

*[Victimization is a running theme in my novels. Everyone deals with being victimized in a different manner. Fury, depression, addiction and resignation are just a few. The genesis for this story was Kitty Genovese who became a national symbol in the seventies or eighties for the fear and apathy of those who witnessed a crime. She was raped and beaten outside a tenement and nobody came to her aid. I recall a similar incident in Boston, in the nineties, where a man chased a woman across a bridge and tossed her off the bridge. Again, many watched, but no one lifted a hand to stop the thug. Those from inner-city projects, like the one described in this story, were forced to live by a different set of rules from the rest of society. Gangs and criminals were lords of the project, with the police as terrified as anyone of getting involved.]*

## **None of My Concern**

**Barry Hoffman**

Walking down the street, Tyra saw a boy – no more than ten – a rock in his hand, skateboarding down the street. His outstretched hand, which held the rock, sounded like chalk on a blackboard as it scratched first one car, then a second, and a third -- every fucking car on the block.

Tyra had a good mind to tell the boy off, but it was none of her concern, so she just shook her head in disgust and looked away.

Living in the projects you learned to mind your own business, Tyra had been told by her mother, who had in turn been warned by her mother. Turn a blind eye, a deaf ear—"No officer, I didn't see nothing"—had been drummed into her, as a means of survival, until it was a part of her. Being a good neighbor scored no points in the projects. Could get yourself hurt bad, even killed.

Now sixteen, Tyra had seen an awful lot, but had dutifully

kept her mouth shut. It was, after all, none of her concern.

Wynton Washington had saved near every penny he had earned for five years so he could buy that fancy silver Porsche. It was a used Porsche, but a Porsche, nevertheless. His clothes were threadbare, his apartment virtually barren, as his every penny went towards his dream car. When he had taken Tyra out, a year and half before, they had gone dutch, and when she'd given her body to him she was surprised he didn't save his condom and wash it out so he could use it again. Dirt poor, but he'd finally got that Porsche.

He hadn't had the car more than a day, when some clown boosted it. Tyra had been across the street, but the boy paid her no nevermind. Just went about his work. She knew it would break Wynton's heart, as he hadn't the money for insurance, but it was none of her concern. Served him right, actually, for thumbing his nose at those who fretted daily how to make ends meet.

It was also none of her concern when a teen she knew gave her eleven year old cousin his first taste of crack. Her cousin had been warned often enough, and should have known better. After that first freebie, which allowed him to forget he could never play basketball on just one leg, he was hooked. And it was no concern of hers when he stole from his mother – hell when he

stole her mother's purse – just so long as he let her be.

Tyra got a real kick out of her teachers who preached coming to the aid of others. Ethics, moral obligations, and doing the right thing; all preached by those who lived where it was safe and if you dialed 911 you were praised, not beaten up by the thug you'd dined on.

"We're all part of a village," Mr. Lankford had told them, and he had them all stand up in a circle, holding one another's hands. "We have to look out for each other. Ignore the problem, you're *part* of the problem."

"So if I see some boy pocket some candy from a store, I got a *moral obligation* to tell the owner?" Tyra had asked.

"Yes you do, Tyra. I know it's not easy—"

"Not when he's wiping the floor with my ass, it's not, Mr. Lankford," she had said, to whoops from the rest of the class.

Mr. Lankford said a lot of fool things, Tyra thought, but he was cool for a teacher. If they cursed in class, he ignored it, so long as they didn't use the "n" word. Shit, fuck, ass, bastard, bitch . . . they didn't hurt no one, according to her teacher. But, use the "n" word, he would tell them, then you were putting down your own kind. To him *that* was profanity, not the expletives heard in the lunchroom. He wasn't too keen on kids saying things about other kid's mothers, either. Putting

down someone's mother inevitably led to a fight, and Mr. Lankford often explored with the class alternatives to what he called "physical confrontations".

Now he was looking earnestly at her. "No, Tyra, he's not going to be wiping the floor with your . . . behind," he said, pausing for a synonym for ass. "You tell the store owner, he'll come to your aid."

"Then the fucker will come back with a piece and put both of us out of our misery," Tyra countered, again to laughter from her classmates.

They'd go in circles, Mr. Lankford trying to convince them to "reach out a helping hand," regardless of the consequences, while Tyra and others were all too worried *about* the consequences.

Tyra knew Kevin Lofton stole Mr. Lankford's rollbook. Hell, most of the class knew. But it was none of their concern. Tyra knew Russell Nivens sprayed graffiti on Mr. Lankford's old, but immaculately waxed car, but it was none of her concern. She knew Mr. Lankford was balling Sheila Laws, one of his students, at lunch. That, too, was none of her concern.

When her own purse was stolen in the cafeteria she wasn't angry that no one came forward to dime on the culprit. It was none of *their* concern. It was her own damn fault, she had

chastised herself. When her locker was broken into and her leather coat taken, she was pissed at herself, not those she was sure had witnessed the act. Her mother had warned her against inviting theft by wearing the coat to school, but vanity had prevailed over common sense. She'd learned her damned lesson.

After school, the next day, wearing her tattered coat, dotted with stains and patches to cover its many holes, Tyra had gone window shopping. Some of the kids at school, she knew, talked behind her back about her wearing clothes that were too tight for her. Some said she was loose and a few boys even spread rumors she had put out for them. Truth be told, with her father long gone and her mother on welfare she and her four brothers and sisters had to make due with precious little. Being the oldest her sisters got her hand-me-downs. With her breasts sprouting like weeds, and her body like clay remolding itself almost weekly, there was no way her mother could keep up with her clothing needs. Still, looking at the clothes in the windows she lost herself dreaming of wearing something one day and discarding it the next.

Before Tyra was even aware the sun had begun to set, and she hustled home. It wasn't quite dark when she came to the projects, but everyone else had gone inside. It didn't do to be out at night, especially alone.

Walking briskly towards the front entrance of her highrise, she was aware of the presence of others. Predators, drawn by her scent, determined to have their pound of flesh.

"Where you rushing to, bitch?" she heard a voice, but didn't turn around.

"You looking good, Ty," another voice, one she recognized, shouted her nickname, and she heard him smacking his lips.

"How about a taste?" she heard yet another call out, followed by a second youth shouting, "Taste, shit, how about we have ourselves a full course meal."

There was the urge to run, but Tyra knew if they smelled her desperation she was doomed.

"Fuck off," she said, without breaking stride, trying to hide her fear.

They circled her, six of them. One threw a rock that hit her in the head and she went down. She felt her blouse and bra ripped off, then a hand under her skirt, roughly pulling at her panties. Each in turn mounted her, like dogs in heat. When she screamed they screamed back at her, oblivious of the attention they'd draw. When she kicked, scratched and bit, they kicked, scratched and bit right back. Outnumbered as she was, if she simply acquiesced to the inevitable, they would be back for more. Put up a fight, regardless of the repercussions, and

they'd move on to fresh conquests.

All the while, as they took turns having their way with her, she looked up at the windows of the highrise that rose eleven stories. She saw some neighbors glance, then turn away, sickened. Saw others – far fewer, but a dozen, maybe more – look long and hard, curious, yet unwilling to lift a hand to come to her aid.

She saw Janet Winston, who had been raped and impregnated in the project's stairwell – her baby suckling at her breast – shake her head in resignation, then close her curtain. Saw Thea Jackson, her closest friend, with tears streaking down her face, horrified, yet unable to avert her eyes, and too fearful to act. Saw white-haired Gladys Evers, who Tyra bought groceries for each week, cross herself as if asking for divine intervention yet knowing full well none would be forthcoming. Tyra saw many others – classmates, friends of her mother, women she babysat for – all good people, yet all silent, as if sanctioning her assault.

She stared at them, yet didn't beseech them to have the courage to come to her aid, or simply call the police. She didn't condemn them. And when these boys were done with her, she wouldn't confront her friends and neighbors with angry eyes or cross words. She wouldn't call them cowards. Wouldn't expect

them to avert their eyes, out of humiliation, when she passed. She would harbor no bitterness nor ill feelings towards them whatsoever.

After all, it was none of their concern.