



**PART I · ON COLOR**

*When Colors Compete*

## **A Powder Room with Sparkle**

*or: how a thousand cold blue lights taught me to stop choosing and add a third color instead*



*The soft pink of the wallpaper, carried up onto the woodwork.*

**What stopped me** — *a Christmas gift of a thousand fairy lights, a granddaughter who would not take no for an answer, and a little room that turned, in one evening, the wrong shade of blue.*

There is a particular freedom in a very small room. A powder room asks nothing of you but delight. No one lives in it, no one lingers, no one will carry a dinner-table opinion out of it. It is the one place in the house where you can be a little outré — buy the exquisite, over-expensive thing, or choose the outrageous color — and no one minds. Small rooms forgive. That is why I love them.

So when I was given a string of one thousand fairy lights for Christmas, and my granddaughter — visiting, and not to be talked out of it — insisted we use them *now*, the powder room was chosen for the honor. Up came the stepladder from the basement. We pinned the tiny lights to the walls, more or less at random, with small clear pushpins: no mess, removable, all but invisible. A thousand little stars, waiting for evening.

#### THE CLASH

Then we turned them on. Disaster. The light those little LEDs threw was cold and blue and utterly wrong — a hospital glare in a room dressed in soft floral wallpaper. Two lovely things, the lights and the room, and together they quarreled. Anyone would have had the same first thought I did.

#### THE TEMPTATION



*Small room, big permission.*

The obvious fix is to pick a winner. Take the lights back down — the wallpaper wins. Or live with the cold blue — the lights win. This is what most of us do when two things we love refuse to get along: we choose, we sacrifice one, and we tell ourselves it was taste.

But I didn't want to choose. I liked the sparkle. I liked the wallpaper. The quarrel was real — and so was everything I'd get to keep if only the two of them would hush.

### **THE THIRD**

So instead of subtracting, I added. We painted the ceiling a bright, unapologetic gold, and painted every bit of the woodwork one of the soft pinks already living in the wallpaper. And the cold blue — outnumbered now, warmed on every side by gold and pink — stopped being wrong. It became the *cool* note in a warm chord. Three colors, where a moment before there had been two combatants. It worked like a charm.

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*When two colors fight, don't pick a winner. Find the third one that lets them both be right.*

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I have, now, a warm, inviting, unusual, very charming powder room with sparkle — and the lights I very nearly tore down are the whole reason to open the door.

## A LITTLE SPELL

### **Add, don't subtract.**

Find two things in a room that don't get along — a rug and a pillow, a lampshade and a wall. Before you banish either one, set a third color between them: a small gold thing, a soft pink thing, something that shares a little with each. Watch the quarrel turn into a chord.

*The colors that seem to be fighting are usually just waiting for a third to introduce them.*