The devil stole into the Garden of Eden.
He carried with him the disease — amor deliria nervosa —
in the form of a seed. It grew and flowered into a
magnificent apple tree, which bore apples as bright as blood.
— From Genesis: A Complete History of the World
and the Known Universe, by Steven Horace, PhD,
Harvard University

By the time the nurse admits me into the waiting room, Hana is gone — vanished down one of the antiseptic
white hallways and whisked behind one of the dozens of identical white doors — although there are about a half-
dozen other girls milling around, waiting. One girl is sitting in a chair, hunched over her clipboard, scribbling and
crossing out her answers, and then rescribbling. Another girl is frantically asking a nurse about the difference between
“chronic medical conditions” and “pre-existing medical conditions.” She looks like she’s on the verge of having some kind of fit — a vein is standing out on her forehead and her voice

is rising hysterically — and I wonder whether she’s going to list a tendency toward excessive anxiety on her sheet.

It’s not funny, but I feel like laughing. I bring my hand to my face, snorting into my palm. I tend to get giggy when I’m extremely nervous. During tests at school I’m always getting in trouble for laughing. I wonder if I should have marked that down.

A nurse takes my clipboard from me and flips through the pages, checking to see that I haven’t left any answers blank.

“Lena Haloway” she says in the bright, clipped voice that all nurses seem to share, like it’s part of their medical training.

“Uh-huh,” I say, and then quickly correct myself. My aunt has told me that the evaluators will expect a certain degree of formality. “Yes. That’s me.” It’s still strange to hear my real name, Haloway, and a dull feeling settles at the bottom of my stomach. For the past decade I’ve gone by my aunt’s name, Tiddle. Even though it’s a pretty stupid last name — Hana once said it reminded her of a little-kid word for peeing — at least it isn’t associated with my mother and father. At least the Tiddles are a real family. The Haloways are nothing but a memory. But for official purposes I have to use my birth name.

“Follow me.” The nurse gestures down one of the hallways, and I follow the neat tick-tock of her heels down the linoleum. The halls are blindingly bright. The butterflies are working their way up from my stomach into my head, making me feel dizzy, and I try to calm myself by imagining the ocean outside, its ragged breathing, the seagulls turning pinwheels in the sky.

It will be over soon, I tell myself. It will be over soon and then you’ll go home, and you’ll never have to think about the evaluation again.
The hallway seems to go on forever. Up ahead a door opens and shuts, and a moment later, as we turn a corner, a girl brushes past us. Her face is red and she’s obviously been crying. She must be done with her evaluation already. I recognize her vaguely, as one of the first girls admitted.

I can’t help but feel sorry for her. Evaluations typically last anywhere from half an hour to two hours, but it’s common wisdom that the longer the evaluators keep you, the better you’re doing. Of course, that isn’t always true. Two years ago Marcy Davies was famously in and out of the lab in forty-five minutes, and she scored a perfect ten. And last year Corey Winde scored an all-time record for longest evaluation – three and a half hours – and still received only a three. There’s a system behind the evaluations, obviously, but there’s always a degree of randomness to them too. Sometimes it seems the whole process is designed to be as intimidating and confusing as possible.

I have a sudden fantasy of running through these clean, sterile hallways, kicking in all the doors. Then, immediately, I feel guilty. This is the worst of all possible times to be having doubts about the evaluations, and I mentally curse Hana. This is her fault, for saying those things to me outside. You can’t be happy unless you’re unhappy sometimes. A limited choice. We get to choose from the people who have been chosen for us.

I’m glad the choice is made for us. I’m glad I don’t have to choose – but more than that, I’m glad I don’t have to make someone else choose me. It would be okay for Hana, of course, if things were still the way they were in the old days. Hana, with her golden, halo hair, and bright grey eyes, and perfect straight teeth, and her laugh that makes everyone in a two-mile radius whip around and look at her and laugh too. Even clumsiness looks good on Hana; it makes you want to reach out a hand to help her or scoop up her books. When I trip on my own feet or spill coffee down the front of my shirt, people look away. You can almost see them thinking, What a mess. And whenever I’m around strangers my mind goes fuzzy and damp and grey, like streets starting to thaw after a hard snow – unlike Hana, who always knows just what to say.

No guy in his right mind would ever choose me when there are people like Hana in the world: it would be like settling for a stale cookie when what you really want is a big bowl of ice cream, whipped cream and cherries and chocolate sprinkles included. So I’ll be happy to receive my neat, printed sheet of ‘Approved Matches.’ At least it means I’ll end up with somebody. It won’t matter if nobody ever thinks I’m pretty (although sometimes I wish, just for a second, that somebody would). It wouldn’t matter if I had one eye.

‘In here.’ The nurse stops, finally, outside a door that looks identical to all the others. ‘You can leave your clothing and things in the antechamber. Please put on the gown that is provided for you, with the opening to the back. Feel free to take a moment, have some water, do some meditation.’

I imagine hundreds and hundreds of girls sitting cross-legged on the floor, hands cupped on their knees, chanting om, and have to stifle another wild urge to laugh.

‘Please be aware, however, that the longer you take to prepare, the less time your evaluators will have to get to know you.’

She smiles tightly. Everything about her is tight: her skin, her eyes, her lab coat. She is looking straight at me, but I
have the impression that she isn’t really focusing, that in her mind she’s already tick-tocking her way back to the waiting room, ready to bring yet another girl down yet another hallway, and give her this same spiel. I feel very lonely, surrounded by these thick walls that muffle all sounds, insulated from the sun and the wind and the heat, all of it perfect and unnatural.

‘When you’re ready, go on through the blue door. The evaluators will be waiting for you in the lab.’

After the nurse clicks away I go into the ante-chamber, which is small and just as bright as the hallway. It looks like a regular doctor’s examination room. There’s an enormous piece of medical equipment squatting in the corner, emitting a series of periodic beeps, a tissue-paper-covered examination table, a stinging, antiseptic smell. I take off my clothes, shivering as the air-conditioning makes goose bumps pop up all over my skin, the fuzz on my arms standing up a little straighter. Great. Now the evaluators will think I’m a hairy beast.

I fold my clothes, including my bra, in a neat pile and slip on the gown. It’s made of super-sheer plastic, and as I wrap it around my body, securing it at the waist with a knot, I’m fully aware that you can still see pretty much everything – including the outline of my underwear – through its fabric.

*Over. Soon it will be over.*

I take a deep breath and step through the blue door.

It’s even brighter in the lab – dazzlingly bright, so the evaluators’ first impression of me must be of someone squinting, stepping backward, bringing her hand to her face. Four shadows float in a canoe in front of me. Then my eyes adjust and the vision resolves into the four evaluators, all sitting behind a long, low table. This room is very large, and totally empty except for the evaluators and, in the corner, a steel surgical table that’s been shoved up against one wall. Dual rows of overhead lights beat down on me, and I notice how high the ceiling is: at least thirty feet. I have a desperate urge to cross my arms over my chest, to cover myself up somehow. My mouth goes dry and my mind goes as hot and blank and white as the lights. I can’t remember what I’m supposed to do, what I’m supposed to say.

Fortunately, one of the evaluators, a woman, speaks first. ‘Do you have your forms?’ Her voice sounds friendly, but it doesn’t help the fist that has closed deeply in my stomach, squeezing my intestines.

*Oh, God, I think. I’m going to pee. I’m going to pee right here.*

I try to imagine what Hana will say after this is over, when we’re walking through the afternoon sunshine, with the smell of salt and sun-warmed pavement heavy on the air around us. ‘God,’ she’ll say. ‘That was a waste of time. All of them just sitting there staring like four frogs on a log.’

‘Um – yes.’ I step closer, feeling like the air has turned solid, resisting me. When I’m a few feet away from the table, I reach out and pass the evaluators my clipboard. There are three men and one woman, but I find I can’t focus on their features for too long. I scan them quickly and then shuffle backward again, getting only an impression of some noses, a few dark eyes, the winking of a pair of glasses.

My clipboard bobs its way down the line of evaluators. I squeeze my arms to my sides and try to appear relaxed.

Behind me, an observation deck runs along the back wall, elevated about twenty feet off the ground. It is accessed through a small red door high up beyond the tiered rows of
white seats that are obviously meant to hold students, doctors, interns, and junior scientists. Not only do the lab scientists perform the procedure, they do checkups afterward and often treat difficult cases of other diseases.

It occurs to me that the scientists must perform the cure here, in this very room. That must be what the surgical table is for. The fist of anxiety starts closing in my stomach again. For some reason, though I've often thought about what it would be like to be cured, I've never really thought about the procedure itself: the hard metal table, the lights winking above me, the tubes and the wires and the pain.

‘Lena Haloway?’

‘Yes. That’s me.’

‘Okay. Why don’t you start by telling us a little about yourself?’ The evaluator with the glasses leans forward, spreading his hands, and smiles. He has big, square white teeth that remind me of bathroom tiles. The reflection in his glasses makes it impossible to see his eyes, and I wish he would take them off. ‘Talk to us about the things you like to do. Your interests, hobbies, favourite subjects.’

I launch into the speech I’ve prepared, about photography and running and spending time with my friends, but I’m not focusing. I see the evaluators nodding in front of me, and smiles beginning to loosen their faces as they take notes, so I know I’m doing fine, but I can’t even hear the words that are coming out of my mouth. I’m fixated on the metal surgical table and keep sneaking looks at it from the corner of my eye, watching it blink and shimmer in the light like the edge of a blade.

And suddenly I’m thinking of my mother. My mother had remained uncured despite three separate procedures, and the disease had claimed her, nipped at her insides and turned her eyes hollow and her cheeks pale, had taken control of her feet and led her, inch by inch, to the edge of a sandy cliff and into the bright, thin air of the plunge beyond.

Or so they tell me. I was six at the time. I remember only the hot pressure of her fingers on my face in the nighttime and her last whispered words to me. I love you. Remember. They cannot take it.

I close my eyes quickly, overwhelmed by the thought of my mother, writhing, and a dozen scientists in lab coats watching, scribbling impassively on notepads. Three separate times she was strapped to a metal table; three separate times a crowd of observers watched her from the deck, took note of her responses as the needles, and then the lasers, pierced her skin. Normally patients are anesthetized during the procedure and don’t feel a thing, but my aunt had once left slip that during my mother’s third procedure they had refused to sedate her, thinking that the anesthesia might be interfering with her brain’s response to the cure.

‘Would you like some water?’ Evaulator One, the woman, gestures to a bottle of water and a glass set up on the table. She has noticed my momentary flinch, but it’s okay. My personal statement is done, and I can tell by the way the evaluators are looking at me – pleased, proud, like I’m a little kid who has managed to fit all the right pegs in all the right holes – that I’ve done a good job.

I pour myself a glass of water and take a few sips, grateful for the pause. I can feel sweat pricking up under my arms, on my scalp, and at the base of my neck, and I pray to God they can’t see it. I try to keep my eyes locked on the evaluators,
but there it is in my peripheral vision, grinning at me: that
darn table.

'Okay now, Lena. We're going to ask you some questions.
We want you to answer honestly. Remember, we're trying to
get to know you as a person.'

As opposed to what? The question plops into my mind before
I can stop it. As an animal?

I take a deep breath, force myself to nod and smile. 'Great.'

'What are some of your favourite books?'

'Love, War, and Interference, by Christopher Malley,' I answer
automatically. 'Border, by Philippa Harold.' It's no use trying
to keep the images away: they are rising now, a flood. That
one word keeps scripting itself on my brain, as though it is
being seared there. Pain. They wanted to make my mother
submit to a fourth procedure. They were coming for her on
the night she died, coming to bring her to the labs. But instead
she had fled into the dark, winged her way into the air. Instead
she had woken me with those words - I love you. Remember.
They cannot take it. — which the wind seemed to carry back
to me long after she had vanished, repeated on the dry trees,
on the leaves coughing and whispering in the cold grey dawn.

And Romeo and Juliet, by William Shakespeare.'

The evaluators nod, make notes. Romeo and Juliet is required
reading in every freshman-year health class.

'And why is that?' Evaluator Three asks.

It's frightening: that's what I'm supposed to say. It's a
cautionary tale, a warning about the dangers of the old world,
before the cure. But my throat seems to have grown swollen
and tender. There is no room to squeeze the words out; they
are stuck there like the burrs that cling to our clothing when
we jog through the farms. And in that moment it's like I can

hear the low growl of the ocean, can hear its distant, insistant
murmur, can imagine its weight closing around my mother,
water as heavy as stone. And what comes out is: 'It's
beautiful.'

Instantly all four faces jerk up to look at me, like puppets
connected to the same string.

'Beautiful?' Evaluator One wrinkles her nose. There's a
zinging, frigid tension in the air, and I realize I've made a
big, big mistake.

The evaluator with the glasses leans forward. 'That's an
interesting word to use. Very interesting.' This time when he
shows his teeth they remind me of the curved white canines
of a dog. 'Perhaps you find suffering beautiful? Perhaps you
enjoy violence?'

'No. No, that's not it.' I'm trying to think straight, but my
head is full of the ocean's wordless roaring. It is growing
louder and louder by the second. And now, faintly, it's as
though I can hear screaming as well — like my mother's
scream is reaching me from across the span of a decade. 'I
just mean . . . there's something so sad about it . . . .' I'm
struggling, floundering, feeling like I'm drowning now, in
the white light and the roaring. Sacrifice. I want to say
something about sacrifice, but the word doesn't come.

'Let's move on.' Evaluator One, who sounded so sweet when
she offered me the water, has lost all pretense of friendliness.
She is all business now. 'Tell us something simple. Like your
favourite colour, for example.'

Part of my brain — the rational, educated part, the logical
me part — screams, Blue! Say blue! But this other, older thing
inside of me is riding across the waves of sound, surging up
with the rising noise. 'Grey,' I blurt out.
very frightened herd animals, and am about two seconds from getting stomped into the ground.

Instantly I launch myself into the corner and wedge myself behind the surgical table, where I'm completely protected from the panicked mass of animals. I poke my head out just a little so I can still see what's going on. The evaluators are hopping up onto the table now, as walls of brown and speckled cow flanks fold around them. Evaluator One is screaming at the top of her lungs, and Glasses is yelling, 'Calm down, calm down!' even though he's grabbing onto her like she's a life raft and he's in danger of sinking.

Some of the cows have wigs hanging crazily from their heads, and others are half-swaddled in gowns identical to the one I'm wearing. For a second I'm sure I'm dreaming. Maybe this whole day has been a dream, and I'll wake up to discover that I'm still at home, in bed, on the morning of my evaluation. But then I notice the writing on the cows' flanks: not cure. Death. The words are written in sloppy ink, just above the neatly branded numbers that identify these cows as destined for the slaughterhouse.

A little chill dances up my spine, and everything starts clicking into place. Every couple of years the Invalids – the people who live in the Wilds, the unregulated land that exists between recognized cities and towns – sneak into Portland and stage some kind of protest. One year they came in at night and painted red death skulls on every single one of the known scientists' houses. Another year they managed to break into the central police station, which coordinates all the patrols and guard shifts for Portland, and move all the furniture onto the roof, even the coffee machines. That was pretty funny, actually – and pretty amazing, since you'd think
Central would be the most secure building in Portland. People in the Wilds don’t see love as a disease, and they don’t believe in the cure. They think it’s a kind of cruelty. Thus the slogan.

Now I get it: the cows are dressed up as us, the people being evaluated. Like we’re all a bunch of herd animals.

The cows are calmer down somewhat. They’re not charging anymore, and have begun to shuffle back and forth in the lab. Evaluator One has a clipboard in her hand, and she’s swooping and swatting as the cows butt up against the table, mooing and nipping at the papers scattered across its surface – the evaluators’ notes, I realize, as a cow snaps up a sheet of paper and begins to rip at it with its teeth. Thank God. Maybe the cows will eat up all the notes, and the evaluators will lose track of the fact that I was completely tanking. Half-concealed behind the table – and safe, now, from those sharp, stamping hooves – I have to admit the whole thing is kind of hilarious.

That’s when I hear it. Somehow, above the snorting and stomping and yelling, I hear the laugh above me – low and short and musical, like someone sounding out a few notes on a piano.

The observation deck. A boy is standing on the observation deck, watching the chaos below. And he’s laughing.

As soon as I look up, his eyes click onto my face. The breath whooshes out of my body and everything freezes for a second, as though I’m looking at him through my camera lens, zoomed in all the way, the world pausing for that tiny span of time between the opening and closing of the shutter.

His hair is golden brown, like leaves in autumn just as they’re turning, and he has bright amber eyes. The moment I see him I know that he’s one of the people responsible for this. I know that he must live in the Wilds; I know he’s an Invalid. Fear clamps down on my stomach, and I open my mouth to shout something – I’m not sure what, exactly – but at precisely that second he gives a minute shake of his head, and suddenly I can’t make a sound. Then he does the absolutely, positively unthinkable.

He winks at me.

At last the alarm goes off. It’s so loud I have to cover my ears with my hands. I look down to see whether the evaluators have seen him, but they’re still doing their little tabletop dance, and when I look up again, he’s gone.