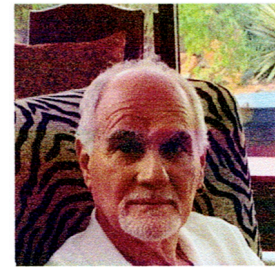


# THE ROBBER

By Rex Maurice Oppenheimer



He hunched against the woman and pushed the gun hard into her stomach. Her purse already hung over his shoulder, but he was digging in her coat pockets, looking for more. Her body, tense with fear, twisting away from his sweaty face, her mouth open, gasping quick, shallow breaths, her eyes frozen wide with terror.

Maybe we could have jumped him. But one move and he would pull the trigger. Yeah, we might get him, but the old woman would certainly be dead, and maybe he'd kill us all. We're not tough guys.

He kept thrusting his hand into her pockets. The air was so thick with dread it stuck to our skin. There was *no place to hide. Everybody was trapped. We dodged* his darting, rat-like eyes and stole cowardly glances; praying we wouldn't catch his attention.

It was while avoiding his glances, and as my own eyes moved across faces and things, channel surfing for another reality, that my gaze caught on his sneakers. I found myself staring at the angle of his feet on the floor. They were at about a 45-degree angle, his weight leaning to one side.

I remembered this morning seeing my 11-year-old son standing in the exact same position, and I also remembered that it had triggered a strange succession of thoughts, which had given me a quirky feeling. I had been overcome with the sense that he was an independent human being. That he would have to make his own choices in the world, and I was fearful for his happiness and safety.

Now, when I stood looking at this brute's sneakers, although his feet were at this angle because he was rifling the old lady's pockets, his stance somehow seemed vulnerable. Tentative.

Innocent. His feet quivered with a restless fear that made me think of a little boy, with an inherent and underlying sweetness. For a moment, I was struck with the incongruent thought that this man ready to kill and terrorizing everyone in the store, contains goodness.

Human beings are capable of the utmost horror. Infants have been pried from their mothers' arms and had bayonets thrust through their tiny, unformed bodies. Children are molested; fathers rape their daughters, and even kids can be cruel to each other. It must be naive to think we are all good, that only circumstances lead us astray.

We have free choice. We can choose good or bad, God or the Devil. Life begins or ends, worlds emerge or explode, in a moment, one breath, one choice.

Looking at this criminal's sneakers, I thought of my little son. Of how I want to help him make the right choices to be able to fulfill his dreams. How I want him to feel satisfied and happy, to glow in the safety of love.

I don't know why, at that moment, my eye traveled from the Robber's shoes to the hand that held the gun. He was digging into the woman's pocket so feverishly, *thinking because of her expensive clothes and jewelry*, there must be something more, that in his sweaty nervousness, his finger was no longer on the trigger. He was holding the big gun like a little boy might, all five fingers clasped tightly around the handle.

Before another thought could come into my mind, I jumped him. Without his finger on the trigger, he couldn't get a shot off fast enough. I tore the old woman free from his grasp and grabbed the gun, my hands snapping shut with the force of an alligator's jaw.

He was bigger and stronger than I am, and he ripped the gun loose from my grip. I saw his finger find the trigger and the barrel level with my eyes. I jerked my head to the side. The deafening blast unwound like a slow-motion roar. As I screamed, I could sense my arm swinging out like an iron bar, striking his hand, and knocking the pistol flying from his grip.

Like an angry ape, he flung me across the room. My hand shot out for the dirty, black pistol lying there on the floor. I was in a storm. Atmospheric pressure closed in on me. I heard thunder, inside me, all around me. My heart was pounding like a jackhammer. My tongue tasted like metal. Breath caught in my throat.

Then, I felt as if I'd just sat up, startled from sleep; a dream disappearing like a bird in the corner of the sky.

I heard cheers. Shouts of happiness filled the store. Hands clasped me, patting me on the back. I heard people saying, "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

Skinny, old Jim told Frank, "He shot the bastard nine times. Emptied the gun into him."

I was looking at a pair of sneakers. They were very still. Nothing more than canvas and rubber.