

Pirgi

I had been placed into the home of a family named Schtetler. There were three boys, all older than me. The father worked at two jobs and was almost never around. The mother was a frantic, watchful woman who was always scrubbing, washing, or cooking. I had been told at the state agency where placements were arranged that the family had asked to have me in their home and that I must not make myself a burden to them. I was careful therefore to thank them for every meal and to be polite at all times. I did not want to risk being sent back to the orphanage.

The walk home from school took me along a street lined with concrete apartment buildings that were identical except for a big wooden letter fastened to the wall beside the front entrance of each one. The letters were painted different colours. 'A' was yellow. 'B' was red. 'C' was green. Further along in the alphabet they ran out of colours and had to use the same ones over again. They also ran out of letters so that after building 'Z' (black) the next building was 'AA' (blue). The family I was staying with didn't live in one of these but in a smaller building farther from the school than all the lettered buildings. I had to walk past the entire alphabet in order to get home.

That afternoon I was alone because the teacher had kept me after school. I had been enrolled on the previous day, and she had kept me back to ask me some questions. Where did I come from? Who were my friends? Where was I living? I told her the name of the town where I used to live and said that I didn't have any friends and that I was living with people I knew nothing about. Instead of expressing sympathy, she seemed suspicious and asked the same questions again. I couldn't understand why she didn't believe me. Finally she said I could go, but she followed me into the hallway and watched me walk all the way to the end. I went to my locker and got my things, and I was walking along the street wondering what I had done to make her think I was lying to her when I heard a man's voice.

"Hello there."

I stopped and looked back the way I had come, but all I could see were a couple of children taking turns beating on a tin can with a stick and

an old man with a crooked back trying to step from the sidewalk down into the street with the help of a cane. I started walking again but stopped when the voice called out a second time.

“Hello. Over here!”

He shook the chain link fence, which rattled against its posts.

What I saw when I turned was a dwarfish man of slight build wearing a dark coat that reached to his feet. He gripped the fence with both hands and smiled, revealing two rows of crooked, yellow teeth. I did not hesitate to approach him.

“What’s your name?”

When I told him he surprised me by saying, “You’re new here, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” I looked down because there seemed to be something shameful about this fact.

To my astonishment he said, “You’re staying with the Schtetlers.”

“How did you know that?”

He regarded me earnestly.

“Pirgi knows everything,” he said and winked.

“Pirgi?” I said. “Is your name really Pirgi?” I was shocked to hear him say this because the word pirgi means “little pig.”

He nodded and seemed sad and proud at the same time. Something in his eyes, which were brown and flecked with tiny veins, made me welcome the idea of telling him about myself. It was a feeling that swept over me, like a sudden understanding.

“That’s what they call me.” He tilted his head. “You should come over here so we can talk more easily.”

There was a break in the fence not far from where we were standing and without a second thought I scrambled over to his side. He was only a few inches taller than I was.

“This is where I live,” he declared, and with a broad gesture indicated the ugly apartment building that rose behind us. Beside the front entrance was the letter ‘P’. The letter was a deep shade of violet but some of the paint had flaked off. “I’ve been living here for so long I can’t remember living anywhere else. I think I was living here before they put up the building.”

“That’s impossible,” I said. “You couldn’t be living here if there was no building.”

He seemed to think for a moment and then admitted, “Perhaps you’re right. I was probably living with my mother and father in their house. But I can’t remember any of that. I was only a baby.”

While he talked he led me across the lawn and behind a clump of

trees to a bench. Next to this was a deserted play area with swings and a slide, both of which were broken. The wooden walls of a sandbox had collapsed and the sand had spilled over the grass. We sat down.

"Do you like it here in our city?"

I didn't know what to say since I had only been there a few days. I shrugged.

"I admit it's not beautiful. But it has some good points. There are the ruins of the old cathedral. And our football team has reached the first circle three years in a row. Someday they'll win the state championship. Where are you from?"

"Elbasan." This was not true. I just wanted to see what he would say.

"Ah, but I have it on good authority that you're from Shkodër."

"How do you know about me?" I asked, because I was not stupid and he seemed to be making a point of demonstrating how knowledgeable he was.

"I make conclusions based on the facts," he said. "For example, I saw Mrs. Shtetler walking with you to the school the other day, probably to register you. She wouldn't be doing that if she had no reason to, not with three boys of her own to worry about. And just now when you spoke I noticed something in your voice that I've heard before. Your accent reminds me of people I know who come from around Lake Scutari. You probably can't tell, because it's the way you speak. But it's there. I knew the name of that town, so I guessed. I'm lucky sometimes too."

This explanation seemed reasonable enough and my worries were dispelled.

"Now," he began, "I want you to tell me something, and be truthful about it. What do you like about our city, and what don't you like?"

I thought for a moment and what came to mind was that you could lose yourself in a city this size. I could still remember what it was like to live in a small village where everybody knew everybody else by their first name. I didn't like the way everyone seemed to know what you were up to and where to find you. It seemed to me that in a large city it would be easy to slip off somewhere and disappear, if that's what you wanted to do. I told him this.

Pirgi nodded and for a moment he seemed to ponder what I'd said.

"And why do you suppose someone would want to disappear?"

I shrugged. "I don't know."

He stared at me for a long time and I began to feel uncomfortable again. Then he smiled.

"Well, if that's what you like about our city, what is it you don't

I said that I found it strange how unfriendly the people were. I told him about my teacher, and how she had refused to believe me when I answered her questions. The Schtetlers were also like this. So far Mr. Schtetler hadn't said a single word to me. All he ever did was look at me, and I could see in his eyes that he didn't trust me. Mrs. Schtetler was different because she was nice, but she also seemed on her guard when I was with her, as if she thought she was being watched. The boys ignored me. But so far, all that living in the city had done was introduce me to people who were scared of each other and who didn't trust anyone, especially a stranger.

"It's the same in every city," Pirgi said without hesitating, as if this complaint were a familiar one. "People everywhere are under all kinds of pressure. Food is scarce. Nobody has enough money. You shouldn't let it bother you."

I nodded. I was going to stand up and leave, but he didn't give me the chance.

"Since we're friends now I am going to tell you something. In a city like this one, most of the people are hard working and honest. They go to their jobs, they follow the rules, and they don't cause any trouble. They live orderly lives and they should be proud of this because they are the foundation of our society. But there are others, like Mr. Schtetler, who would like nothing better than to disrupt the order that our leaders work so hard to maintain. I know they tell you in school that there are rules and that you have to follow them. This is easy for most of us to understand. But imagine if there were no rules, if you could do whatever you liked. Well, there are people who want our society to be like that. They want to come and go as they please and they don't want to do what they're told. There aren't many of these anarchists, but they're still dangerous because you can't tell who they are just by looking at them. They could be your best friend, or your neighbour, or your brother. It's impossible to tell. So we always have to be looking out. This is why you sometimes find people acting strangely, but it's only because they don't know yet that you're one of the good ones. Once they know they can trust you, you'll be welcome anywhere and treated fairly."

I nodded. Everything he said made sense.

"It's too bad that some people want to force their views on everyone. It makes life hard for all of us. But what I've found is that if we stick together, no one will be able to hurt us. When we all think the same way and work toward common goals, nothing can stop us. We have to help one another. Are you willing to help?"

“Yes,” I said.

“That’s good. I can see that you’re a good boy and that you’ll grow up to be a good man. What I need from you is this. We believe Mr. Schtetler is an anarchist, but we have no proof. We need someone to watch him and write down when he goes out and when he comes home. You don’t have to follow him. We just need the times. And let me know if anything unusual happens or if he has any visitors, or even if he and his wife have an argument. It might be that we’re wrong about him. In this case, your information will help us by clearing him of suspicion. Once we know for sure that he’s innocent we can put our resources somewhere else. But if our suspicions are true, then he’ll be arrested. I know it sounds bad, but that’s only because when we hear that someone has been arrested we think they’ve been put in jail. However, if Mr. Schtetler is arrested he’ll be put into a re-education program. It will only last a little while and then he’ll be home with his family. Do you think you can do this for me?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Good. You write the information down in a notebook and put the notebook in a safe place. Write everything down carefully and keep it on one page. When the page is filled, tear it out and bring it with you. I won’t talk to you for a few days, but I’ll be watching. When you have the page with you I want you to signal to me from the street. A wave or a nod will do. We can sit and have another chat and you can give me the page. Above all, don’t tell anyone what we’ve been talking about. There’s no need for anyone else to know. Now, I need you to tell me that you understand.”

I nodded. “I understand.” My heart was racing and I could hardly suppress my smile, but I said this solemnly, as if reciting an oath.

“We’ll talk again in a few days. Go home and don’t say anything to anyone about this.”

I ran toward the street. When I looked back he was still sitting there watching me. His presence filled me with warmth that radiated from deep inside me. Just knowing he was there made me feel safe. It was as if I’d found my guardian angel. He smiled and waved, and I set off toward the Schtetler’s apartment filled with a sense of mission and importance.

I had a small notebook that I had brought with me from the orphanage, and I used this to make my record of Mr. Schtetler’s activities. Pirgi had made it sound like a simple task when he explained what he wanted me to do, but I quickly discovered that Mr. Schtetler was a man who did not keep to a schedule and who seemed to have no need for sleep. I also felt the need for secrecy like a burden on my shoulders, and took measures to conceal my note taking from the youngest Schtetler boy, Juré, who was sharing his

bedroom with me. Because I had no way to lock my belongings away, I carried the notebook with me at all times and slept with it under my pillow. I had decided that if anyone asked what I was doing I would say I was writing poetry.

For the first few days I was able to keep records that were accurate to the minute. I had no watch, but Juré kept a clock with a digital display beside his bed, and I used this as the basis of my report. That night, after Pirgi had enlisted me in his cause, Mr. Schtetler was not home for dinner. It was at around 8 p.m. that I noticed him come in, not because I saw him, but because the sound of the apartment door opening and closing was easy to hear. From the bedroom I heard him exchange some remarks with his wife. I was preparing an assignment for school, and I left the bedroom to get a drink of water and saw them together at the dining room table. They stopped talking as I went into the kitchen, took a glass, and filled it with water. Mrs. Schtetler smiled at me, but Mr. Schtetler stared at the table and did not smile. When I got back to my room I heard the voices start up again. Their conversation was brief, and in a few minutes I heard the door open and close again. I had observed that Mr. Schtetler had not taken off his coat while he spoke with his wife, and I made note of this, thinking that it might be important.

I knew how delicate my position was. I could not afford to raise suspicions. That night I washed quickly and went to bed, wondering while I lay reading my book how late it would be when Mr. Schtetler returned home. Juré went to bed shortly after I did, but he turned his light out immediately. From one of the other rooms I could hear the murmur of the television. I continued to read until, hours later, I started awake with the book lying open on my chest. Juré slept on. Afraid my light would bother him, I turned it off. It was now past midnight, and though I was almost certain that Mr. Schtetler was not home yet, I couldn't be sure. I had no choice but to stay awake until either I heard him come in or somehow determined that he was already home.

I stared at the ceiling, which from time to time was illuminated by lights from traffic moving outside. At one point I got up and stood by the window, which looked over the front grounds of the building. The bedroom was cool, but I trembled because I was afraid that I had failed, that on the first night of my assignment I had allowed Mr. Schtetler to return home undetected. As I stood by the window I composed in my head an appeal for forgiveness that I would present to Pirgi with my eyes cast downward and my bottom lip quivering. I sat on the bed, but stood again after only a minute when I felt my head grow heavy and my eyes begin to shut of their own accord. It was after 3 a.m. when finally a car pulled up

on the street and I saw a slim figure emerge from the passenger side. In a few moments I heard the door of the apartment open and could be absolutely certain that Mr. Schtetler had returned from his late-night adventures. I breathed a sigh of relief and went to bed.

The following day I overslept and had trouble paying attention in school. The next night was much the same. Mr. Schtetler was out when I got home. He came in around 9 p.m., left again almost immediately and didn't return until after 3 a.m. I made careful notes, but wondered if my lack of sleep was making me less observant than I had hoped to be. The next night Mr. Schtetler actually joined us for dinner and spoke to me for the first time, asking me if I liked my school. I said yes and told him that I was much happier here than in the orphanage. After supper the boys asked me to go with them to the video arcade, but I was so tired I had to say no. They left and I went to my room to try to do some homework, but I couldn't concentrate. Mr. and Mrs. Schtetler were talking, and I heard her say that the money the state was paying them for keeping me was good money and that they couldn't afford to send me away. When Mr. Schtetler answered, his voice was so low I couldn't understand what he was saying. I wrote down that he wanted to send me away and that she wanted me to stay. After this Mr. Schtetler left.

I tried to work, but I must have fallen asleep, because when I looked up Mrs. Schtetler was standing in the doorway watching me.

"You work too hard," she said. "My boys wonder if you are some sort of little genius sent to inspire them in their schoolwork."

The notebook was open on the desk. I knew that if I tried to cover it I would only draw her attention to it.

"I want to do well. I'm not a genius. I have to work hard. I have no choice."

"You will make yourself sick, working all the time like that."

"I'm just tired. I haven't been sleeping."

"It must be hard for you, living in all these strange places with people you don't know. I want you to feel at home here. We can give you food and keep you warm, but we'll never be like a real family to you. I can understand that."

I nodded.

"I want you to feel that you can ask me for anything. I'll get it for you."

I looked at her. I wasn't sure what she was trying to say.

"You know, like Coca Cola or a new walkman." She shrugged. "An American rock-music t-shirt."

"I would like a glass of water."

When she left the room I closed the notebook. She came back a moment later with a glass of cold water.

"I know boys your age have certain things that they want. Just let me know. Please."

I smiled at her and when she left I put the notebook under my pillow. I was already so tired I didn't know how I was going to stay awake to keep my watch. I tried reading but immediately felt that familiar heaviness pressing down on my eyelids. I walked around the room, stood at the window. But even standing up I was falling asleep. After the boys returned from the video arcade there were voices and the sounds of people getting ready for bed. Someone turned on the television, but the noise lasted for only a few minutes, and soon there was nothing I could do to keep myself awake. I crawled into bed and was instantly carried away into a profound and dreamless slumber. The next thing I knew Juré was shutting off the alarm. I had slept through the night and heard nothing.

All day I worried about how to fill in the gap in my notes. I had two choices: tell Pirgi that I had fallen asleep and missed Mr. Schtetler's arrival home the previous night, or make something up. If I told him the truth he would probably take the assignment from me and never speak to me again. I would be able to sleep through the night, but I would also have to bear the shame of failure. I thought about what I should do and late that afternoon decided that it would do no harm to simply put down that Mr. Schtetler had arrived home shortly after 3 a.m.

I had the page in my pocket when I walked past building 'P' on the way home. Pirgi was talking to a man wearing a long mushroom-coloured coat. When I signalled to him from the street he motioned for the man to wait and came over to the fence.

"You have something for me?"

I took the paper out and pushed it through the wire fence into his fingers. He put it in his pocket without looking at it.

"I want you to know that your work is very important. I will pass this along. I don't have time to talk today because, as you can see, I am busy. But we will talk again soon. When you bring the next message. I promise."

With this he smiled and gave me a wink before hurrying back to the waiting man. As they resumed their discussion they turned away from me and I could not see their faces. Pirgi gestured with his hands as if emphasizing a point. The man nodded.

I tried to control my disappointment, but all I could think was that he had approached me with an offer of companionship, and now he was dismissing me as if I were a servant. I held back my tears on the walk back

to the Schtetler's apartment, my eyes to the pavement, and once inside I went straight to my room.

That night I stayed awake until dawn waiting for the sound of Mr. Schtetler returning. I fell asleep as it began to get light out, but I managed to wake in time for breakfast. When I went out to the kitchen I saw that Mr. Schtetler was still not home. Mrs. Schtetler did not seem worried, however, and so I concluded that she knew where he was and both expected and approved of his absence.

I went to school, but was so tired that I had trouble following what the teacher was saying and could not focus on the words written on the blackboard. I fell asleep in mathematics class and was sent to the nurse's office, where I explained that it had been weeks since I had been able to sleep soundly at night. I dozed off while she spoke with someone over the phone. Finally she wrote something on a piece of paper and told me to give it to Mrs. Schtetler. Then she sent me home.

After I gave her the paper from the nurse, Mrs. Schtetler went out for a while. She came back with some pills in a bottle and told me they would help me sleep, but I should take them only at night. I struggled to stay awake through dinner, and afterward Mrs. Schtetler gave me one of the pills and sent me straight to bed. I didn't hear a thing the entire night and only awoke when Juré's alarm went off. Mr. Schtetler could have come and gone a hundred times. But lack of sleep had left me so groggy I didn't care about Pirgi and whether or not Mr. Schtetler was an anarchist.

I used a free period at school to fill up a page with notes about Mr. Schtetler. Since I hadn't seen him for several days I made it all up. I wrote that on Sunday he came home at 5 p.m., stayed in the apartment reading until midnight, and then went out. For Monday I wrote that he talked on the phone for two whole hours and then left the apartment after a late night phone call. I wrote that on Tuesday morning he ate breakfast with us and told jokes and made everyone laugh. I invented shadowy visitors and mysterious packages. I wrote whatever came into my head. When I gave this paper to Pirgi he told me I was a good boy and that we would talk again soon.

I was feeling much better. The pills helped me to sleep and I didn't worry about what Mr. Schtetler was doing or how much time he spent away from home. I began to enjoy the company of the Schtetler boys, especially Juré, who was close to me in age, and through him I made some friends in the neighbourhood. We went out most evenings and roamed the streets, talking and laughing. I saw Pirgi whenever I passed by Building 'P', but never let on to anyone that I had spoken with him. He was almost always with someone, two or three young men with shaved heads wearing dark

jackets, or else the man in the mushroom-coloured coat. Every week I found an opportunity to pass a piece of paper through the fence and into his stubby fingers. Each time he put it into his pocket without looking at it and told me I was a good boy. But after the first of these not a single word of truth was written on any of them.

Then one afternoon Pirgi wasn't there when I walked by Building 'P'. I was alone and so I went through the break in the fence and looked around the grounds of the building. I sat on the bench where Pirgi had brought me to chat. The play area was still deserted and all the toys were still broken, and I noticed that the trees were losing their leaves. I had been sitting there for a while when a young girl walked by carrying a baby, but she only glanced at me and didn't say anything. Across the street a few children were playing in the parking lot. But there was no sign of Pirgi.

That evening I went to the video arcade with Juré and some of our friends. It was a chilly night and once we were finished playing our games I was eager to return to the Schtetler's apartment and have a glass of warm milk before going to bed. However, there seemed to be some excitement among the other boys in our group, and before I could grab Juré's arm to get him to come with me, we were joined by some older boys and being swept along by a tide of anticipation. I moved to the middle of the crowd where I was warmed by the crush of bodies. The cold air was still and aromatic with cigarette smoke. I had been separated from Juré, but as we entered a narrow cobbled street he appeared by my side and told me that the police were out and that there was something going on near the ruins of the cathedral. Everyone was drawn by the danger and wanted to see what had happened, and I could tell by the way Juré's eyes shone in the light of the streetlamps that I would not be able to convince him to leave and go home.

The echo of voices grew louder as we approached the cathedral. When we rounded the corner and entered the square, there was suddenly so much light it was like the sun had come up. Several cars had been overturned and lit on fire. There were hundreds of people out, and many of them were chanting slogans that didn't make any sense to me. There were also police in the square, but they were just standing around, watching. I held Juré by the arm as the others pushed forward, and when we saw our chance we crept to the edge of the square and stood on the sidewalk, where the crowd was not as thick. We watched for several minutes, and then I noticed that there were men walking through the crowd with video cameras, filming the scene. I pointed this out to Juré and said I thought we should leave.

A lot of people were arrested, but this didn't end the disturbances,

and after about two weeks the police imposed a curfew. I was glad that Mr. Schtetler was not among those arrested, but my stay was cut short when the fighting started in earnest. The Schtetlers left the city and I returned to the care of the state.

Years later, after the government fell and during the time when nobody was in charge, I lived in a refugee camp in the mountains near the border. We were queuing for food when I noticed a small man in a black rubber rain suit waiting in another line. He stood with his face directed downward and his hands folded in front of him. When he reached the front of the line he took a plate from the stack and then looked back down at the ground. He walked with a limp and seemed to pull his left leg behind him. He spoke to no one. Once we had received our meal he retreated to a corner of the tent and sat on the ground to eat even though there were plenty of empty places at the tables. I took a seat close by. His face was a patchwork of scars and his hand shook when he raised the spoon to his mouth. I had spoken to many people about my experiences and had known for a long time that he was a police informant. But I wasn't angry. I only wished to discuss our common memories. I approached him, but the moment he saw me he dropped his plate and pulled himself to his feet. He looked so scared he seemed to be in pain. I hadn't intended to trouble him, so I just watched as he maintained the distance between us by circling one of the long tables. He crept along, keeping his eyes on me as he approached the exit of the tent. I didn't bother to follow. The last I saw of Pirgi he was dragging his leg along a narrow street, through mud and intermittent rain, in some obscure mountain town.