“Naming Rights”

She knew her name was Niamh. Her father had spent hours with her, helping make her name in the back garden with mud. They’d been planting cabbage seeds and pulling out weeds when he asked her if she could spell her name yet. She didn’t know what he meant, and so he showed her, finding some mud and shaping it into crude letters, laying them on the lawn. She picked them up one at a time, wondering what was expected of her. He pointed at her and said her name, and then he sounded out each letter for her slowly, pointing to the letter made of mud on the lawn each time. She repeated what he said, and sounded out her name, over and over until she too could spell it. When the mud dried out the letters of her name were left there like crudely made pottery, propped up by the wall in the garden until the rain came and washed them back into the grass.

At the dark house they didn’t call her Niamh. They usually called her nothing but you. Sometimes they said 131. Occasionally they said Eve which was frightening, because she knew that story. Eve was the reason for the fall from grace, for the end of the time in the garden with the fruit and the flowers. If it wasn’t for Eve everything would still be perfect and Man would be saved. She wondered if that’s why she was there, at the dark house, at the Industrial School for Homeless and Destitute Children (which made it sound as if they made things of metal when really all they did was sleep, eat and clean there). Man had fallen and she was being punished for her part. And that was why her father had never come back, because he was a Man. It was why the cabbages had gone to seed and the weeds took over the garden at her real home.

She hadn’t been allowed in the garden anymore, her mother didn’t like it after her father was gone. So she stayed inside and tried to clean up, but there was always a new mess and she couldn’t tidy it all before she went to school every day. By the time she’d found something to eat, then cleaned up it was already time to go. Finding fresh clothes had become increasingly difficult, and there were no replacements for worn out sleeves or too short hems. No matter how hard she tried she knew she hadn’t looked quite right as she lined up at the last bell, usually at the end of the queue for her class. Simon would quickly turn around to check she was there and smile at her before turning back to face the teacher. She knew the smile was no longer on his face when he turned away, because the one time he had forgotten to stop smiling, the teacher had pulled him out of line and thumped him in the face for Insolence. They all wondered what insolence was. Was it smiling?

The most surprising thing about being taken away to the dark house was that she continued to go to the same school, even if they shaved her head and made her wear a cap. School was alright. Even if you weren’t allowed to smile because it was Insolence and you had to write on a slate which was hard and cold, there were good bits. The fire which was always roaring in the grate when they arrived at school was delicious, and she loved it when the teacher read to the class. The stories were often about people far away who had troubles which they always managed to solve by the end. Sometimes there were stories about boys who seemed a little like her, but they were orphans and she wasn’t. She had a mother and a father, she just wasn’t quite sure where they’d gone. Simon said they must have had a good reason to go and
they’d come back one day when the time was right. When she listened to the stories she imagined herself sitting by the roaring fire, drinking a cup of cocoa, which was a drink she had never tried, but thought it must be like drinking honey mixed with cinnamon. In all the stories when the children were finally safe after all their adventures, someone gave them a cup of cocoa.

The best part of school was when they were allowed outside to their allotments. They weren’t real allotments like grownups had where you all had a big strip of land and could grow anything you like. These were an earth square beside the classroom windows. Everyone had their own and they could grow what they liked. Sometimes the sun was shining and it warmed her all the way through to her scalp. When she turned her head quickly her hair gave off the smell of the sun. The teacher brought some seeds, but others were brought from homes. One girl had sunflowers, and another daffodils. Niamh leaned over hedges on her way home and picked up seeds from the ground, but they didn’t always grow. When they did it was Magic. She had grown broad beans which had beautiful purple and white flowers before they turned, just like that, into pods with green beans inside which you could eat straight from the plant.

The school had an annual fair. The usual treats were there, if you had the money to pay for them. Candy floss, Rides on the Pony, Shoot the Target, Coconut Shy. One year there was a new entertainment. It was a gardening competition and anyone could enter. Niamh knew that the winner’s garden would have to be extra special. Their teacher was the judge, and she liked daffodils, daphne and roses. Niamh thought for days about how to get these things. She watched the gardener at the dark house, wondering if she could ask him. Finally on her way home from school with the others, she darted around the side of the house when Matron wasn’t looking. The gardener was beside a compost heap with a pitchfork, and he was turning over the steaming brown heap. Niamh coughed and he turned around. Get inside he said. You will be seen. She said Please and burst into tears. He knelt down and offered a grubby handkerchief. What is it? Niamh tried to stop crying as she explained, I need to grow spring flowers. Please. He smiled and lifted his eyebrows. She wondered if that was Insolence and should she hit him in the face? But she remembered how that felt and thought she would not. He gestured to a pot at the corner of the house. I’ll leave them over there tomorrow. You get them on your way. She nodded three times and cried again. He patted her shoulder and turned her round, and she walked into the dark house, thinking of flowers and his smile. She was still holding his handkerchief.

When the fair came everyone said Niamh’s was the most beautiful garden, but the teacher did not give her the prize. Niamh thought the flowers were wonderful, so she did not mind missing out on the prize. A shadow passed and she turned around. A woman stood there with the teacher. The woman had a feather in her hat, blue and green with brown speckles. She leaned over the garden and breathed in the smell of stocks. It’s so beautiful she said and smiled. The teacher looked awkward and tried to move the woman on. What is your name? asked the woman. The teacher glared, and Niamh looked hard at the woman, who leaned over her. Niamh stood on her tiptoes and whispered her own true name into the woman’s ear with the peacock feather above. The woman smiled again and moved away with the teacher. She
looked back once, but Niamh was trembling so hard and her eyes were full of salt so she couldn’t see her clearly.

A few weeks later, Niamh returned to the dark house and walked through to the kitchen to begin her duties. As Niamh worked, Matron came up behind her, grabbed her arm and told her she looked a wreck. She walked her up the stairs to the bathroom where she took off Niamh’s cap and pinafore, roughly washing her with a flannel before putting her in a dress she had never seen before. They walked down the stairs and out the front door, and there was the gardener having a conversation with the woman from the fair. They both looked at Niamh as she stumbled towards them, Matron pushing from behind. The woman smiled and Niamh was confused, but not worried that Matron would hit her. Smiling was obviously something the woman was allowed to do. The gardener smiled too and walked away, looking back and raising his eyebrows at Niamh. The Woman said Hello Niamh. Niamh thought the bottom had fallen out of the world through her stomach. She didn’t know where to look and Matron was speaking quickly, explaining she was Eve, and that was a better name. We don’t let them use that language here. They need to progress and learn the old ways are no good. The woman looked at Matron, and at Niamh. We would like to be alone for a moment she said, and Matron nodded and walked towards the front door, frowning.

How are you Niamh Greenfingers? The woman asked. I am well, replied Niamh. How are you really? Niamh looked at her and, thinking of the gardener’s smile, decided to trust her. I am not well. I am sad. Where are my mother and father? The woman sighed. I don’t know, I have tried to find out but no one will tell me, or else they don’t know. Your father has been a soldier. He may be fighting still. I will try and learn where. Your mother, I don’t know. She became unwell after your father left I think. This was all very new information and Niamh didn’t feel she understood, but she nodded. I’m so sorry, I should have said - I’m Aisling. I have a big garden at my house. Would you like to visit me? Niamh couldn’t remember what happened after that, but woke up lying on the ground looking at the sky and the worried faces of Matron and Aisling. The gardener was called to carry her into the house before she could reply to Aisling’s question. Aisling called after her I will return on Saturday. The gardener whispered to her - Aisling is good, so trust her Niamh Greenfingers.

Camellias, Rhododendrons, Oaks, Magnolia and Azaleas! called Aisling as they walked away from the dark house on Saturday morning. Can they not think of anything a little more imaginative? They come all the way around the world to plant the garden they had at home. Exiles, martyrs, criminals and the children of the idle rich!

None of this made any sense to Niamh who was still reeling from the morning preparations. She had been given her own clean toothbrush and had not had to share with the rest of the dormitory. Be sure to mention that to Mistress Aisling said Matron. Her cap was clean and her pinafore ironed. The gardener gave her some daphne which she handed to Aisling when she arrived. How beautiful, thank you said Aisling as they met at the bottom of the stairs. It was a rainy day with the plants dark green, shiny and slick with rain. Niamh slipped a little on
the rotting flowers and Aisling called out ‘Niamh!’ and grabbed her arm, tucking it in her own as they left through the white gates and turned right, walking up the hill. Niamh smiled as a warm feeling moved up that arm and into her whole body. She felt like she was sitting by a warm fire drinking cocoa, and it was delicious.