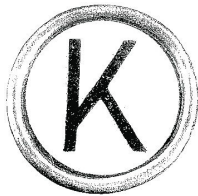


# **Red Wax Rose**

**Stories and Poems by**

**Darlyn Finch**



**Shady Lane Press**

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Again, Basketball, Chris's Shoes, Lonely, Memorial Park, and Tarzan  
*Brushing, the Art and Literary Journal of Rollins College*

Slumming  
*Revelry, the Literary Journal of Seminole Community College*

At the Red Light and Girls  
*Mt. Dora Festival of Music and Literature*

Chris's Shoes and The Pink Ones  
*Poetic Logic, 90.7 FM. WMFE*

*for Daddy*

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## **After the Burning**

i am the red wax rose after the melting  
i am the blackened wick  
no light is left  
no warmth  
i am the last puff of breath  
stirring these ashes  
even the smoke is still.



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## ***The Melting***

## THE MELTING

### Lonely

I used to want  
to touch someone with a poem  
or a beautiful picture of a vineyard in Tuscany  
a sprig of fragrant jasmine  
or a cup of tea with lemon and honey  
a blue feather tipped in white  
or a caress  
or a smile  
or a kiss in the dark, balanced on a stair.

But too many times  
a wall  
went up  
an eye glazed over  
a shrug escaped  
an ear turned away  
a hand fell  
cold and shriveled and useless  
before it touched my hair.

So now I sit and read in the half-light  
of a dirty window  
overlooking  
a silent lake  
where a fish jumps  
and a lazy heron wades  
and I hum a half-forgotten melody  
as I ponder  
a poem  
that curls my toes  
with pleasure

and I tell no one  
but myself.

## THE MELTING

### The Pink Ones

I gave up the little pink pills.  
The pretty ones that made me  
not get angry in grocery store lines  
when the old ladies ran their carts into  
the backs of my ankles and  
that made me  
not care so much if the beds  
weren't made or the  
dishes were dirty in the sink  
or the cat hadn't been fed again and  
that made me smile and not ask  
"Who was that?"  
when you took the call in the other room and  
spoke too softly to be heard.  
I gave them up because  
the smiling, docile creature  
I had become  
no longer cared enough to  
pick a fight  
draw a line in the sand  
claim what was mine  
seize the day or even  
make love all the way to the finish line because  
it just wasn't worth all that hard work  
the sweat  
the heavy breathing  
the pounding heart.  
And now, a few weeks after  
I've given them up, you wonder  
who this woman is  
who is soft, and wet, and warm,  
who wants to do it  
anytime, anywhere  
and comes and comes and screams  
"Do you feel that? Do you?"  
You wonder who she is and  
what in the world she has done with  
your wife. But  
you do not ask.

## THE MELTING

### Hometown

I remember standing in the choir room of the church  
in my white wedding gown,  
bursting into tears at the sound of your voice  
outside in the hall as you greeted  
some obscure relative on that sunny day in May.  
My tears surprised everyone –  
myself most of all.  
Had I not expected you to come?  
Was the fear deep-rooted even then?  
Knowing that I loved more deeply,  
that your love was lighter,  
slippery,  
quicksilver.

Sometimes I drive by that small white church,  
a quarter century  
come and gone,  
like some of the faces  
we laughed with that day.  
My heart is not laughing now.  
There are ghosts in the sanctuary,  
and our hometown is a place  
where we visit family  
alone  
on opposite ends of town.

## THE MELTING

### **Slumming**

The car turned almost by itself  
off the interstate today,  
and drove to the house  
where our baby was born  
twenty years ago last August.

The lot where we took those long walks  
-- with our German Shepard on a leash  
and our daughter in my belly --  
now hosts an upscale mall  
instead of startled rabbits.

The woods across the street are gone;  
now townhomes and palm trees  
dwarf the tiny house,  
painted yellow, not gray  
with white shutters, not red,  
and blue cedar shingles  
we could never afford.

The palmetto that held the wasp's nest  
is still there,  
nestled snugly between the same two palms  
that bend  
toward each other,  
like lovers,  
wind tossing their frond-hair  
as they gossip  
about me, passing by,  
in a new car,  
furtive and alone.

## THE MELTING

### **The Closet**

I pick up the pencil sharpener  
from the floor of her closet,  
feel the smooth,  
round edges, its fragile weight.  
A tiny black knob of lead,  
caught in the silvery blade,  
a whisper of pencil shaving,  
brown, trimmed in yellow,  
clogs the opening.

I lift the thing to my nose,  
inhale and remember  
kindergarten and her  
in her denim dress, trimmed with pink fringe,  
white cowgirl boots  
long, blonde braid  
pink satin ribbon,  
and how she turned to look at me one last time  
before I left her to begin her life without me.

## THE MELTING

### **At the Red Light**

We waited, and we did not breathe.  
I turned my blinker on,  
to make the choice easy for you.  
Turn right, turn right, turn right, it said.  
I gazed into my rearview mirror,  
and you stared back.  
The vinyl seat was hot  
under my legs;  
you opened your window,  
a crack.  
I tried to think what gesture  
could carry my hopes  
through tons of steel and glass.  
My hands clutched the steering wheel.  
Could not have been an hour  
we sat there at the light;  
it only felt that way.  
I pled with my eyes:  
Follow me, even if you cannot stay,  
and I will know at last  
that you want what I want.  
Then the light changed to green.  
I turned right,  
barely pressed the gas pedal.  
The car inched forward.  
I was halfway down the block;  
still you sat there, immobile.  
If I'd driven any slower,  
I'd have rolled backward.  
Follow me, I thought,  
and then I saw you choose.  
You turned left,  
toward home, and her.

## THE MELTING

### I {Heart} My Wife

“I {Heart} My Wife”  
the bumper sticker read  
in the window of the pickup truck  
ahead of me at the red light,  
and I burst into tears  
for no particular reason  
I could explain  
to the crossing guard on the corner  
or even to the man driving the truck,  
who looked quite ordinary,  
and did not realize  
those four happy words  
could rip a woman’s heart out  
under certain circumstances,  
when she’s one man’s abscessed tooth,  
and another’s dirty little secret.

Then I stopped to wonder,  
as I blew my nose  
and wiped my eyes,  
whether the man had bought the bumper sticker  
at all, or if his wife had perhaps  
stuck it there,  
in the window behind his head,  
as a message to women like me,  
whom she surely knows are sitting  
at every red light  
in every town,  
wishing they could one day be  
someone’s  
very best thing.



## *Girls*

The way Uncle Travis came sauntering up our driveway made me wish the broom in my hand was a rifle, so I could shoot the grin right off his face.

I was sweeping scattered hickory nuts and oak leaves off our carport when he came for my cousins. It was a mistake to let this man have those girls. In all my thirteen years I'd never been so sure of anything. I thought about cracking him on the head with one of those hickory nuts. They made the best projectiles, even better than rocks. I had bruises from my brother's perfect aim to prove it.

Uncle Travis was driving a decent-enough car. And though I only saw him from the corner of my eye, he looked better than I remembered. His suit was nicely pressed, and his face had lost its telltale reddish tinge.

Still, I wouldn't say "hello," and I wouldn't look straight at him, or show him any other sign of respect. I was too furious for that. I nodded tersely at his greeting and kept on sweeping.

Uncle Travis's wife, Aunt Rita Faye, was schizophrenic. That was her official diagnosis, and she'd spent years up at Chatahootchee, at the state mental hospital, to prove it. Shock therapy was how they treated what ailed Aunt Rita Faye in those days. We didn't mention her much, to outsiders.

In the way of this sad, messed up world, these two sad, messed-up people managed to spawn six children. Their oldest was Laurie, born when Travis was a social drinker and dark-

## GIRLS

eyed, slim-hipped Rita Faye was just about the prettiest woman in Jacksonville, Florida. Laurie was quickly followed by Priscilla and Delilah. Uncle Travis started drinking every night, and Aunt Rita Faye's hips weren't so very slim any more. Little Travis came along next, and, while Travis, Senior nearly busted a gut with pride over his fine, fat baby boy, Rita Faye found the going rough with four children, two of them still in diapers. By the time Suzannah came along, Uncle Travis was drinking all day, and he never even noticed that little Susie had her mama's unforgettable black eyes.

They never even named the last one. Baby girl Harper was handed over to child services for adoption straight from the delivery room. She was the first, but not the only, daughter Uncle Travis and Aunt Rita Faye let slip away. Over the next few years, Laurie, Priscilla, Delilah and Suzannah all ended up at the Baptist Home for Children, out near Jacksonville Beach.

That's where we used to visit them, when I was small. We'd take them baskets and gifts at Easter and Christmas, and sometimes we'd go for no reason at all, except that they were family, and they needed us. To my brother and me, they didn't seem to have it so bad. There was a big swimming pool (a great advantage, it seemed to us, growing up in the hot south in the Sixties, with no air-conditioning). There were ball fields and basketball courts, and even horses to ride. Sometimes, when Mama would whip me for no good reason I'd think it sure would be nice if she'd let me go live at the Baptist Home for Children. I loved horses, and Mama sure could whip hard.

Still, the girls hugged us and kissed us, and hung on to Mama's skirt-tail, and then the talk always turned to when their mama and daddy were going to come and get them. Mama always agreed with them that, yes, their daddy would be getting a good job soon, and yes, their mama would be feeling better soon, and yes, they would sure enough be all living together again before they knew it, in a big nice house with stairs, and bunk beds for all the children.

## GIRLS

It used to make me so mad. On the way home, from the back seat of the car, I'd light into Mama, as best as I could without making her mad enough to turn around and slap my mouth. She could slap hard, too, hard enough to make my eyes sting and water.

"Why do you do it, Mama? Why do you tell them that no-good daddy of theirs is going to come get them, when you know he won't quit drinking?" I'd ask her.

"Everybody needs a little hope in their life, honey," she'd answer. "And we'll keep praying for Uncle Travis and Aunt Rita Faye, like always."

*I'm praying he'll choke on his beer and go straight to Hell, I'd think, and I hope old crazy Aunt Rita Faye gets one of those shock treatments so strong it makes her hair curly and knocks some sense into her so she'll come and get her daughters. But you didn't talk like that to Mama. Not if you wanted to see straight or sit down for the next few days.*

What made me the maddest of all, was that Uncle Travis and Aunt Rita Faye managed to keep Little Travis. To keep his son, Uncle Travis had to sober up a little, and show up at work for a while. He had to check Aunt Rita Faye out of the hospital and make sure the rent was paid that month. Then he went to court and made sure he kept his boy. I was grown up by the time I realized this did not make Little Travis the lucky one.

After all the aunts and uncles gave Travis and Rita Faye a few futile years to straighten up and get their kids back, they began to realize it wasn't going to happen. They had what would now be called a "reality check" but what was then called a "Come to Jesus meeting." They weren't going to watch their nieces grow up in an orphanage, so the four girls were parceled out among them. Laurie went to live with Aunt Bonnie. Priscilla moved in with Aunt Violet. We got Suzannah and Delilah.

I was beyond excited. We three girls, all in junior high school, would share my room. Two of us would sleep in the double bed, and the third would get the little single bed that was

## GIRLS

squeezed in beside the wall, under the windows. Every week, we'd rotate who got to sleep alone. It was going to be like a slumber party with no end.

Delilah was, and still is, one of the sweetest girls I'd ever met. It seemed like the rougher this old world treated Delilah, the kinder Delilah felt about the world and the people in it. I didn't understand her attitude at all. I thought she should have been a Catholic, because she would have made a perfect nun. Softly pretty, she is now the mother of five children. She cherishes and home-schools them all.

Suzannah was one of the most beautiful girls I'd ever seen. She was the spitting image of Aunt Rita Faye. In the only photo I ever saw of my aunt, she was wearing a stunning white bandeau bathing suit against luscious tanned skin, her black hair blowing in the sea-breeze, her black eyes flashing in the sun.

Mama made me jealous, the way she fussed over Suzannah's beauty.

"You're a ring-a-ding doozie and a black-eyed-suzie," she'd say. This always made Susie laugh. Black-eyed Susans (just a road-side weed, for Christ's sake) were suddenly my mother's favorite flowers, and Susie made sure Mama always had a fresh-picked bouquet of them on the kitchen table.

Unlike Delilah, Suzannah wore her anger on her sleeve. She and I fought a lot, though usually just with words. Once, I got her good, though. We were playing backyard touch football at the neighbor's field, away from Mama's watchful eye. Susie was on the other team, and had the ball. Bigger and faster, I made a beeline for my unfortunate cousin, and hit her hard, laying her out flat. Man, it felt good! *Take that, black-eyed Susie!*

I can still remember the "whooooof!" as the air rushed out of her lungs. She fell flat on her back, the football went flying, and we all started to laugh. But Susie didn't get up. She started to wheeze and gasp for air. Her big, tootsie-roll eyes got bigger and blacker. My big brother, four years older than me, came over and punched me hard on the shoulder.