



New Room

By Michael Welch

[Home](#)

[Winter-Spring 2013](#)

[Fall-Winter 2012-2013](#)

[Summer-Fall 2012](#)

[Spring-Summer 2012](#)

[Winter-Spring 2012](#)

[Autumn/Winter 2011-12](#)

[Summer 2011](#)

[Winter/Spring 2011](#)

[Autumn/Winter 2011](#)

[Summer 2010](#)

[Spring 2010](#)

[Winter 2010](#)

[Autumn 2009](#)

[Summer 2009](#)

[Spring 2009](#)

[Autumn 2008](#)

[Summer 2008](#)

[Spring/Summer 2008](#)

[Winter/Spring 2008](#)

[Editor's Note](#)

[Guidelines](#)

[Contact](#)

Rick recalled the moment he suggested to Amanda that they move in together, pulling her tight in the clutter of their friends Hosea and Lila's kitchen, the hard morning light falling upon the piled, maculated dishes, a thin swinging door away from the uneven bursts of laughter, the noon party in honor of baby Che's first step. Rick had squeezed her even closer, worried about her response; Amanda's bare shoulder there in the band of light, the fresh scent of it, suddenly seemed such rich promise of a new way to wake up each morning.

It was Hosea then, who bumped up against Rick a month later in the swirl of Rick and Amanda's own party—their apartment warming—to say, "Consider the timing, Ricky Boy. You and Amanda envision an apartment as my boy begins to walk. Now—though it's really more of a *closet*—you christen it on the day he speaks. Should he ever stop pissing down his own leg, you two should fuck!"

"Wait till he's in middle school? That's asking a lot. And I hate to tell you, I looked it up—*Ock* is not a word."

Despite all the banter between Rick and Hosea, Hosea and Lila's marriage had for years stood as Rick's standard of love. Amidst the mayhem of the party, Rick had studied the way the two of them briefly touched in, how Lila unconsciously rested her fingertips upon Hosea's belt buckle, how they laughed, really tilted back. For Rick and Amanda the *lovmaking* was extraordinary—sweaty and spiraling, after which they would swoon exhaustively, hold hands and gaze out the window. But dinners could be marked by formal silences, and the cramped size of the apartment (what amounted to a midsized living room that contained kitchen and screened-off bathroom, and an adjacent bedroom no bigger than a bathroom itself, barely large enough for their floored futon mattress) at times felt cage-like. Not to mention, over the first few months there were faucet leaks interrupted by no water at all, and even when the water flowed there wasn't enough hot to fill up the undersized tub. The tenant beneath them whacked away on the radiator pipes, who knew why; loose plaster sprinkled down from the ceiling; and—just what a shy new couple needs—the toilet regularly backed up. Balducci, the super, was friendly in a hardscrabble sort of way, but was unfamiliar with the word "urgent." Squat, fifties, eyebrows thick as Brillo pads, he finally showed up one night at 10:30pm, mildly drunk, only to say, "You young folks, whaddya need hot water for? At your age you make your own heat."

Rick rolled his eyes at Amanda, managed a wink, then tried to engage with the old guy. "So, that was what worked for you and Mrs. Balducci was it?"

Balducci shrugged as if the answer was obvious. "Big woman, my wife—even back then. Heat galore. But squeeze her into a tub and, God Bless, the only space for water would be her bellybutton."

Rick and Amanda looked on as Balducci shoved past them with a wrench and peered beneath the sink. His torso disappeared for a moment, there came a few bangs, then very gradually he reappeared. "Could be I got it. Who knows?"

But no, he hadn't. The next morning not a drop from the kitchen faucet or the bathroom's, and they were forced to use what was left in Rick's gym bag water bottle just to make coffee. They sat at the small kitchen table, a narrow band of light arrowing across the Chintz tablecloth. The previous night, they had made love, but then Amanda had seemed to slip away, didn't want to spoon. Rick

hated his own poutiness, but left for his teaching job at PS 41 early, giving her only a peck on the cheek.

Later that day, at lunch, Amanda was blunt to Lila—the two had never hung out alone before and so Amanda felt the need to get right to the point, to provide a reason why she asked to meet. She admitted, “When we’re done—you know... having sex—I turn my back to him, I don’t know why. He’ll paw at me. I can feel him back there breathing.”

“They can be big babies. In his sleep, Hosea wants to nurse—I’m sure of it.”

“You joke, but it seems...an *indicator*.”

Lila was dismissive. “Indicator? Big word. Of what? ...So you yawn and give him a loving elbow to the ribs. Rest assured, some freedom.”

Amanda didn’t laugh. “A few weeks ago, I saw an email he wrote to the management company complaining about needed repairs. He said that since they’d never bothered to send the lease papers, that *he* was free to leave. He used the singular pronoun.”

Lila took Amanda’s hand and stared deeply into her eyes. “Amanda. *Sweetheart*. I won’t even ask why you are looking at his emails. What good would advice from an old mom of four be, anyway? I’ll only say—think of a tide. It washes back and forth. These lame generalities are the last thing you want to hear, I know. But try to work with the tide.”

Amanda hugged her, but left doing exactly what Lila had cautioned against: chipping at the tide metaphor for something more specific to grasp onto, and later that week, on Saturday morning, when Balducci showed up “uncalled-for” at their door, she reminded herself that Rick’s choice of singular in his email was not an *indicator* but merely a guy-way to get management’s attention.

Balducci stood in the kitchen in a scuffed black suit. “Don’t ask, don’t ask,” he said with a dismissive wave. “Sister’s anniversary last night. I came straight here from the party. Big drinkers, my brother-in-law’s family. Greeks—*marone*. Her nuttiest marriage yet.” Balducci opened his toolbox. “Anyway, wanna know what I got? New pipe-fitting. New fancy faucet. All for you. I’m such a sweet guy.” He handed her a sheet of paper. “Even the lease you ask for.”

Rick was still on the fire escape. It was a sunny morning and they had been reading the newspaper as the cafes opened up and a crowd began to mill along Avenue A. Amanda poked her head out the window and said to Rick, “Balducci’s here. He brought this.” She placed the lease on the fire escape and put her empty coffee mug on it so it wouldn’t blow away.

“What is it?” he asked.

“The lease you aska for,” she said, doing her best *Balducci* to break the tension.

Rick waited, staring at the piece of paper beneath the mug. “We should talk,” he said.

At his serious tone, Amanda steadied herself and took a deep breath. “It might as well read: So how’s your relationship going? Sign below if adequate.”

“Is that how you feel we’re doing?”

The talk with Lila made her more direct. “Me?” she said. “Rick—you’ve seemed so down, lately. Off to work you go, as if you can’t wait to get away.”

“Work, I know I’m good at,” he admitted.

Amanda collected her thoughts and when she continued her voice was preternaturally calm. “I know that I... I know that at times I can be pretty closed. But it’s not you—”

“C’mon, ‘Man. Listen to yourself. How could it not be me?”

Still leaning out the window—half inside half out—Amanda felt exposed, her cheeks felt flushed; she was tempted to duck back into the room and leave the conversation till later. She stopped, thinking she had heard something inside, but when nothing more came she decided it was just wishful thinking. Having lost her train of thought, she struggled a moment. “You’ve lived with someone before, Rick,” she said, lamely. “Me, never. To try and separate the pieces, what’s working and what isn’t,”—what was she trying to say?—“right now it all just feels like...a reach.”

“A reach? You mean *us*?”

A *reach*—he was right, the phrase sounded so airless. Not at all what she wanted to convey, but she found nothing to replace it with.

“Did someone just yell ‘*Help*’? Or am I hearing things?” Amanda asked.

“Are you being funny?”

“No,” said Amanda, impatiently. She scanned the calm street below, then turned inside, but heard nothing. Not only nothing, but when she checked the kitchen, Balducci had apparently left; only his toolbox there. Amanda turned back toward the bedroom but bumped right into Rick, who’d protectively followed her in.

“Nothing,” she said. “Voices in my head, I guess. Telling.”

“I think I heard it too,” Rick said.

Just then, it came again, muted but distinct, seemingly very nearby. Rick and Amanda stopped and looked at each other then checked around. A clunking noise came from beneath the sink where Balducci had left the cabinet doors open. There, beneath the piping under the sink, they saw a pair of shoe soles.

Amanda bent down. “Balducci?”

A voice returned. “Are you really asking, is it me? What the fuck? Who else I gonna be?”

“Well, what are you doing?” Amanda asked, peering into the dark. She could see nothing more than shoes and lower legs, a congestion of pipes, and what was either a hole or trap door in the darkened rear wall.

At first there was no answer. “Long story.”

Amanda and Rick looked at each other, unsure whether to be worried or laugh.

“I think you... maybe gotta try to push my feet,” Balducci suggested.

“Push?” said Rick.

“You want to have a nice conversation?” said Balducci. “YASS—*push*.”

“Will you be coming back?” asked Rick. He didn’t mean to be funny, but as soon as Amanda heard the question she burst out laughing. Rick began to giggle, too.

“Yack, yack, yack,” said Balducci. “I can hear you, you know. And believe me, if I could get away for good, I would!” Then he asked, “So can you at least push while you’re having so much fun?”

“Push,” said Rick, just to confirm.

“Push!” Balducci said.

Amanda and Rick sat side by side on the kitchen floor and decided to press their feet against Balducci’s soles to give him leverage. They felt Balducci’s feet press back, but he didn’t budge. Only after a half minute did some wiggling begin to occur. Then, to both Amanda and Rick’s amazement, the shoes gradually shimmied away.

Amanda and Rick stared from behind at the darkened opening but couldn’t see much of anything. “We have a flashlight?” Rick asked.

“You know we don’t have a flashlight.”

“Okay, guys, lemme back in,” came Balducci’s still-muted voice.

“What do you mean?” asked Amanda. “Where are you?”

“*Marone*—just open the friggin’ door.”

“What door?” asked Rick.

“Again with the yack-yack. The door. Right there—*THE DOOR*.”

“The one by the table?” Amanda asked, truly bewildered. “You’re over there in the next apartment?”

“Okay, enough funny stuff,” said Balducci, clearly running out of patience and delivering a smack to the back of the door. Rick moved closer to see what he could do, only get a good clap on the cheekbone—enough to see a blast of white—as the door flew open.

On the floor where he landed, Rick cupped his ear and stared up at the doorway, at Balducci framed by light. “Geez—what the hell?” he said

“Yes, what the hell!” agreed Balducci. But upon seeing Rick’s bleeding ear, he

softened. “Why didn’t you just open the door?” he asked.

“That door has never opened, Mr. Balducci. It’s *sealed*,” said Amanda.

Balducci looked back in utter dismay. Then he turned and looked about him, at the door frame. “This *light gum sealant*. The painters must have run out of tape. They didn’t want the spray to go in the crack. Out here is—*beige*. In there—*white*.”

Still cupping his ear, Rick did his best to push himself to his feet then stood next to Amanda. Sure enough, they faced a large, empty, fresh-painted bedroom, walls so bright from the sunlight streaming from the window that they appeared not to be there at all. A widening V of light fell across an unfaded section of green carpet where a large bed must have been. For a suspended moment neither of them knew what to do.

Balducci paused, his thick mustache turning down with concern as he again looked at Rick. Trying to cheer him up, to shake them both out of their blankness, he turned and swept his hand toward the room. “See? Ees ok. All yours. All yours *all along*.”

Until slowly, as Balducci stood aside in his scuffed suit and dirtied white shirt, the two took hands and began to step through the open doorway together.

Michael Welch, a graduate of the Pacific University Writing Program, has had his works published in *Crack the Spine*, *Stealing Time*, and *The Mankind Project Reader*. His flash fiction was a finalist in 2012 *New Millennium* writing contest. New works will appear this year in *Prime Mincer* and *Foxing Quarterly*. He grew up in the South Bronx and now lives with his wife and two daughters.

Copyright 2013, © Michael Welch. This work is protected under the U.S. copyright laws. It may not be reproduced, reprinted, reused, or altered without the expressed written permission of the author.
