

**Halloween, 1972**

Betsy was dressed as Cher in blue polyester, though with less skin showing than the genuine article. Anne wore a top hat and tails with a fake moustache and beard and carried a paintbrush. Her trousers, cut from an old pair of Father’s, hung low, making her legs look unnaturally short. As the evening wore on she became increasingly testy when people asked who she was (“Toulouse-Lautrec—you know, the French painter? The painter.”). Lois was a princess, again. Joey had on his regular jeans with a Superman shirt and cape. He had protested even this, saying that costumes made him feel stupid, but Anne had pointed out that he’d get more candy if he would just wear something. No, not Betsy’s boa.

The huge old houses in the long-established neighborhood where they lived had too many old people to make Halloween much fun. Mother drove them to the newish subdivision where the Sullivans, the parents of Lois’s friend Kathy, had put up a two-story redwood house on Quail Run Lane. Every family who bought a lot in this development had picked the design of their house, so it was what their father called “bastard eclectic”—a mix of “California rustic,” “Spanish Colonial,” “American traditional,” and “modern.” What it wasn’t was “fancy”; the yards were small and there were only a few swimming pools.

Several other friends and classmates lived near the Sullivans, including Sarah Moore, Anne’s contemporary, whose mother had a small bungalow three blocks west. Fortunately, Mrs. Moore was one of the few local “ladies” that Mother got along with. After dropping the children off, she pointed the Cadillac west into the long late
afternoon shadows, her cigarette smoke trailing from the open window. They would meet her at the Moores’ house later. It was at the end of their trick-or-treating route.

Nearly two dozen children had gathered at the Sullivans’, of various ages and in all kinds of costumes. Betsy, relieved to see no other Chers, made polite conversation with Mr. Sullivan. Anne found Sarah Moore but not her older brother (he’d taken his fake ID to the bars downtown, Sarah said). After admiring Sarah’s pirate costume and another friend’s cowgirl outfit, and glowering at someone’s mother – “What are you meant to be, sweetheart?” – Anne slipped away to the kitchen where she knew she would find the grown-ups’ food she preferred: chips, guacamole, hot sauce. Lois ran off to join a small pink spangled flock of nine-year-olds in tiaras and tutus. Joey sat on the plaid sofa in the den, gazing at Kathy’s brother Sam, who was talking excitedly about Roger Staubach, the Dallas Cowboys quarterback, and the team’s prospects for the season. He was, Joey gathered, concerned about Staubach’s shoulder. As Sam continued to explain, his Cowboys jersey got twisted around his waist when he reached up to mime a long throw. One of the shoulder pads was starting to slip down his back. Joey wanted to reach over and fix it, but instead sat nodding sagely. “Wow!” he said occasionally, and (a phrase he’d picked up from his grandfather) “You don’t say.”

Finally, as if a secret signal had been exchanged, it was time for all the children to leave the Sullivans’ warm house and tumble out into the chilly evening with their empty brown paper bags. Sam donned his Cowboys helmet and another boy pulled on a vampire mask. The little girls adjusted their tiaras.
The kids knew what they were likely to find at every house. *The man who lives there is mean and his dog bites and my big brother says he has guns* – No, you’re being scaredy.

— Dare you to ring the doorbell – Is that the moon? – No, you idiot, it’s a UFO – Look, the Lewises put out a pumpkin, they were away last year – Trick or treat! – What are you meant to be, little girl? – A man in a hat – Hey, look! The Coburns’ lights are on, they always have brownies – I think my mom’s brownies are better – Yeah, but y’all live on Guadalupe, that’s almost a mile off – My sister told me people are putting poison in brownies, they’re using a hypo-der-mic needle – Wow, thanks, Miz Coburn! – I’m Roger Staubach! – Trick or treat! – Thank you! – Thank you! – Why does everybody give us candy corn? – I like candy corn – What I heard is the police said don’t take apples, someone’s going to put razor blades in apples – Who wants to ring Miz Sellers’ doorbell? – Not me, she dresses like a witch and she jumps out and screams – You really are scaredy, here, I’ll go do it – Eeeeee! … Hi, Miz Sellers – A ghost – A painter – Thank you, Miz Sellers! – Candy corn

Betsy realized as she walked along that her pale blue satin halter dress wasn’t warm enough. She wrapped the embroidered shawl she’d borrowed from her mother more snugly around her shoulders and knotted the ends so that it would stay put. Still she felt goose bumps on her arms. Both Anne and Joey’s costumes had long sleeves. Lois felt too beautiful to worry about whether she was cold or not, and had turned up her nose at Mrs. Sullivan’s offer of “a nice jacket.”

*There’s really no one at the Hunters? That’s weird – Well, I saw them back at Kathy’s house, maybe they’re still there – Dang, they always have Butterfingers – You already have Butterfingers! You’re fat! – I’m rubber, you’re glue, whatever you say … oh, look, the Hunters*
put a basket outside their door – What is it? – Apples – Never mind – Are you scared now? –

Who moved into this house? – Dunno the name, it’s Lee’s aunt, though – Trick or treat! – Oh,

thank you, ma’am – He’s Superman but he’s only halfway changed out of his clothes – A painter

– Wow, she had Tootsie Roll Pops! – See how dark it’s getting? – I bet there’s no sun left


out! – It’s spoooooky! – Shut up!

Eventually the children, strung out in smaller groups but still more or less

together, had gone two blocks along the street. The streetlights cast an intermittent

harsh glow on circular sections of street and sidewalk. As they neared the last block, a

cul de sac, Sarah Moore and the Tennysons were conscious that they were approaching

the house where their mothers had been drinking together for nearly two hours. Not

quite yet, though. There were more houses to visit. For the younger children especially,
too much candy wasn’t enough, and some were now stuffing their pockets full of

M&M’s and Hershey’s Kisses in order to make room in their battered paper bags for

more.

At last they blinked their way past the last streetlight and walked toward the

Moores’ house. … What’s going on? The lights are off! Betsy, Anne, and Sarah pushed

forward but even they could only stare at the house, which stood completely dark, the

front door open, the pumpkin smashed into pieces on the front porch. The children fell

quiet. And then, from somewhere close by in the dark, they heard a man’s deep voice

asking, in a hollow, mocking tone:

“What’s the matter? Lost your mother?”
Born in Texas, Helen Graves moved to New York City after graduating from college and has lived in the city ever since. She has been an editorial assistant for Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Freedom-to-Write program coordinator for PEN American Center, Development Director for The Academy of American Poets, and, most recently, writer and editor for EmcArts, a nonprofit consulting firm that works with arts and cultural organizations. She currently works as a freelance editor, copyeditor, and grant writer.

Helen first began writing fiction in the early 1990s, joining an informal writers’ group in New York. The members included Siobhan Dowd, whose first published book, *A Swift Pure Cry*, was short-listed for the UK’s Carnegie Medal for young adult fiction in 2007. In addition to writing, Helen has participated in story-telling slams sponsored by The Moth at the Nuyorican Poets’ Café.

Beginning in late 2007, after a hiatus, Helen started to write again. In Spring 2009, she participated in a workshop at the 92nd Street Y led by Nalini Jones.