



# The Tulip Thief

*What did he do with them? By Carmen De Vito*



**B**ack in the mid- to-late-1990s, I worked at The Horticultural Society of New York as the plant hotline manager, a type of on-call plant doctor who would answer questions for the public a few hours a week. I answered a lot of questions about house plants—and sometimes just listened as distraught apartment dwellers described insects they were convinced were eating their carpets. I was also hired as the garden shop manager, tasked with helping the small shop generate revenue for the organization to fund community programs and the education department.

I worked on the floor part of the time, but I had two coworkers, Bonnie and Abby, assisting me in the shop. The shop was located on the ground floor of a grand old building just a few blocks from the Plaza Hotel, on a nondescript side street in Midtown Manhattan.

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The Horticultural Society of New York was an old-world type of place. It was a 100-plus-year-old institution that had created the New York Flower Show and had been at that location for decades. It hosted lectures, art openings, and Plant Society meetings, and held one of my favorite places, a horticultural research library that was a godsend to writers and editors in the pre-Google era. For New Yorkers, it was Plant Nerd Central.

The Garden Shop was the first thing you entered when you walked into the building. From the back of the shop, you went up a tall staircase to the second level where two balconies allowed you to look down onto the ground floor. This double-story opening had been used as a restaurant and club, but now was a carpeted, oddly configured multi-use space.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TIM FOLEY



Bonnie and I both happened to be in the shop one afternoon when a tall, middle-aged man came in and asked for some plant advice. The shop carried all kinds of things for the garden, including Spring bulbs. There were not a lot of places to buy these kinds of things in Manhattan at that time, so we were a go-to source for locals and for tourists who wanted to bring a little piece of New York City back home.

Bonnie was behind the counter where the cash register was, assisting another customer, and I was on the floor. I remember that I was looking at the stock and evaluating what needed to be replenished or added for Spring.

It was while I was there that the man asked for some advice

on tulips and what types to buy. I spent a few minutes discussing the different options. He asked a lot of questions. He stood very close to me as I was advising him and helping him fill small brown paper bags—the kind that you would bring your lunch to school in—with tulips. He selected a couple dozen red tulips and then turned away from me and went over to the register. I went back to my inventory.

Suddenly I hear Bonnie shout, “We’re being robbed! Carmen, we’re being robbed!” I turned around and saw her run past the customer, out of the shop and up the stairs to the second level. You should know that Bonnie was a former flight attendant who had been trained to handle emergency situations. At this point, the customer, if you’d like to still call him that, turned to me and pointed a large kitchen knife at my belly. He demanded that I open the register.

Now, time is weird when you’re in these kinds of crisis situations. I remember feeling like I was in slow motion, but I’m sure that it was not slow at all. Within seconds I yelled “NO!”—and turned heel and ran out of the shop and up to the second floor like Bonnie had. Having nobody else to demand money from, the man left the shop with the bag of tulips while we cowered breathlessly on the upper floor with our coworkers.

Everyone was shaken by the experience. Our office manager, an ex-police detective named Len, a man partial to wearing 70s tinted glasses and loose-fitting shirts (that I am pretty sure concealed a legal handgun or two) was put in charge of the investigation and follow-up. A lot changed after that. We got a security system, and you had to be buzzed into the building.

I’ve thought about that afternoon a lot since that day and realized that the man’s asking for plant advice was a stall tactic, just a way to kill time until the other customer left.



he investigation failed. We never found out who The Horticultural Society of New York’s Tulip Thief was. But that’s not what I wanted to learn. What I’ve really always wanted to know is . . .

Did he plant the tulips? ❖