

SORRY BUSINESS

*Penni made me whole,
and then she left me.
She was always too good
at keeping secrets.*



LI JEN

fo

PENNI

Who is Penelope Palmer?

Penni is a quiet one. Penni is from Brisbane. Penni is an anthropologist at the ANU, and spends a lot of time going bush in the Northern Territory, working with the Kuninjku mob south of Maningrida.

Penni was my wife.

Penni is my life.

Penni has left me.

Penni, I love you. My heart is in pieces.

Penni is missing. She separated from me, behaving quite strangely, began seeing another woman, then early last month left her job and flew north in a mad rush. To Arnhem Land in the Big Wet, where it is impossible to travel. She hasn't contacted anyone for weeks. I received very strange text message, so I called the police.

I am so scared: bizarre things are happening around me.

Penni can be a total bitch. She has been so cruel to me, so unthinking of anyone but herself.

Penni is a watcher, standing to one side, observing life. She likes to spend time by herself. She has a deep sense of privacy. I know there is a sadness beneath the silence, a sadness I have never been able to uncover. And I have tried. So hard. So long.

Penni was only thirteen when her mother disappeared. She was raised by her big sister Beth. She also has a younger sister Pia, and they are very close. I like Pia, and she has been offering phone support after Penni left. Beth also phones.

Penni never shared details of her big project up north.

Penni never mentioned her new girlfriend. I guessed though. She didn't deny it.

Penni never said goodbye.

Is Penni dead or is she alive? If alive, she has engaged in a heartless and reckless deceit. If dead...

Penni, I love you.

Who is Penni? I've no idea. Midst all this grief and numbness, I'm not even sure who I am any more.



LI JEN: THE WOUND, THE SCAR, THE LIE

Li Jen's Wound: Broken Heart

Li Jen is overstretched and exhausted, dealing with separation and betrayal while still being deeply in love with Penni. She is grieving and feeling guilty, consumed by a racing mind and brooding fear.

Possible Causes

Loss of Penni and fear for her life, control and trust issues, paranoia, heartbreak, pessimism, being victimized in the past

Li Jen's Scar: Avoidance

Constantly dwelling on the worst-case scenario, panic attacks and profuse sweating, second guessing one's decisions, negative self-talk, sensitivity to noise and movement, tics and unnatural gestures (tears, touching one's hair, pacing, etc.), asking questions that reveal one's worries, isolation, feeling judged or watched, hypervigilance, difficulty sleeping, overprotectiveness

Li Jen's Lie: Guilt

It is my fault that Penni left. Now she may be dead. I have to somehow fix this. I have to be strong.

Associated Emotions

Anxiety, fear, nervousness, paranoia, worry

Positive Aspects

Li Jen's current hypersensitivity to her surroundings means she can be the first to sense danger. In such cases, the fight-or-flight response will kick in quickly. Constantly worrying about what could be, Li Jen avoids risky behaviours and can be counted on to play it safe.

Negative Aspects

Li Jen is physically and emotionally exhausted. Her ever-present fears make it difficult to connect with

others. She tends toward negative thoughts and is fixated on worst possible outcomes.

Healing: Overcoming Emotional Exhaustion as a Major Flaw

Li Jen desperately needs closure: she needs to find Penni. She needs to empower herself with new ways of reacting and new thought patterns to avoid anxiety and negativity. Close contact with people she trusts will also improve her condition.

Traits in Other Characters that may cause Conflict

Bold, catty, confident, cruel, extroverted, flamboyant, independent, mischievous, pushy

LI JEN



I keep finding your hair ties everywhere. And your bobby pins. There are still your dirty clothes in the bedroom laundry basket. The smell of you, the taste; that close sweaty, talcum lilac smell.

Everyone grieves in their own way. I wear your clothes. I feel your name burning like an ulcer on my skin.

I sense you in the kitchen. Not the bedroom, not the lounge, but the kitchen, where we ignored each other.

Lovers have the power to destroy one another. Penni, please come home.

I've started sleeping in the front room, surrounded by a golden halo of candle light. Childhood superstitions die hard. The last week or so weird stuff has started happening around the house. Noises, strange sounds, slamming doors. It's not just possums.

On top of everything else, it's all getting too much to bear. Penni leaving me so suddenly, her affair in Sydney, her sudden flight to Maningrida, that weird text message [Handout], and finally having to call the police. I'm going crazy. Penni's work has no idea what's going on—nothing was authorised. The police are making enquiries, but it's too early and the Top End is flooded and just too big.

Beth has offered to come and stay for support: I politely declined. I'm talking to Pia most nights on the phone. Mah wants me to fly back to Hong Kong. No way.

I'm uncentered, sometimes blank in places, and days are moving so slow that they ache.

The text message especially had a really strange feeling about it. I really can't explain what it was exactly, but to see those meaningless letters, 'LOUD' and then nothing. Nothing. I cried all night. If she's still out there, she's not capable of communicating. Or if someone else has her phone...

It's hard for some people to understand, but you have to believe you're to blame or else there's nothing to hold on to.

Is Penni dead or is she alive? If alive, she has engaged in a heartless and reckless deceit. If dead...

I'm walking too. It's better than sleeping. Better than dreaming. Walking so late the streets of O'Connor are empty. Walking blank, walking onto people's verandahs, peering into darkened windows. Not thinking, not feeling, but just wanting so much to *connect*, to be

inside someone else's life for a while. I'll probably end up being arrested.

Penni and I first met five years ago, became partners a year later. We swapped two crappy heart chains at the Canberra Show, and Penni asked me to be her friend forever. That's all the ceremony we ever needed. Together we found all the colours that the rainbow forgot. We didn't live in Watson, but for a time we were the perfect Canberra dyke couple.

We wore those chains everyday. I still wear mine. When Penni returned from Maningrida in late September last year, she didn't have hers. Nor did she have her phone, her watch, or her other personal jewellery. That's when she started her Big Silence, and became increasingly erratic.

A few weeks later she'd moved out to the flat we were renovating, and spending all her free time in Sydney. There was someone new in her life.

It's hard for some people to understand, but you have to believe you're to blame or else there's nothing to hold on to.

Something big had happened in Maningrida. Underneath it all, I knew Penni was afraid.

I grew up in Hong Kong, surrounded by aunties and cousins. Typical Chinese family. I came to Australia to study, waited out my residence, and settled down. I teach art and work in textiles. I wasn't beautiful, wasn't sexy, yet Penni noticed me and made me happy and whole.

After returning from that trip, Penni said she was rethinking everything. She said she didn't believe in the future anymore, that she needed time by herself. She told me to stop clinging.

I reminded her how much I loved her. How we wanted kids, wanted our future together. This terrified Penni. She then showed me a thing or two about power in its purest form.

Did you run away? Did something make you run away? Is it my fault? Did I do something? I'm sorry for whatever it is.

Just be alive. I will rescue you. I love you.



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 with a strong personality, Beth raised Penni and Pia when their mother disappeared.



PIA

Penni's youngest sister, unmotivated and unsettled. Pia lives in Melbourne, and has a trendy inner city sensibility. She can be very like Penni in gesture and voice.



GERDE

A curator at Maningrida Arts & Crafts, and a former linguistics Master student under Penni at ANU. Gerde has local knowledge of the area.

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