I am twenty-eight, and practically nothing has happened.

RAINER MARIA RILKE
The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge

THE CABLE ADDRESS

Carl's train stopped well before the station, accompanied by a metallic stuttering and juddering as if his journey's heart had suddenly stopped beating just before arrival. Outside, a sea of crisscrossing tracks and behind them, the Wailing Wall. The Wailing Wall was a kilometer-long brick facade that demarcated the Leipzig station grounds from the city, pierced by strange, honeycomb-like openings through which a street, buildings, and sometimes even people were visible. For some reason, it was not uncommon for trains to stop here, outside the station, the destination in view, for minutes or hours; it was like an old complaint, a familiar song. The travelers' gaze inevitably fell on this wall—hence the name.

The morning after the telegram arrived, Carl had set out for Gera. He wore a clean pair of jeans and his old black motorcycle jacket with the diagonal zipper across the chest over a freshly washed shirt. He owned three of these collarless work shirts, identical shirts with thin, pale blue stripes from his time as an apprentice bricklayer before he began his studies. He'd even trimmed his hair a bit, laboriously, with dull nail scissors—shoulder-length would have to do. He was returning home like someone long-lost, at least that's how he saw it for a moment. Most castaways were stranded only after their return—that's the saddest part of those stories. Once home, they could not adapt to life on the mainland. The many obstacles, storms, years—all the loneliness, which, ultimately, turned out to have been best. Often, they were unable to tolerate mainland food or they died because of their excessively long hair, which they had to display

at local fairs to make money, and which, one night, when they were asleep, would wrap itself around their necks like a noose . . .

Outside, the conductor walked the length of the train, swearing and knocking on the windows of each car: "Off the train, everyone off!"

They were on an old outer track with a temporary wooden platform. Technically, it was not a platform, but a ramp through which grass grew and a few young birch trees protruded sideways, apparently impervious to waste oil and excrement. The birch leaves glowed yellow. Carl saw this glow and heard the rap of his steps on the wooden ramp. Like convicts, they trudged single file toward the station on a narrow walkway between the tracks.

The dimly lit concourse surged with people, a billowing motion, shouting and braying. Again and again, the loudspeakers, which transformed every word into a muffled, hollow dream language, a single, completely incomprehensible call, repeated: "Uh-uck!"

The object of their siege was the express train to Berlin, a string of eight or nine grime-encrusted carriages with nicotine-yellow windowpanes. On the evening news the day before, there had been talk of additional trains and further provisional border crossings, along with repeated formulaic appeals for calm. A few of the Berlin-bound managed to scale the greasy carriages and launch themselves headfirst into the overcrowded compartments through the skylights. A scene out of Bombay or Calcutta—in the Leipzig train station it appeared excessive, like part of an overblown choreography, out of place and on a large scale.

Carl slowly pushed his way through the crowd. His bag kept getting caught. The strap cut into his shoulder and seemed about to tear. He immediately regretted having dragged all his papers and books along—how stupid, how thoughtless of him. Several expletives rang out, his face was pressed into the coarse felt

of a jacket that promptly made a feral sound—then something rammed him in the chest. He fell, dragged down and twisted by the weight of his bag. Someone who surely was just trying to catch him hit Carl's face hard with the flat of his hand; Carl tasted sweat and lost his bearings.

"Uh-uck! Uh-uck!"

The cry now came from on high. It was the voice of a drunken giant babbling down at them from the soot-blackened cathedral of the station, but his dwarves no longer obeyed.

"My bag!" Carl shouted when he came to.

"Which bag, young man? Do you mean this one?"

The bag was still there; more precisely, he was lying on it. For a moment Carl saw nothing but faces bending over him, tense but controlled. It's joy, Carl thought, pure joy. But he couldn't actually tell what emotion was controlling them, if it was, in fact, still joy or already hatred.

"Do you need help?"

A girl, sixteen at most, was offering him a handkerchief. As always, Carl was surprised by the gleaming red, that fresh, slightly unctuous substance that couldn't possibly have come from him: blood.

"Will you be alright?" The girl touched Carl's arm. He saw her round face and in it, her eyes, very light and watery, as if blind.

"No, you have to stay with me. Forever."

"Thanks. You'll survive."

He made his way outside along an empty platform. He tried not to pay too much attention to the blind girl (she wasn't actually blind), but she stayed with him, holding his arm. They were a couple, at least until Carl collapsed onto a bench.

"Are you also going to Berlin?"

Carl tilted his head back and felt it in his throat—a warm thread that unspooled from somewhere on the roof of his mouth and, strangely enough, burned a little. He had to swallow, again

and again, but it still hung there. Since he was a child, he often had nosebleeds. Back when these things mattered, he used to impress his friends by being able to stop the bleeding with a single blow of his fist to his forehead. It was a boxing trick. He rammed the ball of his hand against his forehead, or the blow glanced off it. The impact had to be forceful, making the head jerk backward. It was all in the jolt. If you were too timid it didn't work.

"No, I'm going . . ." He shook his head gingerly to stop the spinning before his eyes. The girl remained standing next to him for a while. Carl considered what he could ask her but then, suddenly, she was gone, and he murmured his answer: "Home. I'm going home."

Centimeter by centimeter, the express train to Berlin pulled away from the platform. The overcrowded carriages slid past. Someone hollered, "Arrivederci, you bum!" and a spontaneous chorus struck up the song that Carl only knew in his grandmother's melancholy rendition: "I'd love to stay a bit longer . . ." Carl watched the train leave. The departing chorus passed the ramp with the glowing birch trees, which began waving shyly and tremulously.

The word *bum* was still buzzing in his skull. A bum was someone with a bloody nose, squatting on a train platform that no trains left from. Someone who has no idea where the journey is headed, thought Carl.

He pulled the telegram from his bag. It was just a note, handwritten, with a stamp below the writing. In the lower right-hand corner, the operator had noted the date and time: 10 November, 9:20 a.m. "we need help please do come immediately your parents." No reproach, no mention of his months of silence, only this, a cry for help. Just that weak little word *do*. Carl could hear it, in his mother's voice: "do come." He pictured her hurrying downhill into town, with short, brisk steps, he pictured her

dictating the address, filling out the telegram form, meticulous but also tense, nervous, which is why she forgot the salutation, and he pictured Mrs. Bethmann, the woman at the counter, counting the syllables. Even these days, when the most unimaginable things were happening, the "cable address"—as those behind the post office counter called it—still worked.

Carl had to admit that he hadn't been particularly worried—parents were solid ground, unassailable, the home turf you could retreat to in times of need. Missed, yes, it was odd, he *missed* his parents and not just this past year when he'd only seen them one single time, no, even before then, always, actually, he had always, always missed them.

He looked for the track on which the southbound trains usually ran, to the region on the border between Thuringia and Saxony from which his family came—"where the fox and the hare bid each other goodnight," his father's favorite expression for "in the middle of nowhere." When he was a child, every night before he went to sleep, Carl had imagined foxes and hares slowly gathering at the forest's edge to say goodnight. Sometimes there were other animals in the mix, all different kinds of animals, and sometimes a few humans who were good friends of the animals. All these gentle, clever creatures gathered in one particular, moonlit spot at the end of the day—a silhouette of raised muzzles, raised heads and a single chorus: "Goodnight, you hares from Gera, you foxes from Altenburg, you ravens from Meuselwitz, goodnight!"

PART I

BEWILDERMENT

Carl couldn't remember who'd first suggested "going out for a few steps," his father or his mother. It wasn't unusual. He followed behind, his parents in front, as always. His father had just turned fifty, his mother forty-nine. His father had become slender, the brown leather jacket, the drooping shoulders, gray hair thinning on the back of his head—Carl had never seen him this way. They walked along the Elsterdamm from Langenberg to the Franzosen Bridge, their traditional walk along the river. There were hundreds of photographs of it in the family album, neatly glued and meticulously captioned by his mother: the six-year-old in a collared shirt and bow tie, his eager smile and large, eager teeth—Carl on his first day of school. Then the fourteen-year-old with a pageboy haircut and a serious, dismissive air. Next to him, his mother, her hair in a chignon, wearing a Corfam coat, autumn '77. And so on, along the timeline through all the years and seasons until today, which no one photographed. On their right, the lazy flow of the Elster, its moldy bank and the Langenberg meadows. His father stopped, turned and said, "Carl."

It would be nice to relate that a wind suddenly rose in the Elster Valley, blowing along the river, or that there was a peculiar sound, maybe a kind of whistling, a thin, soft whistle from the meadows that is heard only once every fifty or one hundred years: "Carl . . ."

His parents wanted to go. To leave the country, in short.

A soft whistling, for example. Carl looked around and it was suddenly as if this (their) world of river and path had only

been set up provisionally (not for eternity) and as if it now (like everything else) (obviously) had to be dismantled and stashed away, as if it had (from one moment to the next) become irrelevant and worthless. "That's not how we meant it," Carl's mother would have interjected if there had been the opportunity but there was no pause in the sequence, just bewilderment. Carl's single sentence, bumbling, stammering, like that of a helpless, frightened child whose parents are suddenly no longer adults: "I think you're underrating the whole, the whole—I mean, *the whole homeland thing.*" It was strange for him to say it, he wasn't used to talking to his parents like this; something had been turned upside down. They walked on upriver in silence—mother, father, child amid all the shams of their abruptly obsolete, discontinued life.

There was no conversation at supper, either. The mood was tense, and Carl started to consider it all the result of a bad hypnosis and he didn't want to be drawn in any further. First, they had to eat, then clear the table and wheel everything back into the kitchen on the serving trolley, a small, two-tiered cart with a chrome frame. The muffled rolling sound it made on the carpet, long familiar, the soft clatter of the dishes as always, as if things could only stay this way forever—after all, that's what everything here had been set up for. The cart was lifted over the doorsill in the hallway, this was his father's job, but today Carl leaped up to help him, carefully, so that nothing slipped off. "Now there's someone who sees what work needs to be done," was his father's highest compliment.

Like two children, they pushed the trolley together down the hallway and into the kitchen. Carl felt helpless but he lent a hand and was suddenly overcome with a feeling of homesickness, with a longing for homecoming, for rest, sleep, the return of the prodigal son, something along those lines. Longing for that exhaustion that descends like a seizure, which only ever

struck him here, at home, on his childhood sofa: "Oh Carl, why don't you stretch out for a bit? And here, take the pillow. Do you need a blanket? Here, take the blanket . . ." First the pillow, then the blanket, which meant: defense against all self-doubt, the obliteration of all distress.

When Carl and his father returned from the kitchen, his mother was on the sofa. She seemed nervous and fitfully crossed her legs. These days she wore her hair short and smooth like a young boy's, which made her look even smaller than she was. Still, it was easy to see how much strength there was in her, how much determination. His father held him by the arm.

For a moment, it looked like they were only play-acting: sudden departure, parting, escape—and the papers on the flat surface of the secretary, lined up parallel to the edge. They reflected the light from the small fluorescent tube covered by a shade and Carl had to close his eyes for a moment—land certificates, deeds of transfer, a gift deed form certifying that *all this* would now belong to him. Carl Bischoff, the only child of Inge and Walter Bischoff, born 1963 in Gera, Thuringia, "currently a student"; "student" was only written faintly and in pencil.

"It would be nice if you could look after the place, that's to say, we're asking you to." Or: "Could you look after the place, that's to say, we'd like to ask you to."

Later, Carl couldn't remember the exact wording, just "ask" and "look after" and that he had allowed the *handover*, which in the moment had a solemn aspect to it, to happen without resistance, at least without any mention of his own plans. The brute force of incomprehension left him at a loss for words and eclipsed everything else.

That little word "why?" presented itself but was not admitted, on the contrary, "why?" and any answer, Carl sensed, would only lead deeper into that state of unreality that, it turned out, became absolute when he learned that his parents planned to

attempt their *departure* (that's how they referred to it) *separately after Giessen*. From the central transit camp on, they would initially each try on their own, in order to "double our chances." That's how his mother had put it and that was the name: "Central Transit Camp." She was trying to keep her voice steady, but Carl could hear that *separately after Giessen* had not been her idea.

"We've thought it over carefully."

And then: "Your mother always wanted to leave."

Carl didn't have the slightest doubt that Inge and Walter (since adolescence he was in the habit of calling his parents by their first names) belonged in this house, in this life and no other, which is why he started in on the dangers and risks, of which he only had vague notions. His mother looked at him.

"And you, Carl? Where have you been all this time—without a single word? Do you have any idea how worried . . ."

Then the handover.

A tour of all the rooms, the new oven's features, the electrical wiring and the fuses, their farewell to it all. An envelope lay on the secretary. "Five hundred marks," his father said.

"Any other questions?"

It was already late evening when they returned once more to the garage, down in the valley, next to the railway embankment. For a while, they stood next to each other, their hands in the cone of light cast by the workbench lamp while Walter explained how the tools were organized. That summer, a few important and rare pieces had been added to his collection, including an ignition timing mechanism and a distance gauge with twenty tabs (0.05 to 1 millimeter), priceless tools. There were larger, cruder tools on the metal shelves, but the valuable ones were hung on the wall over the workbench with rubber straps made from preserving-jar rings or mounted on brackets Walter had made himself from narrow slats rubbed with recycled oil: tools of various sizes,

ordered in increasing and decreasing sizes that, together, created a kind of landscape (a homeland), gleaming and cool.

Carl's father wasn't wearing his overalls, which he usually put on when he was in the garage, just an apron, the gray, knee-length apron that was reserved for work on the house. He picked up one of the new socket wrenches and simulated its use. The raised voice, the pauses, the "so" and the "then," the tone of his detailed explanations and the message that hadn't changed since Carl's childhood: the world demanded concentration—and patience; the world was rickety, fragile, in a questionable state, but it could be repaired.

"Do you know how long it takes to set up a collection like this?"

"Quite a few years," Carl replied.

"A lifetime," his father said.

As a sign that he understood, Carl fingered the tabs on the new distance gauge. The thin steel was slightly flexible and rather greasy. The grease smelled sweetish, edible . . . Here in the garage's dim light, with a tool in his hand, Carl could have begun speaking, confiding in his father, suddenly it seemed possible, this was the opening made only for that. He could have recounted what had happened to him in the past year (*befallen* him was the old, more precise word). The breakup with H. and why he'd stopped going to class and why he had hidden himself away from the world.

He wouldn't have told his father everything, of course. His attempt with the pills. The Kröllwitz Clinic. The empty days.

He pictured it: his father's worried expression, but no reproach; a nod, a pause—

"Finally, one more thing about the car."

Carl put down the tool. His father asked him to get behind the wheel of the Zhiguli. He turned on the ignition and pointed to a small light below the tachometer that lit up or not depending

on the motor oil, but Carl had already stopped listening to what his father was explaining.

They sat next to each other in silence for a while, in the semi-darkness of the narrow precast concrete garage, and Carl was unable to imagine his father's life. Walter's hand lay on the black imitation leather dashboard, right in front of Carl's eyes. As if he wanted to show Carl his hand one last time in farewell, how his hand looked exactly like his son's and not only in its shape, the lines on their palms were identical; the same history was written in their hands.

"You don't drive up to the gates of a refugee camp in your own car, I expect," his father said, then fell silent. The tool landscape shimmered in the rearview mirror. Carl realized that the distance that usually stood between them was suspended.

"No, I . . . I know," Carl stammered. That was all.

His father seemed to still be pondering, but then he got out of the car and Carl rested his arms on the steering wheel.

As a child, he would sit for hours behind the wheel of the Zhiguli, making rumbling sounds; clutch, shift, gas. A light went on in the apartment building across the way. Effi lived there—Effi Kalász, with whom Carl had been in love since eighth grade without ever telling her.

A STORY

Carl slept in his childhood room, on the so-called *teen bed*, an orange and green striped sofa bed. Back then, just before his fourteenth birthday, his parents had redecorated his room. He'd been surprised by the unannounced disappearance of his fold-down bed, which could be turned into a cabinet during the day very easily, and that his mother never missed an opportunity to call "very practical and, most importantly, space-saving." In fact,

the new furniture left only a narrow path from the door to the window, under which stood Carl's desk. The disappearance of the fold-down bed and the appearance of the teen bed signaled (still) the end of his childhood.

Carl looked around. The only books in his parents' house (aside from his father's reference books on computers and programming languages) were now kept on the shelf above the teen bed: the Meyers encyclopedia in nine volumes with the one-volume supplement, a Duden dictionary, a dictionary of foreign words and two small encyclopedias (one of nature and one of history). Everything else was unchanged. Also unchanged was the play of light and shadows on the room's ceiling, the street noise and the voices from the entrance lobby. Someone had spray-painted "The revolution will prevail" in red on the base of the apartment block across the street.

Before he fell asleep, Carl heard footsteps overhead, heavy steps, not the steps of a girl: Kerstin Schenkendorff, the daughter of the man who kept the *Hausbuch*, a log of all the building's tenants and their guests. He lived in the apartment above them, she was a few significant years older than Carl; what had become of her? He remembered the night of the story. Inge and Walter had gone out, which rarely happened. Carl counted as one of those children parents proudly call "sound sleepers," but this time there had been a monster, a dragon chasing him unrelentingly and with an enormous appetite. Carl screamed and woke, drenched in sweat. He ran into his parents' bedroom, but it was empty. He ran through the apartment: no one there. Only the dragon, still hiding somewhere, so Carl had to escape but the apartment door was locked. He'd pounded on the door and called, maybe even screamed, and then, at some point, he heard Kerstin Schenkendorff's voice outside on the stairs. She spoke to him soothingly, calmed him down, and asked "if a story wouldn't be nice?" Carl crouched in his pajamas, he pressed his ear to the

door, snuggled up to it (dear door) and heard the soft rustling of the house, then, behind the door, the story that Kerstin started telling him, and kept on telling until he fell asleep.

The next morning, Carl drove his parents to the border. Even before the sun rose, his father had brought the car up from the garage and set the keys next to Carl's plate. Carl saw the keys and he felt a certain pride although he knew that what was happening could only be wrong. Weren't they his parents? With their quiet, daily life organized down to the smallest detail along with a particular love of order and repetition? A few platitudes from his schooldays drifted by: "the historic situation, the historic moment . . ." The historic moment has turned your heads, was Carl's view, but he didn't say it. He did not feel superior, but rather at a loss.

One possibility was to keep thinking of himself as *their child*. Parents knew what they were doing and sooner or later the wisdom of their decisions would become clear. It would emerge, just as it always had. And after all, you could look at it in a completely different way: in their own way, Inge and Walter were contributing to the revolution that was taking place everywhere. They stopped showing up at work, they left their positions and prepared their escape, if you wanted to call it that. His parents! They were the unlikeliest refugees Carl could imagine.

The matter of the accordion was upsetting. His father had dragged the old, black case with the instrument up from the basement. He had attached straps that enabled him to carry the bulky monstrosity on his back. He wanted to take it with him, that much was clear, but what for? Carl knew that the instrument belonged to his father, but he'd never seen him play it. Like so much that was stored in the basement, it came from a distant past that was shrouded in darkness.