



THE
ANTICHRIST IS BORN
RISING
BEFORE THEY WERE LEFT BEHIND

TIM LAHAYE

JERRY B. JENKINS

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The Rising

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The Rising

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Contents

[Prologue](#)

[ONE](#)

[TWO](#)

[THREE](#)

[FOUR](#)

[FIVE](#)

[SIX](#)

[SEVEN](#)

[EIGHT](#)

[NINE](#)

[TEN](#)

[ELEVEN](#)

[TWELVE](#)

[THIRTEEN](#)

[FOURTEEN](#)

[FIFTEEN](#)

[SIXTEEN](#)

[SEVENTEEN](#)

[EIGHTEEN](#)

[NINETEEN](#)

[TWENTY](#)

[TWENTY-ONE](#)

[TWENTY-TWO](#)

[TWENTY-THREE](#)

[TWENTY-FOUR](#)

[TWENTY-FIVE](#)

[TWENTY-SIX](#)

[*About the Authors*](#)

[*Note*](#)

*To Frank Muller¹,
audio reader nonpareil*

*Special thanks
to David Allen
for expert technical consultation*

Prologue

The sun hung just below Rayford Steele's glare shield, making him squint even behind his dark gray lenses. His first officer, Chris Smith, pointed and said, "Oops, how long has that been there?"

Rayford shielded his eyes and found the message screen reading "ENGINE #1 OIL FILT."

Oil pressure was normal, even on the engine in question, the one farthest to his left. "Engine number one oil-filter checklist, please," he said.

Chris dug into the right side pocket for the emergency manual. While Chris was finding the right section, Rayford grabbed the maintenance log he should have checked before pulling back from the gate in Chicago and heading for Los Angeles. He speed-read. Sure enough, engine number one had required an oil filter change in Miami before the leg to O'Hare, and metal chips had been detected on the used filter. They must have been within acceptable limits, however, as the mechanic had signed off on the note. And the plane had made it to Chicago without incident.

"Retard thrust level slowly until message no longer displayed," Chris read.

Rayford followed the procedure and watched the message screen. The throttle reached idle, but the message still shone. After a minute he said, "It's not going out. What next?"

"If ENG OIL FILT message remains displayed with thrust lever closed: FUEL CONTROL SWITCH . . . CUTOFF."

Rayford grabbed the control cutoff switch and said, "Confirm number one cutoff switch?"

"Confirmed."

Rayford pulled out and down in one smooth motion while increasing pressure on the right rudder pedal. Engine number one shut down, and the auto throttle increased power on the other three. Airspeed slowly decreased, and Rayford doubted anyone would even notice.

He and Chris determined a new altitude, and he instructed Chris to call air-traffic control at Albuquerque to get clearance to descend to 32,000 feet. They then positioned a transponder to warn other traffic that they might be unable to climb or maneuver properly if there was a conflict.

Rayford had no question they could reach LAX without incident now. He became aware of the strain on his right foot and remembered he had to increase pressure to compensate for the uneven thrust of the remaining engines. *C'mon, Rayford. Fly the airplane.*

After Rayford informed Pan-Con of the situation, the dispatcher told him to be aware of low visibility at LAX. "You'll want to check weather as you get closer."

Rayford announced to the passengers that he had shut down the number one engine but didn't expect anything but a routine landing at LAX. The lower the plane flew, however, the more he could tell that the power margin had increased. He did not want to have to go around, because going from near idle to full power on three engines would require a lot of rudder to counteract the thrust differential.

LAX tower was informed of the engine issue and cleared the Pan-Con heavy for initial landing sequence. At 10,000 feet Rayford began checking descent figures.

Chris said, "Auto brakes."

Rayford responded, "Three set."

LAX approach control turned Rayford and Chris over to the tower, which cleared them to land on runway 25 left and informed them of wind speed and RVR (runway visual range). Rayford flipped on the taxi lights and directed Chris to zero the rudder trim. Rayford felt the pressure increase under his

foot. He would have to keep up with the auto throttles as the power changed and adjust the rudder pressure to match. He was as busy as he had ever been on a landing, and the weather was not cooperating. Low cloud cover blocked his view of the runway.

Rayford worked with Chris, setting the speed to match the flap settings and feeling the auto throttles respond by reducing power to slow the plane. "Glide slope intercept," he said, "flaps 30, landing check." He set the speed indicator at 148, final speed for a flaps-30 approach with that much weight.

Chris followed orders and grabbed the checklist from the glare shield. "Landing gear," he said.

"Down," Rayford said.

"Flaps."

"Thirty."

"Speed brakes."

"Armed."

"Landing check complete," Chris said.

The plane could land itself, but Rayford wanted to be in control just in case. It was a lot easier to be flying than to have to take over if the autopilot had to be suddenly switched off.

"Final approach fix," Chris said.

A loud horn sounded when Rayford clicked off both the autopilot and throttles. "Autopilot disengaged," he said.

"One thousand feet," Chris said.

"Roger."

They were in the middle of clouds and would not likely see the ground until just before touchdown. A mechanical voice announced, "Five hundred feet." It would announce again at fifty, thirty, twenty, and ten feet. They were ninety seconds from touchdown. Suddenly Rayford overheard transmission.

"Negative, US Air 21," the tower said, "you are not cleared for takeoff."

"Roger, tower," came the answer. "You were broken. Understand US Air 21 is cleared for takeoff."

"Negative!" the tower responded. "Negative, US Air 21! You are *not* cleared to take the runway!"

"Fifty feet," the auto announcer called out. "Thirty."

Rayford broke through the clouds.

"Go around, Cap!" Chris shouted. "A '57 is pulling onto the runway! Go around! Go around!"

Rayford could not imagine missing the 757. Time slowed, and he saw his family clearly in his mind, imagined them grieving, felt guilty about leaving them. And all the people on the plane. The crew. The passengers. And those on the US Air too!

In slow motion he noticed a red dot on the center screen of the instrument console with a minus 2 next to it. The auto announcer was sounding, Chris screaming, the tower shouting on the radio, "Pull up! Pull up! Pull up!"

Rayford mashed the go-around buttons on the throttles twice for maximum power and called out, "God, help me!"

Chris Smith whined, "Amen! Now fly!"

Rayford felt the descent arresting, but it didn't appear it would be enough. Rayford imagined the wide eyes of the US Air passengers on the ground. "Flaps twenty!" he barked. "Positive rate. Gear up" Smith's hands were flying, but the gap was closing.

The plane suddenly dipped left, the three good engines causing the slight roll. Rayford had not added enough rudder to counteract them. If he didn't adjust, the wingtip would hit the ground. They were a split second from the 757's tail—standing nearly four stories—and about to bottom out. Rayford closed his eyes and braced for impact. He heard swearing in the tower and from Chris. What

ONE

MARILENA TITI'S union with Sorin Carpathia was based on anything but physical passion. Yes, they had had what the vulgar in the West would call a fling. But as his student and eventually his assistant at the University of Romania at Bucharest, Marilena had been drawn to Sorin's intellect.

The truth, she knew, was that there was little prepossessing about either of them. He was short and thin and wiry with a shock of curly red hair that, despite its thickness and his aversion to haircuts, could not camouflage the growing bald spot at his crown.

She was thick and plain and eschewed makeup, nail polish, and styling her black hair. Colleagues who she was convinced had been wholly enculturated by outside influences, teased that her frumpy clothing and sensible shoes harkened to previous centuries. They had long since abandoned trying to make her into something she could never be. Marilena was not blind. The mirror did not lie. No amount of paint or spritz would change her, inside or out.

And inside was where she lived, physically and mentally. She would not have traded that for all the *patrician* the butcher could stuff. In recent decades, a tsunami of progress had transformed her quaint motherland from that with the lowest standard of living in Europe to a technological marvel. Marilena could have done without it all. She resided in the horn of plenty of her own prodigious mind, fertilized by an inexhaustible curiosity.

Perhaps she *had* been born a century late. She loved that no other Eastern European nations traced their lineage to the ancient Romans. And while she knew that modern Romanian women looked, dressed, spoke, danced, and acted like their Western icons, Marilena had resisted even the fitness craze that sent her peers biking, hiking, jogging, and climbing all over her native soil.

Marilena knew what was out there, outside the book-lined, computer-laden, two-room flat she shared with her husband of six years. But save for the occasional foray by bus, for reasons she could not now remember, she rarely felt compelled to travel farther than the university, where she too was now a professor of literature. That was a four-block walk to a ten-minute bus ride.

Sorin preferred his ancient bicycle, which he carried to his office upon arriving each day and four floors up to their apartment upon his return. As if they had room for that.

But hiding the bike reflected his mistrust of mankind, and Marilena could not argue. For all their decrying of religion, particularly branches that espoused innate sinfulness, everyone Marilena knew would have taken advantage of their best friends given the slightest chance. Everyone, perhaps, but the mysterious Russian émigré who ran the Tuesday night meetings in the anteroom at a local library. After several months of attending, Marilena had not yet formed an opinion of the thirty or so others who attended, but something deep within her resonated with Viviana Ivinisova.

Ms. Ivinisova, a handsome, tailored woman in her mid-thirties, seemed to take to Marilena too. Short with salt- and-pepper hair, Viviana seemed to be speaking directly to Marilena while gazing at the others just enough to keep their attention. And sure enough, when the younger woman stayed after her twelfth meeting to ask a question, the leader asked if she cared to get a drink.

With her load of books and folders gathered to her chest as she walked, Ms. Ivinisova reminded Marilena of her university colleagues. But Viviana was no professor, bright as she was. "This," she said, nodding to her pile of resources, "is my full-time job."

How delicious, Marilena thought. She herself had never imagined a cause more worthy than

expanding one's mind.

They found a nearly deserted bistro a block from Marilena's bus stop, were seated at a tiny, round table, and Viviana wasted no time starting the conversation. "Do you know the etymology of your name?"

Marilena felt herself redden. "Bitter light," she said.

Viviana nodded, holding her gaze.

Marilena shrugged. "I don't put any stock in—"

"Oh, I do!" Viviana said. "I do indeed. *Bitter*," she said slowly. "It doesn't have to be as negative as it sounds. Sadness perchance, a bit of loneliness? emptiness? a hole? something incomplete?"

Marilena reached too quickly for her glass and sloshed the wine before drawing it to her lips. Swallowing too much, she coughed and dabbed her mouth with a napkin. She shook her head. "I feel complete," she said.

Marilena could not meet the older woman's eyes. Viviana had cocked her head and was studying Marilena with a closed-mouth smile. "There is the matter of *light*," she said. "The bitterness, whatever that entails, is counterbalanced."

"Or my late mother just liked the name," Marilena said. "She was not the type to have thought through its meaning."

"But you are."

"Yes," Marilena wanted to say. "Yes, I am. I think through everything." But agreeing would appear boastful.

Where was the European reserve? Why were Russians so direct? Not as crass as Americans, of course, but there was little diplomacy here. In spite of herself, Marilena could not hold this against Ms. Ivinisova. Something within the woman seemed to care for Marilena in a way that both attracted and repelled her. She might not abet the Russian in her attempt to violate personal borders, but she could not deny the dichotomy that the attention also strangely warmed her.

"Your husband does not attend with you anymore," Viviana said.

It was meant, Marilena decided, to sound like a change of subject. But she knew better. It was an attack on her flank, a probe, an attempt to get to the *bitter* part of her. Clearly Ms. Ivinisova believed in the portent of one's name. It seemed anti-intellectual to Marilena, but then that was what kept Sor from the weekly meetings.

Marilena shook her head. "He's not a believer."

Viviana smiled. "Not a believer." She lit a cigarette. "Are you happy with him?"

"Reasonably."

The older woman raised her eyebrows, and Marilena fought to keep from letting down more of her guard.

"He's brilliant," Marilena added. "One of the most widely read men I have ever known."

"Which makes you 'reasonably happy' with him."

Marilena nodded warily. "We've been together eight years."

Viviana slid her chair back and crossed her legs. "Tell me how you met."

What was it about this persistence that had such a dual impact on Marilena? To anyone else she would have said, "I don't know you well enough to tell you about my personal life." Yet despite the direct approach, Marilena felt bathed in some sort of care, compassion, interest. She was put off and intoxicated at the same time.

She allowed a smile. "We had an affair of sorts."

"Oh!" Viviana said, leaning forward and crushing out her smoke. "I must hear it all. Was he married?"

"He was. But not happily. He did not even wear his ring, though the whiteness near his knuckle

was still fresh.”

Nostalgia washed over Marilena as she recalled her days as a doctoral student under the quiet flamboyance of the strange-looking professor so enamored of classical literature. By her questions, her participation, her papers, he had been able to tell that she was not there to merely fulfill a requirement. He engaged her in class, and the other students seemed content to act as spectators to their daily dialogue.

“He was a god to me,” Marilena said. “It was as if he knew everything. I could not raise an issue, point, a subject he had not studied and thought through. I suddenly knew what love was—not that I believed I loved him. But I could not wait to get back to his class. I threw myself into the work so I would be prepared. I had always lived for learning, but then I burned to impress him, to be considered his equal—not as an intellectual, of course, but as a fellow seeker of knowledge.”

It was the wine, Marilena decided. How long had it been since she had been this effusive, this transparent? And with a virtual stranger, no less. Of course, Viviana Ivinisova reminded her of Sorin in Marilena’s impressionable days. She was just as drawn to this woman who seemed to know so much, to care so deeply, and who was so willing to open an entirely new world to initiates. How could Viviana know who would respond to things beyond themselves, truths most would consider coarse and mystical, outside conventional academia? What would Marilena’s colleagues think? Well, she knew. They would think of her what Sorin now thought of her. His indifference spoke loudly, as did his absence from the meetings after a mere two weeks nearly three months before.

“Did you pursue him?” Viviana Ivinisova said.

“I never even considered it. I pursued his mind, yes. I wanted to be near him, with him, in his class or otherwise. But I believe it was he who pursued me.”

“You believe?”

“He did. He asked if I would consider serving as his assistant. I suspected nothing more than that he respected my mind. He had to consider me his inferior, yet I allowed myself to imagine that he at least respected my intellectual curiosity and dedication to learning.”

Viviana seemed not to have blinked. “You were not used to being pursued.”

No debate there. Marilena barely spoke to males, and not only had she never flirted with or pursued one, but neither had she ever considered such interest coming the other way. Certainly not with Dr. Carpathia. Not even when he insisted she call him Sorin. And have a meal with him. And spend time with him aside from office hours.

Even when he became familiar, touching her shoulder, squeezing her hand, throwing an arm around her, she considered him brotherly, or more precisely, avuncular, for he was ten years her senior.

“But at some point you had to have known,” Viviana said. “You married the man.”

“When I first accepted his invitation to the apartment we now share,” Marilena said, “we spent most of the night discussing great literature. He made dinner—very badly—but I was too intimidated to agree when he said so. We watched two movies, the first a dark, thought-provoking picture. He sat close to me, again in a familial fashion, leaning against me. I was so naïve.”

Viviana’s eyes were dancing. “Then came a romantic picture, am I right?”

Were such things so predictable, or was this part of Viviana’s gift? In the meetings she had often proved her ability to foretell, but now she knew the past as well?

“And not a comedy,” Marilena said. “A thoroughgoing love story, full of pathos.”

“And true love.”

“Yes.”

“Tell me.”

“What?”

“Tell me how he seduced you.”

“I didn’t say that—”

“But he did, Marilena, didn’t he? I know he did.”

“He put his arm around me and left it there, and during the most emotional scenes, he pulled me close.”

“You spent the night, didn’t you?”

Astonishing. Sorin had, in fact, sent her home for her things after they had made love.

“Not very chivalrous of him,” Viviana said. “No wonder it hasn’t lasted.”

“It has lasted.”

Viviana shook her head with obvious pity. “You coexist,” she said. “And you know it. You’re more like brother and sister than husband and wife. And you don’t sleep together anymore.”

“We have only one bed.”

“You know what I mean.”

“But I never wanted that anyway. Really, I didn’t. I was smitten by Sorin’s mind. Truthfully, I still am. There is no one I’d rather converse with, argue with, discuss ideas with.”

“You never loved him?”

“I never thought about it. His seduction, as you call it, gave me an inside track on what I really wanted: to stay in proximity to that mind. He never loved me either.”

“How do you know?”

“He told me by never telling me.”

“That he loved you.”

Marilena nodded and a foreign emotion rose in her. What was this? *Had* that been what she wanted? Had she wanted Sorin to love her and to say so? She honestly believed she had never longed for that. “I must have been an awkward lover.”

“He lost interest?”

“In that. We still spent hours together talking and reading and studying. We still do.”

“But the romance died.”

“Within months of his divorce and our marriage two years later,” Marilena said. “Except for his occasional *necessities*. ” She emphasized it the way he had. “And who knows where or to whom he goes now when *necessary*?”

“You don’t care?”

“I don’t dwell on it. I didn’t marry him for that. I am a born student, and I live with a born teacher. I am not a physically passionate person. I have all I need or want.”

When they were on the street, Viviana walking Marilena to the bus, the older woman took her arm. “You’re lying,” she said, and Marilena felt her first rush of guilt since childhood. “We’re getting close to your bitterness, aren’t we? Your loneliness. Your emptiness. The hole in your soul.”

Marilena was glad she had to keep her eyes forward to avoid tripping in the darkness. She could not have faced her new mentor. *My soul*, she thought. Until a few months before, she had not believed she even had a soul. Souls were for religious people. She was anything but that.

Marilena wished the bus would come and whisk her away. Even facing Sorin’s bemusement at her newfound interest in what he—“and any thinking person, including you”—considered anti-intellectualism would be respite from the relentless searchlight of Viviana’s prescience.

They sat on the bench at the bus stop, Marilena hoping a stranger would join them, anything to interrupt this. “You have discovered something within yourself beyond what I have been teaching,” Viviana said.

It was true. So true.

“You pushed it from your mind the first several times the stirring came over you. You reminded

yourself that you and Sorin had discussed this, had dismissed it. He'd already had a family. Besides, the apartment was too small. Your work could not be interrupted. It was out of the question."—

Marilena's jaw tightened, and she would not have been able to object had she chosen to. She pulled herself free of Viviana's arm and pressed her palms to her face. How long had it been since she had wept? This longing, this stirring, as the older woman referred to it, had nagged at her until she forced herself to push it away. Out of the question was an understatement. She did not want Sorin's child, especially one he would not want. And neither did she want to deceive him into producing a child within her. All of a sudden, after years of looking the other way when he took his "necessities" elsewhere, she would—what?—begin to be his lover again until hitting upon perfect timing?

The whine of the bus in the distance was a relief Marilena could barely embrace. She stood and fished in her shoulder bag for her transit card.

Viviana faced her and grabbed both shoulders. "We will talk next week," she said. "But let me tell you this: I have your answer, bitter one. I have your light."



Nine-year-old Ray Steele raced up the soccer field behind Belvidere Elementary, outflanking the defense and anticipating a pass from Bobby Stark. He cut across the field about twenty feet from the goalie box, and though the feed was behind him, he quickly adjusted, spun, and dribbled the ball with his feet. Juking two defenders, he drove toward the goal, the goalie angling out to meet him.

"Go, Ray, go! Beautiful athlete!"

It was his father. Again. Truth was, Ray wished he would just shut up. It was bad enough his old man really was an old man. His parents were older than anyone else's and looked older than that. One another father had seen Ray walking to the car with his dad and said, "Hey, isn't it nice your grandpa could be here to watch you play?"

"Grandpa's here?" Ray said before figuring it out. The man and Ray's dad found that hilarious. Ray had just jumped into his parents' beater car and hidden his head.

Even Ray's mistakes worked out. He faked left and went right, but the goalie was on to him. Ray reared back and drilled the ball off the goalie's chest. It came right back to him. With the goalie now out of position and the other defenders sprinting toward him, Ray calmly toed the ball into the left side of the net.

He shook off his teammates as they tried to lift him onto their shoulders. Why did everybody have to act so stupid? It wasn't like this was the championship, and it certainly wasn't a deciding goal. In fact it put Ray's team up 7-1, and the other team hadn't won a game all season. Big deal.

Ray Steele was good at soccer, but he hated it. Too much effort for too little result. He couldn't stand watching it on TV. All that racing up and down the field and the incredible skills of international stars, usually resulting in a scoreless tie that had to be decided by a shoot-out.

He played only to keep in shape for his favorite sports: football, basketball, and baseball. In reality, however, Ray was better than good. He was the best player in the soccer league, the top scorer and one of the best defenders. Young as he was, the attention of the cheerleaders wasn't lost on him. He wasn't much for talking with girls though. Didn't know what to say. It wasn't like he was going to do less than his best so people would leave him alone. He had to admit, if only to himself, that the attention wasn't all bad. But usually it was just embarrassing.

Ray was taller than the other kids and an anomaly. First, he could outrun anyone his age and even a little older at long distances. When the team took a couple of laps around the field, he sprinted to the front and led the whole way. And when they finished and everyone else was red-faced, bent over,

hands on their knees, gasping, he recovered quickly and chatted with his coach. If only the coach hadn't told his father, "That son of yours is a beautiful athlete. Beautiful."

Second, Ray was faster than anyone in short races too. That was unusual for someone his height and age. Long-distance runners weren't supposed to also be fast in the dashes. What could he say? His dad claimed to have been a great athlete when he was a kid, but how long ago must that have been?

Third, Ray was an anomaly because he knew what *anomaly* meant. How many other fourth graders had a clue? Being known as the cutest kid in the class made him self-conscious too, but he had to admit he'd rather deal with that than the opposite. He sure didn't envy the fat kid, the ugly girl, or the nerd. He had it all. Smartest, best athlete, fastest, cutest.

That didn't change the fact that he was ashamed of his parents. And their car. No one kept a car as long as Ray's dad. Oh, the plastic polymer still shone. It was designed that way. Cars simply weren't supposed to look like they aged anymore. But everybody knew, because the auto manufacturers now had only two ways to make cars look new: they changed styles every year, and color schemes changed every three or four years.

When his dad first got the yellow Chevy, it was already used. "Don't knock it," his dad said. "It's got low mileage, and I know cars. It's been taken care of, and it should give us lots of years."

That's what Ray was afraid of. It seemed his friends' families were getting the latest models all the time, and they were forever bragging about all the features. There was the silver and platinum phase when cars were designed to look like classics from the first decade of the new century. Then came the primary colors, which didn't last long—except for that Chevy. According to Ray's dad it was going to last as long as he could make it last.

Ray wished it would get stolen or burn or get smashed. He'd made the mistake of saying so.

"Why, Rayford!" his mother said. "Why would you say such a thing?"

"Come on, Ma! Everybody knows that rattletrap is at least six years old."

"In real years, maybe," Mr. Steele said. "But the way it's been maintained and the way I take care of it, it's almost good as new."

"Shakes, rattles, squeaks," Ray mumbled.

"Important thing is the engine. It's plenty good for the likes of us."

That was one of his dad's favorite phrases, and while Ray knew what it meant, he could have gone the rest of his life without hearing it again. He knew what came next. "We're just plain and simple, hardworking people."

There was certainly nothing wrong with being hardworking. Ray himself worked hard, studied, wanted to get good grades. He wanted to be the first in his family to go to college, and nowadays even scholarship athletes had to have good grades. He was a double threat. One of those major sports he loved so much should get him into some real college, and if he also had a good grade point average and class-leadership résumé, he couldn't miss. As much as his parents embarrassed him, he secretly wanted to make them proud.

"We're plain and simple, all right," he had said at the dinner table that evening. He was having more and more trouble keeping his mouth shut. And all that did was cause his parents to jump on him more.

"And what's wrong with plain and simple?" his father thundered.

"Your dad built his tool and die business into something that puts food on this table—"

"—and clothes on my back, yeah, I know."

"And it paid—"

"—for this house too, yeah, I know. I got it, all right?"

"I don't know what's gotten into you, Rayford," his mother said. "All of a sudden we're not good enough for you. Who do you think you are?"

Ray knew he should apologize. He felt like the brat he was. But what good was being the coolest kid in fourth grade if you lived in the seediest house in the neighborhood? He didn't want to get into that. It would just bring out all the stuff about how at least it was paid for and his dad wasn't in debt, and yeah, we may live paycheck to paycheck, but there are people a lot worse off than we are in this world.

Ray just wished he knew some of them. He was top man on the totem pole in lots of areas, but he had to hang his head when he got in and out of that car, and the last thing he wanted was to invite a friend home. When he visited other kids' houses, he saw the possibilities. *Someday. Someday.*

"May I be excused?" he said.

His mother looked startled. "Well, to tell you the truth, young man, I was about to send you to your room for sassing your father, but—"

"Don't fight my battles for me," his dad said. "If he crosses the line, I'll—"

"But what, Ma?" Ray said.

"But I made your favorite dessert, and I thought—"

"Lime delight? Yes!"

"He doesn't deserve it," his dad said.

"—and I thought since you had such a great game . . ."

"I'll have it later," Ray said, bolting for his room. He kept expecting his dad to make him come back; when he glanced their way from the stairs, his mom and dad were shaking their heads and looking at each other with such despair that he nearly went back on his own.

Why did he have to be this way? He didn't really feel too good for them. It just hurt to be such a popular kid and not have all the stuff that should go along with it. Well, if it was true that hard work and brains could get you where you wanted to go in this world, he was going places.

Ray's teacher told him not to be self-conscious about towering over his classmates. That was a laugh. He loved being tall. But she said, "It's just a phase, and the rest will catch up. By junior high you won't likely be the tallest. Some of the girls might even catch you."

That was hardly what Ray wanted to hear. He hadn't decided yet which sport would be his ticket to college, but he hoped it might be basketball. He already gave the lie to the adage that white guys can't jump. If he could just keep growing, he'd be well over six feet by high school. He didn't have to be the tallest guy on the team, but being one of the tallest would be great.

Ray rushed into his room and closed the door, as if shutting out the muffled sound of his parents would take them off his mind. Small and nondescript as the house was, he had made something of his room. Extended from nylon fishing lines all over the ceiling were model planes, from ancient props to tiny fighter jets to massive modern supersonic transports.

Whenever he was asked, in person or in writing, what he wanted to be when he grew up, he invariably answered, "Pilot or pro athlete." He despised the condescending smiles of adults, which only made him recommit himself to his goals. Ray had heard enough that a professional athletic career—in any of his favorite sports—was as likely as being struck by lightning. And expressing his pilot dream always triggered teachers and counselors to remind him how hard he would have to work in math and science.

He knew. He knew. At least the aviation thing didn't draw benevolent, sympathetic smiles. It was actually an achievable goal. His dad was good with engineering stuff, manufacturing, figuring things out. And while Ray excelled in all subjects, it happened that he liked math and science best.

Ray would do whatever he had to do to realize one of his dreams, because either one of them could bring him what he really wanted. Money. That was the bottom line. That was what set people apart. People with nice cars—the latest models—had more money than his dad. He was convinced of that. His dad claimed that those people were probably in debt, and Ray decided maybe a little debt wouldn't

be all bad, if for no other reason than to make it look like you had money.

But he would go one better. If he couldn't be a pro athlete and make tens of millions, he'd be a commercial pilot and make millions. He'd look like he had money because he really had it and wouldn't have to go into debt at all.

MARILENA NORMALLY FOUND the bus drafty, but as it slowly pulled away from the curb, she loosened her coat and tugged her collar away from her neck. It was her custom to lose herself in one of several thick paperbacks in her shoulder bag, but she would not be able to concentrate now. Not on the literary novel in French. Not on the history of the Hungarian revolution of the twentieth century. Not on *King Lear*, which she so enjoyed in its original English.

She sat staring out the window as the shadowy Bucharest cityscape glided past, lit every few feet by amber halogen lamps. Her grandfather used to recall aloud when Communism was an empty promise and how one could walk more than two kilometers in the dark, hoping for one flickering vapor streetlight. “Like the old Soviet Union, we were a paper tiger, no threat to the international community. We would not have been able to engage our weapons. We had our finger on a button that did not work.”

Democracy and technology may have revolutionized Romania, but Marilena considered herself a throwback. She and Sorin were the only couple she knew who still owned a television receiver that did not hang from the wall. That happened to be another subject on which she and her husband agreed. “It’s a tool,” Sorin said, “not an object of worship. And it is the enemy of scholarship.”

Their boxy old set made colleagues chuckle. “You know,” Sorin’s department vice-chair, Baduna Marius, informed them one night, “the world has come a long way since your flat-screen.”

Marilena had settled back to enjoy the spectacle as Sorin warmed to the topic. The vice-chair—a tall, dashing blond—kept insisting he was only joking, but once Sorin sank his teeth into an argument his passion would not allow him to let it go until he had spent himself. He would gesture, rise, sit, run his hand through his hair. His fair skin would flush, his aging freckles darken. There had been times, Marilena had to admit, when she provoked him just to see him roll into action.

Ah, Sorin. Such a mind. Such enthusiasm for scholarship. Did she love him? In her own way. Certainly not romantically. No, never. And she was persuaded he had never seen her in that light either. How could he? He had taken advantage of her youthful devotion to satisfy his urges, yes, but as she matured perhaps he respected her enough to quit expecting acquiescence. Young and inexperienced, she had to have been clumsy. Surely she had never given him cause to see her as sexually appealing. She didn’t feel that way, didn’t see him that way, and could not pretend. In the end, she could not blame him for seeking physical—what? not love—satisfaction elsewhere.

They didn’t clash over it, didn’t argue, didn’t blame, didn’t seem to worry about it. It was something they never discussed. The quaint idea of the marriage bed simply disappeared from their lives. She didn’t miss it. Not really. She still cared for Sorin in a sisterly way. He was a dear friend, an admired mind. She worried after him, took care of him when he fell ill, as he did for her. They were familiar enough with each other, living in such close proximity, that they touched occasionally as friends might. If she amused him, he seemed not averse to briefly embracing her. When her parents died he even cupped her face in his hands and kissed her forehead.

As unconventional a marriage as it was in modern Romania, there was no rancor, no acrimony. Sure, they got on each other’s nerves. But she knew passionate couples with a passel of kids, husbands and wives unafraid of actual public displays of affection, who were also known to live their lives at decibel levels high enough to attract the attention of the police. She could be grateful, she guessed, that she and Sorin largely got along.

So if there was anything to Viviana Ivinisova's speculation that Marilena's name aptly described her—the bitter part, the emptiness, the loneliness—the hole in her heart had nothing to do with Sorin except that if she wanted to fill it, her husband was the logical vehicle.

The maternal instinct had ambushed her most incongruously one afternoon as she rode the bus home from the university. For days she had surprised herself by finally noticing the children who cavorted at the playground in the park near their apartment. Strange, she thought, that she had been only vaguely aware of them for years, and now she found herself watching with interest until she disembarked and headed across the street to her building.

Marilena found herself particularly taken with a young girl, probably five or six years old. Nothing was unique about the child, except that she had caught Marilena's eye, and the woman enjoyed her smile and her manner for the few moments she saw her each day.

Then came the day of the miracle. Marilena didn't know what else to call it. As she got off the bus the little girl deftly launched herself over the wrought-iron fence that separated the children from the busy street. "Oh, child!" Marilena called out, as the girl dashed past her and raced in front of the bus, which had not yet begun to move.

The little girl was chasing something. A ball? An animal? She looked neither right nor left. Marilena caught the bus driver's eye. He shook his head, waiting with his foot obviously on the brake as Marilena followed the child into the street.

Seemingly from out of nowhere a black sedan crossed the double yellow line and passed several cars, sending others sliding to the curb. It was heading directly for the little girl! Marilena froze, screaming, but the girl never looked up. She knelt in the street, reaching for a kitten that bolted away at the last instant.

There was no way the car could miss the child. Marilena grimaced and clamped her eyes shut, waiting for the screech of tires and the killing thud. But it never came. She forced herself to peek and saw the car appear to pass right through the child and slide into the only parking spot left in front of her building.

Marilena expected the driver to leap from the car and check on the girl, but no one emerged. Several pedestrians rushed the car, Marilena following once she was sure the little girl was safely back in the park. People huddled around the car, peering into it, brows knitted. It was empty. A man laid his palm on the hood. "It's cold," he said. "Wasn't this the car?"

The others, Marilena included, assured him it was. The man felt the tires. "Cold," he said.

To a woman of letters, this was more than strange. Marilena dared not even tell Sorin. A driverless car dematerialized as it bore down on a child? He would have laughed in her face.

That night she and Sorin sat reading at their respective desks. Both were crafting new curricula for the next term and occasionally tried ideas out on each other. Their courses were as far afield from marriage, home life, family, and children as they could be, and yet in the middle of casual conversation about required reading lists, Marilena was suddenly overcome.

She felt a longing so deep and severe that she could describe it—only to herself, of course—as physical pain. She would not have been in the least surprised had Sorin asked what was troubling her. How she was able to camouflage it and continue the conversation confounded her to this very night on the bus. It had been as if her very existence depended upon being held, loved, cherished, and—if possible—being allowed the inestimable privilege of holding, loving, and cherishing another.

Marilena had looked at Sorin in a new way, albeit only briefly. Was this an epiphany? Did she love him, want him, long for him? No. Simply no. Here was a man who, despite his prodigious intellect, held no appeal to her in any other way. He sat there late in the evening, hunched over his desk, reading, writing, thinking, discussing, still dressed in the suit and tie he had taught in all day. His only concession had been to slip off his shoes and suit jacket and loosen his tie. Years before she had given

up urging him to change his clothes after work.

And his feet stank. Well, that was petty, she knew. She had her foibles and idiosyncrasies too, not the least her utter lack of interest in feminizing herself. So what was this, this visceral bombardment she could not ward off? In a flash Marilena knew, though she was certain it had never crossed her mind before. She needed, desperately wanted, a child.

It wasn't that they had never discussed having children. Sorin had established early in their relationship that he wanted no more children and hoped that was not an issue with her. She had assured him she felt no such inclination and couldn't imagine herself a mother, let alone imagine a willingness to give up the time in her precious pursuit of knowledge. End of discussion.

Her late mother had raised the question more than once, of course. But Marilena had been so adamant in her refusal to discuss it that Sorin had actually stepped out of character and offended his mother-in-law by scolding her. "If you don't mind my saying so," he said, "and I'm sure that you do, your daughter has made herself quite plain about this, and thus it is no longer any of your business."

Marilena had on one hand felt embarrassed for her mother, while on the other she appreciated her husband's defense.

So with her mother long in the grave and her marriage long since having become a construct of intellectual convenience, what was she to do with this new emotion? It had been all she could do to muster the restraint to keep from blurting out, "Sorin, would you reconsider giving me a child?" Marilena told herself she had ingested too much *mămăligă*, the mush she made from cornmeal that even Sorin admitted was her specialty. Too much of it had caused discomfiting dreams before, but never while she was awake.

Sorin had asked her something, or had he made a suggestion about her new syllabus? "I'm sorry," she said. "Would you care for some *țuică*?" He had raised a brow, as if wondering what that possibly had to do with whatever it was they were discussing.

The plum brandy sped to her bloodstream with enough force to effect some equilibrium. Marilena was able to keep her impulses in check and not say anything that might alarm Sorin. If she knew anything about their evolving relationship, it was that her husband fled real, personal interaction—and what could be more personal than this?

Marilena had been relieved in the days following her epiphany when her urge seemed to have waned. But it would sneak up on her again at the most absurd moments. She might be tidying the apartment, doing the dishes with Sorin, or simply reading. Most disconcerting was that, without fail, every time the need for a child to love and to love her emerged, it was magnified exponentially from the time before. Marilena had devised schemes to fight it off. She developed an inner dialogue, "self-talk" her psychology faculty friends would have called it. She called herself names, told herself she was being selfish, childish, unrealistic. She asked herself who she thought she was and told herself to be practical.

Generally these tactics worked, at least temporarily. When Marilena really thought it through, somehow extracting herself from the emotion of it, she realized there was not room in her life, certainly not in Sorin's, and absolutely not in their apartment, for a child—especially a newborn. Impossible.

For weeks, months even, Marilena had become more and more inclined to stand her ground against the emotion. She believed she had learned to detect nature about to attack, and she would begin her self-talk immediately. "Don't start," she would tell herself. "This is just not going to happen."

It was not long, however, until a baby was on her mind every waking moment. Oh, it was not as if she had found ways to make it make sense. Rather she came to resign herself to the fact that this torment might forever be with her. Was there some other option, some avenue that might satisfy this instinct? Should she support an orphan, send money to a children's cause?

Marilena had never been one to buy into easy diagnoses of depression. She had always been able to chase a low mood by immersing herself more deeply into her reading and studying and teaching. Colleagues admonished her for equating clinical depression with the blues, rightly intimating that someone of her intellect should know better.

She had become depressed and she knew it. She would not seek counsel or treatment. Nothing could fix this. The need for a child had become part of her being, and the knowledge of its impossibility left her in despair.

Ironically, it had been that very paradox that had spurred her interest in a new pursuit. She had seen the ads in academic journals and even one of the many local papers: "Seeking something beyond yourself? Come and be astonished." She had seen posters around the faculty offices with the same message but had paid them no more heed than had her colleagues.

Marilena would have described herself as a humanist. She had not closed the door on the possibility of a supreme being, so *agnostic* perhaps fit her better than *atheist*. Finding the answers to life within oneself had always resonated most with her.

Marilena had also long been self-reliant, eager to do things on her own, not inclined—like so many of her female friends—to need a partner in every new endeavor. Sure, it was sometimes more enjoyable when Sorin or another colleague joined her at an exhibit or lecture, but she was not averse to going by herself.

Her intrigue at the ad for the Tuesday evening meetings at the library had been borne out of a desperate need to distract herself from what she could only assume was something she had always believed was a myth: her ticking biological clock. Motherhood had been such a foreign concept to her that it was not something she had even entertained until this longing attacked.

Somehow she could not imagine satisfying her curiosity about these meetings alone, so she had asked Sorin to go with her. He motioned with his fingers for the paper and read the ad aloud. "Oh, Marilena, really," he said, and she cringed. He tossed it back to her.

Early in their marriage she had given up more easily, intimidated. But that had passed. "I would really like you to go with me," she said.

"But why? Can't you imagine what this is? 'Something beyond yourself,' honestly."

"What? What do you think it is, Sorin?"

"If not religion, then spiritualism, two sides of the same silly coin."

"Have you never entertained the idea that there might *be* something beyond our minds?"

He pressed his lips together. "No, and neither have you. Now spare me this nonsense."

And she had—for a time. But resentment grew. She fell silent at home, answered him in monosyllables. He could not have missed the cues, but clearly he didn't seem to care. Perhaps, she told herself, if they were a conventional couple he would feel the heat. But given that they had evolved into colleagues who simply shared the same chambers, why should he care if she seemed upset?

Usually they took turns doing for each other. One would cook for both. The next night vice versa. So it was when she took to ignoring him completely, cooking only one meal, packing only one lunch, cleaning only her messes, that he finally took notice. "You're not yourself," he said. "What's wrong?"

She felt petty saying nothing and implying that if he didn't know she wasn't about to tell him. That was so juvenile, so typical. She had considered herself above such tactics. But they had worked. Finally he said, "Marilena, you're not pleasant to be around. Does one of us need to move out?"

Leave it to Sorin to cut to the heart of the matter. Marilena had been surprised at her own revulsion for that idea. For whatever they had become to each other, she couldn't imagine life without him. She didn't want to leave, and she certainly didn't want him to.

"Perhaps," she said, surprising herself. It was only a maneuver, but she desperately hoped he would not act on it. And if he did, what form would it take? He wouldn't be leaving the apartment he

had owned since his first wife evicted him from their home years before. Would he turn Marilena out

To her relief, he'd let the matter drop, only raising it again several days later when she wore him down with her toxic indifference.

"Marilena, are you about to leave me?"

"Mentally or physically?"

"Don't play games, dear. We both know you have long ago emotionally deserted. What is it you want?"

"You know."

"I don't!" And it was clear from his look that he really didn't. She had let too much time pass from the original request. "Tell me!"

"I want you to go with me to see what these Tuesday evening sessions are about."

He stood. "That's all? For that you have put on this charade for weeks? Tell me that is not all you are upset about."

"That's it."

"That's ridiculous."

She couldn't argue. It was such a small thing. And yet it was also such a simple request. Why could he not cater to her just this once, step outside his conventions?

Then *he* had been quiet, clearly angry. Occasionally he would appear prepared to continue the argument, then wave it off and turn back to his work. Finally, apparently unable to concentrate, he'd said, "Heaven help us if you ever find something legitimate to be upset over."

"If this is so trivial, Sorin, the remedy is trivial too. Don't disparage my feelings. I want you to go to a one-hour meeting some Tuesday evening. Is that so much to ask?"

"That's not the issue," he said. "It's the transparent nature of the meeting. It will offend my every sensibility and, I hope, yours."

"Maybe it will. Of course, you're right. But humor me. I don't want to go alone."

"So if I accompany you once, you promise to return to civility?"

"Twice."

"Twice? What if you are repulsed after the first meeting?"

"Then you're free."

"Twice. If I go twice—"

"That's all I ask."



Ray had been invited to Bobby Stark's house Friday for dinner and overnight. He would ride with Bobby and his parents to the Saturday soccer game.

Ray couldn't wait. He watched the big clock on the classroom wall all day, especially after he and Bobby had plotted during lunch and recess what all they would do that evening. "Mom's fixin' a big meal, and we can play laser hockey, video games, watch movies, whatever."

Bobby dressed like a rich kid, so Ray could only assume his house would be cool. He wasn't disappointed. It was no palace, nothing like Ray himself would own one day when he was a pro athlete or a pilot, but it was sure something compared to his house.

Bobby had two younger sisters who wanted to be involved in everything, but any time Ray showed them attention, they blushed and giggled and ran off squealing. Bobby just hollered at them and told on them until his mother made them leave the boys alone.

At dinner Mr. Stark asked Ray if he wanted to say the blessing.

“The what?”

“The blessing, son. Say grace. You’re a Christian, aren’t you? Go to church?”

“’Course. Every Sunday. You mean pray?”

“That’s what I mean.”

“Well, um, okay.” Ray bowed his head and closed his eyes, folding his hands over his plate. “God is great; God is good. Now we thank Him for our food. Amen.”

The little sisters laughed aloud, and Bobby couldn’t stop a guffaw even with his palm pressed to his mouth. “That’s your prayer?” he said.

“Robert!” his mother said.

“Sorry.”

“Yeah, that’s my prayer. What about it?”

“That’s how you pray for a meal?”

“Yeah, so?”

Mr. Stark cleared his throat. “How about your father, Raymond?”

“It’s Rayford.”

“All right. Is that how your father prays over a meal? I mean, I’m just curious. It’s a child’s prayer. Uh, you’re a child, but you’re becoming a man.”

Ray wanted this conversation over. What in the world was it with these people? “Do you want me to pray like my father prays? I can.”

Mrs. Stark set down a bowl she had apparently meant to pass. “Yes, that would be nice.” Everyone closed their eyes again.

“For what we are about to receive,” Ray said, “may we be truly thankful. Amen.”

“Amen!” the girls chorused.

Ray got the impression that Bobby and his parents were again amused but had decided not to humiliate him further. At breakfast he was not going to be talked into praying again; that was for sure. For one thing, those were the only two prayers he knew, other than “Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray thee, Lord, my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray thee, Lord, my soul to take.” He could only imagine their reaction to that.

Bobby seemed to quietly study him that evening, and Ray was hoping they wouldn’t start talking about anything serious. No such luck. While they were setting up the video-game controls, Bobby said, “That’s how you pray at your house, eh?”

Ray shrugged. “We don’t pray a lot. Just for meals and at bedtime.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“And it’s those made-up, rhyming prayers?”

Ray sighed. “What’re we supposed to do—pray like the preacher?”

“What church do you go to, anyway?” Bobby said.

“Central.”

“The big one on the corner downtown? Do they believe in Jesus?”

“’Course they do. What do you think?”

“I don’t know. Some churches don’t.”

“Those would be synagogues,” Ray said.

“How about you, Ray? You believe in Jesus?”

“I told you! I go to Central every Sunday.”

“So you’ve got Jesus in your heart?”

Ray just wanted to play. What was this? “In my heart? What’s that mean?”

“How long you been going to this church?”

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