

'08 Hard Times Contest Winner

Tulips on Trial

by Rosemary Mild

When you plant tulip bulbs in October, you take a lot on faith. Will they reward you with gorgeous blooms in the spring? Or will the squirrels get there first, burrowing in, digging up the bulbs and feasting on them?

In Severna Park, Maryland, eight miles north of Annapolis, this endeavor was akin to buying a lottery ticket. My husband and I are not clever gardeners. Nevertheless, my fragile hopes ran high in October 2000, when we diligently planted fifty bulbs in the modest flower bed fronting our house.

We had bought our pack of bulbs in Alsmeer, the Netherlands, home of the largest flower auction in the world. But these were not your ordinary bulbs. Our precious tulips came fraught with symbolism and represented a grievous journey. We bought them a week before traveling to Kamp Zeist, southeast of Amsterdam. We were headed there to attend the trial of two terrorists: Abdel Basset al-Megrahi and Lamem Khalifa Fhimah, two top-level Libyan intelligence agents. They had been indicted by the United States and Great Britain in 1991 for planting a bomb on Pan Am Flight 103.

The 747 exploded over Lockerbie, Scotland, on December 21, 1988, carrying the most important person in the world to me: my daughter, Miriam Luby Wolfe. She was twenty years old and my only child. Miriam was a junior majoring in musical theater at Syracuse University, on her way home after a glorious semester studying with the

Syracuse group in London. My remarkable daughter had many talents: acting, singing, dancing, teaching, writing and directing. Thirty-five Syracuse students died aboard Flight 103. Until September 11, 2001, it was the worst terrorist act against the United States in our country's history. All 259 on board were killed, including 183 Americans and 11 Lockerbie residents on the ground.

In the Alsmeer gift shop, as I waited to pay for our bulbs, my thoughts drove me down two avenues: the romance of buying tulips in Holland and their emotional context on the eve of the trial. These captivating flowers would be more than a souvenir of our trip. They would stand, year after year, as a memorial to Miriam.

So stubbornly had I fixed on these profound implications that I neglected to ask the gift shop ladies just where it is that you plant tulip bulbs. In the shade? In full sun?

Larry and I learned the answer by default. Across the street from our house, the sunny side, our neighbors' tulips sprouted early and bloomed weeks before ours. Oh, dear. Tulips belong in full sun. We, on the north side, get only half-sun. Sometimes only quarter-sun. In the winter, snow sits on our front lawn longer than on anyone else's in the neighborhood.

But in mid-April, 2001, the first bud popped open. I leaned over it and stared in dismay. So skinny, so anemic. Would they all be like that? Did tulip blossoms get larger, more robust each day? Or, if they were born underdeveloped, did they stay pathetic, unable to catch up? Amazingly enough, each day new blooms greeted me. And with each one, I rushed back into the house and announced the status to Larry. "We have seven, dear. Come look!" I shouted. "We're up to twelve!" I cheered. I counted the blooms obsessively at least once a day. Sometimes twice.

Our fifty brave bulbs gave birth to sixty-four blooms. And they all progressed from their anemia to a hearty cup shape. Not earth-shattering, not prize-winning, but respectable. I took pictures, many long shots, then close-ups, to capture their extraordinary beauty: a blaze of yellow bursting inside a scarlet cup; a white star nestling in velvety purple. Each day as I bounded out of the house for the morning paper, I greeted our tulips as if they'd be with me forever.

THE TRIAL OF THE TWO LIBYANS took place in the Netherlands before a Scottish court at Kamp Zeist, a former American Air Force base. The United Nations had negotiated this unusual arrangement with Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi, who demanded that the trial be held in a neutral country. A concrete building at Kamp Zeist was transformed into a modern courthouse with a special secluded lounge for the victims' families. We attended the trial—already in its sixth month—for a week in October 2000, along with twelve other Pan Am family members. Before leaving for Europe, I cried for days, filled with anxiety over the prospect of facing the murderers of my daughter. Larry and I realized there would be a cathartic benefit to seeing them in the flesh and showing our support for their prosecution.

As our minibus approached the courthouse, we saw formidable but reassuring security. High chain-link fences with barbed wire. Scottish guards in blue, white and black uniforms with Kevlar vests and automatic weapons. Entering the courtroom for the first time sent a chill down my spine. A massive, floor-to-ceiling bulletproof glass wall separated the spectators from the court itself. Just beyond the glass, on the left, the defendants sat in an elevated box flanked by two guards. Directly below them, the

defense team occupied two rows of tables and chairs. Facing them along the right wall was the Crown's prosecution team, including several U.S. State Department advisers. The three presiding judges, plus one alternate, occupied the "bench," a massive raised dais under the Scottish court crest.

I stared at the two men accused of mass murder, the men who had destroyed the life of my beautiful Miriam. A wave of fear shot through me. Not because they looked like monsters, not because I felt physically threatened. But because they looked so ordinary. Author Hannah Arendt, writing about Nazi war criminal Adolph Eichmann, described "the banality of evil." I had not understood the concept before, but now I did.

The spectator side of the glass wall held upholstered theater-style chairs and headphones for translations. We family members were seated in the large center section near the front. The physical closeness of these twelve warm, loving people—strangers to Larry and me before the trial—gave me strength. We shared so much, belonging to an involuntary club as victims of terrorism. We shared memories of our loved ones: the pain of our altered lives; our feelings toward the accused; the splintered and sometimes biased media; and the sway of the trial itself.

At the back of the courtroom sat a group of observers of varying ethnic origins, representing the United Nations War Crimes Commission. The defendants' families and supporters, numbering only a few, occupied the smaller section on the left. My eyes unwillingly met the angry gaze of a large swarthy woman wearing the traditional Arab woman's black head scarf: Megrahi's wife. Her outfit, a long print skirt and jacket, could have come from Sears or J.C. Penney. She sat with their two children, perhaps preteens, who fidgeted in their chairs. A stream of heavy emotions tugged at me. The defendants

have families? Loved ones? How could men so zealously evil, deliberately killing innocents, even babies, have genuine feelings? Doesn't ice water run in their veins?

We were warned to use only the restrooms in our family lounge, not the general one for trial visitors out in the corridor, because we might find ourselves in a confrontation.

It is widely believed that Scotland is one of the most pro-defendant countries in the world. *The Washington Post* reported that a special chef would prepare meals for the two defendants. The court also granted them a prayer room and exercise room. Did Oklahoma City bombers Timothy McVeigh and Terry McNichols—or any other mass murderer in an American prison—ever receive such luxuries?

On January 31, 2001, the three Scottish judges pronounced Megrahi “Guilty!” and sentenced him to twenty years before he would be eligible for parole: the longest sentence allowed under Scottish law. Pan Am family members expressed outrage and frustration. They were quick to point out that only twenty years meant Megrahi would serve less than one month for each of the 270 victims. Adding to our dismay, Fhimah was declared “not guilty.” The prosecution could not directly link him to the purchase of the timer circuit board that triggered the bomb. All the evidence linking Fhimah to the bomb was considered circumstantial. We felt sick to read that he flew home to a hero's welcome.

Nevertheless, a small measure of gratitude swept over Larry and me. At least we got one conviction. Evil had not won out entirely. Most of the families felt as we did. Nothing would bring our children back, but after twelve years, the verdict gave us some measure of justice.

Our sense of gratitude didn't last long. Megrahi launched his appeal immediately after his conviction. But first came a hearing to decide whether the appeal should even be allowed to go forward. Back at home, Larry and I followed the nine-month trial on a secure Web site-established just for the Flight 103 families by the U.S. Department of Justice Office for Victims of Crime. Every day, as we printed out summaries of the hearing, I anguished over every shred of the defense's arguments.

On October 15, 2001, the five new Scottish judges announced their decision. I was horrified. "It's only a month after Nine-Eleven!" I ranted to Larry. "How can they allow the appeal to go forward?" I paced the kitchen floor, my voice strident. "The trial lasted nine months, and the Libyans had eleven years to prepare their case. Why is Megrahi being given such leeway? It's shameful!" My husband had no answer. He was just as upset as I.

The appeal trial lasted thirteen months. As we read the summaries each day, Larry remained coolly confident that each new piece of "evidence" produced in such volume by the defense was flimsy. I agreed with him intellectually, but my stomach knotted up with dread. What if the conviction were overturned? What if no one were made to pay for Miriam's death?

On March 14, 2002, at 5:30 a.m. Eastern Standard Time, the five Scottish judges announced their verdict: "We have concluded that none of the grounds of the appeal is well founded. The appeal will accordingly be refused. This brings proceedings to an end."

At the time, Larry and I were spending the winter in Hawaii. Holding our breath, our eyes transfixed on CNN at 12:30 a.m., we heard the verdict. Appeal denied. We did

not whoop and cheer. No. We fell into each other's arms and cried.

A sense of relief flooded me. I could breathe again. But I still felt a lurking reserve—until much later that day, when I logged onto *The New York Times* online and read that Megrahi “was flown to Scotland late tonight to begin his sentence there.” That single line somehow liberated me, released me. It was the first tangible news, something I could grasp and clutch and cling to. Megrahi is now physically caged in a Victorian-era prison in Glasgow. According to Reuter's news service, Barlinnie has borne the reputation (until recently) as Scotland's toughest jail, administered under “Dickensian conditions.” Yes! The bomber is being punished for his unspeakable act of terror, the mass murder of 270 innocent victims.

Megrahi is of course only one man. Although Fhimah was acquitted, the U.S. government believes he, too, was guilty. And it is universally known that the two men did not act on their own, that the order to bomb Pan Am 103 came from Gadhafi himself. For many years, Libya was on our State Department's list of countries that sponsor terrorism.

Considering the nearly insurmountable odds of collecting evidence, the conviction of Megrahi seems almost miraculous. The plane exploded at 31,000 feet. Debris was scattered over 845 square miles. Combing the countryside in the rain, sleet, mud and wind of the Scottish winter, investigators and private citizens collected personal effects. It took the combined heroic efforts of investigators from Scotland, Britain, Interpol, our FBI and CIA, and volunteers from the saintly town of Lockerbie to locate components of the bomb and thus determine how it was smuggled aboard the airplane. They found a brown Samsonite suitcase that, according to Flight 103 baggage records,

had been unaccompanied by a passenger. Although Federal Aviation Administration regulations demand that any unaccompanied piece of luggage be hand-searched, when the suitcase was loaded onto Flight 103 (bound for Heathrow and then JFK) in Frankfurt, Germany, Pan Am's security personnel merely x-rayed the suitcase. If they had hand-searched it, they would have discovered a Toshiba cassette-recorder and the bomb hidden inside it.

A group of Flight 103 families has since filed a civil suit against Libya. The civil action, not yet completely settled, included this cornerstone condition: that Moammar Gadhafi, as head of the Libyan government, take public responsibility for the bombing and renounce his state-sponsored terrorism. In 2003, under pressure from the United States, Great Britain and the United Nations, he renounced his country's terrorism and agreed to dismantle his nuclear weapons program. In 2005, at last, he admitted responsibility for the bombing of Flight 103.

We returned home from Hawaii in time for our darling tulips to perform for their second season. As we wheeled our luggage up the walk, I cheered. "Larry, they're coming up!"

Well, sort of. A few scrawny leaves greeted us. In the next few weeks, I expected them to burst forth with buds and blooms even stronger and healthier than the first year's. I expected them to join Larry and me in celebrating and symbolizing our victory.

But April and May came and went. In our entire flower bed, only twelve clumps of leaves appeared. Twelve clumps. Not one tulip! There the leaves stood: lonely, straggly, disheartened. Some weren't even standing. They were lying down, pale and yellowing, without the strength to even make an effort. And surrounding them, I

discovered dents in the soil. Dents and deep holes. Many holes.

Several years ago, we planted a large pot of gerbera daisies, and the flowers popped out in huge blazing yellows, oranges and purples. But by the next morning, each dazzling bloom had disappeared. Rabbits had devoured them for breakfast. After a week of discovering bare stems, I got so frustrated that I roared across the highway to Frank's Nursery and bought a bunch of silk roses, complete with fake dew on their delicate pink petals. For two whole summers, our friends raved about our stunning roses. Until they tried to smell them, of course.

Larry studied the dents and holes in the dirt. "Hmm," he said. "Must be the squirrels." I nodded, too disappointed even to agree aloud.

But after a day of letting it all sink in, I could visualize what must have happened. Our resident squirrels undoubtedly followed the Libyans' trial and appeal. In my mind's eye, I could see them gathered in a huddle, their plumed tails quivering.

"Listen up, fellas and gals," the head honcho squirrel said. "The trial's over. The appeal's over. Let's eat!"

Yes, indeed.

MY DAUGHTER HAD A JOYFUL PERSONALITY, and her optimism sustains me every hour of my life. In one of her journals, returned to me by the Scottish Police, Miriam kept an account of her exhilarating three-day trip to Wales. Sitting on a hillside, gazing at Kidwelly Castle, she wrote:

"The sky was bluer today, the sun was yellower today, and the whole of the earth seemed to be rejoicing in its own perfection!"

It's time to take my cue from Miriam. Instead of brooding about spring blooms and what will come up or not come up, I think of our precious Dutch bulbs and pack them away in a corner of my memory. I smile at the squirrels prancing along our red maple branches. My decision is made. I jump in my car and head for Frank's Nursery. I hear they have exquisite silk tulips.

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