

welcome

“Wait a Minute!”

THE DINNER PARTY IS OVER. Everyone has gone home—filled with great wine, great food, great conversation, great cheer. You’ve seen your guests to the door; you’ve lingered through every last parting; it is so late; you are exhausted. But happily so. There is the simple satisfaction of a job well done, and the profound pleasure of friendship deepened. You scan the dining room, keeping the chandelier dimmed even as you try to decide between necessary evils: whether to finish the cleaning now or face it in the morning. The table is laden with your favorite dessert plates, the cake platter, the tiny espresso cups, the coffeepot, a nearly empty chocolate tray, whiskey glasses—and, yes, one crammed ash-tray at the place of the friend who simply cannot stop, and another holding the flaky ash and elegant remains of a Cuban cigar. The air is fragrant, and the sharp scent of the night-blooming jasmine and the sweet nicotiana just outside the window waft in on the cool midnight breeze.

Eventually you realize, as if waking from a dream, that you have been standing, becalmed, gazing emptily at that table, for many minutes. You have been utterly absorbed in the peace and quiet that settles on a room that has been joyfully agitated moments before. This is a different sort of peace and quiet from the miserable one that follows a door-slamming argument, or the poignant one that takes up residence in, let’s say, a teenager’s room after he has left for college. I would judge the peace and quiet in a house after a party as a gift from a room at its best. No matter how you’ve done it—colorfully, minimally, exuberantly, subtly—you have created a room that can happily contain, and enhance, the full dimensions of a human life, communal to solitary.

No matter how—that is key. There’s a misconception rampant in the land that the path of Zen decor is the only one to a peaceful space. You know the look: beige, and then some more beige. Cubes seem to play a big role in this style,

though I cannot fathom why. It would seem more likely that the unfathomable nature of the circle (and its component in the armchair family, the curve) would render a room more conducive to meditation, but never mind. The problem is that, more often than not, these beige, angular rooms are virtually screaming with intention; their stark, aggressive lines are an assault on tranquillity, their emptiness an echo chamber to amplify every neurosis you bring home (and who doesn’t bring home a few strays from time to time?). I have found more peace and quiet in rooms whose windows were draped with voluminous folds of chintz, or whose walls were lacquered in oxblood. When it comes to decorating, one woman’s peace and quiet is often another’s heebie-jeebies. Design is nothing if not an emotional trigger. Peace and quiet transcends—or trumps?—things like color and furnishings.

And when it comes to living? Well, some of us find peace and quiet in a long, solitary walk on the beach; and believe it or not, there are those among us for whom peace settles on the soul in the absence of quiet, at a glittering party.

I used to wonder what kind of person says, “Wait a minute!” when you ask them to come to the window to see the twinkling canopy of the midnight sky. (Then again, I’d be the

first to ask for a few minutes—if not hours—when called to view the rosy fingers of dawn.) It has happened more than once that I’ve violated my own peace and quiet with the desire to share it. I used to be annoyed: stars don’t wait for your minute, and neither does a rainbow, or a sunset, or a child’s funny face. But then I understood: someone else’s peace and quiet might simply be at the kitchen sink, up to the elbows in warm, soapy water, doing the dishes when the party’s over.

