

Life on the Outside

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# The System Works: 2 Men's Stories

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**JOHN GLENDON FLETT had a .38-calibre snubnose in one hand and a bag of money in the other when he met Theodore Van Sluytman, who had nothing on him but pluck. Two quick gun shots later and four children were without a father and a wife without a husband.**

That was 16 years ago in a Toronto Hudson's Bay store where Flett and an accomplice had smashed a Brink's guard over the head with a hammer and were fleeing through the store with \$46,000, pursued by the screams and cries of customer.

Van Sluytman, manager of the men's wear, had stepped in front of Flett, grabbed him by the labels, and said: "Give it up."

Flett didn't and Van Sluytman went to his grave the symbol of the courageous, decent man whose last words on earth were to an armed bandit.

Flett, a Victoria native and a career criminal went to jail for murder. A symbol, too, but of all that society finds evil and frightening.

Today, at the age of 43, Flett's life is neither evil nor frightening.

This is someone whose idol was Adolf Hitler, who stabbed a store detective as a teenager and committed armed robberies from Texas to Ontario. He now rises every morning to read his Bible, he wept at Van Sluytman's grave, he says he would give up his life if it would bring him back.

Yet it's in that very space between what Flett was and what he is where the philosophical battle for prison reform is being fought today.

On one side is a prison system designed to offer a criminal a chance to ease his way into society by "cascading" him - the system's word - down from the fortress of maximum security to the country-club atmosphere of minimum security.

On the other, a public alarmed by crimes committed by prisoners on the run or on parole and the Reform Party demanding harsher penalties, tougher imprisonment and little, if any, parole.

In B.C., the controversy gained momentum recently when two prisoners escaped from Ferndale minimum-security institution. They were captured in Oregon and then charged with the murder of a Seattle area resident who had been beaten and strangled two days after their escape May 4.

The two -- Michael Kelly Roberts, 39, a "lifer" who shot a police officer in the stomach with a shotgun shell murdered a man in prison, and Dennis Cronin, an armed robber -- had been cascaded. So had Flett. So, too, had Robert Had-dock, a 81-year-old former drug addict and armed robber with a criminal record stretching back to the 1940s and Rick, as he would like to be known, a murderer from Ontario.

And as they sat in Flett's home -- within a few minutes drive of Ferndale -- they offered themselves as proof that, despite the bad publicity, the system works.

"If I'd have been released straight from Kent," said Flett, "we wouldn't be

sitting here doing this. I'd be too hardened and callous a person."

And that's as close as it gets to describing society's dilemma. On one hand is the desire to see offenders pay dearly in the likes of Kent. On the other, the realization that it's in everyone's best interest if they don't offend again, even if it means giving them prison time on the miniature-golf course in Ferndale.

It would be a mistake if society chose only the maximum-security model of imprisonment for violent offenders, Flett said.

"Right now we're concerned that adverse publicity might affect what they are trying to do at Ferndale.

Kent was a war zone. I had to carry a knife there to stay alive and that's where your mind's at. That's the attitude you bring with you on to the street."

He was in Ferndale, where the bars are psychological, for the final four years of his sentence.

"I'd done ten years with guards and guns and yet when I called to Ferndale and saw a little fence and a house just sitting there across the road I knew for the first time I was in prison."

Haddock described himself as a hopeless case who once did a 20-year sentence after being declared an habitual criminal, only to be pardoned.

Addicted to drugs, he continued pulling armed robberies until arrested and sentenced to 13 years. While in Kent, he trafficked in drugs. It wasn't until he went to Ferndale that he finally kicked the habit.

"I was forced to look inside myself and what I saw I didn't like. But I got treatment there and I've been clean and sober

for three years." Flett is the founder of a support group for lifers, chronic and long-term offenders called LINC -- acronym for Long Term Inmates Now in the Community -- an awkward and self-conscious title that doesn't really describe what it is they do, which is keeping Ferndale graduates from returning to Kent.

So valuable is the program that the Correctional Service of Canada pays Flett a monthly retainer of \$700 to run it, an irony if ever there was one.

Right now, Flett isn't opening membership to inmates leaving prisons like Kent. "I'd like to help guys getting out of Kent or Matsqui but I don't think the odds on helping them are as great as with people from Ferndale I'd like us to grow in strength before we take that on." Flett's day job is as a \$7-an-hour cook in Joey's Only Seafood in Mission. "That's what I learnt in prison, to cool~" said Flett, a quiet, reflective man whose boss, Janice Grundberg, describes him as a "fine employee, honest and reliable."

"I know he attends schools and talks to them about his life and what he did and some of the kids he has talked to work here with him. I can't imagine anyone humbling themselves like that."

Flett has also founded a program in which offenders teach children in alternative schools how to read. At nights, he does shifts answering calls to the crisis line.

Ferndale didn't change Flett. The grace of God did that while he was in Kent hugging a knife. It's easy to scoff at prisoners who get religion just in time for a parole ~ hearing but, in Flett's

case, he was so far from parole he could have become a saint for all it mattered.

He began serving his 21-year-without-parole sentence in 1980 and became known as a "bomber pilot" in Kent because of all the pills he popped.

Flett admits he felt no remorse originally for what had happened to Van Sluytman or his family.

"I wish I could say I did but I didn't"

Then, in 1983, his father and mother brought his nine-year-old twin boys for a prison visit. They stayed overnight in the special unit set aside for families.

He couldn't sleep.

"I hadn't seen them since they were five and, while they were asleep, all I could do was watch them breathe and think how lucky I was to have them.

"Then I began to think of Mr. Van Sluytman and of his children and I realized just what I had done." Flett wept. His remorse led him to an inmate who had embraced Christianity and he persuaded Flett to go to the prison chapel and pray. "I didn't expect to become a Christian. I thought even if Jesus wasn't real this was a better way to live.

His conversion, when it came, had some disturbing consequences. For one thing, he had to stop carrying a knife.

"You have to remember I was a high profile prisoner. I was serving time for a Brink's robbery and a murderer in prison is king, but there are always conflicts in jails and I had had some altercations.

"So for someone like me to become a Christian was dangerous. But I stopped packing the knife because I felt God would protect me and, if not, being a Christian was worth dying for."

In 1986, the Ontario Appeal Court

reduced his sentence from 21 years to 14. In 1990, he was granted a pass to accompany his wife – he had remarried while in prison – on a trip to Toronto.

Flett wanted to meet with the Van Sluytman family but the family spurned him.

Michael Van Sluytman, Theodore's brother, said the decision was unanimous.

"I was told at the time he wanted to see us, that he was remorseful -- which is good for him, I suppose -- but we had no interest in meeting him," Van Sluytman said in an interview from Toronto.

"It's hard to forgive this. My brother was a good person and I never heard anyone say anything bad about him. He was only 39 when he died and he had four children."

But I wish (Flett) well. Now that he's out I hope he wouldn't do anything like that again."

Unknown to the family, Flett and his wife visited Van Sluytman's grave.

Their Bibles had been set in expectation to the 23rd Psalm. When they found where he was buried, there, looking back at them, was that very psalm carved into the marker: "The Lord is my shepherd. There is nothing I shall want..."

One person who agreed to meet him was Detective Staff Superintendent Ron Dick of the Metropolitan Toronto Police, one of the officers whose investigation resulted in the arrests of Flett and two others responsible for the Van Sluytman murder.

Flett and a Dennis Dubinsky had carried I out the robbery and were rushing to meet. Frank Lukes, who was driving the getaway car, when Van Sluytman

intervened. They all escaped. The first to be caught was Dubinsky, who accused Flett of firing both shots. That was the story presented at trial. Now Dick believes the fatal shot was fired by Dubinsky, after Flett fired a shot that hit I Van Sluytman in the shoulder.

"We didn't know at the time who had fired. We only found one gun and we had a young I girl standing right there who said Flett fired twice." Flett says he didn't kill him, that Dubinsky coming back to help while he was struggling with Van Sluytman, shot him in the back. Then he fired.

But he's not about to hide behind technicalities. Van Sluytman died because of him and nothing will ever change that. Dick admits to having been skeptical about Flett's conversion when they met. "I was a little suspicious. I thought he could be using it as a lever to get out early. But now he seems to have turned his life around. So have the other two." he said.

"It gives me: a good feeling to think they have but I can never forget they murdered a man and destroyed a family."

A police officer for 33 years, Dick is, not surprisingly, critical of a system that allows dangerous offenders to get parole or allows them into minimum-security prisons from which some escape.

"We're just too soft. I don't think we should take any chances." But would he argue against Flett's contention that prisoners who show a willingness to change should be given a chance of minimum security to work themselves back into society?

"No. You've got to remember he's been

there and we haven't."

It's 1:30 and the afternoon lunch crowd is thinning at Joey's. Flett gets a break from the kitchen and comes out for a smoke. That morning he'd read The Letter from Paul to Titus: "Remind them that it is their duty to be obedient to the officials and representatives of the government. To be ready to do good at every opportunity ... Remember there was a time when we, too, were ignorant, disobedient and misled and enslaved by different passions and luxuries; we lived then in wickedness and ill-will hating each other and hating ourselves. . ."

There's no trace of self-loathing in this man but there is sorrow. "Nothing I can do will bring Mr. Van Sluytman back. I'd gladly give up my life if it could.

"There have been so many victims in my life, not just Mr. Van Sluytman and his family, but all the people I've ever pulled a gun on. I'm sure I've traumatized an awful lot of people and I can't atone for what I've done.

"All I can do now is try and be the best person I can and help other guys – give them hope, too."