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ABOUT CRIME

A 'Thwack' Is Not Enough

By Johanna Garfield

LIVE IN A TOWNHOUSE on the so-called "fashionable" Upper East Side, though I like to think I have a West Side — or perhaps even a Village — soul. Last Tuesday night, that soul, whatever its spiritual locale, received a shocking blow. At about 10:30, on our quiet, tree-lined street, with a private guard standing across the way to keep an eye on things during the doormen's strike (two apartment houses that usually have doormen face us), a man was murdered right outside my door.

This man — grayish-blond, tall, strikingly handsome and well-dressed — was on his back on the sidewalk not five steps from my house when I saw him. One hand twitched convulsively; his eyes were open but unseeing; his head lolled gently at the curb near the neatly wrapped plastic garbage bag, already urinated upon by several undisci-

minating dogs. Scattered around him, on the sidewalk, were concert ticket stubs from the nearby "Y," loose change . . . and a wooden two-by-four with an ominously jagged edge.

Worse than the sight of the man on the sidewalk, though, was my later realization that I probably had heard the attack. My husband and I were in our third-floor bedroom. Neither of us was dressed for hanging out of windows. So when we heard a faint noise — as I tried to describe it to the police later, the only words I could think of were "thud" and "thwack" — we shrugged and let it pass. True, it was strange enough for us to look at each other and say, "What was that?" But after all, there were no accompanying screams, gunshots, screeching brakes or sounds of struggle — and I've heard plenty of those, even in our supposedly privileged milieu. Somebody probably fell down and picked himself up, I speculated uneasily. And went back to reading the paper.

Only when I heard the sirens a few minutes later (the police came within minutes, summoned by the guard across the street) did I throw on a robe and go to the window to survey the tragic sight: six or seven cops surrounding the elegant man, who — though I didn't know it then — had attended his last concert, and who was nameless even five hours later when the police rang the doorbell to question us. They told us things were "not looking good" for him.

This was certainly no Kitty Genovese case — the 1964 murder of a young Queens woman whose killer stalked and attacked her while people watched from their apartments but refused to "get involved" by calling police. There had been no cries for help, no sounds of a fight here.

But when I examine my conscience — and I have been doing so ever since the attack — I think I knew in my gut something was wrong when I heard that thud.

No, it wasn't fear of involvement that kept me from my window. In fact, once I saw what had happened, I ran downstairs and tried desperately to remember just exactly what I *had* heard — anything that would help the police. I can only think that even in our affluent and relatively safe neighborhood, we have become so inured to the usual sounds of violence — the shouts and sirens, the tinkling of broken glass, the running footsteps — that a mere "thwack" and some vaguely ominous noises were simply not enough to draw a usually curious observer to her window.

I couldn't have stopped the sudden blow, even if I'd gone to the window. Still, I wish I had. If I'd bestirred myself I might have clearly seen the assailant who ended the life of a neighbor, Dr. Robert Kabcenell, on the sidewalk outside my door. And I could live with myself more easily now.

Johanna Garfield is the author of "The Life of a Real Girl" (St. Martin's) and "Cousins" (Donald I. Fine).

