



The Cowley Literary Award

We hope you're enjoying the work of finalists in the fiction section of the second annual COWLEY LITERARY AWARD. Here's this week's offering, from JOHN JENKINS, who hails from Kangaroo Ground in Victoria.

The Red One

WORDS John Jenkins

MY cases were in the luggage rack above her head, squeezed between a handbag and a huge soft-toy lion belonging to the woman's daughter. As the train gained speed, I kept looking up at the red one, but casually so she wouldn't notice.

"Foster's Shearing is the next stop, our stop," she said, inviting conversation. "Aha," I said, peeling an apple with my penknife, then took off my glasses again, holding them up to the light.

But really, I just wanted to see if the red one was safe: squeezed against that lion. I had a sudden vision of the train jolting, and it crashing down, or flinging open. The other case, the black one, full of my samples, did not matter.

"I had my hair cut this morning..." The nosy woman tried again. She was a talker and I had to be careful.

Linda also liked to talk. But I didn't want to think of Linda now. Besides, she was still with me, in a sense. So there was no need.

"Sorry," I croaked as she waited for my reply. "I can't talk, my throat, a virus. A sort of flu, but a bad – a dangerous – one."

That fixed her. She flipped open a magazine, and handed her daughter a large picture book.

In all my years as a salesman, I have encouraged small talk. Like most reps, I'm even fond of it; but I know how, once

a conversation starts, it's hard to stop, and can lead anywhere; even to my private business. I might even mention Linda, slice open an emotional nerve, and blurt out everything in a flood of tears.

The train rattled on to a low, bare shoulder above Foster's Shearing, and I leapt from my seat to grab my luggage. Soon, I was on the platform, still shaking slightly. I composed myself and found, from a map, the nearest motel.

I walked quickly, but almost stumbled at a street corner, shocked that I could feel something bumping around in there, in my case.

I did not want to think of her now, not here. But it was no good. I kept on seeing images of her face. Or rather, of her head. The surprised eyes, long lashes with black mascara, her blonde hair piled in waves, like a country and western singer. And also, very clearly, her very pale, white skin and...

My car was still at the other end of the track. I was so upset I had sliced into a tree near a now-distant station, and just left it there, beside the road. I really don't know why I picked Foster's Shearing for my ticket, perhaps because it was such a long way from everything.

This was a typical small town: a railway cutting; then abrupt shopping strip divided by intersections. Just one long main road, surrounded by paddocks. I'd spent half my life in towns like these: taking orders, chatting to shopkeepers; smiling; small talk. In such places, peo-

ple notice everything: eyes behind every curtain.

The motel sign said "vacancy". Before the panic welled up, I steadied myself; and a bald-headed man was soon recording my details, and I casually picked up a breakfast menu from his neat desk. I told him I was a rep, and he nodded automatically.

He took me to my room. Stupidly, I had put my cases down for a moment. I felt like snatching the red one, but he was already off with them, walking briskly ahead. I was trembling, as our footsteps crunched through endless white gravel.

I almost live in motels, and can tell by the merest glance: this one was okay. When we reached my door, and I shut it quickly, I put down both cases and sat on the bed, my heart beating faster.

Suddenly I felt terribly alone and afraid, blubbing tears down my face.

Our affair had taken a familiar course. I would always visit late on a Tuesday afternoon, when her husband was still away, helping overnight at his brother's farm. Their home-ware shop had a back bedroom; and then, very much later, careful not to be seen, I would return to my motel.

I had made the excuse of bringing some new kitchen knives that Tuesday. But her husband already knew – gossip being a small town's blood sport. He had shouted; then a terrible fight, and she had promised to never see me again.

He would be back again tomorrow, ex-

pecting everything to be over with us, "All done and dusted," she had said.

I was so angry, shocked. I implored her to come with me, to leave him.

"Don't be stupid," she had said.

Yes, I was just a stupid little rep, and perhaps there were others, too. And that's when something snapped, and I couldn't stop, I just couldn't stop myself.

Just as now, I can't stop myself, as I walk over to the case, which has grown so heavy in my mind. The red one. I can't help laying it down on my bed now, opening the clasps, turning back the lid, and looking at her hair and her pale skin and sad eyes.

I bend down, and with both hands unsteady lift her from the case. It is the only thing I have ever stolen in my life: her portrait photo in its chunky silver frame. Blinded by confusion, I had snatched it up from their bedside. My pulse steadied, as I looked at Linda's severely cropped outline, her reserved smile.

I stare blankly for a long time, then go outside, feeling much calmer.

The stars were already out. It is easy to forget they are there. Funny thing is, if you head in one particular direction, and just kept on going, you will end up exactly where you started from... And here I was again, just another aimless speck of dust, wandering on our sad little planet. Anyway, that's how I felt, and it was over.