



# We're the lucky ones. We're alive.

Three months ago, CAROLINE PHILLIPS and her family were caught up in the horrific Bondi

**S**unday 14 December. It's a perfect afternoon: sun, sand, surfers. I'm in Sydney visiting my two Londoner daughters who are here living the Australian dream. My 28-year-old, Ella, is at the beach with friends; her elder sister Anya, 30, is out with her boyfriend. So I go for a swim alone at the iconic oceanside pool, Icebergs. Afterwards I stroll along Bondi Beach photographing women celebrating Christmas around their tiny tree. Nearby, I hear firecrackers.

Walking towards the sound, I wonder if it's people paintballing. But these are sharp, booming bangs, not muffled recreational pops. Deep down, I know it's gunfire, but I deny it and head 'home' to Ella's flat three minutes' walk away. Outside, a group of guys gathers around a phone. 'They're shooting people on the beach!' yells one, who has just fled the scene. I glance at his carnage video: there's a man firing a gun, but still, I think it's a game.

The air fills with 'bang, bang, bang'. Only later will I learn that I'm caught up in the Bondi Beach terrorist atrocity. An Isis-inspired, murderous, anti-Semitic attack that targeted Jewish families celebrating Hanukkah. Fifteen dead. Forty-one hospitalised. Two gunmen – Sajid and Naveed Akram, father and son. Four bombs thrown from a footbridge, none detonated.

My phone rings; it's Ella. 'Where are you?' she cries, gasping. 'There's a man on the beach with a gun, shooting at

us. Anya's OK. She's at home.' (Her flat is a mile away.) Then the phone goes dead. Part of me hopes that Ella is being melodramatic; part acknowledges the unfolding horror; above all, my mind tells me it's not happening.

I try to call Anya, but can't reach her. How can I really know she's safe until I hear her voice? Three minutes after the attack started, and before he sees it on the news, I message my ex-husband, Adrian, in Paris: '18.45: shooting in Bondi. E & I safe.' Anya calls at 18.46. She's alive. I text Adrian that she's OK, just as a bystander shouts, 'Three gunmen. With bombs!'

Is Ella going to die? Fight, flight, freeze. I do all three. Instead of hunting for Ella, I retreat to her flat, as if she should be there. Then I about-turn and drive to Anya's so we can look for Ella together. The air fills with sirens, the street with abandoned cars. En route I have a screaming standoff with a traumatised woman blocking the road, refusing to move.

Anya is terrified but calm. Her boyfriend drives while she tracks Ella's phone. 'You're safe, Smella,' Anya calls. 'We'll find you. LOVE you!' We get out as near to the massacre scene as the cordons allow. 'This is the police,' booms a helicopter. 'Vacate the area.' I disobey, hellbent on reaching Ella. It's a war zone of helicopters, police and first responders. 'Out of the road!' shouts an officer, speeding past in an armoured vehicle. A policewoman bars entry. 'F\*\*k

off!' I scream. 'Let me through! My daughter's in there!'

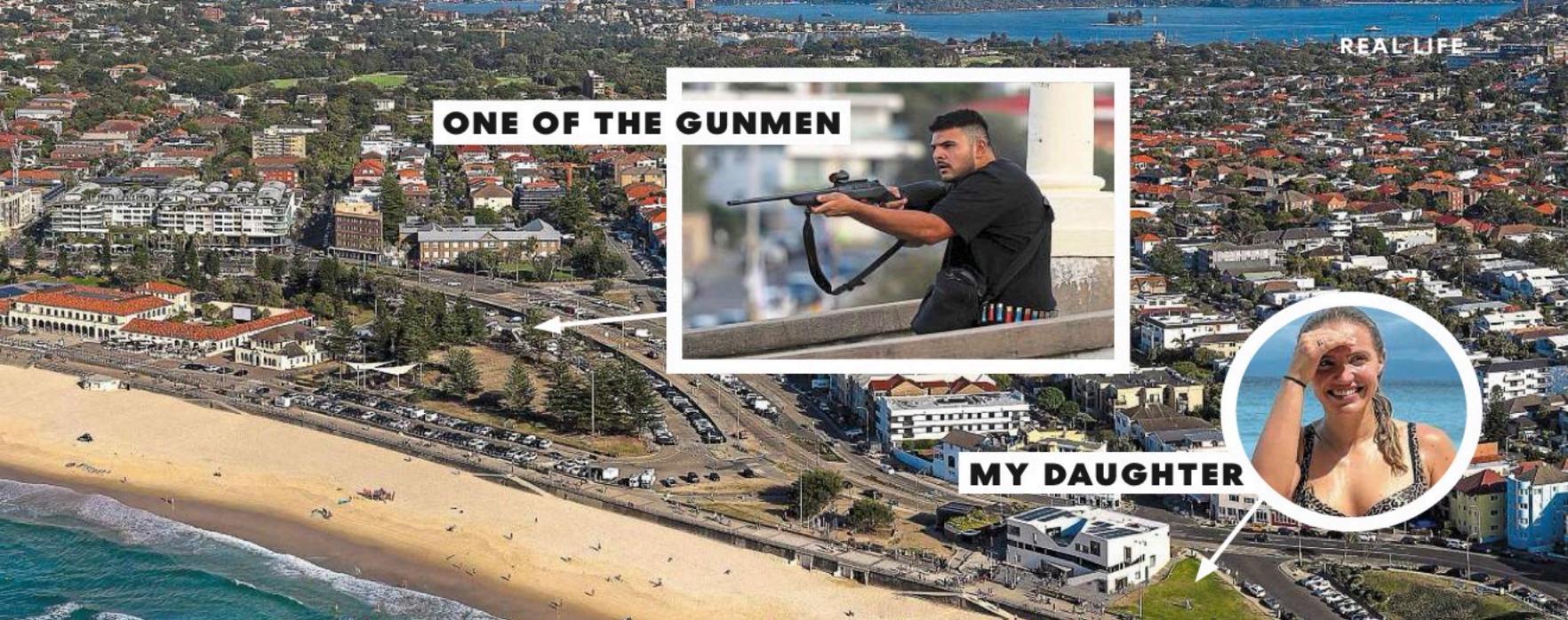
Ella suddenly appears from behind a policewoman – physically uninjured. Surreal. I bear-hug her, crying. She's frozen with fear. It's now 47 minutes since the first shot was fired (the whole incident lasted six minutes, 11 seconds), but feels like a week.

And yet our challenges are just beginning. As night falls, we go to Anya's flat – it's too unbearable to be in Ella's home near the beach, with snipers on roofs and helicopters circling. Ella's flatmate, Esther, locked inside a beachside restaurant, witnessed the shootings and the dying and injured being carried on surfboard 'stretchers'. Their neighbour, Jess, lay on her five-year-old at the Hanukkah celebrations, nearly suffocating her.

I hear about lifeguards sprinting barefoot into gunfire. Shop owner Ahmed al-Ahmed tackling a gunman. The dead: ten-year-old Matilda and 87-year-old Alexander, a Holocaust survivor. There's footage of Ella on BBC News, screaming in the stampede: 'Go, go, go!' I can't watch.

For a week, we feel freezing, despite the heat. I become over-anxious, treating my daughters like five-year-olds. Before swimming, Ella texts: 'Out of contact 30 mins, Mumma Bear.'

For the first three adrenalised nights I don't sleep. Ella conks out during the day, then is up all night. On the Tuesday, we write about Ella's experience for a



ONE OF THE GUNMEN

MY DAUGHTER

# But nothing will ever be the same

Beach shootings, where two gunmen killed 15 people. Today, she says, the trauma lives on

newspaper. It's the first time she is able to talk about Sunday. I find out that the friends she was with had delayed her from going home, otherwise, when the shooting started she'd have been by the footbridge, from where the Akrams fired.

She tells me now how the shots ricocheted, echoing – how she never knew if she was running toward the gunmen. (That's when, breathless, she had rung me.) How, in shock, she returned to her starting point, among prostrate bodies, someone screaming, 'The shooters are coming back!'

**'LET ME THROUGH!' I SCREAM. 'MY DAUGHTER IS IN THERE!'**

'I thought I was going to die,' she says.

The 'what ifs' begin to hit me. At 3.45am on Wednesday 17 December, three days after the shooting, we retrace Ella's footsteps. There's nobody around except the police. Just outside the taped-off crime scene are abandoned pushchairs and piles of discarded shoes; inside it, bullet-holed cars. Ella sits alone for an hour by the sea of floral tributes.

Needing community, we attend vigils every night for a week. Mental-health workers in orange T-shirts wander the Bondi streets, handing out leaflets

and directing people to victim-support services. 'I need help for my daughter,' I say. 'But how are you?' they ask. I burst into tears.

A London friend introduces me to David Trickey, co-director of the UK Trauma Council. 'You're doing all the right things to maximise recovery,' he emails. 'Have confidence in yourselves.' This buoys me. But we're isolated. On the other side of the world, our loved ones think 'alive' means 'OK'. They're busy with Christmas and Hanukkah. How can anyone understand, unless they have experienced a terrorist attack?

I email psychologists repeatedly. No response. It's now 19 December and Christmas is impossible timing for finding help. Then, walking down the street, my bladder suddenly gives out. This hasn't happened since childhood. It's embarrassing, trauma. I hit bottom, thinking of suicide. I call Lifeline, a crisis helpline. 'Your feelings are normal,' the man at the end of the phone consoles me, 'given what you've been through.'

A friend who saw active service in Northern Ireland writes, 'I fear it will take time to fully recover. I had similar experiences, but we were trained for it.'

We take part in group breathwork sessions and go to yoga, where a quarter of the class starts crying.

Almost a month later, on 12 January, all three of us visit the Hub, the nexus of victim services, in Bondi Pavilion. Behind a screen labelled 'quiet space' are three chairs, a candle and a mental-health

practitioner who helps us find therapists.

Still nowhere feels safe. It takes me 46 days to visit the footbridge. I weep. I take up ocean swimming, until there are four shark attacks in 48 hours, including a fatal one at my local beach. I hike in the Blue Mountains, until I encounter an eastern brown snake whose venom kills in 15 to 30 minutes.

Today, three months on, Ella and I still tense and shake when cars backfire, ambulances wail or helicopters roar over. Ella suffers mood swings. Anya says she's fine, then bursts into tears. I feel low.

Yet there has been light and kindness, too. Five days after the evil act, hundreds of surfers, swimmers and lifeguards formed a circle in the ocean to honour victims and reclaim the beach. I volunteer at a food bank, to remind myself of my good fortune. And try donating blood – along with 50,000 other people, so I turn back at the four-hour queue.

Then there's carpe diem stuff: Ella goes skydiving, Anya swims with dolphins, I opt for five-star nosh. Life-affirming, adrenalin-inducing, money-burning activities. We're all rethinking where we want to live, how and with whom. We have tighter familial ties, alternating deeper connections with more arguments – a common post-trauma reaction.

There's a special bond with people who were there that day. We're the lucky ones. We're alive. Only one other thing is certain: nothing will ever be the same again.