

EPISODE 1 - THE JUST ENOUGH FAMILY

Melinda [00:00:00] This is a Three Uncanny Four production.

Ari [00:00:04] OK, this is the first question I have.

Liz [00:00:06] OK.

Ari [00:00:06] Where are we?

Liz [00:00:09] Oh, you mean, I have to talk about Grey Gardens.

Ari [00:00:12] Yes. That's my friend, the fashion designer, Liz Lange, at Grey Gardens, her estate in East Hampton, which was made famous by the Maysles Brothers' iconic documentary. The movie tells the story of Big Edie and Little Edie, two eccentric relatives of Jacqueline Kennedy who once lived in the house. Women with a singular sense of style and a misguided belief that they are still basking in the glow of Camelot. When the truth is anything but. Do you on the regular stop yourself and be like, oh, my God, it's Grey Gardens?

Liz [00:00:50] You know, I don't. I mean, I'm very aware of the documentary, but I also just really love the house. I grew up going out to East Hampton. The houses that I remember from my childhood look like this house. The fact that it's Grey Gardens is just like almost the icing on the cake.

Ari [00:01:08] The house is ten thousand square feet with a pool and a tennis court and acres of beautiful gardens all on the edge of the Atlantic Ocean. Liz has always identified as rich.

Liz [00:01:22] When I was growing up, I thought that we were the richest family in the United States. And it felt impossible that it would change. Absolutely impossible.

Ari [00:01:35] But just like the women in the movie Grey Gardens, what Liz expected from life and what her life turned out to be are two very different things. I'm Ariel Levy, and this is The Just Enough Family.

Liz [00:01:51] If I were to say to my mother, are we rich, she'd say, we're comfortable. But our private plane was a seven twenty seven. We had a very large helicopter that we would take to the plane. Both my parents had their own car and driver. We had a very large apartment. We had a house in East Hampton, we had a different country house in Bedford, we had a ski house in Aspen. It was just very like it was unusual.

Ari [00:02:13] All this wealth was thanks to Liz's uncle, Saul Steinberg, who made a fortune in the 60s, 70s and 80s as a corporate raider with help from his little brother, Bob, Liz's father. Saul, spotted a hole in the market for leasing office equipment and turned it into his first successful company, Leasco. It doesn't sound like much, but it was the beginning of an amazing run that created the Steinberg family fortune.

Liz [00:02:39] He was the richest self-made person in the United States under the age of 30. By the time he was like twenty seven. And he was supporting the entire family, my grandfather, my grandfather's brother, all his cousins, all his siblings and everybody kind of worked for him.

Ari [00:02:54] Or you could say that he worked for all of them. All the Steinberg's had lavish lifestyles because of what Saul accomplished, and they all lived on top of each other in a kind of opulent shtetl. But Saul lived the biggest.

Liz [00:03:10] Jewish rich was new back then, not for German Jews, but we were part of this other wave. German Jews were almost like WASPs. They had made money like the Loeb's and the Warbers. Though, but they were like, very understated. And then came this group of, I guess, Russian Jews. My uncle was part of it. Very, very, very loud, very showy. And my family lived very similarly to that. And I was very well aware of the fact that if you were going to say, hey, my friend Liz is joining us, you probably back then have said Liz's family is crazy rich.

Jonathan [00:03:43] I think if you had taken a poll in college and said, name the girl who is least likely to ever have a job, I would have said that'd have to be Liz Steinberg.

Ari [00:03:55] That's the designer Jonathan Adler, who became friends with Liz at Brown University. They've been close for 30 years.

Jonathan [00:04:03] Probably she'll like doing an internship for a minute, marry a rich dude, live the life she's supposed to live. So I thought when she was doing the maternity line, I was like, that's great. Like go for it. It seemed like a super appropriate, like, cute kind of Lucy and Ethel starting a biz kind of a thing. Like a rich ladies amuse bouche before, you know, settling into her appropriate life.

News [00:04:31] Liz Lange, maternity has revolutionized fashion for expectant mothers. The clothing line infuses maternity wear with high fashion. Liz Lange started the company nearly 10 years ago to provide comfortable maternity clothing for her friends. Now she sells her clothes at high-end boutiques and provides a more modest line as a designer partner for Target.

Ari [00:04:54] I don't know how to put into words what a thing your brand was. I mean, it's hard to explain why good looking, slinky high end maternity wear was such a big deal. What do you attribute that to?

Liz [00:05:10] A couple of things. The whole kind of fetishizing of motherhood was just happening at the same time that I started my brand. Like mommy groups and mommy blogs.

Ari [00:05:20] Is that what led you to start the brand?

Liz [00:05:22] No.

Ari [00:05:23] Did you notice that happening?

Liz [00:05:24] I was not pregnant myself when I started the brand, which is super weird. But I was thinking about it and I noticed that my friends were all getting pregnant and they are all complaining. There's nothing to wear. Even friends that weren't normally like big shoppers, they're buying this really expensive stuff like Donna Karan and Calvin Klein. Anything they can find that is stretchy, that is fitted. That looks more normal. And I'm saying to them, like, why don't you just going into a regular ma- like I've heard of these maternity stores, why aren't you shopping there? Like, what are you doing? I took a look at what some of that stuff looked like. I was just curious. The clothes were so down market. The fabrics were hideous. I always used to joke that they were kind of like, don't stand too close to an open flame fabrics. They were styled like the woman herself was kind of morphing into a baby, like with bows and cute details.

Ari [00:06:09] Peter Pan collars.

Liz [00:06:11] Peter Pan collars. Little strings on each side that you were meant to tie in the back or tie in the front in a bow. And this was in the nineties when people were the look was so clean.

Ari [00:06:18] And like Armani.

Liz [00:06:19] Armani. Yes. It was the years of Armani. You just wanted to be in a neutral color, very tailored.

Ari [00:06:25] And then all of a sudden you're pregnant. You feel chemically like another species of humanoid, and then you're supposed to look

Liz [00:06:34] Like a freak.

Ari [00:06:35] Like a dumpy freak.

Liz [00:06:36] Exactly.

Ari [00:06:37] Right. I mean, there wasn't high end.

Liz [00:06:39] The clothing needed to look just like what women I knew liked to wear when they weren't pregnant. It needs to be made of fabrics that felt high end. And just like the fabrics they liked to wear when they weren't pregnant and that didn't exist.

Ari [00:06:51] After graduating from Brown, both Liz and Jonathan started their own companies in New York City. Like her uncle Saul, Liz had a talent for identifying a gap in the market.

Jonathan [00:07:03] I would be like on my potter's wheel, talking to her on the phone and I'd say, OK, can you talk to me? She'd say can't talk, slammed. And I'd say, how much do you have in this morning? It was like 11 a.m. She's like, thirty thousand got to go bye. A one room shop on the second floor that's doing thirty thousand dollars by 11 a.m. is a retail revolution. Like those numbers simply do not exist.

Kathy [00:07:31] I thought she was crazy.

Ari [00:07:33] That's Liz's mom, Kathy Steinberg. She knows a lot about retail. Kathy was once on a TV show about shoppers who spend over a million dollars a year.

Kathy [00:07:43] Now, I would understand if Prada decided to be open by appointment, but Liz Lange was not Miuccia Prada. And I remember saying, or, thinking who is going to make an appointment? I just didn't think the way she was rolling it out could possibly work.

Liz [00:08:04] The room was nothing, it was Wizard of Oz, it was me in a small office seeing women one at a time, but all of a sudden I was in Vogue, or this huge spread in People magazine with Cindy Crawford. And Cindy also was on TV every week. And she would open her closet and be like, there's this woman in New York named Liz Lange who's making clothes for me. And then my answering machine at the office would be on can't accept any more messages. I always think that if I was watching a movie of my life, I'd watch like that whirlwind thing that they sometimes show in a montage, like it all happened so fast.

Laura [00:08:34] It went from, oh, I have my cousin Liz. Great. You know, to my cousin is Liz Lange. Liz Lange? Wow, that's amazing. What a smart idea. I love her stuff. All of a sudden, she was kind of a celebrity.

Ari [00:08:54] That's Laura, Liz's cousin and Saul's daughter. Laura grew up with an expectation that she'd go into business and do something innovative, too.

Laura [00:09:02] Being an entrepreneur in our family is something that comes very naturally.

Ari [00:09:08] Just talk to me about that for for a second. How was that in the ether of your family? How did you know that was kind of what one did?

Laura [00:09:16] I mean, the story of starting Leasco was I knew a big deal. That whole concept of coming up with a new business model was a big, big part of our childhood. And then we were surrounded by people who were doing things a little differently.

Liz [00:09:40] We would do our seder every year with who I called Uncle Ronnie, but it was Ron Perlman and Carl Icahn and like all the corporate raiders of the 80s. Everybody in my parents' world was a thing in the business world. Like the way celebrities must all hang out together. Like that was just who they knew.

Ari [00:09:57] And what did the women do?

Liz [00:09:59] I didn't know any friends of my parents' wives. No, none of the women worked.

Ari [00:10:04] Right.

Liz [00:10:04] None of them.

Ari [00:10:04] Oh, no, no. I know what they do with their, how'd they spend the day?

Liz [00:10:07] See, I never really was clear on that because I always joked- people would always be like oh so your mother is a homemaker. I'm like, well, no, she wasn't a homemaker. I mean, I think of my mother like, you know, out shopping on the phone. Like when I would come home, my mother would usually be sitting on her chaise lounge in her bedroom. She wasn't a big smoker, but she always had one cigarette a day and she'd be on the phone with her friends. This is what's really strange about it. I actually thought it was a great life. That's I think also why when I started Liz Lange maternity, that I wasn't certain it was going to be my career because I didn't have a lot of role models, not in a bad way. Again, like no complaints. That just wasn't the way I looked at the world because my mom-

Ari [00:10:44] Right.

Liz [00:10:44] -and her friends didn't work.

Ari [00:10:45] You never thought, oh, this is inadequate. I need more stimulation than this.

Liz [00:10:48] No, I don't recall them complaining. I know there's a lot today, women wrote about it in the 70s. They were unsatisfied. But that wasn't, I didn't if-

Ari [00:10:55] But maybe they weren't rich.

Liz [00:10:58] Right they didn't seem it to me. It seemed really great.

Ari [00:11:00] Yeah yeah yeah.

Liz [00:11:00] That's the way it seemed to my, again, like my little girl eyes like it all look kind of fun.

Ari [00:11:03] So you were going to make clothes for other Upper East Side ladies?

Liz [00:11:07] That's what I thought.

Ari [00:11:07] It was for fancy ladies.

Liz [00:11:09] Well, that's the other really interesting part. So that was my conception. I thought, well, this is going to be for all the, I don't know, ladies who lunch and my, you know, rich fancy friends. But really, really quickly, it became apparent to me that actually my best customers and really my bread and butter were like working women. And this is like sort of feminist but true. They would basically like, I cannot face this sea of men who already think it's weird that I'm pregnant at my job in investment banking or my job at a law firm and come in in some weird pink item with big bows on it and say, here, I'm here to help. I can't do it. Like the stories and letters that I used to get from women. You have changed my life. I couldn't have kept my job. I was so humiliated. But you made me feel normal. Like things that literally like still to this day move me.

Ari [00:11:54] I was about to say, like, as much as you don't like the term feminist, I can't help it. It smells a little bit really empowered. I mean, surely you feel proud.

Liz [00:12:04] Ended up being really empowering for women and that part is so cool and I am so proud.

Ari [00:12:08] So you are actually OK with that. You don't want to be called a feminist, but you don't object.

Liz [00:12:12] I'm not saying I wasn't trying to disempower women. Let's say that. I wasn't trying to disempower them. I don't think I fully understood how humiliated women were feeling. I knew they didn't like the clothes. And here I was on the most superficial level, never having been pregnant, being like, I'm not going to wear that when I'm pregnant in six months, no way. And then I realized it was so much bigger than that. Then it became almost like a movement.

Ari [00:12:36] Liz changed the way people thought about maternity wear. She created a whole new idea of how a pregnant woman should look. She was so successful, so beloved by women, that companies like Target and Nike wanted to collaborate with Liz on maternity lines of their own.

Liz [00:12:52] So it's nineteen ninety nine. And I got a call from someone who identified herself as an executive at Nike. And the head of like Nike Women's basically said, we are having trouble at Nike. Like, we're having trouble with female customers. So I was thinking like, you are? We're having trouble with female customers, so we've been doing a lot of market research about who the female customers trust the most. I'm thinking, like, I don't know, Tampax, like what's the most trusted brand? And they were like, and, you know, your name keeps coming up. And that was like such a crazy moment, almost like I was being punk'd.

Ari [00:13:26] And you didn't even have a store yet?

Liz [00:13:28] No, I had an office where people could come see me by appointment, literally.

Ari [00:13:34] While Liz's star is rising. She also becomes a mom. She has two children, Gus and Alice, with her first husband, Jeff Lange. And basically everything is going her way. Her life is exceeding her fantasies.

Liz [00:13:48] Looking back on it, it was so cool. That might have been like when I think about like the apex of whatever, that I was very happy. I was just things were great. I had a one year old daughter and a three year old son. It was the summer of 2001. I was preparing for my first ever runway show, which was huge, like, absolutely huge, indescribably so. I had that date circled on my calendar. I was going to be part of this New York Fashion Week doing the first ever maternity fashion show.

Ari [00:14:15] Real models who just happened to be pregnant.

Liz [00:14:18] Famous models who happened to be pregnant. Exactly. Everything about it, just like a regular show. But it just happened to be a maternity show.

Carol - News [00:14:24] Leather, lace and everything in between, it is all moving down the catwalk at Fashion Week in New York and CNN's Gail O'Neill has been braving the crowds to see what some of us, at least, are going to be wearing, maybe the most pregnant of us. Morning, Gayle.

Gayle - News [00:14:36] Morning, Carol. I'll tell you, this is the biggest media crush I've seen so far, and it's all over maternity wear. I'm backstage at the Liz Lange maternity show and it's rock and roll back here. We have media from all over the world. There's been huge buzz surrounding the show. Here we have the designer, Liz Lange herself. Liz, tell me, why is it so important for women to shop for this very small window of their lives?

Liz [00:14:56] Because you know what? It's not such a small window. It's nine months and then it's a few months when you're trying to get your body back and it's you know, you're talking about almost a year. Why would a woman want to take a year off of looking fashionable, feeling pretty, feeling great, feeling sexy. She needs to celebrate this time.

Liz [00:15:10] Every media outlet that you can imagine the way you're here right now with a microphone was there trying to shove a microphone in my face every minute. Like crazy. I thought, this is my moment. This is like the Oscars. But I noticed that, like halfway through the show, I can see because I'm standing backstage that the CNN TV cameras and the Good Morning America TV cameras are literally just racing out of the tents. And then I will never forget that I walked out onto the street and the world had changed.

News [00:15:41] This just in you are looking at obviously a very disturbing live shot there. That is the World Trade Center and we have unconfirmed reports this morning that a plane has crashed into one of the towers of the World Trade Center. CNN Center right now is just beginning to work on this story.

Ari [00:15:57] For thousands of New Yorkers, September 11th was a personal tragedy. For all of us, it was the day that separated life into before and after.

Liz [00:16:07] It started like the best year of my life, and it ended, I'd say, like the fourth quarter of that year, the worst time of my life. Everything that I thought was just a given became not a given. Everything. My health, my finances, my business, my family. That year was like perestroika. It was thirty five and I was beyond completely fine, like there was-

Ari [00:16:30] Zipping through life.

Liz [00:16:31] -nothing wrong. Zipping through life like a barrel of energy. But I had had like a weird pap smear that didn't even register in my mind as a problem. Cut to, its Columbus Day. And I see I have a message from my OBGYN saying, hey, Liz, you know, we're trying to reach you. And at that moment it was like my heart stopped. I was like, they would never try to reach me on a holiday unless something was terrible. So I almost, with my hand shaking, call back my doctor and I'll never forget. He just picked up the phone and said, well, I don't have good news. He said, you have cervical cancer and I was like, this is embarrassing, but I barely knew what cervical cancer was. You know, I had a radical hysterectomy. I was in hospital for weeks. I underwent chemotherapy and radiation, and they did them at the same time, which is extraordinarily debilitating. I was sick and I was tired and I was so scared and I was scared both of my own death and other people finding out. It was at the time was probably the most well known. And for some reason, radiation was seven days a week. So I went every single morning like seven in the morning down to the basement of Mount Sinai. When you got there, you would check in. Like you'd say, I'm Liz Lange. I'm here for radiation. And so when it was your turn, they would call out your name. So one day I was down there and when the receptionist called out Liz Lange, a lot of

heads kind of whipped, like it was a moment. And I thought to myself, oh, my God. I still remember it. Like, I can picture that moment. Word was somehow going to get out that I was sick. I didn't want people in my world, in my office, in my business life to know because everybody would think I was dying and totally lose confidence in the business. I hated the idea that people would feel sorry for me. It was way overdone, but that's the way it felt.

Ari [00:18:19] What is so ghastly about the idea of people feeling sorry for you?

Liz [00:18:24] Yeah, I don't totally know why, but I always was very aware of the fact that there was a lot on paper or from the outside world about my family that looked very charmed. Not that things were so, so, so terrible. They weren't. But the reality, like every reality, wasn't exactly sparkly. You know, I just knew that things weren't exactly as they appeared and I became overly invested. That's probably not what you were looking too deep o f an answer. But I became overly invested, which I was really never able to shake, in the idea that even if things aren't so good, at least let them look good. At least let people from the outside be envious. Feeling sorry for me would be the opposite of what I was used to, where everyone was like, oh, like Liz Steinberg, have you seen her apartment? And it was just a lot of buzz around us. And at that same time period, that is the time period that my family is losing its money. I don't remember where the repo man coming to my door fits in, but I've got to imagine that I'm home from the hospital in the middle of my chemo and radiation when that happened.

Ari [00:19:34] And what did that look like?

Liz [00:19:36] I had bills, American Express bills and other things that I sent to my father's secretary at his office because, like, that's what I did. And then, like a couple times, bills weren't getting paid, like as fast as I would have wanted to. And I was like calling my dad's secretary, like, what's going on? And she was like, no, no, you know, I'm going to pay it. I'm just paying this one first. And I was thinking like, paying it first? Well just pay them together, OK? Because, like, this is weird. Then one day in my beautiful big apartment and there's a knock on the door. And it's some strange guy who I think because I don't think I knew the word prior to that is looking for me and he's repossessing my cars. And I was like, there has been a big mistake. You just need to call my father. Like, I was that person. I'm not that person today. But this is literally impossible. The next thing I knew, my dad wasn't paying any of these things. At that point in my life, my husband was making some money, I had Liz Lange maternity, but the lifestyle we were leading was bigger than that. It was a really tense time.

Ari [00:20:42] Right.

Liz [00:20:42] I had cancer. We've got a three year old and a one year old. The business that had been the family business, the multibillion dollar business, was publicly going bankrupt and literally disappearing before our very eyes.

Ari [00:20:54] And so that's when the family fractures?

Liz [00:20:57] Fracture is the understatement of the year.

Ari [00:21:01] What happens?

Liz [00:21:02] So we went from being like extremely close. We spent every holiday together. We were just always together. There was something so mooring about being part of my family. Like on the high holidays when we went to Central Synagogue, which was sort of one of the centers of like rich Jewish life. And when we went there, everybody wanted to say hello to my parents. Everybody wanted to curry favor. Everybody wanted to be nice. How's Saul? What's going on? And we would sit with my uncle and we we all sat together. We'd go afterwards like to Chinese food for lunch, like everything like everywhere we went. And then everything changed. When

money is good, everyone gets along. The minute you see money issues, that's when you start seeing major fights. And my family fell apart. Like fell apart. No one was speaking. Everybody was angry. We were like being humiliated and left, right, and center. There were tons of articles like if you Googled it, you'd see I think our family's collapse was profiled in Vanity Fair and possibly New York magazine.

Ari [00:21:59] They were always boldface names, but when their business collapsed, the press covered the Steinberg's relentlessly. Here's how Vanity Fair describes Saul and his third wife in that piece about their downfall, which was called Vanished Opulence. "Using his huge fortune at times estimated to have been nearly a billion dollars, Saul and Gayfryd had become the king and queen of nouvelle society. Just what happened to Saul Steinberg's money is a question the Steinberg's friends wish people would stop asking."

Liz [00:22:32] It just like it was this overarching looming thing. How rich we were, how smart my uncle was, what an incredible business person he was. I was so worshipful. Everything that was presented to me and our family, I just swallowed completely whole. We are one of the richest families in the world, that could never change. We're Steinberg's. Like we are Steinberg's. We're made of money.

Liz [00:23:04] When I was a child, I always felt like things felt strange and a little out of control, even though I don't know that I could put my finger on it. So because I wanted to be a writer, I was always writing this little story and in the story, my name was Lisa and Lisa lived with the just enough family. And the just enough family always had just enough. They weren't hurting. They could always get the next meal, but they had just enough. Whereas we had way too much.

Melinda [00:23:49] The Just Enough Family is co-created and written by executive producer Melinda Shopsin, that's me, and Ariel Levy. Our editor is David Klagsbrun and our other executive producer is Laura Mayer. We had additional help from archival researcher Laura Coxson and fact checker David Kortava, transcriber Elijah Grossman and assistant editor Allison Sirota. Our music supervisor is Jasmine Flott, and the show is mixed by Christopher Koch. For a transcript and full credits, please visit our website thejustenoughfamily.com.