

## *Caroline Leavitt*

{ IN HER WORDS }

### Paranoia in the Burbs

**I**n the 1960s, I moved from my grandmother's Brookline apartment to a new development in Waltham, Massachusetts. The suburbs! Our own house! My father never tired of telling me that "here was life." My sister and I could run around on our own, the schools were great, there was fresh air and sunshine. There were even spindly little trees planted, the promise of big leafy greenery to come. This new dream meant happiness, safety, community. Or did it?

I remember the thrill of roaming around solo, of going in and out of neighbors' houses whenever I wanted because no one ever locked their doors. But there was some tarnish under the shine. When a black family wanted to move into the development, some neighbors started up a petition to stop them. My mother got the list of names and called every one. "Aren't you ashamed?" she accused, until the protest was dropped. There was the fact that we were the only Jewish family in a predominantly Christian neighborhood, and I often heard, casually, like the passing of party nuts, that we killed Christ, that we would be going to Hell, and one friend even called me weeping to tell me she could no longer hang around with me because her parents "didn't trust Jews."

But it wasn't just racism that permeated the neighborhood. People were terrified of Communists. A neighbor accused my mother of being "more than a little pink" because she was antiwar. We had duck-and-cover drills in school, cowering under our desks for protection against the atom bomb and glow of radiation. We were all on alert, especially when a suspicious new family moved in: a divorced woman and her son and daughter. "She's had it once; she'll do anything to get it again," a neighbor said knowingly, and even though we kids weren't quite sure what "it" was, we had a good idea. She often sunned in her front yard in a bikini, at a time when all of

our mothers wore modest one-pieces, and the tight dresses she wore to the backyard barbecues made all of the fathers want to dance close with her. Our parents warned us not to go into her house because, they insisted, it was dirty or there was no food. Even worse, she worked, instead of making a nice home, cooking dinner, being a wife. She was unusual, and that was never a good thing.

The daughter — we'll call her Anna — was my friend, as was her brother. Roger. We kids liked Anna and Roger, but we knew early on that for a cookie, Roger would do your homework. For a pack of gum, Anna would show her panties. But that summer, something shocking happened. The wealthy family Anna babysat for wanted to adopt her, to take her away to New York, where they were moving, and Anna's mother said yes. Just like that her mother gave her up, and Anna vanished. Two days later, Anna's mother and Roger disappeared, too.

I never forgot them. I tried to find out what had happened to them, as a kid and as an adult, but I met dead end after dead end. When I started *Is This Tomorrow*, it was about that family, but like all fiction, it began to breathe and take on its own life, and it soon morphed into something else. I wrote about Ava Lark, divorced, Jewish, working, and beautiful, all of which made her a target in her suburban enclave. But unlike her real-life counterpart, she was devoted to her son, Lewis, who never forgave her for the yearning he felt for his absent father. The character who vanishes is Jimmy, Lewis's best friend, which somehow escalates the dislike everyone feels for Ava, and ruptures the neighborhood sense of safety, as Jimmy's unsolved mystery haunts and affects everyone for years to come.

I set the novel in the fifties because the contrasts of that era stun me. Underneath that good life, the Eisenhower blandness, the wood-paneled rec rooms, the suburban idyll, was desperate anxiety about anything different, terror of Communism, unease about nuclear destruction, distrust of anyone even remotely unique and a need to attack them for it. The thing is, these facts, these attitudes, still seem to resonate today.

I never found out what happened to the real-life people who left without a trace, but I got to have closure with my fictional characters, solving their mysteries in ways that none of them — or I — ever expected. And through them, I was able to project a more hopeful, progressive, and truly accepting future.