THE CURE
by Karen Gilchrist
Winner of the 2001 Linda Flowers Prize

“This is my last season in the fields.”

Mama just smiled—a straight, little grin really. “Uh huh. And what’s out there for you beyond the tobacco barns?”

I looked off toward the field, catching a gray glint of one of the long barns. “Don’t know. Something.”

“You don’t really want to leave.”
It's what I've heard all my life. "You don't really want to play little league. No one can take you to early morning practices. We'd all be in the fields already, Jamie." And, "What do you need with a diploma, son? You're set up here for life."

But I'm ready to leave now. Sitting in the dark kitchen, I finish a cup of coffee. I feel for the letter in my shirt pocket. "Come on, Tar." The old lab pulls himself up from a baby blanket with faded trains on it, stretches, yawns, then shakes, his tags chinking as he wriggles all over. I open the screen door and he bounds off ahead of me. The old spring groans as the door closes behind me.

Tar tears off straight for the tractor, thinking he will ride in the trailer hitched to it. "Not today, boy. We're done." The other workers will be here before daylight to stuff the boxes with the sand crusted bottom leaves. Tar and I will be almost to the coast.

The lab follows me into the rows, stepping easy by the bright moonlight. The plants are only three feet tall, but Mama's cropping early to save what she can. The leaves started turning too soon—90 degree plus temperatures and no rain. We've had close calls. Thick thunderheads roll in from time to time, threatening to dump—all the noise and light shows, then nothing. A good storm would have simplified things. A random strike of lightning or some of the hail that wiped out half the crop two counties south.

Mama's farm. Daddy's 300 sandy acres. She's got seventy five in tobacco. The rest she lets out. We've talked about diversifying. Even the county agent told her, "Cassie, imports are killing everyone. Most around here are planting less tobacco and more soybeans and cotton."

"Not interested," she said. "If everybody else quits, that just makes it better for me. Something about supply and demand, I believe, Harris. And you know damn well soybeans and cotton don't pay near what tobacco does."

That's it right there—control and money. Mama was the last in the county to switch from wooden barns for curing until Harris showed her the numbers proving
the trailer-looking barns were cheaper. And she rents them out, too, if she's got a spare. Harris hasn't approached her about cropping by machine. It's cheaper for her to pay the low wages she does. Help comes and goes regularly—why break a back for three bucks an hour when neighboring farms pay four and five? She has a hard time hiring every season. That's why I didn't figure she'd mind when I brought Amelia home.

I saw her on the bench in front of the Unocal station after I picked up the mail—one of my chores, though Mama pays me for working the farm. She was rolling a popbottle between her palms, swinging her feet, her sneakers smoothing out a spot in the sand. She reached over to stroke Tar as we walked into the store. "Who's that?"

I tossed a ten on the counter for gas.

Behind the counter, Bud just shrugged. "Don't know. Bought a bus ticket to Greenville or thereabouts. Cute, ain't she? All delicate sorta."

I nodded and headed out to the pump, Tar following. He backtracked and ambled over to the girl who was blowing softly in the bottle. She reached over and started rubbing just below his ears. He was a goner.

She was pale, as if she never stepped into the sun, with green eyes and blue black hair pulled back straight off her face. She wore a thin cotton dress that looked as if it once had flowers all over it. Now they were just blue shadows. She smiled. The pump stopped at $10.87.

"Nice dog." Tar's head rested in her lap.

"He's spoiled something awful." I fumbled in my pocket for change.

"Good."

I went inside and dropped the money on the counter. "Don't say a damn thing, Bud."

"Not me," he said, raising his eyebrows. "Whatcha gonna do?"

"Don't know. Later."

I let the screen door bang shut. She looked up. Tar turned his head, too, as if to ask if he could keep her.

"You know anything about tobacco?"

"I grew up in it east of here," she said.

"You want a job? Pay's awful, but free room and board." I was making it up as I went.

"Unlimited petting privileges?" She held Tar's muzzle in her hand.

I nodded.

"All right. I wasn't going anywhere special." I helped her step up into the truck and noticed the thick braid trailing past her waist.

"How long—?"

"All my life," she said.

Driving through the flat, dry farmland in silence, Tar sitting upright between us, I went over what I'd say to Mama. Amelia sat in the truck while Mama and I carried on in the kitchen.

"You offered her what?"

She perched her hands on her hips, the smoke from a cigarette pinched between her fingers rising up beside her.
“Room and board, Mama. We got the guest room in the attic that has never seen a guest, and she’s tiny. Won’t eat much at all.”

“Too tiny to work?”

“She grew up in tobacco. Besides,” I added, pulling out my ace, “I’d be a lot happier this last season with her around.”

“You still think you’re leaving.” She shook her head. “Well, I’m not paying if she can’t carry her load—”

“She’ll do fine, Mama. And you don’t have the luxury of picking and choosing.”

It surprised me more than her. I felt as though I’d tapped into some new source of spine leading right back to the truck. I showed Amelia the room and a dresser where she could keep her stuff. She carried only a small daypack.

“You need anything— toothpaste, shampoo?”

“It’s all in here,” she said, grinning.

“Well, I’ll get you some clothes for work. You can hang your dress up in there—well, you know. The bathroom is downstairs. If you need anything, holler. Dinner’s at 6:30, breakfast at 5:00.

She smiled.

“Come on, Tar.” The dog rose, then sat down again, his tail sweeping the floor.

“It’s all right. He can stay.”

“Mama doesn’t allow—” I looked at his graying face and bright eyes. “Okay.” I went to my room and dug out one of my cleanest, unstained tee shirts and a pair of sweats that still had a drawstring and took them to her. The door was wide open. She rested on her back, feet and legs together, her braid across her chest, ever so slightly rising and falling. Tar was stretched out on the floor beside the bed, all four in the air, his lips peeled back in a grin as if he’d found heaven. I placed the clothes on the dresser, then backed out, hitting the doorknob and knocking the door against the wall. She didn’t stir, but Tar jerked himself up, thumped his tail once, and flopped back down.

We started setting out plants two days later. She showed up at breakfast in her dress, and Mama rolled her eyes in disgust and satisfaction.

“Thanks for the clothes, but I don’t want to mess them up. This is a rag,” she said, pulling at her collar. “I’ll save yours for sleeping.”

The thought of that sent a shiver up my neck.

Mama didn’t need to doubt Amelia’s abilities in the field either. I thought for sure she’d bounce off the back of the tractor as I hauled her and three other workers we’d scrambled to find. But she set those plants with an almost ballet like motion, all the time balanced in the seat.

Tar and I are almost to the edge of the field farthest from the house. Late last night I parked the truck here after Mama fell asleep. I open the door slowly, though no one can hear it. “Up, boy!” I pat the seat in the cab—the only place he will ride now—then walk back to the truck bed.
When we finished each day, Amelia, Tar and I walked around the fields, talking and asking questions, wanting to know everything. She had been on her way to a cousin’s farm outside Greenville when Tar picked her up. She’d lived in Raleigh with her mother, who’d moved there after selling their farm when Amelia’s daddy died. She was wandering back to where she came from. “I miss the dirt,” she said.

“I’m trying to get away,” I said.

“Your mama’s got a grip, doesn’t she?”

“I’m loosening it,” I said, wanting to believe it.

We were late for supper most nights, avoiding Mama’s hard looks and sharp silence. She’d leave peanut butter sandwiches unwrapped in the fridge. We just choked down the thin bricks with milk, sitting on the porch and talking. “What if,” Amelia asked one night, “you could change your life? What would you change?”

Up to then, I’d wanted to change everything. “I don’t know,” I said.

“I would have never left the farm,” she said, running her finger around the rim of her glass. And I thanked whoever was in control of such things that she had.

“Long day tomorrow.” Mama stood at the door, drawing deep on a cigarette and blowing smoke through the screen. “I pay for a full day.” We headed in and whispered “good night” at my bedroom door.

Later, I just slid out of bed and climbed the narrow carpeted staircase to her room. The door was halfway open, probably to get air moving since all Mama had up there was a fan. Light from the security lamp on the garage outside the window flooded the room. Tar was a curled heap on the floor next to the bed. He opened his eyes, but didn’t move. On the night stand were a glass of water, a bottle of lotion and another of sunscreen. I realized that even with all the sun we were in, she was still pale as her worn out dress. She was face down, her arms tucked beneath the pillow, the sheet pulled to her waist, her face turned to the window. Her braid flowed down the white shirt from her shoulders to the small of her back, the end like the soft tuft of a paintbrush. I sat on the bed, lifting her hair as I sank into the too-soft mattress. “If I could change my life,” I started in a low voice, picking at the elastic.

From the pillow her voice, as clear as if she’d never been asleep, said, “If you undo it, you have to put it right afterward.”

“You show me how,” I said, slipping the band off. I started pulling through each twist, one at a time with my finger, letting it slide the whole length of the unraveled strands.
“All right,” she said, rolling over to meet me as I stretched out beside her.

Amelia started getting sick while we topped off and suckered the plants—Mama refused to use chemicals to make the suckers drop off, still clinging to her old ways. We were standing back to back between rows pinching off sticky blossoms and sprouts between leaves and stems. The plants already suffered from the lack of water. We were debating as to whether the blossoms could be used in corsages when she turned and tapped my back, her hand to her mouth. It happened four days straight, soon as we stepped into the fields. I’d walk her to the house, and she’d rest with a damp washcloth on her head and feel fine as long as she stayed out of the sun and the rows.

“Nicotine poisoning,” Mama said. “A tobacco worker with nicotine poisoning.”
“She’ll be okay, Mama. I’ll take up the slack.”
“And if she isn’t? She can’t just hang around mooching.”
“Hell, Mama, I’ll pay for her.”
She opened her mouth to say something, then just turned and walked away. The night of the fourth day, Amelia told me, “It’s not nicotine poisoning.”
“I know.”
“Since when?”
“First day.”
She laughed. “Yeah, sure.”
I stared hard at her belly, as if I could see right through. We decided she would go on to her cousin’s. Tar and I would join her after the auctions. I would be paid then, and Mama wouldn’t need me. We would write.

Tar and I drove her to the Unocal, all of us beaming. As she climbed the steps of the bus, I tugged her on her hair, pulling the elastic off. I watched her unbraid the length of it when she sat down. She waved goodbye, the little glint of gold on her hand visible through the dusty glass.
I search for the best spot in the rows, the drier, the better. Mama had insurance. She'd be fine.

I’d found her standing by the door, reading the letter. I’d dropped the mail on the porch railing, then headed back to the truck to get the bag I left on the front seat—a package of tiny pink hair bows.

“This—this is yours,” she said. “I didn’t mean to read it—it was already open, so I just—here.” She offered the piece of ruled yellow paper and envelope.

I tucked them in my shirt pocket.

“She’s using you, you know.” She blurted it out. “Probably showed up that way—a trap. You don’t really want to go to her.”

The words. That tone. The same as when the sheriff suggested Daddy hadn’t met with foul play. “Perhaps he just left, Cassie. Some men do.”

“You expect me to believe that he would just up and drive off on his tractor, leaving his wife and young son?” Seven years later she had him declared dead for the insurance. I admired his escape.

“Besides,” she said, as I stepped off the porch, “I need you here.”

“Later, Mama. I’ve got work to do.” I whistled and Tar slunk out from under the porch.

I stare in the rear view mirror at the blaze’s glow as I pull away, imagining the sounds as it snaps and crawls along the stalks, then up the tiers of leaves. Parking the truck on the state road, I watch as the flames edge toward the house. Tar lifts his head as if to ask why we’ve stopped. I smile at the ring on my finger, start the engine again, and speed like fire to see what I know is beyond the tobacco barns.
A native of Texas, Karen Gilchrist received her BA and MS degrees in geology from Trinity University and Texas A&M University, respectively. After working as an exploration geologist in Houston, she returned to school and earned her MA in English, specializing in creative writing, from the University of Florida. She moved to North Carolina in 1990, and lives with her husband, two daughters, and seven dogs in Southern Pines. Self-employed as a proofreader, copywriter, and editor, she is currently working on two novels and a collection of short stories. This is her first published work.

The Linda Flowers Prize is awarded annually to the author of an original literary work that addresses a public humanities theme in an especially noteworthy way. The selection of the Prize-winning entry is based on its capacity to capture the richness of North Carolina, its people and cultures. Established in 2000, the Prize honors the memory of Dr. Linda Flowers (1944-2000), who served on the Council with great distinction from 1992-1998. Linda was the author of the acclaimed book Thowed Away-Failures of Progress in Eastern North Carolina and “Coming Home,” NC CROSSROADS, 1998.

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For information about the history and culture of tobacco farming in North Carolina, see the following works:


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