

I'm sorry

How a burglar and his victim became the best of friends

Peter Woolf, a life-long criminal, broke into Will Riley's home one March evening. Will found Peter standing in his hall, his pockets stuffed with money and jewellery.

Peter was jailed for three years for the burglary. So it's hard to think of them becoming friends.

Here, Will and Peter describe their first encounter, and why meeting each other again was the best thing for both of them ...

By Victoria Kennedy



**Close friends: Peter Woolf
and Will Riley**



The victim

Businessman Will Riley, 50, lives in Islington, north London, with his wife and daughter ...

‘I was getting ready to go to the gym when I walked into my hall and stopped dead. There, standing on the stairs, was a man about the same age as me, dressed in a scruffy leather jacket.

“What are you doing here?” I asked in shock. He said he was a neighbour who’d got lost. But it was obvious who he was.

I was suddenly scared. I thought, “If he’s got a knife, he could kill me.” We kind of fought with each other. A passer-by saw us and phoned the police. Somehow I managed to hold him until the police arrived. It was only after they arrested him and took him away that a policeman asked if I was OK. I put my hand to my head and felt blood. I hadn’t realized what he’d done to me. It’s incredible, but I just didn’t register that he’d hit me really hard. He’d smashed a flower pot on my head, and all the bits were on the ground. I went to hospital and needed stitches.

After the burglary, my whole life changed. I’ve always lived in big cities, and I’ve never been afraid of urban crime, but suddenly I became too frightened to open my front door. All I could think was “What if my daughter had been at home? Would he have attacked her?”

I was asked to meet the burglar in prison. I wasn’t sure what the purpose was, but I went anyway. I was curious.

We sat in the prison library, and he explained how he’d come from a dysfunctional family, was a heroin addict and spent his life in and out of jail. He spoke without any emotion. But it was when he suddenly said “Last time we met ...” that I exploded.

I screamed at him, ‘Why me? Why did you ruin my life?’



“We didn’t meet in a bar, you little ...! You broke into my house!” I was so angry. I screamed at him, “Why me? Why did you do this to me? Why did you ruin my life?”

I could see from his face that I had got through to him. He looked stunned. It was then I realized he was just an ordinary guy. And I wanted to help him ...

When I got home, I felt relieved. All my fears disappeared. Because I could see Peter was just a normal human being, he became less frightening.

When he was finally released, we stayed in touch. I’ve met him dozens of times since and the change in him is amazing. It’s hard to believe he’s the same person who broke into my home. He’s totally different.

I’m delighted that I’ve done something to help Peter get his life back.’

The robber

Peter Woolf, 50, is married to Louise, and works as a counsellor to rehabilitate criminals ...

‘It was easy to break into Will’s house. Just one push and the lock broke. I quickly took some gold jewellery and some money from upstairs. I was feeling lucky.

But when I was coming downstairs and I bumped into Will in the hall, I suddenly felt frightened. I thought, “He’s a big guy. If he wanted to, he could hurt me.”

I tried to escape. I didn’t want to hit him, but I did. I’m not a violent guy, but I just did what I had to do. There was a flower pot, and I smashed it on his head.

After I was arrested, all I felt was a big sense of relief. I was going back to a place I knew well. I’d been in and out of prison for 18 years, for theft, burglary and fraud.



I started using drugs when I was 10 and became an addict at 14. I'd hit rock bottom. I stole because it was the only thing I knew how to do. I knew it would only lead me back to prison.

I was given a three-year sentence. It was while I was in jail someone mentioned Restorative Justice. I couldn't see the point, but I agreed to do it because I was bored.

It wasn't until I started walking down the corridor towards the library that I got scared.

When I got there I sat down and just looked at the floor. I said the same rubbish I always used to say to the police. But Will was furious, and I was shocked. I thought, "My God, I did all this."

I felt angry with myself, and ashamed. I was determined to make things better.

I suddenly realized that I was responsible for this man's pain. He wasn't just a faceless nobody that I'd stolen from. I felt angry with myself, and ashamed. I was determined to make things better.

I did a course of rehab to get off drugs. I also started a course to be a counsellor.

It was at the counselling class that I met Louise. I was over the moon. And my life changed completely ...

I was released early after 18 months, and Louise and I got married. Life hasn't been easy, but I've worked hard to get things together.

I'm now helping others. I'm clean of drugs and haven't committed another crime. I feel proud of myself. These days, I consider myself lucky that I broke into Will's house that day. If I hadn't – and if we hadn't become friends – I don't know what I would have done. I guess I'd be dead by now.'