

Excerpt from 'Listen for the Nightingale'
Chapter 1 pps 5-7

It happens during chemistry. I'm watching the pigeons on the sports shed roof and then it occurs to me. It isn't like ordinary thinking. It slides into my mind like a snake, like the serpent from the Garden of Eden. I could kill myself. Suicide. An end to everything.

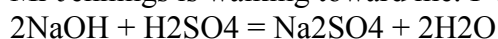
Startled, I turn from the window and glance around. Everyone is busy copying equations into their notebooks. They're like that at this school. Conscientious. I used to be too. Before. Before it all got to be too much.

I need to think. To examine the serpent. He coils himself around my mind. He knows I am watching him and his tongue flicks in and out of his mouth. I look around the classroom again but it's difficult to think at school. You'd think it would be easy because education is meant to be about thinking. Or at least that is what I used to believe before I came here. Now I know it's not. It's about conforming, about fitting into their pattern.

Mr Jennings is watching me. He knows I'm not doing my work. He doesn't like me, though I'm not sure why. You'd think he wouldn't bother. After all, I'm not that important. Quickly, I pick up my pen. I'd better start, otherwise he'll give me another detention and that'd waste time. I don't want that, especially now I've got this to decide about. I find the right place in my book and begin writing carefully because, suddenly, I know I have to do this properly. Neat precise figures. My best handwriting. This might be my last page of work and I want to leave behind an impeccable record. It'll confuse them. They'll expect the work of a girl about to kill herself to be illegible, disjointed. Disturbed. That's what my mother will say. 'Kathleen has been disturbed lately, though, of course, she has always been difficult.' No one will believe her. Not when my work is so painstakingly neat. It'll make her a liar. I smile to myself.

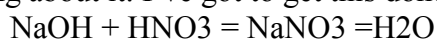
The serpent in my mind uncoils himself. He gleams. His colours are iridescent. He opens his eyes. They aren't black like I expected. They're gold. They beguile me. The serpent in the Garden of Eden beguiled Eve and made her eat the forbidden fruit. I feel like her. I am stretching out my hand to do something forbidden. Only, of course, that story is a lie. God didn't punish them by making them die. He rewarded them. And I ought to be allowed to die too. After all, I know all about good and evil.

Mr Jennings is walking toward me. I've got to concentrate.



I've got to be able to get home on time. I've got to think this thing through. Not that I get much chance of privacy at home either. Not since Mum married Bob. Too many people. Bob and Mum and Sally.

Sally's the worst. She's always following me around. 'You're my sister now, aren't you, Kathleen?' she says. It's pathetic. She just can't see that I don't like her. I wish I could tell her. I could if she were my real sister. It'd be different then. Poor little Sally. She, at any rate, will miss me if I . . . I grit my teeth. I've got to stop thinking about it. I've got to get this done.



At last the bell rings and I lean back and look at my work. I've finished it on time. It looks good too. I feel ridiculously proud of myself. For the first time since I've been at this school, I feel like the other kids.

I decide to walk home, although I'm meant to catch the bus. Mum insists on it. At first it amused me, Mum trying so hard to be a good mother in front of Bob. Now I'm tired of it. It's as though we're caught in some elaborate dance and can't break free. Her eyes, watching me, are often so desperate. Sometimes I almost let myself pity her, but then I remember. I remember everything.

I shake my head. I'm wasting time. It's the serpent I want to think about, not my mother. My heart starts to beat fast in anticipation. But the serpent isn't there any more. He's escaped.

I put down my backpack and stare around me. The sky is endless. I hold out my arms to it, spinning, laughing. The light splinters on my closed eyelids so they prickle with colour: red and purple and green. I open my eyes and clutch at a street tree to steady myself. The sky goes on whirling above me. It is so blue. I feel my mind go spinning after it. I want to be part of it. To merge with it and be lost. This is what happened to the Little Mermaid when she became sea-foam. I want that . . .to be just spindrift or a grain of sand or a bird's song, a flower petal . . .I catch my breath on a sob.