



Case Study

No, I can't! Overcoming school refusal

April 2024

Case study 1: Carleen

The screen door slams with a particular fury when Alison is angry. Carleen could hear the distinctive bang even from deep inside her wardrobe, swaddled by a reassuring forest of coats and dresses.

“You know I’ll get the blame for you missing the bus! Again!” Alison yelled as she marched down the drive towards the front gate, nearly a kilometre distant. The school bus driver was a notorious time freak and would not even slow down unless the sisters were standing in the shelter ready to go.

Carleen peeped cautiously out of the wardrobe, her tear-streaked face red and puffy. The house was quiet now with her big sister gone and would remain so until Mum came home from night shift at Karratha base hospital. Dad would be halfway to Derby in his truck by now with a load of washing machines or cars or whatever. It was just Carleen and a couple of cats.

Life in a small town had been pretty good for the first eight years of Carleen’s life. Then, just before Christmas, she and Alison had come home from school to find their grandmother sitting quietly in her favourite chair on the veranda. Dead.

Carleen had loved Nonna deeply, and she wafted through the organised chaos of funeral arrangements and visiting relatives in a daze. It was a summer of sadness.

But now school was back, and there was no way she was leaving Mum alone all day.

Who knew what might happen?

Case study 2: Hong

Hong nearly had himself convinced. At 16, he might become the youngest ever winner of the Oscar for best actor.

“So, it’s like a stabbing pain, is it?” his mother asked, sitting solicitously on the edge of his bed.

“It’s more of a burning, cramping pain...” he replied in English, writhing a little and grimacing.

His mother glanced to the doorway where Hong’s father stood, a sceptical look on his tired face.

“He can’t go to school like this,” she said. “We’ll need to get him to Dr Tran if he’s not better by this afternoon. It’s the fifth time this year.”

Her husband sighed and turned away, heading downstairs to open the shop. Urgent city noises flooded in as he threw up the roller door.

Hong turned towards the wall and allowed himself a small smile. Mr Nicholas (or “Old Bronze Bottom”, as he was known by the students) would have to find someone else to torture today. And it wouldn’t hurt to have another day away from Mitch and his mates. Maybe they’d forget his slip of the tongue about thinking Taylor Swift was cool. His cheeks flushed as he remembered their stunned disbelief.

His mother clattered back into the room and Hong let out a small moan, just to round out his performance. Mustn’t overdo it.