

Every summer, the Shakopee and Prior Lake fire departments co-host the Fireman's Dance. In the early years of the two towns, the annual Dance provided avenues for things to be built or upgraded: the massively large playground and city park in Prior Lake; the upgrades to the fire stations caused in part by the construction of the casinos down the road; money to help rebuild lower Shakopee, which sits on the southern edge of the Minnesota River and every seven to ten years floods. It became less of a fund raiser and more of a social event the year that the popular rock star who called himself by a symbol instead of a name showed up and spent the entire evening dancing and being around "real people" -- he didn't sing a tune and did not use his or anyone else's guitar.

People are still talking about the year that the "purple prince" came out of hiding just to be as silly as all of the other people who paid \$2 to stand around, dance, listen to bands butcher up popular tunes -- including his own -- and just "be there".

Gussett Henry was torn. On one hand, he wanted so much to be "seen" at the Dance. It was a social event, and people from both towns poured out and welcomed their neighbors and people they have not seen for months. It was a way for him to forget that school was going to start up in a few weeks, and with that another set of decisions for his mother and him to decide upon.

On the other hand, Gus did not really know how to dance. The few lessons his mother patiently showed him, accompanied by songs from her own teen years, taught him only to avoid stepping on toes and stop looking at his mother's breasts -- he could not help it: size wise, his mother had another foot or so on him so his line of vision came right to his mom's chest.

"So embarrassing," Gus said to himself as he stood there, barely moving as his mom hummed the tune of "I Want to Know what Love is", a song by the band Foreigner as she moved for the both of them. He then stepped on Sheila's toes again.

"OW! I KNEW this was not a good idea...Let's stop..." Sheila started hopping around until the pain subsided. She then went over to the stereo and turned the music down.

"Sorry again, Mom..." Gus wailed. "Besides, I'm getting hungry and I've got to change and then go down and pick up Penny."

"Who's taking you to the Dance?" Sheila found a pair of slippers and placed them on her feet.

"Penny's mom. She's gonna meet up with some friends from one of her writing circles there...they're just going there for the music." Gus added, using a singsong tone to his voice, "You should go also. There's gonna be some fire men there..." He then giggled as he went to the bathroom and shut the door behind him.

Henry Gussett emerged minutes later from the bathroom, freshly scrubbed but still with wet hair. Looking at himself in the mirror before he left, he looked closely and saw that his lip hair was a bit more visible than last week. "Won't be long now...I'll have to start shaving. Man am I getting old!" He left the bathroom and moved to his bedroom to dress for the dance.

"Do you know anyone else you'll maybe see there?" the voice from the living room spoke. Then Gus overheard his mother thanking someone and closing the door.

Gus wandered out of his bedroom, pulling his pants up and looking around the living room for a belt. "I know that it's somewhere out here..." he said to nobody as he moved cushions and stacks of paper around.

"If you stop using every other room as a dressing barn, you'd find your things..." Sheila stated, reading a document on top of a postal service priority mail envelope.

"Whatcha reading?" Gus stopped looking around and instead looked in his mother's direction.

"Don't know. It's from the hospital where you were born. They want us to come in and talk about our experiences. I didn't know it's been 15 years since..." Sheila responded and then stopped herself.

"Fifteen years since I was born. You didn't know how old I am? Didn't we just talk about what I wanted to do for my 15th birthday last Thursday??" Gussett looked at his mother. He was teasing but the look on his mother's face said she was not thinking about this.

"Here -- you read this. See if you think we should go there." Sheila gave the letter and cardboard envelope to her son.

"Ms. Owen," the son started to read aloud.

"To yourself please. I've already read it." Sheila retreated to the kitchen.

Gus read the letter to himself.

"Part of our agreement with your family provided for this firm to pay all costs associated with your pregnancy, birth and care until your child's sixteenth birthday. This letter is to inform you that we have complied with that portion of the agreement.

A significant part of the agreement calls for you to bring your child, Henry Gussett Owen, to our facility so that a battery of test may be performed to ascertain his continued health. Once certified we will continue to pay for any and all health-related costs borne by you and your son until he turns 21 years of age or has graduated from college and is 25 years of age, whichever is the later."

Gus looked at his mother, who stood sullenly, looking at her son from the open kitchen area. He then finished the letter.

"Please acknowledge the date and time in which the two of you will arrive here so we may make appropriate arrangements and to pay for your stay."

Gus looked away from the letter and in the direction of his mother. He did not need to ask.

"We had no money. Your father and I thought that the best thing to do was to pay as much as possible and to have the hospital pay the rest. They did, but they want to see if your birth was real or we were something doing a scam of some sorts." Sheila looked at her son.

"And yes, I remembered. You are 15 -- and next year you turn 16. We have enough in savings to pay the rest of the hospital bill...and then some. But I was going to use that for your college fund." Shelia moved to the living room and sat down on the couch.

"What are you worried about?" the child moved and sat down beside his mother.

"I'm worried that they will want to do more tests on you. That somehow they will find out just how special you are. Invent some way for "experts" to show up and eventually take you -- and me -- away."

Gus wrapped his right arm around his mother and held her tight.

"Nobody's gonna know about my gifts. They aren't gonna take us away. And besides, they've run all of those tests and couldn't find anything, remember? That's what you said, Mom..."

Shelia looked at her son and nodded up and down. "Yes. That's what I said and that is what I was told. So you think this is a good thing?"

"At the least I can get a second opinion on this sex thing, anyway...." Gus spoke as he got up and moved back to his bedroom.

"Need this?" Shelia got up from the couch long enough to reveal the child's belt. She was sitting on it.

Caroline and Mark, friends of Penelope -- Penny -- drove her and Gus the seven blocks to the "drop off" point for the dance. Gus informed Mark that his mom would come and pick them up when the dance was just about over. He thanked them for the ride, and

the two drove over to the parking lot behind the bank and library to see if there were open slots to park.

"We could pop this stand and walk over to the docks, Penny..." Gus stated. "We can always come back closer to the time my Mom should be driving around."

"Your Mom isn't coming??" Penny asked.

"Where's YOUR Mom?" Gus asked.

"Um...she...um...had a date. Not really. There's a cool show on TV and she wanted to stay home and watch it... How come you guys don't have a TV? I was meaning to ask you that a while back..." The two of them continued to walk toward the music. Some guy was singing a song about "going through the changes..." and rather poorly at that.

"Don't know how long I can take that guy..." Gus pointed in the direction of the stage, smiling.

"You're ignoring the question," Penny asked.

"Okay. When I was five, the test patterns on one station scared me. It scared me so much that I would cry whenever the station breaks would come on...you know," and then Gus lowered his voice before stating "you're watching channel 3!" and then returning back to his own voice, "like that..."

Penny looked at her date.

"You expect me to believe this, right?"

"It's the truth. Ask my mom why we don't have a TV in the house. She'll tell you." Gussett Henry lowered his head slightly. "I'm just about over it, but my Dad took the TV out -- sold it he said -- and we never had one in the house since."

"Okay."

"I think it has something else to do with this gift I have...I don't understand it. Maybe that's something else I can talk with the doctors about..."

"What doctors?"

Gus then shared with Penny the information about the doctor's appointment at the hospital where he was born in Nebraska. The music changed and a slow ballad started up.

"Okay. You've told me enough. Let's go over there and see if our parents taught us enough to not make fools out of ourselves!" Penny smiled. She then added, "Besides, I've been looking forward to this part of the evening all summer!"

Penny yanked Gus by the hand and arm, forcing him to follow her to the dancing area roped off with yellow "Caution Fire Line" tape. She stood, looking at Gussett to do something.

Gus moved forward, taking his hands and gently resting them on his date's shoulders. Penny moved his left hand to her hip and pressed forward against him. "How about if you let me lead, okay?" she said silently. Gussett just nodded. The two of them moved in somewhat time to the beat of the slow song, rotating themselves as the other couples around them, in small circles.

At the end of the song, Penny looked at Gus's face and kissed him warmly on the lips. Gus returned the kiss.

The only thing Gus remembered from that time onward was that kiss. He did not remember the two other slow songs, nor did he remember sitting on one of the park benches while Penny went to the bathroom. Nor did he remember the phone call Penny made using someone's cell phone to get Shelia to pick the two of them up.

"You okay?" Penny asked as Shelia's car came around the drop off point to pick them up.

"Um...yeah..." Gussett Henry said.

"You've never kissed a girl before, have you?"

"No. Did I do it right? I mean...I did..."

"You were perfect, Henry. But do you know what you look like right now?"

"No. I don't look like I'm sick or something, right??"

Penny let a giggle escape her face before saying "you know those cartoons where someone hits someone else on the head with one of those big hammers and there are birdies flying round in a circle..." she giggled again as she opened the back door, "that's what you look like right now...I can even hear the bird sounds."

Gussett Henry felt like someone hit him with a large mallet, causing those birds to spin around his head. He pushed himself into the back seat and Penny pushed him a little bit more before getting in and shutting the door.

"Henry Gussett...are you okay back there?"

"Um...yeah Mom...Okay..." Gus spoke back, leaning against his date for the evening.

"Is he? Didn't eat too much, did he??" Shelia spoke, looking at the two of them from the rear view mirror.

"No. His first date...first dance...first kiss..." Penny said. "You know how it goes..."

Shelia smiled, remembering her first kiss.

There was a little break of silence before Penny spoke.

"Gus told me why you guys don't have TV in your place. Can you tell me the real version...I mean, if it's not personal or something like religion or something..."

"Well Penny, it was when Gussett was five," Shelia started. "We had a bad thunderstorm to hit town and it knocked out all of the electricity. When the power came back on, the television station we were watching had their test pattern thing on the set. I don't know if it was waiting for the electricity to come back on in other parts of town or whatever or if they were having problems... but whatever, they kept announcing the channel number out of Salina.

That was it. The combination of the test pattern and that voice put little Gus over the rail and he went into the bathroom and threw up all over the place." Shelia paused to make a turn onto Penny's street.

"Since then, every time he heard a station announcement, it would make him physically sick. After three or four times of this, his Dad sold the TV set and we never had another one in the house." Shelia stopped in front of Penny's home. The lights were out.

"Got a key to get in? I hope you keep that to yourself, the TV thing. It can be embarrassing and some of Gus's "friends", if you know what I mean, may want to tease him with it..." Shelia stated, looking back at the sleeping mass of male youth leaning against the door frame.

"Agreed. And yes, I have a key. Tell Gus to call me when he's around tomorrow please? We did have a good time and you taught him how to dance well..."

"Thanks for being a great friend to my son, Penny. Tell your mom that I'll call her in the afternoon..." Shelia said, as the young teen got out of the car and closed the door as not to wake Gus. She then went in the direction of her house but then turned and returned to the car.

Shelia rolled the window down and asked "What's wrong?"

"Do you have a scrap of paper and a pen?"

"I have a marker...and the back of a...Target receipt. Would that do?" She handed both to the young girl, who went to the back of the car, wrote something down and folded it, and handed the folded paper and the marker to the adult.

"Can you please give that to Gus? It's a note telling him how much of a good time I had." Shelia accepted both items before rolling the window back up.

Penny then skipped back to the front of their home, opening her small purse to get the house key. She opened the door, turned the outside light on and then the living room lights on as she made her entrance into the house.

It was only when the child was inside and the front door was closed did Shelia look around and drove to her trailer.

When Shelia pulled into the driveway besides their trailer, she turned the car off and unfolded the note. She read it to herself and smiled.

"I want to be your study girlfriend. Circle yes or no." she remembered the note as she got her sleepy son out of the car and up the steps to their front door.

"I think the word she's looking for, is "steady". The word should have been "sleepy" ", Shelia thought to herself, as she closed and locked the door and let her son sleep off the night on the couch.