

How a Calgary poet found the words to forgive the man who murdered her father

They met 29 years after the fatal shooting. He said he was sorry. She believed him.

Adrian Humphreys, National Post

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Barry Goertzen/ahaideas.com

"I said I was sorry and I am sorry. I'm sorry I killed her dad," says John Glendon Flett, convicted in the murder of a Toronto store clerk in 1978.

MISSION -- Every story of redemption must begin with a fall and John Glendon Flett's titanic tumble came from the muzzle of his gun. It started with a robbery in 1978. One crook waited in a stolen Cadillac outside a Bay store in east Toronto while Flett and another partner watched a Brinks guard collect \$46,000 from the office.

"We took him out on the second floor, in the furniture department," said Flett, now 58, in an interview this week.

His partner cracked the guard on the head with a hammer, snatched the money bag and tossed it to Flett. In the confusion, Flett ran down the up escalator, pushing shoppers aside.

He headed through men's wear, where Theodore Van Sluytman was working despite having the day off. Mr. Van Sluytman likely did not understand Flett's desperation. He would have heard shouts of "Stop him!" and likely thought Flett was shoplifting.

"I didn't see him as I ran. He came out from behind a rack of clothes and grabbed me," said Flett.

There was no tackle or shouts, just Mr. Van Sluytman clutching the front of Flett's coat with a fatherly exhortation: "Give it up, son. It's not worth it."

As the men struggled, Flett's partner fired.

"I heard the shot," said Flett. "Then I shot too. He was hit once in the back by my partner, once in the front by me."

Mr. Van Sluytman, 39, let go, slid to the floor and died.

The day before, Mr. Van Sluytman led his children on an Easter egg hunt. His youngest, Jeremy, was just five. The oldest, Loretta, 18. In between were Margot, 16, and Karen, 10.

The family ran an in-home day-care and their house was bustling with little ones when two officers came with the news.

"From that second, life was never the same," said Margot Van Sluytman. "It caused a nightmare for my whole family."

As she spoke from her Calgary home, a picture of her father is beside her. With her memory of him frozen at the age of 16, the 47-year-old often still calls him Daddy.

"I was in long-term grief and trauma. Since my dad's death I have felt completely inadequate. When Daddy was killed, everything stopped."

As a teen she tried suicide, a cut wrist and pills. As an adult -- through marriage, two children, divorce -- the murder preyed on her. She found solace in writing. She won awards for her poetry and established a small book press devoted to art and healing.

Still, the murder clung to her.

"Why couldn't I get over this? I was tired of being weighed down.

"I felt like I was carry Dad's corpse around."

Little did she know the key to

her serenity lay with the man who caused that grief and that the killer's redemption lay within her own heart.

A gunpoint heist was not new for Flett.

"I started young. I was involved in crime at the age of 10, younger probably. I spent my life in crime," Flett said.

He met his accomplices in prison and after escaping jail hooked up with them again in Toronto. They were robbing theatres, conning their way into a manager's office and sticking a gun in his face.

But the gang eyed larger scores and researched armoured truck routes. "We thought this would be an easy one to start with," Flett said of the Bay heist.

With the murder, however, outrage spilled from newspapers. A huge reward was offered. Police threw themselves into the case. Eventually the trio was caught.

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Flett and the driver were convicted of murder after what was the nation's longest jury trial. Both received life sentences. The other shooter testified against them and received 15 years.

"Prison was pretty bad. I got involved in the criminal element, drugs, violence," Flett said. A fellow convict urged him to come to church. He laughed. Then in 1982 he thought it might be good to talk to someone other than criminals and so he went.

"I got convinced that maybe God was the answer ... I started trying to be part of the solution rather than the problem. It was hugely rewarding to do good things."

And good things happened to him. His sentence was reduced and a woman volunteering at the prison took a shine to him. After a lengthy courtship, Flett married Sherry Edmunds behind bars with 110 inmates and staff as guests.

He was, he said, a changed man.

When he was granted a leave in 1990, he came to pay respects at Mr. Van Sluytman's grave. He spoke with officers and prosecutors from the case. Everyone said not to contact the family to apologize.

In 1992, Flett and his wife started a parolee support group in their hometown of Mission, B. C., called Long-term Inmates Now in the Community.

Even so, Flett had his own relapse. Complicated circumstances led him to fear for his life and when his car was pulled over by police in 2005, he was intoxicated and carrying a loaded handgun, a rifle, a false police badge and drug paraphernalia. "I'm not a poster child for anything, I know that. I'm ashamed of what I did but I'm not apologizing for wanting to live. I just went about it the wrong way."

He began working with victims of violence, all the while longing to apologize to his own victims, he said.

In May, 2007, his wife found Ms. Van Sluytman's Web site. Impetuously, she sent what she thought was an anonymous donation for her publishing efforts.

Ms. Van Sluytman was waiting for an e-mail when the electronic deposit arrived. The transaction was not anonymous, however, and "Flett" in the e-mail address startled her.

"I bawled my eyes out," Ms. Van Sluytman said. "Then I had to find out if she was married to the man who murdered my father."

A flurry of e-mails led to a written apology from Flett the next morning.

"I had so many questions. I wanted to know what he looked like at the very second that the happy, perky dad who left our house that morning was killed."

In July, 2007, Ms. Van Sluytman flew to Mission and, with inter-mediators present, faced him for the first time.

"I was shaking," she said. "I hugged him and we started to cry. It was a really powerful meeting."

Said Flett: "I won't lie. I wanted to run away. I was ashamed. It was humbling and difficult. But I said I was sorry and I am sorry. I'm sorry I killed her dad."

It took 31 years and several meetings for her to realize she had forgiven him.

"In my heart, I knew I had forgiven him. I'm a poet but I'm not a bleeding heart," she said. "But I feel that healing matters. Forgiveness is healthy and worthwhile but the process of healing is what is truly important."

Last week, Ms. Van Sluytman and Flett stood together on a small stage in Mission to speak out for restorative justice and the power of forgiveness, redemption and healing -- for both victims and offenders.

And then they embraced. As friends.

Additional information:

The L.I.N.C. Society

<http://www.lincsociety.bc.ca/learning.html>

Vancouver Association for Restorative Justice

<http://vanrj.wordpress.com/>