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Kitty, 40 Years Later

By Jim Rasenberger

KEW Gardens does not look much like the setting of an urban horror story. Nestled along the tracks of the Long Island Rail Road, 16 minutes by train from Pennsylvania Station, the Queens neighborhood is quiet and well kept, its streets shaded by tall oaks and bordered by handsome red-brick and wood-frame houses. At first glance, the surroundings appear as remote from big-city clamor as a far-flung Westchester suburb.

Forty years ago, on March 13, 1964, the picturesque tranquillity of Kew Gardens was shattered by the murder of 28-year-old Catherine Genovese, known as Kitty. The murder was grisly, but it wasn't the particulars of the killing that became the focus of the case. It was the response of her neighbors. As Ms. Genovese screamed -- "Please help me! Please help me!" -- 38 witnesses did nothing to intervene, according to reports; nobody even bothered to call the police. One witness later explained himself with a phrase that has passed into infamy: "I didn't want to get involved."

Seldom has a crime in New York City galvanized public outrage so intensely. Newspapers spread the story across the nation and as far away as Istanbul and Moscow. Clergymen and politicians decried the events, while psychologists scrambled to comprehend them.

At a time when the world seemed to be unraveling -- Kennedy had been assassinated four months earlier, Harlem was on the verge of race riots, crime rates were suddenly taking off -- the case quickly expanded into an all-consuming metaphor for the ills of contemporary urban life. A psychiatrist speculated that television had rendered the witnesses inactive by making them almost delusional. Other observers cited a general moral collapse of modern society.

"When you have this general sense that things are going wrong, you look for events that are going

to confirm that," said Neal Gabler, author of "Life: The Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality." "A society in which people are indifferent to one another; a society in which no one cares; a society in which we are all atomized. Here you had a story that confirmed all of those anxieties and fears."

But for all that has been said and written about Ms. Genovese's murder, important questions persist. Some Kew Gardens residents maintain, even now, that there were fewer than 38 witnesses and that many of them could not have seen much of the killing -- in other words, that there was less cold-heartedness in Kew Gardens than has been commonly portrayed. Psychologists continue to grapple with the social implications of the neighbors' response. And then there is the woman who occupies the tragic center of this landmark case: some of the details of Ms. Genovese's life have tended to get lost beneath the appalling circumstances of her death.

A Peaceful Life

Kitty Genovese, the petite eldest child of an Italian-American family, grew up in Park Slope, Brooklyn. When her family moved to New Canaan, Conn., she stayed in the city and, in the spring of 1963, settled in Kew Gardens. With a roommate, Mary Ann Zielonko, she took an apartment in a two-story Tudor-style building on Austin Street, near the village, as residents referred to the central cluster of shops. Across the street rose one of the few high-rises in the neighborhood, an elegant 10-story apartment house called the Mowbray.

Tony Corrado, an 84-year-old upholsterer who has owned a small shop on Austin Street since the 1950's, recalls the day a cheerful Ms. Genovese moved in. She knocked on his door and asked him to give her help carrying a sofa up the stairs. "That was my introduction to Kitty," Mr.

Corrado said. "I remember saying, boy, gonna be a lot of wild parties up there. I thought they were airline stewardesses, which we had a lot coming in."

In fact, Ms. Genovese worked as manager at a tavern in Hollis, Queens, called Ev's 11th Hour, and she and Ms. Zielonko lived a quiet, peaceful life over Mr. Corrado's shop. Crime rates were still low in the spring of 1963, and many residents slept with their doors unlocked. A cat burglar had recently made the rounds, and occasionally a loud drunk stumbled out of the Old Bailey bar, but these were minor disturbances. "I used to say, gee, nothing ever happens in Kew Gardens," Mr. Corrado recalled. "And all of a sudden, this nightmare."

The nightmare struck a year after Ms. Genovese moved in. Shortly after 3 a.m. on that night in March, she was driving home from Ev's 11th Hour. As she stopped her Fiat at a red light, she caught the eye of Winston Moseley, a business machine operator from Ozone Park. He had been cruising the streets in his white Corvair, searching for a woman to mutilate.

Mr. Moseley tailed Ms. Genovese to Kew Gardens, to the paved lot of the railroad station. When she got out of her car, he followed on foot. Ms. Genovese began to run up Austin Street, but he quickly caught up and stabbed her in the back. As she screamed, he stabbed her again, then twice more. A window opened in the Mowbray and a man's voice called out: "Leave that girl alone!"

Mr. Moseley later told the police he was not that concerned about the voice -- "I had a feeling this man would close his window and go back to sleep," he said -- but he ran off upon hearing it. He moved his car to a more discreet location, changed his hat, then returned. He found Ms. Genovese collapsed in a foyer in the back of her building and finished what he'd begun on Austin Street, stabbing and slashing her repeatedly, then leaving her to die.

The Community as Villain

Kitty Genovese's murder did not initially attract much attention from the press -- The New York Times gave it four paragraphs -- but 10 days later, A.M. Rosenthal, then metropolitan editor of The Times, happened to meet Police Commissioner Michael J. Murphy for lunch. Mr. Moseley had just been arrested and had confessed to the murders of both Ms. Genovese and another young

woman. When the subject turned to Mr. Moseley's double confession, Mr. Murphy, who is dead, mentioned the 38 witnesses. "Brother," he said, "that Queens story is one for the books."

As Mr. Rosenthal later recounted in his own book about the Genovese case, "Thirty-Eight Witnesses," he knew he'd just been handed a startling scoop, and he assigned it to a reporter, Martin Gansberg, that afternoon. A few days later, Mr. Gansberg, who died in 1995, filed his story, and it soon appeared on the front page.

"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," the article began. "Twice the sound of their voices and the sudden glow of their bedroom lights interrupted him and frightened him off. Each time he returned, sought her out and stabbed her again."

Beginning with its plain but indelible first sentence, the article suggested that 38 eyewitnesses had seen all, or at least a substantial part, of the killing; that they had "watched" it for half an hour, almost as if gaping at a performance. The Times was first to describe this horrifying spectacle, but it would soon have plenty of company. Writing in Life magazine, Loudon Wainwright put it like this: "For the most part, the witnesses, crouching in darkened windows like watchers of a Late Show, looked on until the play had passed from their view."

A pall fell over Kew Gardens in the months after the murder. "People had an impression of Kew Gardens that was unbelievable," said Charles Skoller, a Queens assistant district attorney at the time who would help prosecute the killer at his insanity trial. "The entire community was villainous."

Slowly, though, life returned to its tranquil ways in Kew Gardens. Slowly, the residents began to shake off their stigma. And slowly, some of them began to insist that the portrayal of their neighborhood had been unfair, based on exaggerated accounts by police and journalists. As Mr. Corrado said, "Kew Gardens got a bad rap."

In the years since Ms. Genovese's death, this charge has been repeated a handful of times in newspaper articles, including a Daily News column by John Melia in 1984 and, more briefly, a 1995 account in The Times. No one, though, has ever undertaken the task of defending Kew Gardens as assiduously as Joseph De May Jr.

A More Complex View

It was never the intention of Mr. De May, a 54-year-old maritime lawyer, to spend hundreds of hours analyzing a decades-old murder. Indeed, he had little interest in the subject of Kitty Genovese's death until two years ago. That is when he decided, as a hobby, to create a nostalgic Web site devoted to Kew Gardens, where he'd lived for almost 30 years. If he was going to delve into his neighborhood's past, he reasoned, he'd certainly have to consider its most notorious episode.

In the end, Mr. De May's conclusion about the murder is that, while the behavior of the witnesses was hardly beyond reproach, the common conception of exactly what occurred that night is not in fact what occurred. What did occur, he argues, is far more complex and far less damning to the residents of Kew Gardens.

"Yeah, there was a murder," Mr. De May said. "Yeah, people heard something. You can question how a few people behaved. But this wasn't 38 people watching a woman be slaughtered for 35 minutes and saying, 'Oh, I don't want to be involved.'"

Mr. De May began his research with the seminal Times article of March 27, 1964. "I remember reading through it, then putting it down and thinking, 'Well, this doesn't hang together at all,'" he said. "And then I read it again carefully. I knew the area. I knew the crime scene because I go by there every day."

Mr. De May soon found himself poring through legal documents related to the case, scouring books and articles, and interviewing neighbors. At one point, he even ran the route of Ms. Genovese's flight up Austin Street, timing it with a watch. He became convinced that his first impression was correct. "Here's something that everyone thinks happened," he said, "that isn't so."

His argument, made in full at oldkewgardens.com, boils down to two claims: that the great majority of the 38 so-called witnesses did not see any part of the actual killing; and that what most of them did see, or hear, was fleeting and vague.

To begin, he points out that there were two attacks on Kitty Genovese, not three, as The Times initially indicated. The newspaper later acknowledged the discrepancy -- it was caused by

confused police accounts -- but three is still given as the number of attacks, recently in "The Tipping Point" by Malcolm Gladwell and "New York: An Illustrated History" by Ric Burns and James Sanders. Since the extra attack was supposed to have occurred in full view of surrounding windows, it added to an impression of callous disregard by neighbors.

Of the two attacks that did occur, the first was on Austin Street, across from the Mowbray. Contrary to what some accounts imply, Mr. De May, citing courtroom testimony, contends that this first attack must have lasted only minutes before Mr. Moseley jogged off to his car. By the time most witnesses heard the screams and made it to their windows, Mr. De May argues, they saw just a young woman walking or stumbling alone down Austin Street toward the side of her building, then vanishing around the corner.

Every bit as significant as the brevity of the first attack, Mr. De May believes, was the location of the second, more sustained attack. This occurred in a narrow foyer at the back of Ms. Genovese's building, indoors and facing away from the Mowbray toward the railroad tracks. This is where Kitty had gone to seek safety, and where Mr. Moseley discovered her. Only one witness, a man who lived at the top of the stairs, could have seen what occurred in that foyer, Mr. De May said.

Charles Skoller, the former assistant district attorney, supports part of Mr. De May's conclusion. "I don't think 38 people witnessed it," said Mr. Skoller, now retired. "I don't know where that came from, the 38. I didn't count 38. We only found half a dozen that saw what was going on, that we could use."

But Mr. Skoller is far less willing than Mr. De May to forgive the neighbors. Even if not all saw the crime, Mr. Skoller is convinced they heard it. "I believe that many people heard the screams," he said. "It could have been more than 38. And anyone that heard the screams had to know there was a vicious crime taking place. There's no doubt in my mind about that."

Many witnesses claimed they thought it was a lovers' quarrel or a drunken argument spilling out of the Old Bailey. Mr. De May points out that a good number of the witnesses were elderly, and nearly all awoke from deep slumbers, their brains befogged, their windows shut to the cold. Furthermore, he raises the possibility that several

witnesses did call the police after the first attack, but that their calls were ignored and never recorded.

A.M. Rosenthal, who went on to become executive editor of *The Times*, stands by the article he assigned to Mr. Gansberg 40 years ago, right down to the word "watched" in its opening sentence. This questioning of details, he said, is to be expected.

"In a story that gets a lot of attention, there's always somebody who's saying, 'Well, that's not really what it's supposed to be,'" said Mr. Rosenthal, who is retired from *The Times* and now writes a column for *The Daily News*. There may have been minor inaccuracies, he allows, but none that alter the story's essential meaning. "There may have been 38, there may have been 39," he said, "but the whole picture, as I saw it, was very affecting."

Theory, Guilt and Loss

Nowhere was the case more affecting than among America's psychologists. "It was monumental," said Harold Takooshian, a professor of urban psychology at Fordham University. Before the murder, he added, "nobody really had any idea why people did not help, and conversely why people did help. The psychologists were really stunned by their lack of information on this."

The first major studies prompted by the murder, conducted in the 1960's by the psychologists Bibb Latane and John Darley, arrived at a counterintuitive conclusion: the greater the number of bystanders who view an emergency, the smaller the chance that any will intervene. People tend to feel a "diffusion of responsibility" in groups, the two concluded. Kitty Genovese would have been better off, in other words, had one witness seen or heard her attack, rather than the reputed 38.

In the years since these experiments, the study of human altruism has developed into a whole new branch of psychology, now known as prosocial behavior. "That area did not exist before," Professor Takooshian said. And, still, Ms. Genovese's death continues to haunt the field. On March 9, Professor Takooshian will host a symposium at Fordham to revisit many of the conundrums posed by that night 40 years ago.

It is psychology that probably offers the best explanation of the issues the case raised. A raft of behavioral studies performed over the last 40 years suggests that Ms. Genovese's neighbors reacted as they reportedly did not because they were apathetic or cold-hearted, but because they were confused, uncertain and afraid. "Where others might have seen them as villains," Professor Takooshian said, "psychologists see these people as normal."

Normal or not, many of the 38 were consumed by guilt after the crime. Others simply got fed up with the negative attention, and many of them moved away from Kew Gardens. "It was just too much for them, I guess," said Mr. Corrado, sitting in his shop, looking out over the spot where Ms. Genovese was first attacked.

Ms. Genovese's death hit hardest, of course, among those who loved her. This includes Mary Ann Zielonko, the young woman who moved with her to Kew Gardens -- and who had the grim task of identifying her remains. One of the many little-known facts about Ms. Genovese was her close relationship with Ms. Zielonko, an omission that perhaps was understandable in 1964. "She was actually my partner," said Ms. Zielonko, who now lives in Vermont. "We were lovers together. Everybody tried to hush that up."

Ms. Zielonko still becomes emotional remembering the horror of Ms. Genovese's death,

but brightens as she recalls what she cherished. "It sounds trite," she said, "but it was her smile. She had a great smile."

William Genovese, one of Kitty's four younger siblings, offers other memories of his sister. He remembers how she would sweep into New Canaan to visit the family in her Nash Rambler, or later in her red Fiat, fresh from the city and bubbling with new ambitions and ideas. He remembers how the two of them would stay up late into the night talking about subjects as esoteric as solipsism and Einstein's theory of relativity. "She and I had a special affinity," Mr. Genovese said.

Two years after his sister's murder, Mr. Genovese volunteered for the Marines, a decision he attributes to his disgust with public apathy. "I became obsessed with saving people," he said. "When I got to Vietnam, I would have flashbacks of my sister all the time. I'd find myself in situations where I'd think, 'This is a test.' That's the way I viewed it."

GRAPHIC: Photos: Kitty Genovese, a young bar manager who lived in Kew Gardens, Queens, was attacked late one night in March 1964 as she returned from work. After the killer, Winston Moseley, stabbed her, she fled down a path, above center. But he found her in a foyer and finished the job. (Photos by Genovese, illustration by The New York Times; Moseley, United Press International; building, Joyce Dopkeen/The New York Times)(pg. 1); Ms. Genovese died in a foyer of her apartment house, second door from the corner.; The behavior of the witnesses was the focus of the Genovese case. The Mowbray, an elegant apartment house, sits across the street from where the first attack occurred. (Photo by Edward Hausner/The New York Times, 1965); (Photo by Joyce Dopkeen/The New York Times)(pg. 9)

BYLINE: By JIM RASENBERGER; Jim Rasenberger's book, "High Steel: The Daring Men Who Built the World's Greatest Skyline," will be published in April by HarperCollins.
