

*Is This Tomorrow*

A Note from the Author

Questions for Discussion





## *A Note from the Author*

In 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. 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 the 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 1950s 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.

## Questions for Discussion

1. Why do you think Leavitt takes a child-vanishing story and sets it in the 1950s? What does the era add to the story? Would the story have had a different outcome if it were set in a different time frame?
2. The title, *Is This Tomorrow*, was the actual name of a lurid 1950s-era pamphlet about the threat of Communism, but the title works on other levels in the novel. Why else do you think Leavitt gave the novel that title?
3. So much of *Is This Tomorrow* is about what it means to be part of a community and how difficult it is to be an outsider. Who besides Ava and Lewis are outsiders? How does being an outsider affect both Ava and Lewis at work and in their relationships?
4. Cooking and the meaning of cooking figure in the novel, from the “meals men like” that Ava struggles with to her discovery that she has a talent for making pies. How does Leavitt show the changing nature of relationships, creativity, and male/female jobs in the novel, especially in the context of the 1950s, when women often didn’t become professionals but married the people they wanted to be?
5. Leavitt’s novel probes the directions our lives can take. Lewis and Jimmy have an actual map to guide them in future trips. Lewis has no sense of direction, and at one point Ava tells him to watch for and read

the signs and he won't get lost. What do you think are some of the important signs in Lewis's life, and how does Lewis follow or ignore them?

6. What are the very different ways in which Lewis and Rose cope with Jimmy's disappearance, and how is each way integral to their personality? Who do you think has the most difficulty coping and why?

7. What makes Ava so suspect in the neighborhood, and would those things be suspect in any other era?

8. Although the novel is set in the 1950s, what parallels do you see to contemporary life?

9. *It Is Tomorrow* is very much about fathers and sons and mothers and sons. How does Lewis's relationship with his father and with Ava change throughout the novel?

10. The novel explores the way we communicate. Rose feels she has an intuitive communication with Jimmy. She tells everyone about her brother, but she can't really listen to any disagreement about him. She also writes out her thoughts to Lewis in a journal. Lewis can really open up only to his patients. And even Ava hides things about his father from Lewis. How would the story have turned out differently if the characters could have communicated with one another without fear?

11. Why is being a nurse the perfect job for Lewis? And why does he begin to move away from it?

12. Why and how do all of the characters feel guilt in one way or another for something they could have or should have done?

13. At one point in the story, Lewis wants to tell Ava, "Don't be this person anymore" (page 183). What does he mean, and how do you think that question also refers to him?

14. Who does Leavitt lead you to suspect is responsible for what happens to Jimmy? How many different people did you suspect and why?

15. Ava asks at one point, about one of her boyfriends, “How had she missed the truth?” (page 311), which could apply to everyone in terms of what really happened to Jimmy. Why do you think people missed the truth?
16. Why do you think Leavitt jumped forward in time to show Lewis and Rose as adults? How would the novel have been different if the story had resolved while they were still children?
17. Why do you think Lewis chooses not to tell Ava what he knows about his father? What does this act show about Lewis?
18. How is the suburban dream blighted in the novel? What hints do you see of the 1960s era to come?
19. Ava’s being Jewish marks her as an outsider, and yet she isn’t a particularly observant Jew. How do you think the story would have changed if she were?
20. Leavitt has said that she always wants the endings of her novels to be never-ending, to be unexpected, and to make you continue to wonder about the characters’ lives. Did the novel end the way you expected? What do you think happens after the last page, and why?

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