

# THE ENEMY

by Gottschalk

## 1.

Down to the riverbank the two story brick buildings, flat-roofed and box-like, marched in even, straight-edged and gridded formation. The streets surrounding the buildings met at right angles. But for a gentle hill that rose up from the river, everything: streets, buildings, walkways, and planted trees were straight and even. The river was spanned by an old bridge, once used for trains, then adapted for automobile and pedestrian traffic. From the bridge one could view the riverbank's geometric perfection, but there was one point, near the Schumdorf side, from which these old buildings looked quite different. From this one point, an accident of perspective, a shift in the measured angles gave the buildings and trees the aspect of a Mediterranean seaside village, a place where the streets were narrow stone, where the buildings were jumbled haphazardly together, accidentally producing a perfect chaotic beauty-- a beauty that would have been diminished had it been produced with awareness and intent.

At this spot Peter stood, not sure why he found the sight so compelling, but transfixed he was. Not for the first time he drank it in, determined to press it into his memory forever. He was concentrating so hard that he did not notice a quiet rustling in the bushes at the bridge's threshold. But he did notice, a few moments later, a high-pitched wailing sound that quickly multiplied in volume. Then across the bridge they started to run-- a gang of eleven boys, a certain Josh Klein at spearhead, screeching mock Indian war yelps-- they had sticks tied to their legs, arms, chests and heads in a crude imitation of the first Americans' wooden armor, something from a book one of them had misread. They bore down on Peter who stood like a statue for a long moment, thoroughly terrified. Then he turned, almost within reach of the gang's first boy, and ran as fast as he could across the bridge. Cars with smiling faces passed the tearing boys, the adult motorists fondly remembering their own childhood games and failing to notice the abject fear on Peter's face.

Peter was outstripping his pursuers and had nearly reached the end of the bridge when he caught his foot on a board sticking up, a warped, cracked piece of wood left over from the days when the bridge was for trains. He pitched forward, lost his balance, and, skinning his elbow and

bruising his knee, went straight down onto the walkway. The noise from the motley tribe grew louder. Peter held his knee in both hands and turned towards them expecting to see stick war clubs raised to beat the life from him. Instead he saw a blur fly over his head, then a pair of thin legs over feet firmly planted wide apart, above them hands on narrow hips, all topped by a head of jet black hair. Irene Thresher stood facing the group of boys, her rigidly straight back to Peter. Fewer than ten feet from the prone boy and proudly upright girl the gang of boys stopped and stood, tense, menacing and uncertain. Peter expected them to rush the girl and attack her with their war clubs-- they were still too young for chivalry to hold any meaning-- but he could not see her face. Irene's expression was hard, her jaw set and pointed out, not a flicker of fear was in her eyes. The silence was, for Peter, painfully sustained before it was finally broken by a resumption of the boys' imitative war cries; they lurched forward then parted into two groups, ran past Peter and Irene and disappeared around a corner on the other side of the bridge. Irene turned around and looked down at Peter, hands still on her hips.

"I saved your life," she said. "Now you have to do what I say."

She stepped over him and started walking away. Peter watched her for a moment without moving, then she turned her head.

"Are you coming?" she called out.

Slowly he stood and stumbled after her. Of course, it would have been easy simply to walk the other way, to ignore her, but he did not.

She led him under the bridge then along a path in the grass at the bank's edge. As she walked, she picked her knees up high and stomped her feet to the ground, yet despite her elaborate stepping she moved quite fast; Peter had to run after her to catch up.

They followed the path to a large clump of trees. Irene went into it, and as Peter came up behind her he saw that inside the trunks and branches made a little enclosure like a small room. Standing in the middle was a weathered table and two small chairs that looked as though they might crumble at the smallest touch. Irene sat upon one of the precarious seats and loudly declared, "It's tea time. You must be my butler!"

"But there's no tea," said Peter, quietly.

"Of course there is. It's over there." Irene pointed at empty air. Peter decided to play along. Stiffening his body and assuming a haughty air, he held his hands in front of him as though carrying a tea tray. He set it down in front of her, lifted the teapot and poured out a cup for her. Daintily, she lifted the cup to her lips while he stood near her chair, his hands clasped behind his

back.

"Would you like more tea, madame?" he asked in a roughly British accent.

Irene looked at him, in her eyes a rather kind expression. "You can sit down if you want," she said. "You don't have to be my butler anymore."

Peter sat down and lifted an imaginary cup.

"Your cup is empty," said Irene.

"No, it's not," said Peter.

"Yet it is," she insisted. "You didn't pour any tea into it."

Peter hesitated, then lifted the teapot and poured a cup.

"Is it good?" she asked.

"Too hot," said Peter.

They sat looking at each other. Irene seemed disappointed by his criticism, but she didn't complain. Peter was attacked suddenly by a feeling of great embarrassment. He stood up quickly, knocking over his chair, and ran from Irene's hide-out.

## 2.

Two days later, Peter's legs pumped hard on the pedals of his bicycle. It was a motocross imitation, black, with a banana seat and handlebars shaped like a motorcycle's. He sped down the driveway of his parents' house out into the empty street. Despite his furious movements, the town's streets and sidewalks rolled under him much too slowly. Breathing hard, he stopped at the intersection leading to the bridge. He'd avoided going to the bridge for the last two days-- afraid to remind himself of just how scared he was, but that day he looked over the structure with a refreshing lack of emotion. He jumped and brought his feet down on the pedals, then took off across the river.

In the huge parking lot of the abandoned seed company building, which sat on the edge of Schumdorf, crumbling slowly, Peter practiced his wheelies. There was a sense of danger in riding his bike there; he knew Josh lived nearby and he even imagined that most of the broken windows in the old building were broken by stones that Josh had thrown. But, he unfortunately thought to himself, Josh had by now completely forgotten the bridge incident. It was just a few brief seconds in a long summer.

As Peter rode his bike back and forth across the parking lot, lifting the frame's front end

into the air, his lack of wheely proficiency was being carefully studied by six mocking eyes. As he rode away from them, they moved out of the bushes and stood on the sandy gravel. As Peter turned around, he saw them, and his heart pounded faster than the fastest riding of his bike could make it pound. Josh, Leo, and Kurt stood between him and the driveway that led to the street. A large expanse of parking lot stood between them, but it led nowhere, and he and his bike would never make it through any of the thick bushes that had grown all around the unattended building's perimeter. A stand-off of sorts occurred. The three boys looked at the one, the one stared back. Peter was afraid, of course, and fear banished action. The three boys knew Peter was afraid, they gloated over it, but they had no idea what they would do to take advantage of it.

Peter finally recovered the use of his limbs. He started pedaling, but his fear had robbed him of serious determination, so he was moving rather slowly when he reached the three boys. Josh stopped him easily; he stood in front of Peter's bike and held onto the handlebars, his arms stretched out in front of him.

"Hey, Peter-cockroach-eater," he said. "What ya doin in our town?"

"Nothin," said Peter.

Peter spun his head wildly, hoping for the *deus ex machina* that would release him.

"What're you lookin for?" asked Josh. "Your girlfriend's not around." He put a sneering emphasis on the word girlfriend. Then he turned his head and spat onto the ground, a large sticky white globule that looked like a wad of spider eggs.

"She stays in Eston," said Kurt, and he spat, too, though not as impressively as Josh.

"Did you have fun playing tea-time, little girl?" said Josh, tauntingly. In his humiliation, Peter failed to realize that the likeliest way Josh would know about Irene's tea game was to have played it himself. "She's a psycho little girl," said Josh, "and so are you."

"Peter is a psycho-girl, Peter is a psycho girl," the three boys started chanting. They walked around Peter in a circle, stepping sideways, leaning in and chanting.

"I think we will have to kill him, men," said Josh.

Kurt and Leo pulled cap guns out of their back pockets, aimed them at Peter, and began firing. The noise shook Peter from his terrified stupor. He put his feet on the pedals and spun them furiously. A few gravel stones flew out from under his back wheel, then his bike took off; two seconds later, he was out of the parking lot and on the street, Kurt's, Leo's, and Josh's taunts and raucous laughter fading fast behind him.

### 3.

Scott Zimmerman, Peter's best friend, side-armed a flat rock across the river's surface. "One, two, three, four," he called out loudly, counting the little splash rings the rock made as it skipped over the water. Peter picked up a stone and did the same, but his only bounced three times before submerging.

"You know Irene Thresher?" Peter asked, trying to sound casual.

"Yeah, I know her," said Scott. "So what?"

"So, she's gross," said Peter. "I hate her." He turned his head to the side and spat, then looked carefully at the disappointingly small white glob.

"Why do you hate her?" asked Scott.

"It's kind of a secret," said Peter. "I told her I wouldn't tell."

"But you hate her," said Scott.

"Yeah," said Peter, "but still, I promised."

"Okay," said Scott. "Whatever."

"I mean, I want to tell you," said Peter. "I'm just not sure I should."

"It's up to you," said Scott.

"If you promise not to say anything, I could tell you," said Peter. "Do you promise?"

"Yeah, I promise," said Scott.

"Well, I was walking in, you know, that path by the river? I saw this big grey toad jump in there-- it was really cool, and I wanted to find it. I was walking down there and there're these trees, and in the trees, Irene has her secret hide-out. And she was there, okay? And I didn't want her to see me, cause I knew she was crazy, so I hid behind a tree. And she was in there. And this is the really gross part-- she had the toad I was chasing, and she had this pocket knife. . . and she cut up the toad into little pieces and ate it!"

"God," said Scott. "That's gross."

"So I hate her. Cause she's a gross toad-eater."

"But you were chasing the toad," said Scott.

"I was just gonna play with it and let it go," said Peter.

There was a pause in the conversation. Peter picked up another rock and chucked it at the water. Scott stared at several water striders, their legs making little circular depressions in the water but never breaking through its surface. In the distance, they heard a boat horn. Peter was suddenly afraid of losing Scott's interest.

"You wanna see the hide-out?" he asked.

"Sure. Why not?" said Scott.

After skipping one more stone, Scott climbed onto his bike-- an exact replica in red of Peters' bike. Peter climbed onto his and led the way down the street toward Bridge Road, where the grassy river path started. They didn't dismount after turning onto the path, their bikes were moto-cross style after all, and they bounced and vibrated wildly over the uneven ground. At the clump of trees they stopped-- Peter put one hand on Scott's shoulder, and when Scott turned to face him, he held the first finger of his other hand to his lips. Scott nodded gravely. Though he'd seemed rather disinterested before, now he was fully participating in the adventure. In crouching positions, they stole into the little bower where he'd played Irene's butler. There was no one around, but the little table and chairs stood there looking even more pathetic than Peter remembered. Peter was disappointed. He'd been hoping for some kind of confrontation, and that obviously wasn't going to happen. Peter tried hard to think of something they could do-- if he'd had a frog or toad, they could have killed it and left its corpse for her to discover, but of course, they didn't. Then he thought of something fiendishly simple. The bower's furniture was already falling apart. They didn't need much strength-- in fact, it was easy for them to break the legs off the table and two chairs.

#### 4.

A few days later, Peter and Scott were again playing together. In the five-foot high drainage pipe at one end of a park, with little plastic dolls made to look like comic book characters, they were concocting an elaborate story of a super-villain's plan to flood the world. The super-heroes had to escape the drainage tunnel and capture the villain before North America was submerged. Scott saw her first as he carried Spider-Man, swinging on his webs, out of the tunnel. She was apparently alone, walking across the park's broad, flat field, carrying a stuffed rabbit. Leaving the hapless Spider-Man at the side of the narrow stream that ran through the tunnel, Scott ran back in and whispered fiercely to Peter, "She's here!"

"Who's here?" asked Peter.

"Toad-eater," said Scott. Peter's eyes went wide.

Slowly they crawled out of the tunnel and looked out across the park. Irene had moved a little closer to them; it was obvious she hadn't seen them. Suddenly Peter, inspired by his deep hatred, picked up a small rock that was lying half in the small stream's water and threw it across

the park with all his strength. He lost sight of it in mid-flight. Irene made no sign that she'd noticed his assault at all. Peter picked up another rock and threw it.

"What are you doing?" Scott whispered hissing. He sounded quite scared.

"I'm gonna peg her," said Peter.

The second rock landed near Irene, and she noticed it. As Peter grasped and flung the third rock, Irene stopped walking and looked toward Peter and Scott. The third rock struck her forehead-- Irene fell to the ground and sat there. She opened her mouth wide-- Peter and Scott were terrified, expecting a huge scream, but no sound came from Irene's mouth; no sound at all.

"You threw the rocks," Scott hissed; then he ran for his life. After a few moments of confusion and regret, Peter chased after him.

## 5.

From the window of his bedroom, Peter looked out at the dark and cloudy sky. Imprisoned by his parents, feeling embarrassed, he still could not quite bring himself to believe that he was entirely in the wrong. Hadn't he suffered at her hands, too? And Josh's? Josh, the true villain, was now outside the chain of events. In the distance, a boat horn sounded loudly; Peter covered his ears with the palms of his hands. He stood in that pose for a few moments and didn't hear his father come into the room. A bit confused by Peter's positioning, his father stood at the door waiting until Peter removed his hands from his ears.

"Are you OK?" he asked his son.

"Yeah," said Peter. He walked from the window and lay down on his bed. Peter's father sat on the edge of the bed and looked down at him.

"Can you tell me why you threw rocks at Irene?"

"I don't know," said Peter, sulking.

"You don't know?" his father repeated. Peter shook his head. "You must have had a reason. You're not a mean person are you?"

"Maybe I am," said Peter.

"If you're mean, people will be mean to you. You don't want that, do you?" said Peter's father.

"No," said Peter, still sulking.

"You know what?" said his father, suddenly irritated, "I don't care why you did it. When you're out there, making your own way in the world, if you do something wrong, nobody cares

why. You get punished no matter how good your reasons are. Nobody cares how many nice things you've done, only the one bad thing matters. So keep that in mind while you're sitting up here."

"But why don't the people who really deserve it get punished?" asked Peter. He was thinking of Josh, of course, but Peter's father, in his irritation, missed the implication in Peter's question.

"Well, they do sometimes. If someone does a bad thing," he said, "he may not get caught the first time. But getting away with it encourages him to do it again. He usually does the bad thing again. If he doesn't get caught, he'll do it again. It's almost a law of nature. He'll get caught eventually, because he'll keep doing the bad thing until he gets caught. He knows it's bad. I think most people who do bad things secretly want to get caught."

"Why would they want to get caught?" asked Peter.

"I don't know," said Peter's father. "Maybe they think it's the only way they can stop doing bad things."

"Why don't they just not do the bad things?" asked Peter.

"Why did you throw the rock?" said Peter's father.

"I don't know," said Peter, missing his father's meaning.

"Get some sleep," said Peter's father.

When he had left the room, Peter pulled an issue of Spider-Man from under his bed, climbed down beneath the sheet and thin blanket, switched on his flashlight, and stared at the bright four-color printing.

## 6.

Once freed from his confinement, Peter joined Scott at the scene of his crime to play again the evil flood with their comic-book super-hero dolls. His choice of location was deliberate-- perhaps he'd thought it out, perhaps he was acting on instinct, but either way, he wanted to banish thoughts of his misdeeds and replace them with more pleasant associations. As they approached the tunnel, Peter felt a twinge of nausea, but soon he and Scott were engrossed in their game, and all other thoughts vanished. They were so wrapped-up, in fact, that neither of them heard Irene approaching-- unless Scott chose to ignore it. As Peter rushed out of the tunnel with the Incredible Hulk, pretending to smash the boulders that blocked his way, he looked up across the field and saw her standing above him-- behind her stood four unfamiliar girls.

"I'm gonna kick your ass," Irene said.

Peter's eyes widened with fear.

"Don't be scared, Jeeves," said Irene. (Peter didn't understand why she called him that.) "It's just you and me. They're just here to make sure it's a fair fight. You're not afraid of a girl, are you?"

Without saying another word and without hesitating, Irene walked up to Peter and threw her fist into his stomach. Peter bent over, his hands interlaced over his abdomen, his face turned toward the ground just a few inches from the grass. Irene stepped back.

"Come on!" she yelled.

With some effort, Peter managed to stand up straight. He took a step towards her and threw out an awkward punch-- she easily moved out of the way, and her punch landed on the side of Peter's mouth. Tasting a small trickle of blood, surprised by Irene's strength, Peter stood stunned for a moment. Irene watched him expectantly. Though he was angry and frustrated, Peter couldn't force himself to feel enthusiastic over the fight. Irene's attack had been so unexpected and so surprisingly violent that it left him with an overwhelming longing to either flee or give in and accept his beating passively. Holding up his clenched fists, imitating the pose he'd seen in boxing movies, he slowly advanced toward Irene.

"You think I'm not gonna hit a girl?" he growled. "You'll see. I'm gonna beat the shit out of you."

Though the tone of his voice was less than certain, the words themselves momentarily intimidated Irene; she held her hands in front of her face and backed three steps away from him. Encouraged by her gesture, Peter advanced; he threw another punch which Irene again dodged easily. She kicked out her foot and caught Peter in the knee. Again Peter was paralyzed-- Irene struck him again in the face, and his instinct to flee at last fell ahead of his others. He would later tell people it was a fight of five against one, and Scott would not contradict him.

## 7.

Peter expected his battle with Irene to haunt him for the rest of the summer, perhaps even for the rest of his life. As he ran from the park, a long string of images ran through his mind; of Josh taunting him, of his parents' disapproval, of Scott and his other friends abandoning him completely. He spent a week in depressed resignation, as if all of those events had already occurred; his parents continually asked him why he was feeling sad, but he never explained it to

them. In fact, miraculously, they did not even learn of his fight. The anticipated assault from Josh Klein never came, and Scott remained loyal and even sympathetic.

He had been punished twice for the same misdeed. Curiously, the idea that Irene deserved punishment for her violence did not occur to him-- children are usually highly aware of an imbalance in fairness when that imbalance is not in their favor. For the third time in a week, Peter went to the bridge. He rode his bike along it from one side of the river to the other and made sure there was no one else around, then he took up his position. The view was the same, but it appealed to him less. It no longer seemed to be a magic window to an exotic place, though it did retain some of its beauty, and the longer Peter looked at it, the more beautiful it looked. Before, it had seemed to him that the beauty of this image was foreign, strange, and completely apart from him-- that day, he had the odd sense that he was making the image beautiful simply by looking at it. He stood there for a long time, next to his bike which leaned against the steel railing, his energy fading quickly. Then he gripped the handlebar and walked slowly away, wheeling his bike beside him.

As he approached Eston, he saw Irene and was struck by panic, but before he could jump onto his bike and flee, she saw him. They both stopped walking. She turned away from him and walked two steps in the opposite direction, then turned again and looked at him. He hadn't moved. She walked toward him slowly, holding her hands behind her back. When she was a little less than ten feet away, she stopped and looked at the ground.

"I'm sorry I hit you," she said quietly.

Peter just looked at her. She lifted her head.

"You hate me, don't you?" she said.

Now Peter looked at the ground. He was torn between wanting to forgive her and wanting to keep her as an enemy. If he forgave her, the whole incident would fade, the tension would disappear, the burden of his shame and hatred would be lifted. But her apology had given him the upper hand, changed his role from victim to adversary. He wanted her to be afraid of his revenge, which could come at any time. He fixed an angry expression on his face and lifted his head. But she wasn't looking at him; with his angry expression still on his face, he stared at her back as she ran, her sandals clapping loudly on the sidewalk.