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Alone in a Group

## Alone in a Group

Ronit Plank

*Photo credit to Joanne Adela Low*

**Note:** “*Alone in a Group*” is excerpted from *When She Comes Back*, Plank’s memoir about losing her mother to a guru in India, growing up too fast, and what happens when the person your life revolves around can’t stay.

It was Halloween night three weeks after my bat mitzvah, I was dressed as a cave girl, and I had lost my friends in the dark. I was wearing a flesh-colored bodysuit underneath a cavewoman tunic made of fake fur and the inside of the acrylic fabric was rough. I ran my finger along the edge to pull it away from my neck where it kept rubbing against my skin. I had a dog’s toy bone in my hair and a faded blue pillowcase for a trick-or-treat bag. I had helped organize our group of six to meet that night at 6:30 and travel together up and down the apartment buildings along Kissena Boulevard.

This was the first Halloween my father had allowed me to go out in the neighborhood with only my friends. Up to that point my younger sister Nava and I had trick-or-treated together only in our apartment building, first in Ivy Hill, New Jersey, and then here in Flushing. But this year I had petitioned my father to walk the neighborhood without an adult nearby and he had said yes. For the first time I was spending Halloween like a teenager.

Now, I stood on the corner, the skin on my bare legs and arms prickling in the light wind that had picked up, trying to figure out which direction my friends, Claudia and four boys we knew from Junior High School 189, had gone. Groups of adults and costumed children moved by me in clusters, entering and exiting the apartment buildings that lined the street in all directions.

My friends and I had walked a block together when an unsupervised group of seven kids in regular clothes chased after us, scattering us in all directions, yelling, “That’s right, you better run,” and “We’re coming after you!” The pack of kids was gone now and so were my friends.

I could turn back home, toward my apartment building two blocks away, or I could head south. I usually didn’t go that direction unless I was walking to the “Y” with Claudia, which was where she and I had been swimming together since fourth grade. I knew I’d pass the candy store where we bought and wolfed down chips and chocolate bars after hours in the pool. I’d pass the apartment building where Grandpa Sammy had lived before he moved to Florida, and the fruit stand where last summer the wife of the owner had told me to stop cherry-picking from the flat of Bings. Since I knew the area, I decided to search for my friends. I hadn’t made the point about being old enough and mature enough when I begged my father to let me go out tonight only to return home thirty minutes after leaving the apartment. All I had to do was find Claudia and the boys and pick up where we’d left off. I began my walk south.

I’d gone a block when I saw a group of kids headed in my direction. Relieved, I began walking faster toward them.

Trying to make their faces out in the dark I called, “Hey guys!”

As I got closer, I saw they seemed shorter than my friends. And there were too many of them. I had almost reached them when I realized they were the pack of girls and boys that had chased us. My stomach clenched.

If I hadn’t drawn attention to myself, I might have been able to hide or maybe walk past them. But they had heard me. They stopped right in front of me, blocking my path.

They ranged in age from about nine years old to about thirteen. The biggest boy was my height. I didn’t entertain the idea of running away. I wasn’t fast. But I also wasn’t tough: I’d never hit anybody except for Nava.

I decided that if I showed them I was nice and meant them no trouble they’d leave me alone. I needed to pretend that I wasn’t out of my element; I needed to pretend I wasn’t afraid.

I opened my eyes wide, hoping they would see I was harmless, and in my friendliest voice, I said, “Excuse me, have you by any chance seen a group of kids trick-or-treating?”

They stared back at me with flat expressions.

“A group of kids trick or treating?” the oldest kid asked. He seemed like the leader.

“Yes,” I said. It was a good sign the leader was talking to me. I described a few of their costumes and kept my face open, as if I had no concerns about running into them.

“Yeah,” he said, looking back toward his posse and I noticed a kind of amusement on his friends’ faces. “I think we did.” He gestured in the direction I was headed. “That way.”

“Over there? Great! Thank you so much.”

“Oh, sure,” he said. His eyes were engaged, but his face was inscrutable.

“I’m going to go find them,” I said cheerily. “Thanks again!”

I took a step left to go around them, but he blocked me with his arm. I laughed lightly as if I had misunderstood and took a step to the right. This time he draped his arm around my shoulder pulled me next to him.

“You know what,” he said. “Let’s go find them together.”

With his arm on my shoulder he steered me south and we started walking. His friends followed closely behind. I played it cool and kept moving with him, as if this was the most natural thing in the world to be going somewhere with this guy I didn’t know, this guy whose arm was squeezing me tight; holding me in place.

I scanned the streets for my friends as he took us south another block. I searched for a safe place to run from them, but there was nowhere to go. When we got to the curb in front of the fruit stand, I reached my hands up to take his arm off me, but it was too late. He wrapped it around my neck and tightened his grip.

“Wait, wait,” I said through the boy’s chokehold. I was speaking to him, to the gang of them, but he pressed his arm harder against my neck.

A switch had been flipped, and we stopped pretending now.

The kids crowded around me and shouted, taking their turns to push me. I was in the middle of their circle, their noise. The leader forced me down, and my knees were on cement.

I kept talking like it could save me, as if all I had to do is make what I needed from them clearer and they would realize they’d made a mistake, that this was a misunderstanding. Like if I could figure out what I had done wrong they would stop.

I felt something hit me in the back. Then in the shoulder. Something else swooshed past my ear. I ducked, my arms over my head, my eyes focused on the grain in the dark gray sidewalk. An apple rolled into my line of vision. A pear. That’s when I understood. Fruit. They were taking fruit off the fruit stand and throwing it at me. I couldn’t even get beaten up in a normal way.

I tried to look up in between each round of their assault to scan the space beyond their heads. How could this happen? People were out tonight. Nobody was coming to help. An adult had to be somewhere.

Standing just inside where his awning began, I saw the grocer at the fruit stand, his face ghostly in the fluorescence of his overhead lighting. For a moment I was able to meet his eyes. He could be the one to tell the kids to leave me alone. He could chase them away from his stand. He could even call the police. But he stayed where he was, watching.

When I saw a grapefruit coming, I turned to cover my face, but it smacked me in the jaw. It rolled to the ground. I saw it flash rubbery yellow against the rough pavement. I curled down around myself to protect my body.

A minute passed and the kids’ laughter subsided. Then the fruit stopped. Then their voices sounded farther away. I waited until I was sure they had left before I moved. I didn’t know why they had quit; I didn’t understand why they had started. In the gutter in front of me were clumped old leaves, a few Now and Later wrappers, cigarette butts, and a crushed McDonald’s coffee cup.

Clutching my pillowcase, I wobbled up to standing.

My knees were scraped. My ponytail had fallen out; I’d lost my bone. I glanced north and I glanced south. Cars drove past me on Kissena Boulevard, and stepping out of the road and onto the curb, I began the walk home. The windows in the apartment buildings I passed glowed against the darkness outside.

I was alert like I had been on the walk home with Janine and Tracy after the mugging on that snowy night in New Jersey and with my mother the night of the party she brought us to near Central Park when the man followed us. I moved quickly, my body rigid, my eyes mapping the distance until I made it to the lobby of my apartment building.

The doorman stopped me before I opened the glass doors. I couldn’t come in, he said. I live here, I told him. No, he said. He didn’t know me and thought I was a teenager up to mischief. “Please,” I pleaded, trying to catch my breath which I could no longer control. “Buzz my father, apartment 333. He’ll tell you.” The doorman didn’t look convinced but rang my father, and soon Nava came down and told the doorman he had to let me in, pounding on his chest when he wouldn’t budge.

When we got up to our apartment and I told them what had happened, I saw Nava’s face crumple into worry for me, into sadness. My father listened but didn’t say anything. His eyes were unreadable. The only sign that he was upset was how his jaw clenched. I wouldn’t ask him to go trick-or-treating again, and we wouldn’t talk about this after tonight.

When I got to the bathroom mirror, I saw my costume was torn, my eye makeup was running, and I had shaving cream on my back which I hadn’t felt the kids spray on me. I cleaned myself up, and still shivering from being out in the cold, I crawled into my bed.

I was thankful Nava was already asleep—that she wouldn’t ever have to know how my chest shook in the dark.

*Ronit Plank is a writer, teacher, and podcaster with work in The Atlantic, The Washington Post, The HuffPost, The Rumpus, & American Literary Review. She is host & producer of the award-winning podcast And Then Everything Changed featuring interviews with survivors, authors, and thought leaders about pivotal moments in their lives and decisions that have defined them. Find her at <https://ronitplank.com/>*

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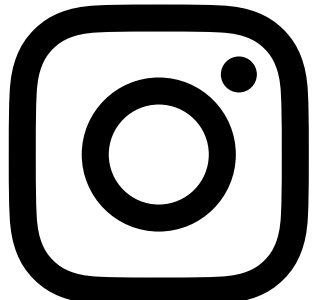
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