



‘I’M SORRY, I’M SORRY, I’M SORRY’

A murderer, his victim’s daughter, and an unlikely bond

BY KEN MACQUEEN • The bones of this story can be told in two deceptively simple sentences written by Margot Van Sluytman, a poet who lives in Calgary with her two daughters and the memories of a father stolen from her on an Easter Monday, 31 years ago. She wrote: “The man, Glen Flett, who murdered my Dad, wrote to me. And I chose to respond.”

The man, Glen Flett, who murdered Ted Van Sluytman at a Hudson’s Bay store in Eglinton Square mall in Scarborough, Ont., is sitting across the table of a Greek restaurant in Mission, B.C., where he lives. He is now 58 years old, more than one-third of those spent in Canadian prisons. The evidence is written in deep creases cross-hatching his face. The truth is, though, Flett looks better than he has in years. He seems younger, healthier, and lighter in spirit. He is talking about Margot Van Sluytman, and the unlikely kinship that they have developed over the past two years via a steady email correspondence and a few powerful face-to-face meetings. It’s strange, says Flett: “Victims and offenders have a huge amount in common.”

What Flett and Van Sluytman share is the memory of Ted Van Sluytman, who worked

in the menswear department at the Bay. He was a fourth-generation Guyanese of Dutch and Portuguese descent who moved his family to Canada in 1969. He thought it a safe haven. Margot was his doting 16-year-old daughter, one of four children. Flett’s memories of him consist of a frantic, violent 10 or 20 seconds on the afternoon of April 27, 1978. Time enough for a tussle as Van Sluytman, 40, stepped into his path as Flett and an accomplice, Dennis Dubinsky, fled after robbing an armoured car guard of the store’s cash deposit. Time enough for Dubinsky to shoot Van Sluytman in the back as Flett shot him point blank in the left front shoulder. Time enough to hear him cry out and fall unconscious to the floor. “I was 27 but I probably looked like I was 24,” Flett says. “I’ll never forget when he grabbed hold of me, he said, ‘Give it up, son. It’s not worth it.’”

“If your husband might want to say sorry, just even in a short email to me, I would appreciate that.”

Sincerely, Margot Van Sluytman

It was Sherry Edmunds-Flett, Glen’s wife, who sent “The Email,” as Margot calls it, the one that set her and Glen on a path to reconciliation. It was a bit of an accident, probably, but Sherry is a strong woman with a way of cutting through the crap to get things done. She was an adult education teacher who mar-

ried Glen while he was still in prison. That was some 22 years ago. He had turned his life around, and had embraced Christianity. In 1992, the year Glen was paroled, they founded an organization called LINC (Long-term Inmates Now in the Community). It is a self-help charity run by ex-inmates with the aim of reintegrating former prisoners back into society. Sherry is LINC’s executive director and Glen works directly with inmates, escorting them from prison into the community, helping them access services and find housing. The job is all-consuming, and in 2005 he suffered what amounted to a breakdown. He was pulled over by police. He was intoxicated and carrying a loaded handgun. In sentencing, Justice Ronald Caryer called him a “ticking time bomb.” Remarkably he sentenced him to a minimal year in jail. The judge noted his stellar work with LINC, and urged Flett to let go of the mistakes of his past, adding: “He is riddled, addled and saddled with guilt, some of which he should be, some of which he is carrying when he shouldn’t.” The ghosts of the past, Sherry knew, had to be confronted.

Sherry learned from a friend about Margot’s work as poet, publisher and writing coach with a special emphasis on writing as a form of healing and therapy. Glen had tried in the past to contact the Van Sluytmans only to be told by intermediaries that the family wanted no dealings with him. Nonetheless, Sherry

FLETT and Van Sluytman at Westminster Abbey, in Mission, B.C., where they first met

used PayPal to send what she thought would be an anonymous \$100 online donation to Margot's Palabras Press. Her name, however, remained on the emailed donation, and 30 anguished minutes later, Margot wrote back. She asked if Sherry was the wife of the man who killed her father. "You've put your foot in it now," Flett told his wife. "You have to answer that." She wrote back:

"I am married to Glen Flett. I am sorry if I have offended or hurt you in any way."

The correspondence began, tentatively, first with Sherry acting as an intermediary. Finally, Glen wrote directly: *"Dear Ms. Van Sluytman. I read your words and truthfully I am without words. For so long I have prayed for this moment. Every day I pray that somehow you and your family have been able to move on from the despicable thing I did. Every day I say I am sorry but it never seems enough. I don't expect you to ever forgive me but I so hope that your wounds are healing... I would like you to know that I have put my whole heart into being a different man than I was."*

Van Sluytman believes in words, but what to make of these? She teaches workshops on the healing power of writing. She received an award from the National Association of Poetry Therapy. She has always been a writer and in the years since her father's murder words offered what little solace she could find. She left home, and struggled through high school. She entered and quit the University of Toronto. There was a half-hearted attempt to overdose on pills. She enrolled in college. Married. Drifted through a variety of jobs. Divorced. Moved with her children to Venezuela. Then to Guyana, and finally back to Canada. "And could not," she would later write, "no matter how many books and poems I wrote, stop carrying the pain of Dad's death."

Her jumbled thoughts have become her latest book, *Sawbonna: Dialogue of Hope*. Sawbonna, or Sawubona as it is often spelled, is a Zulu form of hello, meaning "I see you." It became a greeting she and Flett used, one that well describes the unflinching torrent of emails that weave through the book.

Van Sluytman, 47, is an intriguing mix. Her writing is sensitive and spiritual, in a New Age sort of way. Yet, on the phone from Calgary, she is blunt and frank, with a good command of earthy Anglo-Saxon. "I see this man," she says, referencing the title of her book. "He knows he f---ed with my life royally. He knows that, and it matters to him. And I am grateful for that." And so the emails continued, and she allowed herself to trust.

Still, she had doubts. Her family had no

part in this. Was she betraying them, and her father? She decided she had lived too long with grief. She needed this connection. "I wanted my life back," she says. They decided it was time to meet.

"Hello. I am Glen's kid, Victoria. How are U.

'HELLO. I AM GLEN'S KID, VICTORIA. HOW ARE U? ITS SAD THAT YOUR DAD GOT KILLED BY MY DAD.'

Its sad that your Dad got killed by my Dad. But my Dad knows that he did bad. But he is way way better now he is a great guy. And I am happy that U know that my Dad is sorry. Look forward to seeing U.

Love, Victoria [then, age 10]"

For their first meeting, July 14, 2007, the Fletts chose Westminster Abbey, a Benedictine monastery on a rise above the Fraser River in Mission. Sherry picked Margot up at the airport and delivered her to Glen. Van Sluytman remembers it this way: "I said to him, you must be John Glendon Flett. And he said, Yes. And I said, I am Margot Van Sluytman. And we looked at each other and we started to cry. And we hugged. And we cried for awhile and he said: 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm

sorry.' And I said, I know. I believe you."

There have been a few meetings since. And first by happenstance and then by design, she began conducting writing workshops in jails and remand centres. Her work has come to parallel Flett's, and she has sought his advice.

This week, she is back in Mission to appear with Flett at a forum marking National Victims of Crime Week.

It took almost 30 years to meet one of her father's killers, to get her questions answered, and to see they were both locked in a sentence running since April 27, 1978. She accepted his apology at the abbey because she needed the release as much as he did.

She will not prescribe such reconciliations for others. But for her, she says, it is a small miracle. She and Flett see Van Sluytman's last words as a gift for both of them. "I don't think he meant malice to me," says Flett. "He didn't try to hit me or beat me. He just said, 'Give it up, son.' " To Margot they are an affirmation of her father's character. "He was a really gentle guy. But I've got to tell you," she says, "I'm not sure those are the words I would have said." M



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