

# SORRY BUSINESS

*Penni was a rare white  
face in a black town.  
Like me, an outsider. A  
partner in crime.*



# GERDIE

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# PENNI

Who is Doctor Penelope Palmer?

Penni is my friend and academic mentor. We met while I was studying linguistics and anthropology at the Australian National University in Canberra. She was my supervisor, and we became close friends. I respect her. I like her smile.

Penni is a quiet person. She is Australian, originally from Brisbane. She has never been to Germany. Her interests are in Indigenous art, religion and northern Australian languages. As a scholar she is steady but not outstanding. She wears her hair short. She likes banana paddle pops. She does not like the caramel.

I obtained my job here at Maningrida Arts and Culture with a reference from Penni. I often assist her when she visits. Sometimes I provide discrete special assistance.

I know one Penni and maybe her family and friends know another. Like me, she is a very private person. She says little about her past and I respect that.

Penni and I both have skin names, and have been accepted as part of local Kuninjku society. I am 'Kamandj'. Penni is 'grandmother' to me, despite being just a decade or so older. I must always treat her with honour and respect.

Penni has gone to the outstations. I helped her set out. She said almost nothing. Now the police are asking questions. Her friends are worried and have contacted me to help search for her. They have no idea what this region is like, what travelling during the Wet is like. I am sure Penni is holed up on a homeland somewhere.

*I hope that Penni is holed up on a homeland somewhere.*

Penni and I had a terrifying experience on Country late last year. It changed Penni a lot. I think it also changed me. I am a different person now.

I know that Penni has a partner, Li Jen, or maybe they have split up. I don't pry about people's lives. I wish people would not pry about mine, just leave me alone.

Penni is working on a big project on Kuninjku Country. She never says much about it. I think she wants to keep it quiet until she is ready to publish.

I am not an affectionate person. I hope that Penni knows how much I respect her. It would be a shame to think she might not know.

Who is Penni? She is still a stranger. I have lied for her, helped her in ways that may get me in trouble. I hope that she is doing well.



Kristin Krychek, *Pretty Penni P.*, 2013, From the collection of the NSWAG.

## GERDE: THE WOUND, THE SCAR, THE LIE

### Gerde's Wound: Withdrawal

Gerde is detached from others, having retreated inside herself because of her asexuality and vulnerability.

### Possible Causes

Being a highly private person, low self-esteem, shyness, past abuse at school, high intelligence, guilt or shame, fear of being hurt or rejected by others

### Gerde's Scar: Avoidance

Avoiding people and social activities, needing few friends; being highly independent, living on the fringes, focusing on work or projects, not calling attention to oneself, introspection, not paying attention, difficulty participating in conversations, feeling misunderstood, exhaustion, difficulty maintaining eye contact, thinking too much

### Gerde's Lie: Isolation

*Because I am asexual, lacking sexual attraction to others, I should permanently remain distant from*

*close relationships, friendships and social activity. People always pry and this hurts me. It is my secret. I have little reason to be social.*

### Associated Emotions

Anxiety, depression, disappointment, guilt, overwhelmed, sadness

### Positive Aspects

Gerde can easily tune out everyone else's noise and avoid unnecessary drama. Preferring one's own company to others, Gerde often has deep insight into who they are, far beyond what most people will ever discover about themselves.

### Negative Aspects

Gerde's withdrawal has taken isolation and introversion to a point of dysfunction, allowing social fears and phobias to form. When Gerde finds herself unable to cope with the outside world, it potentially puts her in

danger; should she ever need help, she may not be able to reach beyond her self-imposed walls to get it.

### Healing: Overcoming Withdrawal as a Major Flaw

For Gerde to fully engage as a friend and companion, or to enjoy her romantic inclinations, she would need to feel that it was safe to do so. Learning to trust someone who truly values her would help her open up and develop a stronger feeling of self-worth. Being accepted for who she is may cause Gerde to want to stay connected with others and balance her need for sanctuary with a desire for enrichment through relationships and experiences.

### Traits in Other Characters that may cause Conflict

Extroverted, friendly, pushy, needy, nosy, melodramatic, reckless, uninhibited, verbose

**Asexuality:** Gerde identifies herself as 'ace' or asexual. She has never experienced sexual desire towards another person or engaged in sexual relations with others. She does experience non-sexual romantic attachments and deep friendships. She is secretive about being ace and does not openly self-identify.

# GERDIE

*Death takes everything. It is the meanest, dumbest machine there is. It just keeps coming and it doesn't care.*

The local police spoke with me this morning. Dr Palmer has been reported missing. I told them about her visit here in early January, how she hired a 4WD to head south through the Wet to interview artists from the Kuninjku and Gunnartpa mobs. A big research project on artist lineages.

She was calm and cheerful, I lied, for she had really been agitated and upset. I did not tell them how I helped her with MAC gear and supplies for the trip. Nor did I tell them about our terrifying trip together last September to Kunannjii outstation. Penni had asked me to keep the secret, and I respect the confidences of my friends.

*I don't feel ready. I feel like I can't do anything. There were too many things to understand and finally just one.*

Whatever Penni is working on, it must be very significant. Something she'd need to keep secret from the other anthropologists till written up and published. A new sacred site perhaps, or women's business, or a songline myth that has not been shared with *balanda*.

And also, I am not sure the police would have believed my account of our September trip. I think that night was the worst of my life. I have not been the same since.

We drove to Kunannjii homeland to find it deserted. Then Penni left by herself in the Toyota soon after dark. It is wild country. A windstorm came up about ten, and afraid of being alone in the *wald*, I began drinking quite heavily. Perhaps I hallucinated. I recall low clouds and wind, the bush alive with voices and blue lights through the trees.

Penni returned in an extreme state. The 4WD careened in at three o'clock in the morning. Totally exhausted, she was vague about where she'd been, both terrified and elated. By then, I was almost comatose. We huddled together, sobbing and sobbing, a rather uncomfortable experience. She had lost her camera in the dark.

The petrol guage hadn't moved. Penni had not travelled far.

When we drove back to Maningrida, it became apparent Penni had also lost her phone.

*I did not ask to be born. Why should I be asked to die? I am not afraid of the universe. I accept its beauty and sadness for what they are. Life is a matter of mechanics. Humans are not really rational.*

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***I feel that something bad has happened. It hasn't reached me yet, but it is on its way. And it's getting closer.***

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I grew up in Frankfurt, and came to Australia to study. I like it here and so I have stayed. I like the sunshine and the people, though the beer is not as pure or good as in Germany. That is a small price to pay. I am very happy working in Maningrida. For a year now I have worked with local artists as a cultural curator.

I have a somewhat androgynous appearance, with thick brows and a modest bust. I am asexual, something I never discuss with others. People

can be very cruel and demanding, and I have little need of them.

Many in white Maningrida regard me as a queer fish. I do not care. There is a saying that *balanda* in remote communities are either missionaries, misfits or mercenaries. I am sometimes tempted to add a fourth term: morons. However, I enjoy my work and enjoy the company of my workmates.

I read Schopenhauer late into the night. I await the dawn.

The TOs and their guest clans also find me odd. With my pale skin, blonde hair, and light grey eyes, I must seem strikingly bizarre. Sometimes young children follow me in awe, whispering that I am a *mimih* or evil spirit. I say "boo" and laugh. Often they laugh too, but sometimes they cry.

In the first days back from Kunannjii I collapsed several times—a small helpless sinking toward the ground, a kind of forgetting how to stand. I felt, and still feel, that something terrible is going to happen to me.

*I feel that something bad has happened. It hasn't reached me yet, but it is on its way. And it's getting closer. The meaning is so thin I cannot read it.*

I am confused about what has happened to Penni. I have followed her wishes, but things are spiralling down the river. I can be quite strong-willed in my own creepy crawly way. I should act.

Penni is alive. *I need for Penni to be alive.* Perhaps I have done wrong, for Penni and for myself. All the joy and pain of our friendship is festering inside like cancer cells. Metastasised memories.

And now, these phone calls from her family in the south.

Something bad is coming. Perhaps I should look at this in a new way.



**KRISTEN**  
A Sydney photographer and art curator. Kristen became Penni's lover after the separation from Li Jen.



**BETH**  
Penni's older sister. A Brisbane businesswoman, Beth raised Penni and Pia when their mother disappeared. She was barely eighteen.



**PIA**  
Penni's youngest sister, unmotivated and unsettled. Pia lives in Melbourne, and has a trendy inner city sensibility.



**LI JEN**  
Penni's former partner of five years. Originally from Hong Kong, Jen is a textile artist and teacher in Canberra.

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