

welcome

Living Color

The gift starts with the box!" said my friend with a grin of delight as I handed him the big orange box. "Whatever it is, it's great!" Not too many boxes command this sort of rapture; I can think of a red one, and a robin's-egg blue box. It's interesting that color—a mere play of light—can come to represent surpassing quality, luxurious pleasure, extravagant surprise. My friend is a pretty colorful character himself; sartorially speaking, though, he confines his flamboyance to his shoes, which are wildly lyrical. Men are shy about color, I notice. They could stride about in any plumage, taking a cue from the world of wildlife, but they stick to shades of brown, subdued blues, and grays. Every once in a while, though, a man's jacket will flip open to reveal a dazzling striped lining, or the collar will turn up and sizzle with yellow, or a gorgeous lavender and blue striped sock will peek out from a pant leg. In this way men secretly succumb to the lure of color; perhaps wearing color on the inside is a more subtle way of showing that the gift starts with the package.

In any event, lust entered my heart recently when I saw an altogether different orange box: Kenmore's confident pumpkin of a front-loading washer and dryer. I want them. And I want a purple Dyson vacuum cleaner and a bright red Viking megamixer. What's my problem? Why all this stuff, the color of candy, or clown suits, or parrots—or childhood? That's it. It's playtime again.

Again? Well, yes. There was a time, way back in the '50s, when women were told that their only place was in the kitchen. That ended; now women are in the kitchen if they want to be (and can afford to be)—and many of us wish we could be there more often. We're drawn by all that colorful equipment. Who wouldn't feel powerful commanding a fire-engine, stop-sign, valentine-heart red mixer? Who wouldn't feel rakish waltzing around with a vacuum cleaner that looks as if it were wearing a ball gown (and that enviously upright posture, too).

But it's the big orange pumpkin of a washer-dryer that makes me want to redecorate the laundry room—throw up some wallpaper and move in with my blanket and a stuffed animal. The laundry room has always

been the most comforting place to be. I once read, when I was a new mother, that the way to soothe squalling babies was to place them in a basket on top of the washing machine, set it on its spin cycle, and let the agitation soothe them to sleep. This is not unlike Car Therapy, in which you drive aimlessly and endlessly through town at three in the morning with the baby screaming in his car seat until you both fall into an exhausted stupor in some far-off parking lot. (I warn you that Washing Machine Therapy has often been misappropriated by jealous brothers who are themselves deranged from interrupted sleep; they feel the baby should be *in* the machine. But I digress.)

I confess that I have spun babies into dreamland on top of the washer. And I've turned to the comfort of doing laundry, from time to time, during a spasm of middle of the night wakefulness. I'll sit on the cold floor, with a cup of tea, my back against the dryer, feeling its solid warmth, remembering college days, or a first apartment when I'd sit in the Laundromat waiting for my clothes to dry. All the thrumming noises of the kitchen are comforting, too, especially if you live alone. They make you think you aren't the only one up, the only one spinning and agitating and soaking and tossing with the work of the nighttime, which, let's face it, is sometimes for dreaming, and other times for being anxious.

So who needs the color? All these things work just as well in black or white, don't they? Not really. Even if we're only doing housework—and there aren't too many things more important than making and taking care of a home—we need a sense of play, a jolt of fun. When its color is electrifying you can just feel

how much more quickly the vacuum flits around the room. As for that orange washer and dryer? Its appeal must have something to do with a residual memory of the pumpkin that turned into the coach that carried the princess (in clean clothes!) to the wild party where she waltzed headily in the arms of the prince, who changed her life. So who said it was just a washing machine? That's what a touch of color can do.



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