



Case Study

Identifying and treating Agoraphobia

March 2024

The knocking came again. Louder, this time. A harsh rat-a-tat that penetrated even the plump cushion covering her head.

“Stella! Stella, come on! Open the door!”

She cursed silently. Why couldn't they just leave her alone?

“Come on, Stella! We know you're in there. We can see your bum sticking up on the couch!”

She lifted a corner of the cushion and squinted down the length of the hall. Pressed against the glass on each side of the front door were the distorted faces of her sisters, Toni and Laura. Dearly loved faces – no question - but right now they looked to Bella like grinning goblins come to drag her away for torture. Laura gave her a jaunty wave with what looked like an open bottle of prosecco. Toni's tiara was askew; her hen's night was evidently well under way.

Stella sighed and jammed the cushion more firmly over her head. It hadn't always been like this. Sure, she'd been shy at school, but she'd put that down to the usual teenage insecurities. It was only about a year ago that things had worsened.

Stella could feel her cheeks burn as she remembered that time last year when she'd lost it at the airport on the way home after schoolies. All those people! All that noise! And she was trapped like a rat in a box with no escape.

But at least she'd found out what happens when you barge through an emergency exit labelled “This door is alarmed”. The door wasn't nearly as alarmed as her school friends, it turned out, who had to talk the Federal Police out of arresting her.

Since then, Stella had found herself spending more and more time at home. Thank heavens for virtual lectures, food delivery riders and online shopping. The last time she'd tried going to the fruit & vegetable market she'd felt the dreaded breathlessness and tightening of her throat, her racing heart and dizziness making her drop her

shopping and bolt for the nearest door. Even walking her little dog late at night between the empty stalls had been enough to bring on the feelings. And she hadn't set foot on campus since O-week.

On the veranda, Toni straightened her tiara and reapplied her fist to the door's flaking paint with all the frustration of an older sister being denied.

“Stella!!” she bellowed, like a rhinestone Brando. “The bus is waiting. If you won't come, we're going without you!”

“A bus,” groaned Stella quietly. “Hell on wheels, you mean.” She gestured to the apparitions peering through the glass.

“You go,” she called, and faked a harsh bark. “I...I...I'm sorry. I think I'm getting the spicy cough again. Not worth the risk, with your wedding so close...”

She pulled the cushion firmly over her ears and let her thoughts drift to the contents of the fridge, particularly her own bottle of prosecco on the second shelf. May as well have that tonight and get another couple for the following Saturday. She'd need every drop to get her to the ceremony. If only she could really catch COVID.

She could feel the anger rising up within her.

“This is just so bloody irrational!” she screamed into the heedless cushion.