

## Wilderness House Literary Review 18/1

Amanda Marples  
**Find Him**

"Is sir enjoying his stay?"

"He certainly is."

"Is it business or pleasure?"

He doesn't answer immediately, makes a theatre of considering her question.

"Perhaps both." She takes it as a kindness, an acknowledgment of the tiresome nature of her work. A smile is at the corner of his eyes; she is certain they lingered on her lips.

Burning, she finds his booking details, the white noise of desire drowning out her fear of Mr. Daventry. The wanting had begun when she checked him in last week. He belongs to her for the duration of his stay. She watches him wait for the elevator, his coat slung over one arm. Relaxed and professional. She slides a vase of lilies across, to block her scribbling hand from view. She notes his address, his phone number.

Mr Daventry calls her from the back office, "Go on your break."



In bed that night, she traces the outline of the black mould blossoming in the corner of the window where the wood is rotting. Drunk men shout incomprehensibly in the street below. A can is kicked, a melancholy clash of tin. She hardly hears any of it. She is nurturing scenes in her head: he is a lonely man, a divorcée, a widower. He is looking for someone. Someone like her, someone who will attend his needs with delicious accuracy. She herself has no needs. The ageing boiler shudders and sighs. He is looking for her. She fights sleep in case her traitor mind lets go of him in her dreams.



She splashes water on her face, and watches herself in the staff toilet mirror, at how the drops run over her skin. She wonders how she might look to him when they shower together.

She forgets her dentist appointment. She kills off an imaginary relative and is forgiven and rebooked. She feels --A tentative inner voice asks, *is this healthy?* She swats it like a bluebottle.

She turns down lunch with Janine, she doesn't have the energy for celebrity divorces, the latest mutilated body found, the price of implants. She says she can't afford lunch. This is true, in a way. She is running out of time.

The force of her desire must be surging through the air to him wherever he goes, tingling down telegraph wires, carried by morning fog. How many more nights does she have before he checks out? The skin around her fingers is painfully stripped by anxious teeth. She will buy false nails when he asks her to dinner. New work shoes will have to wait. The water they let in hardly bothers her.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 18/1

She takes her breaks in the lounge with the guests, near the potted palms. She sips black coffee with a book in front of her that she does not read, her eye trained on the door. He doesn't come and so he doesn't see how the lashing rain casts dancing jewels of pink and green on her pale skin from the stained-glass window in front of which she has shrewdly positioned herself. She pinches the skin at the back of her knee, twists it hard. This restores balance, makes the wasted Pre-Raphaelite vision of her feel less wasteful.

She works double shifts, taking her breaks on the street outside, smoking in the cold and damp, leaning casually against the wall. Janine asks since when did she smoke? She answers with a twist of her lips, which means, *you don't know all there is, Janine.*

On the third night she catches him. She has rehearsed this. He will say *hello how are you* in the darkness and that is when he will notice the shade of her eyes, the tilt of her wrist. He will pause and nod to the cigarette burning gently between her fingers, and say *do you mind?* She will light him up, her hand cupped around his. He will delight at her fragility. They will look at each other and then he will say something blunt like *I can't stop thinking about you.*

As he approaches, his collar is up against the cold. A heron passes overhead, a silver bellied ghost. She takes it as a sign, and prepares. But her heart lodges itself in her throat and she observes with horror the drying up of her confidence as she abruptly sees how foolish she must seem smoking in the rain when she could be indoors. She holds her breath as his eyes slide over her face without recognition. She wants to clutch at him as his passing body drags her gaze along with it. The hems of his trousers are soaked, there are dark splashes up the back of his raincoat and she imagines him rushing through the streets, the tube, taking shortcuts through the city's parks, feet hammering the pavement to get to her before she goes off shift. But now he is afraid, like her, afraid of the brittleness of love, how blundered words might cause it to shatter.

As her mind whirls, he stumbles up the last step, lurching and dropping his case. She runs to him, knowing they will laugh about this one day, laid together in a bed in Southern France draped in white sheets as heavy as whipped cream, her head on his chest. He will stroke her hair. Schubert will turn on their old gramophone. The vinyl will crackle.

"Are you alright?" Her hands are stretched out to where he has sprawled.

"Yes," he says, already on his feet. "So clumsy." He straightens his tie. "So kind of you," he says. She notes a smear of mud above his temple, a nervous red scratch to his neck, his hair a little ruffled from the strangled rush through the city's muck. But in a flash he is gone, the lobby doors closing on him before she can think of the next line now they have wandered so far off script. She shudders, frozen in her thin jacket. She becomes aware of everything at once, sparkles in her lashes from unnoticed sleet, the hole in her shoe which lets in the weather. She looks down at her feet. To the side, a flash of gold, a tiny white face. She picks up the watch.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 18/1

It must be his, but it is feminine. The wife lost to cancer, or killed in a crash, their marriage still young. Or did she leave him? She hates her. She will not hurt him like that.

Janine calls, "What are you doing?" as she darts past reception, pausing at the elevator. The light above the door ticks lazily through the floors. He is almost there. She throws herself through the door marked *stairs*, swings around balustrades. His floor and room numbers are etched in her mind. All his numbers are.

He is sliding the key card into his door when she rounds the corner, panting.

"You dropped this," she says.

He turns, sets down his briefcase, and peers at her outstretched hand.

"Ah," he says with a light gasp, making him boyish. "Thank God." He takes the watch, cradles it in his palm, touches the face with tenderness. "My mother's," he says. "How careless I am today." He looks at her with mournful gratitude, but can't she feel fire as well? Her eyes sweep him over. The smear over his brow is not mud, but a graze. His fingers go to it in response to her gaze. "I have not had a good day. Not one fall, but two."

She gestures to his mud-streaked coat. "I would be happy to send your coat for dry cleaning," she says. "We don't normally, but..." she searches. "I like to take care of people." She stops. He is looking at her as though she is a mystery. She feels surveyed, disassembled. She shivers with it.

"Is your trip going well?" she asks.

"Yes. Yes," he replies softly. His eyes are dark with curiosity. And then he smiles, and sunshine fills the corridor. "I am finding many opportunities." She cannot place his accent and desire plunges her deeper, her heart a labyrinth of painful desire.

He shrugs off his overcoat and hands it to her. "Thank you," he says. He puts a hand to his forehead, feigns a swoon. "And now I must sleep and bury this terrible day."

"Of course," she says. She turns before he enters his room and feels his eyes on her. She does not look back. Let him feel the loss of her.

Tomorrow, she will make it happen.



She calls in sick, without guilt. She watches the lobby doors from the café across the road. He never leaves before midday, but she has been there since ten, just in case.

Will there be dinner with powerful men? Laughter roughened by Scotch? A burst of pride illuminates this inner scene. Whichever restaurant, office block, conference hall he eventually exits, she will be there, rounding the corner, stumbling into him. He will catch her, steady her. They will apologise over each other and laugh before he pins her with his cobalt eyes and says *let me buy you a drink*.

She follows.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 18/1

There are no dinners. No deals. She is dizzy and tired of turnstiles and traffic, of jogging to keep up, with her hat pulled down and her scarf pushed up, smothered and invisible. The tube rides lead nowhere, he strides the pavements with steadfast purposelessness, his briefcase swinging.

And still she follows.

He is running from something. Himself? The past? He is trying to find *her*, but he does not know it. And still she can find no way to put herself in his path in the declining daylight. She is gripped with fear.

As the moon blooms above, he abruptly slows by the old museum. He mounts the broad steps, pauses, and turns to look. Can he feel her? Snow begins to spit as she presses herself to a monument, just out of his view. She chances a look. He wears a half smile, revealing teeth so neat, so white, they shine in the night. He is statuesque, lost in thought. Suddenly, he moves. He is dashing down the steps, and if she does not move he will see her crouching and it will be spoiled. She shifts crabwise around the stone, watching as he passes, frowning. He crosses the road and enters the park across the square, heavy with trees and prospering rhododendron.

From her safe place she watches. He sits on a bench, his briefcase beside him. He has produced a woollen hat; he must be so cold in this bitter night. He is mausoleum-still. The world, its people, even time itself fades as she watches and thinks. Then, he folds in on himself, falling forward, his head in his hands in a posture of bottomless distress. Now is the time. She heads for the pedestrian crossing, Belisha beacon pulsing warm gold on her face. The city is romantic tonight, and here she is to soothe him.

Her smile freezes to ice as she watches him stand and collide into a woman, young and slight, with long hair and a pink beret. Immobilised on the crossing she watches the surprised *pas de deux* of apology that should have been hers. She watches as he dashes his hand to his head, clasps them to his heart space, pleading. He points around, communicating some emergency, some disaster. The woman takes a hesitant step backwards, takes her phone from her pocket, but he shakes his head: *no, no*. She can feel his urgent panic and is not surprised to see the woman nod and follow as he turns with his briefcase, pointing ahead to something beyond the trees in the deep of the park and taking her chance for deliverance with him.

A horn blasts, a driver shouts a reproof, and she is startled to action. She walks, leaving her heart behind to be crushed under the wheels of a hackney carriage.



She is ill for some time. Eventually, her decaying flat demands rent.

Janine is pleased at her return, her breaks have been dull, Mr. Daventry foul-tempered.

She checks the system. He is gone, the very night she lost him.

She sits with Janine in the staff room, where she has resumed her breaks; the lounge being too lit up with memories now. Janine is reading the newspaper with undisguised glee. How awful it is. Janine hopes they

## Wilderness House Literary Review 18/1

will catch him soon. Another girl found dead and, and another still missing. Janine moves on, prattling about micro-dermabrasion and this season's palette.

She is not listening.

She is looking at the last grainy CCTV image of the missing girl in the pink beret beneath the monstrous headline:

*Find Him.*

She finishes her sandwich in silence, dry swallowing over and over until there is nothing left.