

welcome

quixotic plum

WE WERE IN THE SHOE DEPARTMENT at Barneys, and I was trying on a frivolous pair of yellow heels. My friend Maurie (you always need a friend along to rationalize unnecessary purchases) swooned helpfully. “Banana!” she said. “Khaki! What a combination. You must buy them.” Banana? Khaki? “And look at these,” Maurie said. “Try these on. Raspberry stilettos.”

I suddenly felt like I was shopping in a fruit bowl. I am the kind of person who sees red, yellow, green, lavender. Okay, celadon or saffron, in a pinch. But to Maurie, the world was a cornucopia of color. “Red?” said Maurie. “I would never

see just red.” I could see a crease of scorn over one eyebrow. “My mother taught me never to see just yellow or blue or green. My mother was crazy about color. She loved it, and wanted us to pay close attention to it. She always wore an Hermès scarf, and showed us how to pick up colors from the patterns, and use them to learn how to put colors together. She never wore plain clothes. Even white was complicated: Linen? Putty? Sailcloth? She had a butter blazer, and a lilac evening dress; she got married in an ice blue gown. Eggplant was big at my house. And cordovan, and cognac. If people say blue to me, I don’t know what they’re talking about. I need to know, periwinkle? Royal? Yves Klein? Blueberry? My mother wanted life to be full of drama, mystery, magic; she wanted everything to be more vivid, more exciting, than it might have been.” When she was a young girl, Maurie’s mother changed the way she pronounced her own name—and informed her family, who rolled their eyes affectionately—because it was more decorative to sound like she came from Paris.

Maurie’s mother was on to something. The urge to change the names of things, and, in particular, colors, seems to be irresistible. A trip to the paint store these days is likely to be mouthwatering—or stomach turning. On the happy side of the color wheel, Benjamin Moore has a calendar called Colorful Cuisine, displaying pictures of food—in case you didn’t get it—pointing to chips with names like Merlot Red, Maple Syrup, Dijon, and Milk Shake, which happens to be a café au lait shade, if you’re not on a diet.

At the weirdo end of the color spectrum lurks Farrow & Ball, maker of gorgeous paints. But they defy the customer to take a look—a strategy that may be too clever by half. Who would paint her dining room Dead Salmon? No matter how sophisticated the hue—and who cares that “dead” meant matte in the nineteenth century?—no matter how elegant the shade on the walls, I, for one, would never be able to think of anything but a fishy demise when I sat down to dinner. To say nothing of flattened, matte-finished fish. And imagine the decorator using Mouse’s Back on the clueless client’s bedroom walls; this gives new meaning to inside jokes. And whatever shall we do with Quixotic Plum from Sherwin-Williams? Or their Relentless Olive? Shaken, I hope, not stirred. Martinis to all who get past these labels.

The teenage boys at my dinner table embark, one night, on a discussion that begins with “What would happen if aliens came to this planet?” I mutter something about its being hard to imagine. My father, sensing an opportunity to broaden little minds, says, “Here’s something to think about, boys. There are two things to know about the universe. It is infinite, and it is always expanding.” The boys are not to be derailed. “I’ll tell you one thing,” says Theo. “If an alien came to earth, he could never discover another color. All the colors already exist.” That stops us.

I’m sure he’s right, in a red, yellow, green, blue sort of way. But we seem to require something more of our world. I take

a parochial view of cosmological matters. An ever expanding infinity? No new colors? Maurie’s mother knows best, of course. You start with an endless expanse of blue, and that becomes Caribbean, or delphinium, or ice, or blueberry, or aquamarine, or celestial. Suddenly the world—or at least the way we see it—gets bigger and better. And it’s so much brighter that way.



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