

The Dying Girl That No One Helped

To judge from the recent bitter example given us by the good folks of a respectable New York residential area, Samaritans are very scarce these days. In fact, if the reactions of 38 heedless witnesses to the murder of Catherine Genovese provide any true reflection of a national attitude towards our neighbors we are becoming a callous, chicken-hearted and immoral people. Psychiatrists, poking around in the ruins of characters at the scene of the crime, have already come up with some generous, culture-blaming excuses for this grotesque piece of bad fellowship. But the matter calls for something more than sheer indignation. An examination of the pitiful facts of Miss Genovese's terminal experience makes very necessary the ugly question each of us must ask: What would I have done?

The story is simple and brutal. As she arrived home in the early morning darkness, Kitty Genovese, a decent pretty young woman of 28, was stalked through the streets close to her New Gardens apartment and stabbed again and again by a man who followed her home and who took almost a half an hour to kill her. During that bloody eternity, according to an extraordinary account published in the New York Times, Kitty screamed and cried repeatedly for help. Her entreaties were unequivocal. "Oh my God!" she cried at one point, "He stabbed me! Please help me! Someone help me!" Minutes later, before the murderer came back and attacked her for the final time, she screamed, "I'm dying! I'm dying!"

The reason that the killer's despicable actions and his victim's calls are so well documented is that the police were able to find 38 of Kitty's neighbors who admitted they witnessed the awful event. They heard the screams and understood her cry for help. Peeking out of their windows many saw enough of the killer to provide a good description of his appearance and clothing. A few saw him strike Kitty, and more saw her staggering down the sidewalk after she had been stabbed twice and was looking for a place to hide. One sharp-eyed person was able to report that the murderer was sucking his fingers as he left the scene; he had cut himself during the attack. Another witness had the awful distinction of being the only person Kitty Genovese recognized in the audience taking in her final moments. She looked at him and called to him by name. He did not reply.

No one really helped Kitty at all. Only one person shouted at the killer (Let that girl alone!) and the one phone call that was finally made to the police was placed after the murderer had got in his car and driven off. For the most part, the witnesses, crouching in the darkened windows like watchers of a Late show, looked on until the play had passed their view. Then they went back to bed. Not all of these people, it must be said, understood they were watching a murder. Some thought they were looking on at a lover's quarrel; others saw or heard so very little that they could not have reached any conclusion about the disturbance. Even if one of her neighbors had called the police promptly, it cannot be definitely stated that Kitty would have survived. But that is quite beside the point.

But there were those who were sure something was terribly

wrong, and did not feel moved enough to act. **There is, of course, no law against not being helpful.** On the scene a few days after the killer had been caught and confessed, Police Lieutenant Bernard Jacobs discussed the investigation. "The word we kept hearing from witnesses later was 'involved,'" Jacobs said. A dark-haired, thoughtful man, he was standing on the sidewalk next to two fist-sized, dark-grey blotches on the cement. These were Kitty's bloodstains and it was here that the killer first stabbed her. "People told us they just didn't want to get involved," Jacobs said to me. "They don't want to be questioned or have to go to court." He pointed to an apartment house directly across the street. "They looked down at this thing," he went on, "from four different floors of that building." Jacobs indicated the long two-story building immediately next to him. A row of stores took up the ground floor; there were apartments on the upper floor. "Kitty lived in one of them," Jacobs said. "People up there were sitting right on top of the crime." He moved his arm in a gesture that included all of the buildings. "It's a nice neighborhood, isn't it?" he went on. "Doesn't look like a jungle. Good solid people. We don't expect anybody to come out into the street and fight this kind of bum. All we want is a phone call. We don't even need to know who's making it."

"You know what this man told us after we caught him?" Jacobs asked. "He said he figured nobody would do anything to help. He heard the windows go up and saw the lights go on. He just retreated for a while and when things quieted down, he came back to finish the job."

Later in one of the apartment houses, a witness to part of Kitty Genovese's murder talked. His comments --contradictory, guilt-ridden, self-excusing-- indicate the price in bad conscience he and his neighbors are now paying. "I feel terrible about it," he said. "The thing keeps coming back in my mind. You just don't want to get involved. They might have picked me up as a suspect if I'd bounced right out there. I was getting ready, but my wife stopped me. She didn't want to be hero's widow. I woke up about the third scream. I pulled the blind so hard it came off the window. The girl was on her knees struggling to get up. I didn't know if she was drunk or what. I never saw the man. She staggered a little when she walked, like she had a few drinks in her. I forgot the screen was there and I almost put my head through it trying to get a better look. I could see people with their heads out and hear windows going up and down all along the street."

The man walked to the window and looked down at the sidewalk. He was plainly depressed and disappointed at his own failure. "Every time I look out here now," he said, "it's like looking out at a nightmare. How could so many of us have had the same idea that we didn't need to do anything? But that's not all that's wrong." Now he sounded betrayed and told what was really eating him. Those 38 witnesses had, at least, talked to the police after the murder. The man pointed to a nearby building. "There are people over there who saw everything," he said. "And there hasn't been a peep out of them yet. Not one peep."