Thirty-Eight Who Saw Murder Didn’t Call the Police

Martin Gansberg (1920–1995), a native of Brooklyn, New York, was a reporter and editor for the *New York Times* for forty-three years. The following article, written for the *Times* two weeks after the 1964 murder it recounts, earned Gansberg an award for excellence from the Newspaper Reporters Association of New York. Gansberg’s thesis, though not explicitly stated, still retains its power.

Background on the Kitty Genovese murder case: The events reported here took place on March 14, 1964, as contemporary American culture was undergoing a complex transition. The relatively placid years of the 1950s were giving way to more troubling times: the Civil Rights movement was leading to social unrest in the South and in northern inner cities; the escalating war in Vietnam was creating angry political divisions; President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated just four months earlier; violent imagery was increasing in television and film; crime rates were rising; and a growing drug culture was becoming apparent. The brutal, senseless murder of Kitty Genovese—and, more important, her neighbors’ failure to respond immediately to her cries for help—became a nationwide, and even worldwide, symbol for what was perceived as an evolving culture of violence and indifference.

Recently, some of the details Gansberg mentions have been challenged. For example, as the *New York Times* now acknowledges, there were only two attacks on Ms. Genovese, not three; the first attack may have been shorter than first reported; the second attack may have occurred in the apartment house foyer, where neighbors would not have been able to see Genovese; and some witnesses may, in fact, actually have called the police. At the time, however, the world was shocked by the incident, and even today social scientists around the world debate the causes of “the Genovese syndrome.”

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.

Twice their chatter 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. Not one person telephoned the police during the assault; one witness called after the woman was dead.

That was two weeks ago today.

Still shocked is Assistant Chief Inspector Frederick M. Lussen, in charge of the borough’s detectives and a veteran of 25 years of homicide investigations. He can give a matter-of-fact recitation on many murders.
But the Kew Gardens slaying baffles him—not because it is a murder, but because the “good people” failed to call the police.

“As we have reconstructed the crime,” he said, “the assailant had three chances to kill this woman during a 35-minute period. He returned twice to complete the job. If we had been called when he first attacked, the woman might not be dead now.”

This is what the police say happened beginning at 3:20 A.M. in the staid, middle-class, tree-lined Austin Street area:

Twenty-eight-year-old Catherine Genovese, who was called Kitty by almost everyone in the neighborhood, was returning home from her job as manager of a bar in Hollis. She parked her red Fiat in a lot adjacent to the Kew Gardens Long Island Rail Road Station, facing Mowbray Place. Like many residents of the neighborhood, she had parked there day after day since her arrival from Connecticut a year ago, although the railroad frowns on the practice.

She turned off the lights of her car, locked the door, and started to walk the 100 feet to the entrance of her apartment at 82-70 Austin Street, which is in a Tudor building, with stores in the first floor and apartments on the second.

The entrance to the apartment is in the rear of the building because the front is rented to retail stores. At night the quiet neighborhood is shrouded in the slumbering darkness that marks most residential areas.

Miss Genovese noticed a man at the far end of the lot, near a seven-story apartment house at 82-40 Austin Street. She halted. Then, nervously, she headed up Austin Street toward Lefferts Boulevard, where there is a call box to the 102nd Police Precinct in nearby Richmond Hill.

She got as far as a street light in front of a bookstore before the man grabbed her. She screamed. Lights went on in the 10-story apartment house at 82-67 Austin Street, which faces the bookstore. Windows slid open and voices punctuated the early-morning stillness.

Miss Genovese screamed: “Oh, my God, he stabbed me! Please help me! Please help me!”

From one of the upper windows in the apartment house, a man called down: “Let that girl alone!”

The assailant looked up at him, shrugged, and walked down Austin Street toward a white sedan parked a short distance away. Miss Genovese struggled to her feet.

Lights went out. The killer returned to Miss Genovese, now trying to make her way around the side of the building by the parking lot to get to her apartment. The assailant stabbed her again.

“I’m dying!” she shrieked. “I’m dying!”

Windows were opened again, and lights went on in many apartments. The assailant got into his car and drove away. Miss Genovese staggered to her feet. A city bus, 0–10, the Lefferts Boulevard line to Kennedy International Airport, passed. It was 3:35 A.M.
The assailant returned. By then, Miss Genovese had crawled to the back of the building, where the freshly painted brown doors to the apartment house held out hope for safety. The killer tried the first door; she wasn’t there. At the second door, 82-62 Austin Street, he saw her slumped on the floor at the foot of the stairs. He stabbed her a third time—fatally.

It was 3:50 by the time the police received their first call, from a man who was a neighbor of Miss Genovese. In two minutes they were at the scene. The neighbor, a 70-year-old woman, and another woman were the only persons on the street. Nobody else came forward.

The man explained that he had called the police after much deliberation. He had phoned a friend in Nassau County for advice, and then he had crossed the roof of the building to the apartment of the elderly woman to get her to make the call.

“I didn’t want to get involved,” he sheepishly told police.

Six days later, the police arrested Winston Moseley, a 29-year-old business machine operator, and charged him with homicide. Moseley had no previous record. He is married, has two children and owns a home at 133-19 Sutter Avenue, South Ozone Park, Queens. On Wednesday, a court committed him to Kings County Hospital for psychiatric observation.

When questioned by the police, Moseley also said that he had slain Mrs. Annie May Johnson, 24, of 146-12 133d Avenue, Jamaica, on Feb. 29 and Barbara Kralk, 15, of 174-17 140th Avenue, Springfield Gardens, last July. In the Kralk case, the police are holding Alvin L. Mitchell, who is said to have confessed to that slaying.

The police stressed how simple it would have been to have gotten in touch with them. “A phone call,” said one of the detectives, “would have done it.” The police may be reached by dialing “0” for operator or SPring 7-3100.

Today witnesses from the neighborhood, which is made up of one-family homes in the $35,000 to $60,000 range with the exception of the two apartment houses near the railroad station, find it difficult to explain why they didn’t call the police.

A housewife, knowingly if quite casually, said, “We thought it was a lovers’ quarrel.” A husband and wife both said, “Frankly, we were afraid.” They seemed aware of the fact that events might have been different. A distraught woman, wiping her hands in her apron, said, “I didn’t want my husband to get involved.”

One couple, now willing to talk about that night, said they heard the first screams. The husband looked thoughtfully at the bookstore where the killer first grabbed Miss Genovese.

“We went to the window to see what was happening,” he said, “but the light from our bedroom made it difficult to see the street.” The wife, still apprehensive, added: “I put out the light and we were able to see better.”

Asked why they hadn’t called the police, she shrugged and replied: “I don’t know.”
A man peeked out from a slight opening in the doorway to his apartment and rattled off an account of the killer's second attack. Why hadn't he called the police at the time? "I was tired," he said without emotion. "I went back to bed."

It was 4:25 A.M. when the ambulance arrived to take the body of Miss Genovese. It drove off. "Then," a solemn police detective said, "the people came out."

Comprehension

1. How much time elapsed between the first stabbing of Kitty Genovese and the time when the people finally came out?
2. What excuses do the neighbors make for not coming to Kitty Genovese's aid?

Purpose and Audience

1. This article appeared in 1964. What effect was it intended to have on its audience? Do you think it has the same impact today, or has its impact changed or diminished?
2. What is the article's main point? Why does Gansberg imply his thesis rather than state it explicitly?
3. What is Gansberg's purpose in describing the Austin Street area as "staid, middle-class, tree-lined" (6)?
4. Why do you suppose Gansberg provides the police department's phone number in his article? (Note that New York City did not have 911 emergency service in 1964.)

Style and Structure

1. Gansberg is very precise in this article, especially in his references to time, addresses, and ages. Why?
2. The objective newspaper style is dominant in this article, but the writer's anger shows through. Point to words and phrases that reveal his attitude toward his material.
3. Because this article was originally set in the narrow columns of a newspaper, it has many short paragraphs. Would the narrative be more effective if some of these brief paragraphs were combined? If so, why? If not, why not? Give examples to support your answer.
4. Review the dialogue. Does it strengthen Gansberg's narrative? Would the article be more compelling without dialogue? Explain.
5. This article does not have a formal conclusion; nevertheless, the last paragraph sums up the writer's attitude. How?