

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 carries 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, faintly-too-expensive thing, or choose the outrageous color — and the world does not care. Small rooms forgive. That is why I love them; they are the pocket of the house where nerve costs nothing.

The lights arrived at Christmas — a string of one thousand fairy lights, coiled in a box like a captured galaxy. My granddaughter found them before I could think better of it. She is at the age where an idea, once had, must be *acted upon*, and she had decided, on the spot, that the lights must go up and must go up today. After a good deal of happy negotiation, the powder room was chosen for the honor. Up came the stepladder from the basement. We pinned the tiny bulbs to the walls, more or less at random, with small clear pushpins — no mess, removable, all but invisible — until a thousand little stars hung waiting for the dark.

THE CLASH

Then we turned them on. Disaster. The light those small LEDs threw was cold and blue and utterly, comically wrong — a hospital glare spilling over the soft florals of the wallpaper, draining the pink right out of the roses. Two lovely things, the lights and the room, each perfectly fine alone, and set side by side they simply quarreled. My granddaughter looked at me. 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, and let the wallpaper win. Or leave the cold blue burning, and let the lights win. This is what most of us do when two things we love refuse to get along: we choose between them, we sacrifice one, and afterward we tell ourselves that choosing was *taste* — that maturity is knowing what to give up.

I have never much believed that. I liked the sparkle. I liked the wallpaper. The quarrel was real — but so was every bit of beauty I'd get to keep, if only the two of them could be made to hush and sit together.

THE THIRD

So instead of subtracting, I added. We painted the ceiling a bright, unapologetic gold — the color of good afternoon light — and painted every inch of the woodwork one of the soft pinks that already lived, half-hidden, in the wallpaper's own flowers. Then we waited for evening, and turned the lights back on.

And the cold blue — outnumbered now, warmed on every side by gold overhead and pink at the edges — stopped being wrong. It settled. It became the *cool* note in a warm chord, the little shiver of silver that makes gold look like gold. Three colors, where a moment before there had been two combatants; a harmony, where there had been a squabble. It worked, as these things do when you finally stop fighting them, like a charm.

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

I have, now, a warm, inviting, unusual, very charming powder room with sparkle — and the thousand cold little lights I very nearly tore down in defeat are the whole reason, on a winter evening, to open the door.

> **A LITTLE SPELL**
>
> **Add, don't subtract.**
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> Find two things in a room that don't get along — a rug and a pillow, a lampshade and a wall, a light that's colder than the space around it. Before you banish either one, set a third color quietly between them: a small gold thing, a soft pink thing, something that shares a little with each. Then step back and watch the quarrel turn into a chord.

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