



Note: Readers have written, asking what happens to Savannah, who is six years old when "The Comfort of Lies" ends. This epilogue was in the original manuscript—I thought some readers would enjoy seeing how my lovely girl (I adored her every minute of writing the book) made out. WARNING: SPOILERS AHEAD!!! Don't' read before reading the book!

Epilogue

The Comfort of Lies

by Randy Susan Meyers

Savannah at 14

Tonight, my parents—all six of them—were going to be together for the first time. Half of me felt a weird sort of excitement; the other half was ready to throw up. Worry jangled everywhere in my body, from a fizzy full feeling in my throat to the tips of my fingers. What would it be like, having my real parents (which truly, my adoptive parents are) and my real, but not real, parents (honestly, that's what my birth parents felt like) plus, what I guess I'd call my sort-of-stepmother and stepfather, all with me at the same time?

There's no doubt that my life's complicated.

At the age of five, I met my biological mother and father for the first time. My memories from that day are probably just stories stuck in my head from what Mom and Dad told me, but there's one crystalized moment that I swear I remember: I'm was on my father Peter's lap. Tia, my biological mother, handed me a picture showing her when she was hugely pregnant. With me.

There I was.

Right inside.

I wanted to peer through her belly with x-ray eyes and see tiny me floating there.

Afterwards, Mom says I asked about that photograph so often she finally had to ask Tia for a copy.

It's been on my dresser ever since. I guess at times it was hard for her and Dad to see it, but they never said anything. Sometimes I traced the outline of Tia's belly, trying to squeeze my mind into a time when we were connected. It's not like I wanted to live with her, but sometimes it seemed strange that I didn't. You curled up inside someone for nine months, and then boom, you're born and given to someone else. And she's in my live now and has been since I was five.

Did I know? Do babies come into the world recognizing their mothers, knowing their voice, their smell? And if that's true, do they miss them when they're given to a new parent? I wonder if I began missing Tia when my mom—Caroline—held me.

I grew up differently than other kids. Maybe everybody feels that way—my mother says we're all the stars of our own show—but how many kids have a million parents applauding every moment of their lives? There are times it's great; I probably got more birthday presents than anyone I know—which by the way, drove my mother and father

nuts. But sometimes it overwhelmed me to be spinning from parent to parent, trying to be the girl each one wanted.

My mom would like me to be more studious. She'd love it if every grade I received were an "A." My dad seems to think I'm perfect, but he'd like it if I enjoyed watching every single sport in the world. I watch Red Sox games with him, but I fall asleep most of the time.

I knew Tia wanted me to be more at ease with her, although she's never pushed me about anything. And Nathan, my birth father, I think he'd like it if I were surer of myself. It's just a feeling I get. Or maybe I'm just thinking that because it's what I wish, and thinking Nathan wants the same thing for me makes me feel better. Closer to him.

More than anything, I wish I were braver. Brave enough to say what I'm thinking without figuring out ahead of time if what I say will make people happy.

You'd think I'd be used to being worried, since I'm scared of so much stuff.

Storms.

Nuclear war.

Getting lost.

Wolves.

Oceans at night.

Mom blames herself for what she calls my timidity. She thinks she was too impatient and hurried when I was little, so I'm always studying people to see if I'm doing the right thing.

Maybe Mom's right, but at fourteen it was time for me to change. No more little kid excuses and tonight was going to be my first big step. Not only hanging out with my million parents, but I'd be playing one of the leads in the school play, *Fame*—which meant I could barely eat a thing all day. My part was huge. I played Doris. Of course. She's the scared one.

Dad had forced me to come to the dining room and eat French toast eggs, and now I only had a few hours left before I had to leave the safety of my bedroom. I practiced my first lines as I put on my costume.

"I was told to report here " (Doris said with a tremulous voice.)

"I knew it! Just what I expected! There are no other mothers!" (Doris uses an angry whisper.)

I peered over my shoulder to see the back of myself in the mirror. The black lace skirt looked great, but my thighs were huge and the weird black beret I wore looked stupid no matter how I adjusted it, pushing it forward and then back, and then forward again.

Instead of having a lead, I suddenly wished I'd only been picked for the chorus. I'd be performing with high school kids tonight, despite being in eighth grade, since my school, Boston Latin, went from seventh to twelfth grade. I had to take a test to get in. Nathan made

a huge deal when I got accepted, telling my parents the history of the school as though they were clueless. Which, of course, drove Dad crazy. *You'd think he took the test instead of her*, I heard him whisper to my mother. *Like he's taking credit. Like it was his idea that she go there. Like he grew up here instead of me.*

Of course, he had his *Nathan's-a-jerk* face on when he said it.

As I squinted at the mirror, imagined myself as thin as Tia. Ever since she gave me an album of photos for my tenth birthday, I'd wondered if I'd look more like her as I got older, but my body was more like Tia's mother's.

At least I had Tia's eyes.

Mom's hushed knock interrupted my thoughts. "Come in," I said.

I turned around again, so I could see my butt.

"It's ready." She held out the sweater she'd been working on.

"I look fat." I put my hands on my waist to see how much flab I could feel.

"Stop that." Mom took my hands away from where I squeezed my flesh. "You can't look fat, because you're not fat. You have a beautiful muscular body."

"Thanks, Mom. Dream come true. Every girl in my school is just dying for a muscular body." I spoke fast so I wouldn't cry, and then bit my lip as hard as I could. I hated when mean words leapt out, especially at Mom.

“I know it’s hard at your age.” She draped the sweater over my shoulders. “But it’s true. You look fantastic.”

We stared in the mirror together. Black skirt, bright red sweater, my long hair frizzed out in a million curls to look eighties—I looked like I had a dark cloud around my head. I looked too old for my pink room. And I looked the opposite of Mom.

I tugged at the rhinestone buttons she’d sewn on the sweater, checking to see if they were secure. Mom had put them on for a theatrical look and to catch the stage lights. “I think I’m going to throw up.”

“And if you do, it’s fine. You’re having stage fright. Try not to think of it as a bad thing, but as being tense with anticipation.” Mom pushed her flyaway hair behind her ears as she always did when coming up with a theory. “It’s because you’re imagining a catastrophe. Or people judging you. But really, sweetheart, everyone is rooting for you.”

My father stuck his head in, as though he’d been listening in. “Sometimes being nervous is just being nervous, honey. Put it out of your head and you’ll do great.”

Mom smiled at me and raised her eyebrows. She was used to Dad’s impatience when we *‘talked things to death.’* “Dad’s right. You’ll do great. Finish up. We’ll be leaving soon.” She hugged me, careful not to mess up my hair, and left my room.

Daddy called us *The Jamaica Plain Society of Over-Analyzers*. For instance, when I asked why we moved to Jamaica Plain after Tia moved away, Daddy swore it was sheer

happenstance. Karma makes more sense to me as the reason we ended up in JP. When I'm at City Feed, which I can walk to, I always think of Mom meeting Tia there. Mom said it was that day she realized it was time to let go of secrets. I'm positive there's more to the story than what Mom said. Like how did they decide to let Tia and Nathan come to our house? Did they fight about it? Were they scared?

They never told me if they were worried that Tia or Nathan would try to take me away, but I knew that Tia had once thought about trying to get custody, though not seriously. She told me about it when I was twelve. We were on the phone late at night (late for me, since she lived in San Francisco). I was crying, though I was really trying hard to cover up the whole teary voice thing.

Didn't you ever wonder about me? What it would be like to have me live with you?

That's when she told me about how she almost tried to get me back, but didn't follow through. And why. But how it led to us being in touch, and wasn't that a good thing?

Tia shared more with me than any of my parents; I never told Mom or Dad what she said. As close as I am with them, there are things we just can't talk about. They worry a lot, and besides, I hate making them sad.

Every parent-type would be at the play. Dad and Mom argued about it when they thought I was asleep.

I am not having her play ruined by having a circus of . . . of them there.

They're not a circus, Peter. Or a 'them.' They're her family.

We're her family.

Listen to me. This is just going to be the first of many: Graduations. Weddings. Baby showers. Grandchildren. Next time they'll be grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Her brothers. We might as well get used to it.

Movie scenes of my-life-to-be floated past my eyes. Suddenly I had a husband. Children. Imagining the crowd in my future, I worried about my potential sons and daughters—how would they ever get enough tickets for all the family wanting to come to their plays?

As usual, Mom calmed Dad down. It made me sad, seeing him jealous of Nathan and Tia. I became even more nervous about how I'd act when everyone was together. When I'd asked Mom what we'd do after the play, she'd been straightforward, as she always was. "I think this may be one we'll have to play by ear. But Dad and I will be right there with you. You'll never be alone."

I almost laughed when Mom said that, because that was the opposite of what I worried about sometimes—that I'd never be alone. For a supposed only child, not counting Lucas and Max, my biological half-brothers, I sure had a lot of people around.

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When the play ended, I was almost too excited to worry about my parents—any of them. The applause went on forever. The cast members hugged about a million times before we left backstage. Inside, I felt pink and shimmery.

Then it was time. My stomach flipped as smoothed my skirt down. I took the deep breaths that Mom always recommends and went to find them.

They crowded together in the lobby with all the other kids' families. Seeing them like that, despite being petrified, I was happy, even though I wished I were invisible—positive we looked like the oddest family in the school.

Juliette and my mother each held a bouquet of flowers. I smiled, thinking that if Nathan and my father held the flowers, they'd end up crushing every petal as they pushed to get them to me first.

My mother handed her wrapped roses to Tia to hold, and then came forward for a hug. I buried my head in her soft ivory sweater.

"You were wonderful, sweetheart," she whispered into my hair.

Dad came up next to us. "I am not being the least bit prejudiced when I say this: you were the best." He squeezed me so hard my beret fell off. "It's true."

Then he did something I'll never forget. He put his hands on my shoulders and turned me around so that I faced everyone. "Tell me, Nathan," he asked. "Can you believe this girl of ours?"

This was exactly what my mother meant when she said my father had more generosity of spirit than anyone she knew. He grumbled, but when it was time, he always rescued me.

Tia handed the flowers back to my mother, and took my hands in hers. “Oh, Savannah, what you did! You make us all so proud.”

I looked into her eyes, which were kind of teary, grateful all over again that I didn’t have to fantasize about who Tia was. Tia and her husband had come all the way from California to see me in the play.

When Mom enrolled me in a support group for adopted kids, all they talked about was what their mother or father might look like, or how they thought they’d act, and why they’d been given up. My life might not be a fairy tale, but it didn’t keep me up nights crying. I didn’t have the sort of sadness the other kids had.

Tia’s husband, Elliot, wrapped his arms around both of us. He’s a marine biologist who works with penguins. After an awful oil spill, he spent months as part of what he calls the great penguin rescue. I actually went to their wedding with Mom and Dad three years ago.

“Here’s something to tell your psychiatrist someday,” my father had whispered as the minister spoke, almost making me laugh in the middle of the ceremony.

Of course, Nathan and Juliette weren't at the wedding. Even in our odd little family that would be too weird. The fact that I'm the product of an affair was the creepiest piece of the puzzle. It was a barrier between Max, Lucas, and me, which I totally understood. If my father slept with someone other than my mother, and they had a baby, that would be calamitous to say the least.

Mom says the older we get, the closer we'll be, my half-brothers and I, and that right now just being polite was probably fine.

Tia's husband is a good guy. When I had to write a report about a relative's work, I chose him. His job is interesting, but mostly it was the safest choice. Mom's work, she was a pediatric pathologist, which means dissecting stuff that's cut out of kids, honestly, made me too sad to want to write about it. Dad's job—something, something computers—put me to sleep. Tia was a gerontologist, she worked with old people, which I thought was interesting, but I didn't want to hurt Mom's feelings by picking Tia and not her.

I loved Juliette's store—that was where I really wanted to go. Juliette, she's Nathan's wife, owns an organic skincare and makeup store. She gives me great stuff, though not make-up; Mom said I couldn't even think about it until I'm fifteen. Anyway, I wasn't going to choose her over Tia or Mom. I'm not nuts.

Everyone understands a kid choosing penguins.

Tia handed me a tiny box. “Robin sent you this as congratulations.” Robin was Tia’s best friend, who I met at the wedding.

I opened the white box and took out three gold discs on a thin chain. A deep brown stone in the middle circle glinted where the light hit.

“They look like cat’s eyes.” I said.

“Or yours.” Tia ran a soft finger over my hair, pulling out a curl and letting it spring back. “It’s tourmaline.”

“Want me to put it on for you?” Mom asked.

I turned around so she could fasten it. When it was clasped, I slid the cold charms back and forth on the chain until they warmed in my hands.

Someday I want to ask Juliette how she feels being around Tia. When I asked Mom, she said that Juliette disassociates—which is like disappearing mentally. Which sounds sad to me.

Juliette came for her hug. “You were great.” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “You reminded me of Nathan.”

After that I don’t remember much about who said what. All I know is that I looked around and saw that I was one of those kids with a ton of people around them and I realized it felt good. At that moment it really didn’t matter how we all got there.

When Mom and I talked about our situation, we agreed that sometimes it was eggshells all over the place, but that was way better than imagining stuff. If I didn't know Tia and Nathan, Mom said I'd have built them into either fantasies or nightmares. This way they were real people.

I held the red roses from my mother and the white ones from Juliette to my nose and breathed in the mingled flowers. During the years I took gymnastics, I dreamt that I'd be in the Olympics. Now I wanted to be an actress.

Mom and Dad swore it could happen. *Anything is possible*, they always said. *Never forget that.*

I believed anything was possible. Look at my crazy life, with mothers and fathers coming out of my ears. They all loved me. Once in a while they messed up—jealous of each other, worried that they'd messed up—and I had to take care of them, but somehow I'd ended up pretty lucky.

Nobody has an ideal life. Mom said that also. But considering how we all started out, I thought we were as close to perfect as people like us could hope for.

I held the three gold circles, pressing one at a time to my lips, and made three wishes.

I wished world hunger would end.

I wished all my parents would understand that I'm fine, and begin to relax a bit.

And I wished that people believed there really could be a happily ever after, because I thought it could happen. That's what I wanted for all of us, happily ever after, and not that word Nathan used: *dayenu*. *Dayenu* is a Yiddish word that meant '*when things went well, you didn't always have to ask for more.*'

If this is all we have, then it's enough.

But I wanted more than good enough. Maybe that's because I practically lived three different lives, which Mom said gave me a totally different perspective than other kids.

If I'd stayed with Tia, I don't think I would have ended up knowing how big the world could be. She told me that when we drove around the streets in South Boston where we would have lived.

If I'd somehow ended up with Nathan, Juliette might have thought about Nathan's mistake every time she looked at me. I wouldn't have wanted to be raised as a reminder of someone's bad judgment.

And if I'd never met Nathan or Tia, I'd have grown up with a million questions that no one could answer.

Many things were right in my life, but I still wasn't a *dayenu* sort of person.

Good enough wouldn't be enough.

Whether anyone believed me or not, I remembered being a lonely little kid. I remembered wishing I'd have someone to play with. I remembered wishing that Mom and Dad would come home.

I remembered being scared.

Now I was hardly ever afraid. I knew for sure there would always be someone there for me.

I'd become the kind of person who believed miracles could happen. And I believed you could end up living happily ever after.

I wondered which of my parents I got that from.

**** THE END ****