

PART I · ON COLOR

When Colors Compete

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A Hare in the Powder Room



Sweet peas from the garden, a soap rose between visitors — three kinds of rose in one small room.

or: how a thousand cold blue lights and a long-eared hare turned the smallest room in the house into the largest world in it

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.*

My granddaughter was visiting me for several days. We were bored and looking for "something to do." A dangerous state of mind. Voila! We had a great idea. For Christmas I had been given a light curtain — let's hang it. We settled on the powder room.

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. Small rooms forgive. That is why I love them.

THE CLASH



One of the trio of vintage Spanish botanical prints — a flower taller than the house it grows behind.

Of course, there were problems: you knew going in there were going to be problems. One just didn't know how bad the problems were going to be. With great drama we flipped the light switch, expecting to ooh and aah. We were very disappointed. The color of the light was that halogen blue of headlights, not the warm, incandescent glow we were expecting. Two lovely things — the lights and the room — and together they quarreled.

THE TEMPTATION

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. After much discussion, the decision was made to dilute the blue glow by painting the ceiling an intense orangey gold, and to carry a soft pink up onto the woodwork. 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. It was the right decision.

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Now the walls are covered with pinpoints of fairy light scattered in a riot of Colefax & Fowler pink roses and ivy. An old gold vintage chandelier hangs from a ceiling now painted antique gold. The walls are adorned with a trio of rare vintage Spanish botanical prints in carved gold frames. Hanging on another wall is a large antique mirror with gold carved detail and small bright pink marquee Broadway-style lights meandering around the frame. A small end table's top holds a menagerie of small animals. The marble floor cools my bare feet.

Hanging from the towel rack are vintage handmade linens. These linens, of course, are not meant to be used, but as you can see from the wrinkled towel, not everyone seems to know that.

The soap is a sculpted rose. You pluck a petal from the rose to get your own personal, one-use soap. Unfortunately, children can't resist depetaling it. Still, I continue with the soap rose as I, too, am charmed by its beauty and scent.

Tucked in among the roses and ivy, a metal wall sculpture of a long-eared hare hiding in field grass. Each new season finds him bedecked anew. In the fall, seed pods, dried flowers, and weeds are tucked in his long metal grass. Spring finds him hiding in a thicket of fresh flowers, and the holiday season, wearing a jaunty hat between his long ears and tiny ornaments nestled in snow-covered moss. Every party or guest visit finds him dressed anew and ready to say hello.

The menagerie of animals on the tabletop gets the most attention. It's like my powder room is a "changing room": a person walks in and changes into a different person — usually, it seems, a teenage boy. My guests, seemingly, cannot resist moving the animals around in amusing, often lascivious, ways, with copulation a favorite pose. The boy and girl soft-sculpture bunnies have found a new home elsewhere.

A favorite children's story: For a few years, I was captivated by artist-made, salesman's-sample furniture — especially chairs — and started a collection of them. Some of these chairs found their home in my powder room among the menagerie. I loved putting animals in the chairs, especially dogs with their inquisitive look of "who, me? of course I'm allowed to be on the chairs." As any one-of-a-kind thing is, they were not inexpensive. One day I had a realization: that no one, just looking at these little chairs, would have any idea that they were more than cheap imports. That if I died, my children would have a yard sale and sell the chairs for a dollar. So, I put a sticker under the seat of each chair with the cost of what I had paid for it. My children found this hilarious. On hindsight, I, too, find it hilarious! My children are grown, but the stickers are still there.

My powder room is more than a powder room. It is the smallest room in the house and the largest world in it — and my guests keep proving it is a changing room after all. You walk in one person. For one bright, gold-ceilinged minute, you walk out another.

> **A LITTLE SPELL**
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> **When two colors quarrel, invite a third.**
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> Somewhere in your house, two colors are arguing — a cold light against a warm wall, a rug against a curtain. Don't referee. Don't banish either one. Find the third color that makes them a chord instead of a quarrel, and let all three sing.

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