



# THE BEAST OF APATHY

AROUND TOWN

**They were fascinated by the drama, by the action, and yet not entirely sure that what was taking place was actually happening,”**

—Psychiatrist Ralph Banay on the reaction of neighbors to the murder of Kitty Genovese.

March of 1964. It was a time when the United States stood on the cusp of a convulsive, violent and defining epoch of national adolescence. Awkward and ungainly, Americans battled the polarizing forces of a self-confidence that was often times underscored by self-consciousness. Nineteen years after World War II, the men and women of the United States assumed it was their divine right to bask in unparalleled economic growth and military might. Yet this insular sense of security (some would say naiveté) that was so emblematic of the fifties faded abruptly in the emerging decade of the turbulent sixties. The assassination of a charismatic president who overcame hostilities over his wealth, youthfulness and Catholicism, coupled with an ever-growing conflict in a place called Vietnam, caught America off guard. This period of growth and introspection was also magnified by the escalating violence associated with the civil rights movement. Further compounding this state of cultural flux, the appearance of a singing group known as The Beatles proved to be a phenomenon that redefined the paradigms of America's increasingly disillusioned youth. Against this backdrop of sudden change, violence and discord, residents of New York City and the nation confronted themselves and their own vulnerabilities in the tragic saga of Queens resident Kitty Genovese.

Born in 1935 to a middle class Italian-American family in Brooklyn, Catherine Genovese was the oldest of five children. Known by her nickname, "Kitty," she was described by her younger brother, Bill Genovese, as a girl who, "Loved to talk

politics and knew a great deal about what was going on. She was a Renaissance woman, interested in a lot of different subjects." Like millions of (other) New Yorkers, Kitty Genovese lived a life of sedate respectability; one punctuated by closeness to her family, whom she visited regularly in the Connecticut enclave of New Canaan. Employed as an evening (lounge) manager at Ev's 11th Hour Sports Bar in nearby Hollis, Queens, Kitty often worked late. She was accustomed to, but not comfortable with, arriving at her Austin Street apartment well after midnight. In the early morning hours of March 13, 1964, Kitty Genovese drove back to her Kew Gardens neighborhood and entered the pages of urban legend.

"As she got out of her car she saw me and started to run. I started running after her with a knife in my hand," stated Winston Moseley of Ozone Park, Kitty's 29-year-old killer. After Moseley plunged his knife into her several times, Kitty Genovese cried out, "Oh my God. He stabbed me," she screamed. "Please help me. Please help me." In response to her cries for help, bedroom lights went on in the neighborhood and several residents looked out their windows. "Hey, leave that girl alone," cried out area resident Robert Mozer. Sensing danger, Moseley immediately left the vicinity, but returned a few minutes later. Again, he stabbed her and left, only to return for a third and final assault. After following a trail of blood, he found Kitty Genovese semiconscious and near death in the secluded back vestibule of her building. Moseley cut off her bra and underwear and

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proceeded to rape the dying young woman. In all, he inflicted 17 stab wounds on Kitty Genovese. As a final act of violation, he took the sum of \$49 from her wallet. "Why would I leave money behind?" Moseley later explained to police.

The murder of Kitty Genovese, vicious and brutal as it was, represented a mere blip on the crime screen of New York City at the time. Hundreds of murders were committed in New York City that year. Indeed, throughout the United States in 1964, over 9,360 homicides took place, a figure that worked out to an average of 187 killings for each of the 50 states. The initial media reaction to the murder of Kitty Genovese mirrored the callousness and cynicism of that era. When first reported, the killing of Kitty Genovese appeared as only a few brief paragraphs on page 12 of *The New York Times*. It was not until two weeks later that *The Times*, acting as the self-appointed flagship arbiter of journalistic integrity, brought forth the "real" story of the Genovese murder.

"For more than half an hour, 38 respectable, law-abiding citizens in Queens watched a killer stalk and stab a woman in three separate attacks in Kew Gardens." This lead sentence, written by reporter/editor Martin Gansberg, galvanized the nation and the world when it appeared in the March 27, 1964 edition of *The New York Times*. Gansberg's observations quickly became a mantra, encapsulating all of the shortcomings associated with urban living. While Gansberg's outrage was real and justified, his handling of the facts remains open to question. As later reports indicated, 12 people, not 38, as originally cited, were witnesses to the attack on Kitty Genovese. It is also important to note that not one person saw the attack unfold in its entirety. Moseley's third and final assault on Ms. Genovese took place in the back entrance of her apartment building, which was out of the line of sight of her neighbors. Also overlooked in the early reports of this tragedy was the fact that community residents were accustomed to loud fights and raucous behavior that occurred almost nightly at a neighborhood bar. These facts do not, of course, offer blanket absolution to those who were present. Even today, 44 years after this event, police and social scientists still ponder the question as to why someone did not pick up the phone and call the police immediately at the first sign of trouble.

In the aftermath of the Genovese murder, as facts, perceptions and hindsight merged into a unified consensus of condemnation and disbelief, there was no shortage of scapegoats for the tragedy that had occurred the previous month. In discussing the Genovese case at the Barbizon Hotel in April of 1964, psychiatrist Ralph Banay said that the medium of television was partly to blame for the Genovese murder. "We underestimate the damage that these accumulated images do to the brain," he noted, "The immediate effect can be delusional, equivalent to a sort of post-hypnotic suggestion. The witnesses became confused, and paralyzed by the violence they witnessed outside their window. They were fascinated by the drama, by the action, and yet not entirely sure that what was taking place was actually happening,"

Other social scientists, looking for broader venues of explanation, developed what has come to be known as the Genovese Effect. According to this theory, the more witnesses there are to an event, the less likely it is that any one individual will take the initiative and responsibility for intervening or calling the appropriate authorities. Ten years after the murder of Kitty Genovese, this observation took on a terrible credibility. In a *New York Times* article dated December 28, 1974, it was reported that 25-year-old Sandra Zahler was beaten to death early Christmas Day in an apartment that overlooked the site of the Genovese attack. Again, neighbors reported that they heard screams and a "fierce struggle" but chose to do nothing.

Today, more than four decades after her death, Kitty Genovese remains an eponymous symbol for the dark side of city living. The actions, or inactions, of her neighbors continue to be a source of speculation on fundamental issues of right and wrong. Questions dealing with sins of commission and omission still overshadow the issues of journalistic fairness, accurate reporting, context and moral hindsight.

The death of Kitty Genovese is an urban Morality Tale that is at once terrible in scope but forever incomplete in terms of unanswered issues concerning individual conscience. This young woman's murder will always be characterized by the recriminating echoes of would have, could have, should have-perhaps. ■

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