

Run. Hide.

TRACED

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Guardian

CATHERINE
JINKS



2020

I KEYED IN the number and waited. Two rings. Three.

‘Hello?’ A woman’s voice, hectically cheerful.

I checked the name on my screen. ‘Hello,’ I said. ‘Can I speak to Nicole Younan?’

She gasped. Usually the shock came later, once I’d broken the news. Maybe she was expecting another call. ‘Who is this?’ she demanded.

‘I’m Jane, from New South Wales Health. Are you Nicole?’

‘Yes.’

Bullseye. ‘Hi, Nicole. Is it a good time to talk?’

‘If you’re quick.’ She was strung so tight I could almost hear the twang. ‘He’ll be ringing back in a minute...’

‘Who will?’

‘My fiancé. He’ll hate it if he can’t get through.’

A faint alarm went off in my head. But I stayed calm.

‘Okay—well, I just want to make sure I’m speaking to the right person.’ I consulted my screen. ‘Can I ask if you live at

twelve Argyle Road—’

‘—Kurrajong Heights, yes. What’s this all about?’ She wanted me off the line. *‘Please hurry!’*

‘The thing is, Nicole...’ I’d said it before, dozens of times, but it never got any easier. ‘You’ve been identified as a close contact of someone who’s tested positive for COVID-19.’

Bang. The news hit her like a punch. No matter how gently I spoke, or how careful I tried to be, I was lobbing a grenade into her life.

Back then, I had no idea her life was already a war zone.

—

There were seven of us on the team that morning. We’d been fully briefed: case numbers, locations, contact details. The cluster had grown, but not by enough to justify a lockdown. ‘Barely ahead of the curve,’ was how Rani had described the situation, before we’d burrowed back into our cubicles, each of us armed with a list of names, a customised script and a cup of coffee. I’d brought some homemade vanilla slices to work, but the office smelled mostly of Daniel’s bacon roll. He was a big boy, and always ate a second breakfast.

It was damp outside. A dull, greyish light filtered through our only window, which had a limited view of stalled construction. Blue tarps flapped in the breeze, adding a touch of colour to an endless expanse of beige mud.

Everything inside was beige as well: desks, walls, computers, partitions. My bright-pink blouse fought a losing battle against all the public-health dinginess. But the dinginess

was useful. It meant you could block out your surroundings. Focus on the people you were trying to help.

‘Hello? Nicole?’ Silence had fallen at the other end of the line. In the hush I could hear Daniel near me, murmuring into his headset. He had a footballer’s build, all shoulders and thighs, so he looked a bit odd perched on his creaky office chair, stretching the seams of his business shirt. But he was a good contact tracer. His voice was reassuring: warm, relaxed. He could get anyone to do anything.

‘Nicole.’ I took a deep breath. ‘This must be very difficult for you—’

‘No.’ Her tone was strained. ‘You’re wrong. You must have mixed me up with someone else.’

‘There’s—’

‘I don’t go out. I haven’t been out in weeks. I live on a farm. We have goats.’ She was starting to babble. ‘We get stuff delivered. I don’t have a car. The only person I’ve seen is my fiancé, and I *know* he’s not sick.’

‘Okay, but what about your cousin?’

She fell silent again.

‘Paige says she was at your house last Thursday, between ten-fifteen and half past eleven. Did she get that wrong?’

I was careful not to sound reproachful or accusatory. Paige Fenech had sat beside our cluster’s index case about a week earlier. Since then, she’d been to eighteen locations and met with sixty close contacts. She had a large extended family and a wide circle of friends; it was possible she’d got confused about her visit to Nicole’s.

‘She said you made her a cup of tea,’ I went on. No answer. ‘She said she sat at your kitchen table and used your toilet. Would that be right?’

Still nothing. But then I heard a muffled, watery sniff, and I realised Nicole was in tears.

My heart went out to her.

‘Paige is feeling fine.’ At our team briefing we’d been told the cousins had very little contact with each other, but it seemed strange to me that Nicole hadn’t heard about Paige’s positive result.

‘She’s young,’ I continued. ‘She’s healthy. So far, she hasn’t got any symptoms. I’m sure you don’t have to be concerned.’

Nicole mumbled something. It sounded like, ‘He’ll kill me.’

‘Sorry—what was that?’

‘Paige shouldn’t have been here.’ Her voice cracked. ‘We’re not meant to be talking...’

I made a sympathetic noise. I still had to confirm her movements, and didn’t want to push too hard.

‘She’s a slut,’ Nicole whimpered. ‘She propositioned my fiancé. She’s not safe to have around. Even though she says she’s worried about me, she’s just sticking her nose in.’

Ouch. I could see why the two of them weren’t close.

‘But did she visit you? Last Thursday?’ I had to establish that once and for all.

‘Yes.’ A wobbly croak.

‘Between ten fifteen and half past eleven?’

‘I guess.’

‘And do you have any symptoms? Any fever? Dry cough? Fatigue?’

‘No.’

‘Well, that’s good.’ I coaxed her along, pleasant and upbeat. ‘You still need to get a test, though. And isolate at home for fourteen days. Can you do that?’

No response. I thought I heard a gulping noise, followed by a muffled groan. Was she scared? Angry? Had she planned a weekend trip? People were beginning to travel again; she might have booked a non-refundable hotel room.

‘Nicole? Can you tell me who you live with?’ I didn’t have that information, though I assumed somebody at her place must own a car. Getting out of a semi-rural area would have been impossible without one. ‘Are you sharing a house? With your fiancé?’

‘Oh my god.’ She was barely audible. ‘Oh, no.’

‘It’s okay.’ We were veering off script, but that wasn’t unusual. I’d handled a lot of phone meltdowns in the past six months, and I hadn’t done it by slavishly ticking boxes. ‘You’ll be all right. We’ll look after you. We’ll make sure you have everything you need—’

‘He’ll be so mad!’ she wailed.

I frowned. ‘Who will?’

‘Something bad’s gunna happen.’

‘No.’ I was feeling my way, trying to ignore my own sense of disquiet. Her fear was starting to infect me. ‘You might not even be sick...’

But she wasn’t listening. ‘I shouldn’t have talked to Paige.

I shouldn't have opened the door. He'll be so mad.'

'Your fiancé?'

'What am I gonna do?' She sounded hysterical.

'Nicole.' I spoke so firmly that Truc's head jerked up. Truc sat in the cubicle facing me, behind a beige partition; sometimes, if she sat up straight, I could just glimpse her white satin scrunchie.

'Something bad will happen.' Nicole's voice was a broken whisper. 'Please don't tell him. Please.'

Oh, shit. A familiar spurt of adrenaline pushed me back in my chair. 'Are we talking about your fiancé, Nicole? Do you live with him?'

The words were innocuous, but my tone brought Truc to her feet. She peered over our partition, brow puckered.

Daniel didn't even notice. He was completely absorbed in his own contact call.

'Yes,' said Nicole, and began to sob.

Shit, shit, shit. 'Does anyone else live there? Besides your fiancé?'

'No.'

'He'll need to isolate as well.' I had to lay it out for her. 'Where is he now?'

'At work!' She was shrieking. 'Oh, god! Oh my god!'

'Nicole—'

'He'll kill me! I lied to him!'

Normally, at this point, I would have asked her to describe her living arrangements. Was she able to use a separate bedroom? A separate bathroom? Did she know anyone

who could supply her with food? Medicine? A friendly ear? I would have been subtle about probing for abuse. Alert to nuance. Gentle. Cautious.

But sometimes your training goes out the window. Sometimes you have to follow your gut. ‘Do you mean that?’ I asked. ‘Are you afraid your fiancé will kill you?’

Truc’s eyes widened. She glanced towards Rani, our team leader, who was on the other side of the room. Even Daniel turned, frowning.

‘Something bad will happen,’ Nicole whispered into my ear.

I didn’t say it out loud, but I was thinking: *Not on my watch, it won’t.*

—

When I first became a contact tracer, I didn’t have any clinical experience. Truc used to be a physiotherapist and Rani was a registered nurse, but I’d always worked in the travel industry—until COVID-19 hit it like a torpedo. I wasn’t the only one; you wouldn’t believe how many Qantas staff ended up as contact tracers. There were two former flight attendants in our office, plus an event planner named Caroline. We’d all abandoned a rapidly sinking ship and washed up on the shores of Nepean Public Health.

That’s why we’d done so much training. I’d spent years sorting out lost luggage and missed connections, but even though I’d shepherded hundreds of panicky clients safely back home, there was a lot of stuff I still had to master for

my new job. The NCIMS database. Compliance assessment. Case summaries. A bunch of My Health Learning modules. One of the things we'd covered was how to handle 'escalation' calls: illegal immigrants, domestic abuse, marital infidelity. I was supposed to alert my team leader, then write a full report. There were procedures to follow. Core fields to fill in.

Unless you decided to wing it.

'When's your fiancé coming home, Nicole?' I asked.

She didn't answer. She was too busy sobbing.

'Nicole? When does your fiancé finish work?'

'Five.' Her delivery was uneven, full of gasps and hiccups. 'But he'll call soon. He calls me through the day, to check I'm here.'

'Does he use this landline?'

'Yeah. I don't have a mobile.' After a brief pause, she added, 'I have to make sure I'm always home...'

Bastard. I knew the type. My old responses were kicking in: tight muscles, elevated heartbeat. 'Okay. Do you think you'll be able to isolate yourself from him? Or would you prefer to isolate at a different venue?' Meaning: are you scared to be around when he shows up?

Nicole seemed to think about this for a few seconds. 'I don't have anywhere else to go.'

'We can arrange something for you. A secure location. Is that what you'd prefer?'

Daniel had stopped talking. Truc was riveted. But when I caught her eye, she ducked back down into her cubicle.

We weren't encouraged to listen to each other's calls.

‘Nicole?’ I could hear her breathing. ‘The thing is, your fiancé might have been exposed to the virus. He has to be told. He has to isolate.’

She muttered something.

‘What’s that?’

‘He’ll find me.’ Her voice was numb and hopeless. ‘Wherever I go, he’ll track me down.’

‘Not while he’s isolating, he won’t.’ Not if he didn’t want the police getting involved. ‘Anyway, we’d send you to a secure location. A refuge. You’d be safe there.’

She sighed. ‘He’d still find me.’

For all I knew, she was right. Even if she wasn’t, I had to respect her take on things. After all, I’d never met the man. ‘So you’d prefer to isolate at home? With support? We can arrange that too.’ If there was ongoing follow-up, he might leave her alone.

She didn’t reply. I let the silence drag on, because you don’t push people—not when they’re thinking. Not when they have big decisions to make.

‘No,’ she said at last. ‘I want to leave.’

That was it: tipping point. We were on an escalation pathway.

I was frantically typing notes. ‘Do you have a car, Nicole?’

‘I told you I don’t!’

No car. No mobile. Did she even have a job? Or had he taken that away as well? Perhaps she was working from home—or on a night shift. ‘Have you been in contact with anyone since last Thursday? Apart from your fiancé?’

‘No.’

‘You didn’t have any friends over on the weekend?’

She snorted. ‘No.’

‘What about tradespeople? Canvassers?’

‘No.’

‘Did you go anywhere? Shopping? A cafe?’

‘I didn’t. But Griffin did.’

For a second everything blurred; a wave of nausea engulfed me, then quickly faded. I realised I was holding my breath.

I swallowed. ‘Griffin?’

‘Griffin Clynch. My fiancé.’

God help us. My hands were shaking. But I had to focus.

‘Where does...’ I stopped to clear my throat. ‘Where does Griffin work?’

‘Werrington. At the corporate centre.’

Christ. Just a stone’s throw from my own office. I pictured wall-to-wall desks full of people breathing into each other’s faces. ‘He’ll need to come home. Do *you* want to tell him, or—?’

‘No!’ The screech nearly burst my eardrum.

‘Okay. That’s fine.’ I took a deep, steady breath. This wasn’t the time to collapse in a heap. ‘We can do it, no problem. Why don’t you give me his number?’

She did. I tapped it into NCIMS. Then I said, ‘Let me make a few calls. It won’t take long. When I’m finished, I’ll ring you back with everything you need to know. Is that all right?’

‘I guess.’ She sounded dazed. Wrung out.

‘Don’t worry. I’ll be as quick as I can.’

I didn’t thank her for her time. I didn’t talk to her about social distancing, hand washing, mask wearing or anything else virus-related. I said goodbye, ripped off my headset and jumped to my feet.

‘Busting,’ I explained to Daniel, who’d glanced up. Then I grabbed my purse and bolted for the bathroom.

On my way there, I passed Rani. ‘Just had an escalation call,’ I said, but didn’t stop to brief her. She was staring at me, round-eyed, as I swerved into the hallway and plunged through the door of the ladies.

It was empty, thank god. Fluorescent lights beat down on four gaping cubicles and a silent hand dryer. The only colour in the room was a splash of orange soap from one of the dispensers—soap like paint stripper, so harsh it deserved a hazmat warning. There was toilet paper on the floor and a puddle of water on the benchtop, but no sign of the people who’d left them there.

I dumped my bag on a bin and fished around for my phone. Pulled it out. Jabbed at the first name on my contacts list, then looked up and saw myself in the mirror.

No wonder Rani had stared. My shoulders were nudging my ears, bunched with tension. My eyes were popping out of my head. My hair was exploding off my scalp in fizzy corkscrews. The ruffles on my blouse quivered with every heartbeat.

I realised I couldn’t blurt everything into my daughter’s ear. Not yet. I had to get a handle on this situation before I broke the awful news.

‘Hello? Mum?’ Her tinny voice trickled out of the phone. ‘What are you up to? Aren’t you at work?’

I swallowed—unclenched—rebooted. ‘Don’t worry, bub, I’m in the toilet. No one’s here.’ I sounded so calm, I amazed myself. ‘There’s just something I have to ask...’

What, though? I racked my brain. What could she possibly tell me that I didn’t know already?

‘Mum?’ She was getting restless; she probably had a million things to do at the nursing home. Suddenly I remembered: Axel’s birthday.

‘The cupcakes,’ I said. ‘The ones I’m bringing this weekend? I was wondering if I should make some with almond meal. And maybe no food colouring, in case any of the kids are gluten-free or whatever.’

‘Oh, no, they’re fine. They’ll eat everything you put in front of them.’ Her voice softened. ‘It’s okay, Mum. No need to panic. And remember—you don’t have to make a whole boot-load. It’s only six kids.’

‘Plus parents.’

‘Plus parents,’ she conceded. ‘How’s it going?’

I didn’t want to tell her. ‘So-so. We’re not quite on top of it yet, but things are definitely slowing down.’

‘Really? Are you sure? Because you sound a bit...I dunno. Keyed up?’

Shit. ‘Well—same old, I guess. Making secret calls in the bathroom.’

‘Yeah.’ She sighed. ‘Sorry.’

‘Speaking of which, I’d better go. Before they start to

think I've got diarrhoea.'

'Okay. Bye, Mum.'

'Bye, pet. Take it easy.'

I hung up. Then I waited until my pulse had slowed before I keyed in another number.

I'd decided to call Lauren Hodges, a domestic violence caseworker who lived on my street. Lauren was a good friend. When I'd first moved to Katoomba, she'd shown me the community garden, offered to lend me her wood-splitter and asked me to join her bushcare group. Four years later, after Blue Bookings fell victim to the pandemic, Lauren had called a friend at Nepean Public Health, paving the way for my new career as a contact tracer.

I worried our friendship was too one-sided. I'd tried to balance the books a little by minding her dog and collecting her packages, but it didn't seem nearly enough—especially now, when I was asking for yet another favour.

'Hi, Jane.' She had a slightly metallic chirpiness that went with her sinewy build and simple pixie cut. 'How are you?'

'I'm good.' I didn't ask her how she was. Thanks to all the shit she had to deal with, the answer was generally a grunt. 'But I've got an escalation here, it's DV, and I don't think it's going to escalate fast enough. Not if Rani has to refer it. Not unless it's...'. I hesitated, choosing my words. 'Unofficially expedited?'

'I'm listening.'

'The woman's a close contact, she needs to isolate, she's at Kurrajong Heights with no car and she's terrified. I mean,

terrified. I could feel Nicole's terror, deep in my guts. 'The confirmed case was her cousin, who isn't supposed to be seeing her. Now the fiancé will know they've been getting together.'

Lauren clicked her tongue and sighed.

'He's in Werrington, working, but he'll have to go home and isolate,' I continued. 'She doesn't want to be there when he gets back—and the minute we call him, the clock's ticking. She says he's going to kill her. Which isn't necessarily the case, but...'

'Yeah.' Lauren had heard it all before. 'Okay. Let me think.'

As she lapsed into silence, I glanced at the door. What if someone walked in? I was being a bit cheeky; this wasn't my remit. But I knew what Griffin was capable of. And I couldn't face what might happen if I let this wind its way through the official channels.

Besides, I needed to know how things were unfolding. A lot of lives depended on it.

I needed a front-row seat.

'We can free up one of our isolation rooms,' Lauren said at last. 'The funding we get for them means COVID cases are fast-tracked. I'll have a word with Mischa.'

'This woman doesn't have a car. Plus she needs to get her COVID test done.'

Another brief silence. 'Does she have any money?'

'I'm not sure.' Was Lauren thinking about Uber? 'She doesn't have a mobile.'

'We don't usually offer transport,' Lauren mused, 'but

if she's a close contact, she can't exactly ask a friend to drive her...'

She trailed off. I held my breath. Finally, she made her decision. 'Get her to call me. On my work phone. I'll see what I can do.'

My knees almost liquefied in relief. 'Thanks, Lore. Thanks so much.'

'Meanwhile—what? The referral's coming down the pipe?'

'I guess. These things usually go to HelpWest.'

'I'll give Mischa a heads-up. What's this woman's name?'

'Nicole.'

Nicole. I had to ring her back with Lauren's number. I had to do it before Griffin received a contact call. 'Talk to you soon,' I told Lauren, and headed back to the office.

As soon as I walked in, Rani pounced. I think she was lying in wait, though she was pretending to untangle a power cord. 'Jane?' she said. 'What was that about an escalation?'

'Oh—it's a DV case.' I was itching to get back to my desk. 'Nicole Younan's got a fiancé who needs to isolate, and she doesn't want him anywhere near her when he does.'

'Have you—'

'Just let me do one more welfare check. Then I'll finish the report and you can refer it.'

Rani looked at me. She had enormous dark eyes, ringed with shadow. They were soulful, but penetrating. 'Are you worried?'

Worried? I was frantic. 'I am a bit. Yes.'

'This fiancé—is he dangerous?'

'I think he might be.' Bloody dangerous.

'Do you know if any ADVOs have been taken out against him?'

'Let me ask Nicole.' I was edging away. 'Someone needs to call this guy, but it shouldn't be me. A man would be better. Daniel.'

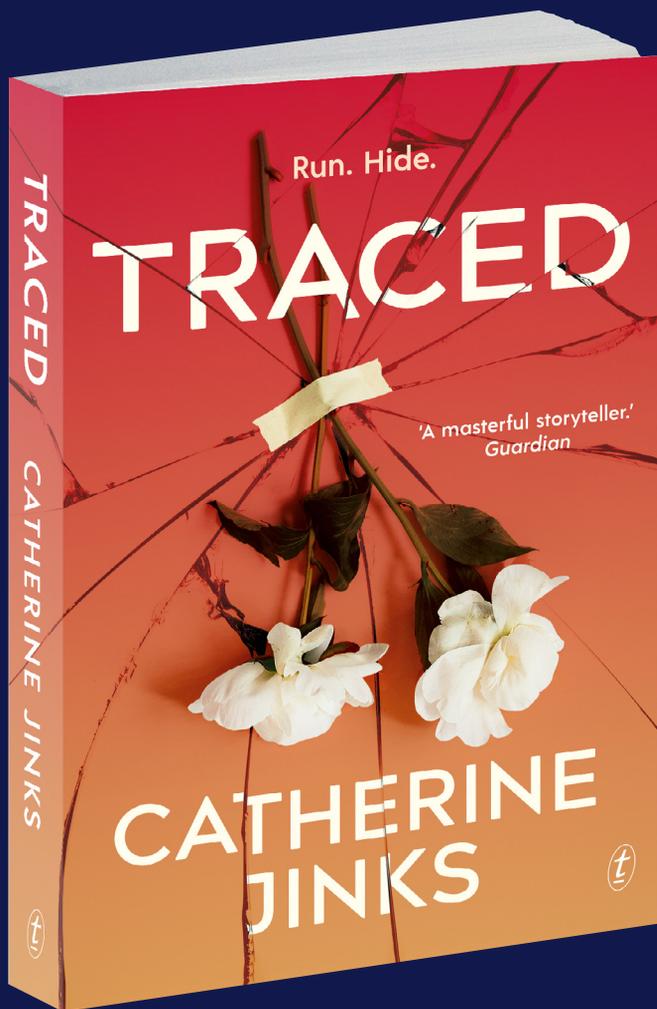
Rani frowned. 'Will there be abuse? Of staff?'

I doubted it. Griffin's methods were more subtle. But I couldn't say that, so I shrugged. 'Maybe.'

'What's his name? The abusive fiancé?'

'Griffin. Griffin Clynch.'

Griffin fucking Clynch.



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