

"Why do you want me to call you "Penny??" Isn't your name "Penelo..."

"SHUT IT! RIGHT THERE. UNLESS YOU WANT A KNUCKLE SANDWICH!!"

The girl looked at the chubby boy with the glasses, holding her small left hand into a tight fist as illustration.

"Okay! Penny!!! Geezo!!!" the boy adjusted his glasses with both hands, mostly as a defensive maneuver to protect his eyes in case the knuckle sandwich would be delivered anyway.

"Relax, Gus. I'm not gonna hit you...at least in your face!" The narrow girl lowered her hand but kept her fist clenched. "You KNOW I don't like that name...My Dad thought he was being cute. Naming me after some cartoon girl named Penelope Pitstop. I guess you don't like being called "Gussett" either, huh?"

"But that's my name."

The two of them were sitting on top of a green transformer which was placed under the shade of a large oak tree and across the street from the home of the narrow girl with pig tails. Penny's mom shooed her outside when other women started showing up for Jeannie's birthday celebration.

"Doesn't have to be. Doesn't your mom call you something else? Mine calls me "Princess" sometimes. Don't yours call you something other than "Gussett"?"

Gussett thought about what his dad called him...

"Henry... HENRY!!!" The man shook his son into waking.

"It's Saturday!! Let's get goin' son!!!"

Clive looked down on the bed, removing his hand from some part of his son's body, as he shook the small body to wake up his son.

"You know those fishies aren't gonna find their way onto our rods all on their own..." Clive went down the hallway, looking for fishing gear and boxes and other loud things. He was trying to be quiet -- his wife was still in the bed. Probably laughing at the two males trying to get out of the trailer as quiet as guys can be.

If there was anything Clive loved more than the rodeo, it was something to do with the water. Whether he was in it, around it, on top of it riding on a boat or canoe... he was all for it. And if it involved either his good-looking wife or his "little man" Gussett Henry, Clive Owen was more than willing to forget about anything else...and spend that time with his family. And water.

Clive was not a real big family man, but after the miracle birth of his son Gus, he "grew up" and became a provider, a supporter and a father to the one thing he loved more than the rodeo -- the person who would propel the Owen name forward.

"Where we going, Dad?" Gussett called somewhat quietly while gathering his "fishing clothes".

"Hell, I don't know son...I just think we'll just play it by ear today... It'll be just me and my "little man"!!

"My dad did call me his "little man", but that was when I was younger..."

"Silly boy," Penny said, "you STILL are a little boy..."

"Keep that up, and I'll slip and call you that other name you don't like..." Henry said, standing up and motioning for Penny to follow him.

"I can't go far. I promised my mom that I would hang around the house today. She's turned 46 today and she's got some of her gal friends coming to keep her company," Penny stated.

"Probably to have some of that chocolate cake with rum in it," she quickly added. "Your momma -- does she drink?"

"Not around me. My daddy used to drink a lot...come home drunk a lot...but after he died, she stopped drinking. Every once in a while, I'll see a beer bottle in the trash, though..."

"It's good that she's not trying to hide it from you. My mom tries also, but we've already talked about it." Penny opened the fenced door to her yard, and then let Gussett get past her before she closed it. "Mom and I talked about a lot of things after Dad took off... drinking, drugs, sex..."

"Your mom talked with you about SEX? Penny...you and I are the same age..." Gussett stopped and looked at her.

"No time like the present, my mom said. You mean your mom hasn't talked with you about sex and urges and making babies and all of that crap?"

Gussett didn't know whether to answer the questions honestly or to pretend that the words never left the girl's mouth.

Gus was thinking that Penny's mom thought that she would get tempted and become one of those girls making a living over on Falmouth Avenue. Over there, off Highway 212 leading to the casino, there were women and girls out there each evening hustling for a few dollars. Some of them were professionals -- prostitutes from the Cities, coming out for horse racing season, hitting men up as they come to or from the nearby horse racing track. Others, including some young girls, are there two times a month -- the first and middle of the month -- making additional dollars to feed their families or themselves.

"Payday girls" the locals called them. Brule Davis told Gussett to stay away from them. Gussett however, ignored the advice.

One evening, Gussett rode his bicycle past the brightly lit "sin center", the Little Five Casino, on his way back from, well, somewhere...He stopped to admire the unbelievable amount of lighting -- blinking, rotating, illuminating -- which came from the front and sides of the large building. Cars were parked several rows thick in the parking lots and their owners would be making their way to or from the cars to the front of the building.

And the "Payday girls" would be in the parking lot, asking for whatever they can get and offering their bodies in exchange. That evening, there were eight women and two girls...no, there were three.

A girl was asking a bit too much and got in response a knife to her side. She was bleeding and calling out for help. Gus at first ignored the pleas because they were laced with so many obscenities -- and his only previous experience as far as those girls proved to be rather embarrassing. The girl was not calling for help from God but instead was delirious with carnal delight at the hands and body of some man. Gus intervened that night, only to have the woman to turn and say "you'll have to wait your turn, little man..." and then go back to the attentions of the man. Gus left quickly, seeing enough of what he thought was a 'damsel in distress'.

It was after that situation, that Brule Davis offered his advice: "Stay clear of anyone who will use God's name in vain. Either they are beyond help, or they don't need God's help at all. And stay away from those girls. They may look and perhaps smell nice...but they are poisonous!"

As the girl found her way to the ground, the car sped off. Gussett got off his bike and ran to where the girl was not being pleased, nor was she even standing. But the words came fast and non-stop out of her mouth.

"Look." Gussett looked into the eyes of the girl. "You have to shut up. I know you're in a lot of pain -- I can see where you've been stabbed. But the yelling -- and the words, please -- you've got to stop."

"And who the..."

"I'm the boy who came here to save your life. Shut up and let me see the damage."
Gussett looked at her face, and then at her side.

The knife blade was deep. She was seconds away perhaps from falling asleep and not waking up again. He placed his hand over the wound, pressed hard -- which produced a loud "DAMN!" from the voice of the girl -- to which Gussett moved his gaze to her face as a warning, and then returned back to looking at the wound.

"I want this wound to heal," Gussett stated, pressing his hand against the girl's wound.

"What?" The girl of about 16 or so voiced. Gussett continued to keep his hand there for a few more seconds, and then removed it.

There was a brownish scar on the pale body; and blood remained on both her clothing and on Gussett's hand. He pushed the girl up and then, standing up, he helped the girl stand up.

"Who are you? What did you do to me? Why I'm not bleeding anymore?"

"You'll be fine. I stopped the bleeding. You need to see a doctor to make sure that the knife didn't have any germs or something on it. You need to get away from here. A friend of mine said that this is like poison out here..."

"Thank you...whatever you did, thank you..." the girl smoothed her hair and located her purse. Then moving toward Gussett's pants, she started to unzip the fly.

"No. That's okay. I am sure that you're great with what you can do, but all I wanted to do was to help save you." Gus zipped his fly back up, rubbing his bloodied hands onto his pant legs. "I'm leaving now."

"What's your name. At least I can know that, right?" The girl stood as Gus went back toward his bicycle. After a few steps, he turned and said "You won't remember it anyway, but the name's Henry. Bye..."

"You're not gonna tell me, are you Gussett?"

"Tell you what, Penny?" The two walked around the side of the house. The two stopped long enough to hear the assembled women indoors all singing the ending of the "birthday son" to Jeannie...adding the "cha cha cha!!" to the end of the song.

The two giggled as they found places on the dual swing set Penelope's dad assembled in their backyard.

"Answer my question...did your Mom tell you about sex yet?" Penny let her legs drag into the grass under the swing set.

"All I know is that I'm not ready for it, that everyone does it, that it's a part of how we were created, and for some people who are not careful, it can be very dangerous. Even deadly. That's all I need to know. I don't need to know the gory details..."

Penny laughed at Gus' last comment.

"What's so funny." Gus started to swing back and forth, not paying attention to the girl sitting beside him.

"You are. And you -- and only you -- can call me "Penelope" any time you like, "little man..."

Gussett moved his body in the swing back and forth and then jumped out, flying through the air and landing a few feet in front of the swing set.

"And you can forget about calling me "little man"....call me "Henry". That's what's my mom calls me when she wants my attention. You can too."

Penny jumped out of her swing and landed a few inches from Gussett.

"You know...I kinda like "Gus", " she said, looking at the chunky boy half laying in the grass.

Penny then got up, extended her hands to the boy, and asked "two out of three?" Gussett used her hands and body to get up and the two ran back to the swing set to start again...