tiles everywhere, even the bedrooms.

“Fit for the hot weather. Easy to sweep,” Ma Ma had said.

Upstairs, though, there is something strange on the floor. Shaggy, spongy and dirty, with round patches of dark burgundy here and there. This, you presume, is New House’s fur; the marks, her spots.

You stretch out and place your bare foot on top, trapping the fibres in between your toes. You don’t know what you were expecting, perhaps a growl. Instead you feel a vibration. It could be your imagination, it could be the house settling, it could be a purr.

First Uncle has made a bedroom for you, but it is only half finished because First Uncle had a heart attack while picking oranges out in the backyard, one week before you were all to arrive – this is the awful news First Uncle’s lawyer told Ba Ba. This is why only one of the walls is painted. One perfect pink square, like a sheet of joss paper.

But you have your *own* bedroom.

You no longer all have to sleep together, two mattresses on the floor pushed together like an ill-fitting puzzle. Feet against head, head against feet.

In comparison, New House is a palace. You should feel like a princess, but instead you feel more like an intruder who might at any moment be told to go back home. You place your rag doll on the bed, with the superstitious worry that it will be rejected by some unwritten rule of this inner universe. Nothing happens to the doll. She slumps against the pillow and you are relieved.

As if sensing that you need a distraction, a door creaks somewhere beyond your bedroom. This prompts you to go out and investigate. The house appears to watch you as you wander down the hall and find a pale pink door you swear you didn't pass before. You stick your head inside.

The ceiling in this room is not in line with the height of the other ceilings. It is three times as tall, to fit what you discover is an entire playground complete with a rocket, a slide and a spinning wheel. It is too much.

You run away in fright and bolt back down the hallway. You stop at your bedroom door, your hand over your heart. It is beating like mad. How big is this house? How scary?

Big Scary.

The house slowly closes the door you have left open; the creaking sound a sad whimper.

“It’s not your fault you’re scary, but it’s not my fault I’m scared,” you whisper to the house, the first words you have said all day.

There is a tapping noise along the hallway. Big Scary is composing a long response.

“If you’re angry about me being here, know that I wish I wasn’t here either.”

You shut your bedroom door behind you and sit cross-legged on the bed, staring out the window into the backyard. You see waist-high weeds and a broken-down house made of glass. You don’t see any orange trees. The orange trees were all First Uncle ever talked about in his letters and on the phone. About watering and pruning and what type of animal poo was the best and when and how to apply it.

On the fence sits a black and white cat, wondering if she is brave enough to jump down into that long, wild grass. She looks at you and you look back at her. She winks and then jumps back to the safe side of the fence she came from. You rub your eyes in surprise and then you rub them again. Looking all around you with blurred vision at these strange new surroundings, you wish you could jump back to safety too.