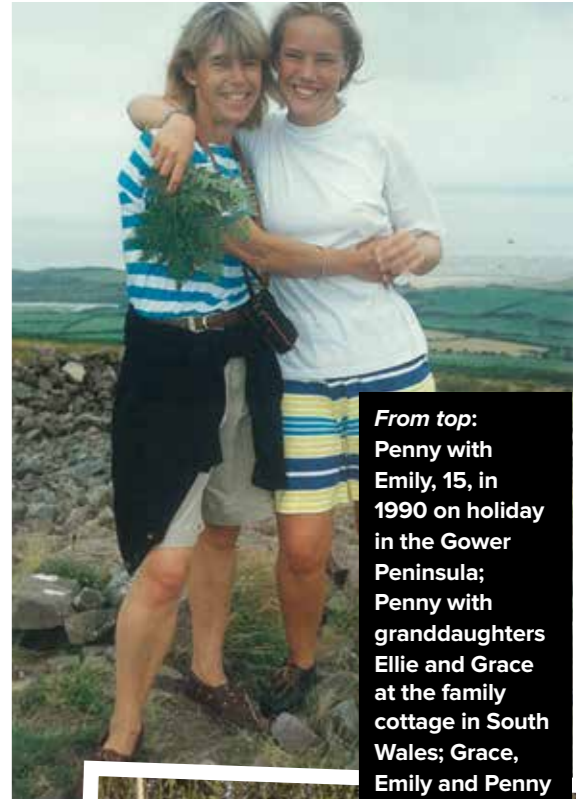




Emily on her wedding day with mum Penny



From top: Penny with Emily, 15, in 1990 on holiday in the Gower Peninsula; Penny with granddaughters Ellie and Grace at the family cottage in South Wales; Grace, Emily and Penny at the Gower Show in 2012



# My first year of MISSING MUM

Author Emily Gunnis's mother, the bestselling novelist Penny Vincenzi, died last year. Here Emily shares what she has learned in the time in between

**O**n 25 February 2019, it was the first anniversary of the death of my mother, Penny Vincenzi. I have learned over the past year that it's all about the firsts; you are desperate to get these over with. Your first birthday without the person who gave birth to you, the first children's birthday party without her there marvelling at the rather unremarkable things your offspring are doing, the first Christmas without her French onion

soup and overly laden brandy butter, the first anniversary of her death. But the minute the firsts are over with, you are desperate to call them back. To be closer to the time when you could still hear her laugh, smell her perfume in the next room, feel her energy. When her number was still one of the most recent calls on your phone. The irony is that, professionally, it has probably been the best year of my life. My debut novel has come out in eBook and is due out in paperback in April. So

far, it's done better than I dared hope. But, emotionally, this year has definitely been the worst and I'm struggling with all the classic symptoms of grief: insomnia, exhaustion, irritability, spontaneously bursting into tears at the most inappropriate moments, all while trying to write Book Two with half a brain and attempting to feel joy about finally finding my niche in life. And the person I most want to talk to about it all isn't here.

Thus, possibly the most overwhelming emotion during this roller coaster year has been a feeling of anticlimax. That it has taken until my 43rd year to not feel like a misfit and she's missed it. Because, really, if your mother isn't there – clapping enthusiastically in the audience – then, somehow, it doesn't feel real.

Her greatest talent in life, besides being the doyenne of the modern blockbuster, was making everyone she met feel special, and I was no exception, to the point where I had a rather delusional image of my own talents growing up.

"What a wonderful idea, you are so clever, you really should be an editor," she'd say after I made some lame suggestion about a plot dead-end she'd found herself in. Or, "I really think you should be a party planner, you just have an incredible gift for it," because I'd organised a photo album and a few bottles of fizz for my sister's hen weekend.

She spent her life marvelling over my slightly lacklustre career, then I finally actually do okay at something and she's not here to see it. I'm very grateful that she knew I secured a two-book deal, and that three days before she died she read the first three chapters of Book Two as we got drunk together on Sauvignon and chatted about the plot. And perhaps, in spite of my mother's insistence that she was "doing wonderfully", I had a sixth sense about what was about to happen because Book Two touches on the grief of a woman who has just had a baby and has recently lost her mother.

I think I found myself focusing on this aspect of my grief because there is something truly heartbreaking about not having your mother around when you

have small children. But, in a funny way, though the greatest source of my sadness comes because they don't have their wonderful granny anymore, I think my children are the key. Grace, my eldest, looks so like her granny and we talk about her all the time. I find myself pouring her spirit into them in a desperate attempt to stop them forgetting her, saying things like, "Don't let the day slip away", as they throw their eyes to heaven at me and, "Isn't this fun?" while I drag them through the woods in the rain.

We all eventually turn into our mothers and the writer in me is the part of me that's her; she is with me on this new adventure of mine, which I was reminded of on a recent tour with five fellow debut novelists. It was one of the most healing experiences of my life. I had been feeling so removed from the world because of my grief, and to come out of my cave and go away with

lovely, warm, funny, kind strangers and be Emily again, have amazing conversations on trains with like-minded authors and publicists, get drunk and properly laugh

with strangers who aren't judging me. It has truly brought me back to life and made me realise that she is very much still out in the world and that I certainly wasn't the only person she made feel special. I talked to so many people on the tour who knew my mum, or met her, admired her, or whose mother had read every book my mum had written. I began to see a thread from my mother through to me, because – although I could never dream of having success on a par with hers – I have "taken the baton", as she said to me the last time I saw her.

And I know that once I've got past the final first, and the shock and rawness of it starts to fade a little, I'll feel that everything is just as it should be.

And that somewhere, somehow, she knows. And it's just as she planned it. **w&h** *The Girl in the Letter* by Emily Gunnis, is published in paperback this April by Headline, price £7.99.

*"I began to see a thread from my mother through to me"*