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The Color of Home

a novel



Kit Tosello

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a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan
RevellBooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Tosello, Kit, 1961– author.

Title: The color of home / Kit Tosello.

Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2024.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024005992 | ISBN 9780800772697 (paperback) | ISBN 9780800746452 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493447251 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Christian fiction. | Romance fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3620.O78 C65 2024 | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20240212

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024005992>

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Cover design by Mumtaz Mustafa

Published in association with Books & Such Literary Management, www.booksandsuch.com.

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24 25 26 27 28 29 30 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Of one thing I am perfectly sure:
God's story never ends with "ashes."

Elisabeth Elliot

I've made LORD GOD my home.

Psalm 73:28 *The Message*

For Dad,
whose voice still guides me

And for Auntie Midgie,
whose real name was Marguerite,
like the daisy



One

MENLO PARK, CALIFORNIA

Audrey

I should have dialed back the melatonin in favor of chamomile tea years ago. Because this time when I dreamed about Dad there were no flames. Still, from what I can tell about the target demographic of sleep-aid advertisements, women my age aren't supposed to wrestle so hard with their pillows at night. Should I worry? See a doctor?

In my dream, the day was dry as wheat and bright as gold. There we were, just the two of us, caught in a tender moment in a tidy patch of green lawn next to a white clapboard cottage. It was late September in Central Oregon's high desert. I know this because the wild fields of rabbitbrush that lay beyond the fence had transfigured from summer's drab olive to school-bus yellow.

I know this too because I lived it, that moment in that place. At the time, I'd never seen a true autumn, hadn't realized that a thing could be one way today and a different way the next. What does a California girl know of seasons? I had no idea, for example, that by some surreptitious ordering of the universe, on some random day that no human can foretell, a family of geese will take to the air and honk their goodbyes.

Or that we have no say in such matters.

I was just a waif of a girl, maybe nine years old, crouching beneath that honey-colored sky, cradling a root ball. Bits of soil slipping through my skinny fingers. When my father planned a horticultural birthday caper for the dear woman who raised him, he'd offered me a starring role—even though it meant missing school. Everything in me tingled with such an anointing. I possessed my dad's favor. He desired my companionship!

We'd arrived under the day's waning heat and set to work at the southwest corner of the tiny home where Dad grew up. In the end, this side of the house would be trimmed in Shasta daisies—genus *Leucanthemum*, Dad explained—like a pristine white cake with yellow-and-white flowers piped around the base. Daisies for my great-aunt Daisy.

Dad turned to receive the plant from my small hands into his large, gloved ones, but a sudden uproar in the scrubby golden field next door interrupted the motion, commanding our attention. With loud honks and a ruckus of wing flapping, a skein of Canada geese went airborne. It seemed to me quite the hasty decision.

Dad stopped working to watch, rested a dirt-caked boot on the step of his shovel as the birds clambered into a loose V. Already they'd cleared the blue roof of the historic farmhouse across the road, the main lodgings of the Sugar Pine Inn. Formation tightening, wings pumping, they angled toward the far tree line.

"Are they a family?" I asked.

Dad did that narrowing thing with his eyes that made long creases appear above his high, summer-bronzed cheekbones. My cheekbones. The same look he wore while calculating a landscaping bid. He offered a slow nod to the sky. "I suppose they are, Audrey. I suppose they are."

The geese had all but disappeared into the clouds, which now glowed like warm buttermilk as the sun slipped behind the mountains. The seedling still rested in my hands, suspended mid-journey. "So how do they know when it's time to leave?"

Dad removed his Oakland A's baseball cap, wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his wrist, and scratched his mussy blond head. "I don't really know, hon," he said, replacing the cap. "They just do, I guess."

Maybe that's why the moment's indelibly scored into my memory—on account of Dad's not knowing. There were mysteries to which my father didn't hold the answers. Which, to me, meant no one did. And he seemed somehow okay with that.

Something I'll never be.

We watched the family of geese fade into soft, unending light. Measured and purposeful. Spread out in such a way that they couldn't lose sight of one another.

So no one got left behind.



"Grande sugar-free hazelnut latte. Half-decaf. Light foam. Extra hot." Enunciating each detail on my scribbled list, I will the green-aproned hipster to make my order the highest calling of his day. If only I possessed Jedi mind tricks. "Oh, sorry," I add, heat rising to my cheeks, "and half a stevia stirred in. Here—need this?" I offer up the neon-orange square of paper stuck to my fingertip, which is trembling noticeably.

The barista's thin handlebar mustache stretches wide over a pandering smile. Does it really matter if he mistakenly pegs me as one of those self-important, high-maintenance women—the kind I swore never to become? Okay, yes, it bothers me. A lot. I stuff a few I can't afford to part with into the tip jar.

"Sorry. It's not for me," I say, leaning in. "I'll have a small light roast. Please." *I'm just a simple girl, you see.*

"So, a tall brewed coffee."

"No, a small—oh, I mean yes." To detract from the accursed face flush, I laugh and toss my long and unruly auburn curls. How

am I the only person with breath and a pulse in the Bay Area who doesn't speak Starbucks lingo?

On the other hand, I speak fluent Dairy Queen, which ought to count for something.

"The smallest tall you've got." I add a wink. "Actually, um, let's make that a decaf."

When I give the barista my name, he scratches it on the cup in black Sharpie, leaving the *e* out of Audrey. His eyes, two dark espresso beans, twinkle with politeness. But I read something else—condescension, perhaps. I'm being paranoid again, of course. I've probably just caught an unsettling glimpse of myself reflected there.

I can't recall ever, even as a teenager with funky hormones, being so easily rattled. But lately I've been forced to wonder . . . what good is magna cum laude if you're easily intimidated by a barista?

I'm sardined in the pickup area next to a woman with a flawless updo who smells like the Nordstrom perfume counter. The bold mustard shade of her Kate Spade satchel calls to mind the Midas-touched shrubs of my dream. Even as espresso machines hiss and the morning rush shows no sign of slowing, I hold on to a measure of solace from that slow and simple afternoon spent with my dad, the one I relived last night.

Just like that, better aromas flood my senses—remembered ones. Juniper. Sun-warmed peat. Lake air. As if it's already tomorrow, and I'm already five hundred and fifty miles removed from here.

I expect the usual tinge of sadness in the mix, but this time it doesn't come. Instead, I'm oddly comforted, and this feels like a betrayal.

After all, I've worked for years to unknow every recollection of our family's annual summertime visits to Aunt Daisy and Uncle Dean. Of a country road and a picturesque inn. Of trail dust caught in my throat and velvet horsehair between my fingers. Of a carefree child in a land of wide-open front doors and welcoming arms.

Because it was also the place that stole my oxygen.

So I've moved on. Am I winning at life? Crushing it?

Ask me later today.

My purse vibrates, and I startle. Mom's soft features fill my phone screen, but I hurriedly click the decline button. Why not just send a text, Mom? Working women haven't got time for impromptu phone calls. I fidget with a napkin. Twist it into a corkscrew. Use it to buff out a tiny dull spot on one of my blush patent-leather slingbacks.

I'm headed in the right direction, I think. At least I've got a roof over my head in one of the world's most expensive housing markets. Never mind that it's the least desirable room in a sixty-year-old bungalow with four black smudges out front where shutters used to hang, or that it smells suspiciously of mold. Or that I room with three younger women, none of whom know how to refill the ice cube trays or would notice if I went missing until rent came due.

But here's what I hold on to. I work for Pilar DeSoto, the trendiest interior designer in Silicon Valley. Already I can drive through the rolling Los Altos hills and point to dozens of grand, sun-drenched estates made grander thanks to my contributions. Not that I have anyone in my life to show them off to. But still. I have to believe it would make my father proud.

I square my shoulders and stretch to my full height. All five-foot-three of it.

Of course, Dad would also want me to have Harriet's engine looked at. Harriet's my eight-year-old Kia, and lately she doesn't seem to espouse the same conviction my dad held about the evils of credit card debt. But I've got a plan. Assuming today's client meeting goes well, I'm considered the obvious choice to replace Pilar's top design assistant and inherit her coveted salary. A salary that recently went up for grabs when she made an abrupt exit—under hushed circumstances.

At least, Joshua and Keiko are convinced the position is mine to lose. I never have any idea what Pilar's thinking.

Thus, my last-second Starbucks detour. I wouldn't normally bend my budget for overpriced coffee when a box of tea bags will last me two weeks. Well-timed kissing up is a professional skill, right? Remind me to add it to my LinkedIn profile. And if this coffee bribe leaves a good taste in Pilar's mouth before I abandon her for a couple weeks, well . . .

Better to save the cornball puns for Uncle Dean. I'm not in Oregon yet.

At the sound of her name, Chignon Lady hikes her purse strap higher on her shoulder and retrieves her drink. While she departs with an air of purpose, I flick through a Pantone color deck in my mind, landing on . . . hmm, let's see . . . *Saffron*.

It's self-soothing, this game of mine, assigning just the right color name to this or that. In fact, for her Kate Spade, I'll go with Mimosa instead. Final answer. Pantone's Color of the Year for 2010. No, that's not right. That year was all about turquoise—which, back when I was studying interior design at Sacramento State, struck me as uninspired. I'm more open-minded these days, after seven years in this game.

I emerge from the café's warmth into a web of silvery dew and the drone of commuter traffic on California Avenue. The chilly May mist invigorates, and the nutty aroma of Pilar's over-fussy latte confection smells like my salvation. And just like that, I'm transported from this cookie-cutter Menlo Park strip-mall parking lot, populated by a virtual clone army of Teslas, to the warmth of Daisy's kitchen. I can taste every decadent note in her signature dessert, a sugared hazelnut torte. Dad's fave. My mouth waters.

Was I really once that wide-eyed child with copper curls, up on my toes sprinkling coarse sugar on the marionberry scones that made my great-aunt a small-town celebrity? Scones destined for guests of the Sugar Pine Inn. An image appears of the quaint resort, a semi-elegant B&B-meets-dude-ranch sort of affair, and I wince. After more than a decade of practice, I know how to slam

on my emotional brakes before my heart hits that spike strip and re-punctures.

But for the first time in as long, I tease my mind open, consider the potential upsides of revisiting my old summer stomping grounds—tomorrow, in fact. Charity Falls, Oregon, where even in June the air smells like Christmas trees. It's not exactly a pleasure trip, which seems fitting. Daisy's in a vulnerable place, and I'm the one she reached out to. We always did share a special connection. Do we still?

I'm surprised how much the answer suddenly matters to me.

So. My bags are packed—big-girl panties and all the rest. Tomorrow I'll leave behind the trappings I've come to depend on and get behind the wheel of a car I'm pretty sure I can't. But I won't park my emotions there just now. This sense of dread I awoke to is due to more than the dream or my impending road trip. First I've got to knock the Boatman meeting out of the park. No worries there, though. I'm prepared.

I'm probably overprepared.

Someone lays on their horn, and my shoulders flinch. In the nearby intersection, a Lexus driver thrusts his arm out the window and gestures wildly at another car. Jittery, I set the two coffees on Harriet's roof. Droplets of dew freckle her recently waxed finish. I shuffle through my purse for the keys, but they're not in the usual pocket.

My fingers rummage around the silky lining while I simultaneously peer through the front window. On the passenger seat, there's the stack of mail I haven't had a chance to go through, including that curious padded yellow envelope from Aunt Daisy. But no keys. And they're not easy to miss, what with the bright, rainbow-colored plastic lanyard my eight-year-old niece crafted for me. Terror clenches my chest. I soothe it with self-assurances. *No worries. All is still well. You simply set them down inside.*

Legs cinched tight inside my pencil skirt, I quickstep back to the

café in my accursed heels, hold the door for the woman exiting, and offer a smile that's embarrassingly insincere.

Inside, forest-green walls sway and the coffee-shop din drifts around me with an odd, faraway cadence. *Just breathe.* Sure enough, my keys rest peacefully beside the napkin dispenser. But as I turn to leave, something catches my eye. Someone has left the latest edition of *San Francisco Style* magazine flung casually on a sofa. I angle my head for a better look. There's no mistaking the woman staring back at me from the glossy cover.

Skin, flawless. Hair, inky black and precision cut. Eyeliner, flicked up at the corners. Signature red-rimmed glasses. The bold headline reads, "Designer on the Rise."

Pilar.

Well then. This should ensure a celebratory mood at the office today. Good thing, because this might be the first time I'm late to work in, well, ever. At least I won't show up empty-handed.

But wait . . . was that . . . was that a hint of movement on the roof of my car? I'm a ways off, so maybe I'm imagining things. *Oh no, no, no, no.*

I pick up my pace.

Too late. The two coffees are taking a roller-coaster ride down my front windshield.

A plunge. A midair flip. A crash. Eighteen bucks' worth of brown liquid and foam gushes heavenward, rains down on Harriet's white hood, and then dribbles down the fender. The two paper cups hop to the pavement and tumble in random directions like drunks leaving a bar.

Welp. One more reason I'll never be a fan of Karl the Fog, as the soggy marine layer that often creeps this far inland is affectionately known to some. Or Starbucks. Nor, it seems, have I done anything to help secure my own destiny as a designer on the rise.