

EPISODE 3 – THE JUST ENOUGH FAMILY

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

Liz [00:00:20] I had zero control over what I wore when I was a kid, my mother dressed me every single day in things that I could not stand because I'd go out and I'm very itchy. Like very thick tights, dresses that had smocking. You know, the elasticized smocking with matching. I would call them like bloomers, but they were like over your underwear matching. Saddle shoes and Mary Janes, gray flannel pants and Fair Aisle sweaters. There were only like a couple of approved stores in New York City where I was allowed to buy new clothes, where again, we would have to go and spend like hours at the beginning of every season, which is weird that I like to shop because I hated those days more than I can express.

Ari [00:00:56] Because it was just one itchy fabric after the next.

Liz [00:00:58] Just one itchy fabric after another. It was super boring Seruties and Pumpkins and Monkeys. But all the fun stuff that I like at Pumpkins and Monkeys, like little dresses and like purple and pink mohair, I wasn't allowed to get. In fact Pumpkins and monkeys was so cool it had a spiral staircase in the middle of the store. And I think that my mother dragged me down that spiral staircase while I was sobbing, trying to hold on to the purple mohair dress. That's how badly I wanted it. I still think about that purple mohair dress.

Ari [00:01:25] I'm Ariel Levy and this is the Just Enough Family.

Liz [00:01:31] My mother was so excessive with herself and then so excessively frugal with my sister and I, like. You already probably had more access to shopping than I did. You're probably thinking like that's impossible, but I am telling you.

Kathy [00:01:46] I would almost say Imelda Marcos has nothing on me, I mean, of course she does, but as soon as we got money, I started shopping. And I basically never stopped. And I bought everything from shoes up to fur coats, fur coats down to shoes. And I'm a hoarder, as you can see from the shopping bags.

Ari [00:02:03] No one can see them except me. Tell us about what's on your walls.

Kathy [00:02:06] I just don't throw away shopping bags. So I have two walls filled with shopping bags and it's a real for me shopping and travel history. And I have Liz Lange up there, too. I've got a few of those.

Liz [00:02:21] I feel like when I was growing up, it was just who's your mother? A shopper. In fact, when you asked me what I thought I would do with my life, I think I thought I'd just be like my mom. I guess you just get up and you go to Bergdorf's and when you're done, maybe you go to Eve St. Laurent because it's the nineteen seventies and then you go maybe to Prada or Armani and that's just what you do all day. And I didn't know how weird that was. Like I didn't know that was strange.

Ari [00:02:46] So what would she wear all the her clothes to? Just lunch?

Liz [00:02:48] We don't know because she also would be the first to say that she doesn't do lunch. She doesn't. I don't know what she did.

Ari [00:02:56] I guess that leaves dinner.

Liz [00:02:56] I think she. I think she, but we ate dinner at home. I think she would get up, get into an outfit, go shopping for more outfits. Like my mother was like a shopper's shopper. For instance, Fred Leighton owned this jewelry shop. His name was actually Murray. I called him Uncle Murray. And I thought that Fred Leighton was a shop where you bought jewelry and had lunch. Because on Saturdays I would go with my parents and we'd walk down Madison Avenue. And as we walked down, all the shopkeepers would be like waving to say hello to my mother. And then we get to Fred Leighton. And Uncle Murray would be there and he'd always have a huge brunch spread in the back of the store. And I loved it.

Ari [00:03:39] So you'd go she'd shop for jewels and you and your sister would just be eating bagels.

Liz [00:03:44] Yeah lunch, taking things out of cases. That was the level of, um.

Ari [00:03:50] Client.

Liz [00:03:50] Client that they were. Yes.

Jane [00:03:53] I mean, my mom did a shop. Literally all she did was shop.

Ari [00:03:57] That's Liz's little sister. Jane. Tell me about your mom's closet.

Jane [00:04:02] The closet was a big deal. I mean, I feel like I grew up in that closet playing under the clothing. She had a standing appointment with her dressmaker, and the dressmaker would come every Friday morning and my mom would go through her clothing and she would be like, this skirt needs an inch in, it needs an inch out, it needs an inch down. There'd be a pile of giveaways. I mean, every single week. And, you know, I just remember sitting there on the floor watching this crazy fashion show.

Liz [00:04:33] My mother's closet was immaculate to the point where I'm not joking, I feel like if I just walked in there when she wasn't home and just touched one sweater, just touched it because I just wanted to feel the soft cashmere feeling of it with, like, my little grubby little girl hands. Then like two hours later, I might hear almost a scream from her bedroom. That would be basically who was in my closet?

Jane [00:04:56] There were so many rules in our house, like I just felt like their go-to was just no. You know, you weren't allowed to sit on the furniture. Nothing was comfortable. The kitchen would close at night. You couldn't have a snack. There are only certain foods allowed in the house. Everything was a rule like, you know, we weren't allowed to listen to music loud. We had to have our doors open so we could hear the phone. We had to answer the phone in a certain way. We literally were not allowed to miss a call. I mean, this is pre answering machines. If we missed a call, we were in so much trouble.

Liz [00:05:28] It was a regimented household. This sounds meaner than I mean it. But when my sister and I saw the movie Mommy Dearest, we literally were like, yeah, what's your point? Who's allowed to wire hangers in their closet?

Ari [00:05:43] You're like, what's this lovely movie about a gentle-

Liz [00:05:46] Yeah, exactly.

Ari [00:05:46] -kind of mother and indulgent mom?

Mommy Dearest [00:05:48] What do I get? A daughter who cares as much about the beautiful dresses I give her as she cares about me.

Jane [00:06:02] Like I was just scared all the time. I mean, Liz and my mom were constantly fighting. It was terrifying. You know, if Liz had knots in her hair, it would be a fight. Like why do you have knots in your hair? If Liz pulled the covers up too high it would be like, why are you using the quilt on your bed? So when I would wash my hair, I would just sort of pat the shampoo on it because I didn't want to get any knots. And when I slept, I would slide out of the bed because I just didn't want to ruffle any feathers. But yeah, the hair was a constant battle.

Ari [00:06:38] What was this haircut Kathy wanted you to maintain?

Liz [00:06:41] She had this thing where girls should have very, very short hair, like crazy, like a boy cut. So, of course, as a little girl, I wanted, like, what I've thought of as like princess hair. I don't know. I just wanted long hair, but that was absolutely not allowed. So I had this, like, crazy short haircut that I hated. But at certain points, sometimes my hair could get a tiny bit longer. So I had this habit that I would take a strand of my hair and I would suck on my hair. I mean, I was young, you know maybe five or six. And it drove my mother mad. It drove her absolutely crazy, like a personal narcissistic injury somehow, like she couldn't bear it. And then the ultimate thing happened. I went to the Dalton School and one of my friends named Nancy Robinson had a birthday party and her birthday party was at this place called Mr. Jennings Old Fashioned Ice Cream Parlor. And I guess I had no idea this, but looking back on it, Nancy or her family must have been very social because there was a picture in The New York Times in that photo I have a piece of hair in my mouth. My mother saw it and she went absolutely berserk, like Joan Crawford style. I mean, in my mind, but it's probably overexaggerated. She was kind of chasing after me with the scissors to cut those parts of my hair as short so that I could never do that again.

Bob [00:07:52] She was really tough on Liz. Liz had, her hair was always thick. Kathy would take a brush and brush it very hard.

Ari [00:08:04] Why?

Bob [00:08:05] Don't ask me why. Alright. And Liz would carry on. And this would elevate to a war. And when I say a war, I mean, Kathy would drag Liz into the bathroom by her hair.

Ari [00:08:20] Jeez.

Bob [00:08:20] Yeah, jeez. So Jane sees all this and says, I'm not talking. You're never going to hear from me. She faded into the background so that she didn't have to-

Ari [00:08:36] She didn't want that kind of trouble.

Bob [00:08:37] She didn't want that trouble. But Liz wouldn't stop. I mean, she.

Ari [00:08:40] Wouldn't stop what?

Bob [00:08:41] With Kathy. I mean, she was determined to win. She couldn't win against Kathy.

Liz [00:08:49] I think I was like oddly strong, like I might have been stronger than either of them mentally because they're both like always remembering these horrifying stories and I'm like, oh yeah, that happened. Like like I can't say, like was how upset was I at that time? I think I thought my mother was a crazy person. You know what I mean? Like, I was more like, I don't know how you kept your mouth shut because I would just be like. I think they would describe it as they're watching basically, like with their hands shaking because they know that what I'm saying is going to set off my mother to a point of like beyond. And I'm just like, well, it had to be said.

Kathy [00:09:20] Well, I didn't even know there was a war. Her hair was short and adorable. I don't remember her saying she wanted it long.

Ari [00:09:30] Uh huh.

Kathy [00:09:30] I say call me a bad mother. I don't remember it being a war.

Ari [00:09:35] Bobby thinks the hair was a war. But that's not your memory of it.

Kathy [00:09:38] No, but I'm not suggesting that I couldn't be wrong.

Ari [00:09:42] Of course.

Kathy [00:09:42] You know, and there's nothing like revisionist history and we all know that. So we remember what we want to remember. When people ask me specifics about my married life, my answer is often I blocked it out.

Ari [00:09:57] How did you get together with Bobby in the first place?

Kathy [00:10:00] Oh, I won't do much on that. I met him in high school. I said to the girls, if you ever do anything like this, you will be stepping on my back, walking to the chuppah. And he's a very good guy. But.

Ari [00:10:13] You were too young.

Kathy [00:10:14] Yeah, I was a child. I was not fully formed in any way, shape or form. So that's how I met him in high school. Then we ended up getting married, we were both young, I felt I should he clearly wanted to get out of his house. His brother had done the same thing three years earlier, and so we did it.

Ari [00:10:34] So why'd you marry her?

Bob [00:10:36] I don't know,

Ari [00:10:37] Why do you think?

Bob [00:10:39] I'll tell you what I think. Kathy had something that I lacked. She's very outgoing. I was very shy. I know it sounds crazy.

Ari [00:10:51] It's hard to believe. Yeah.

Bob [00:10:51] Yeah, Kathy she gave me strength. I admit it. She gave me strength. The other thing, and this is I'm going to say it on tape. Sex was a no no. So if you wanted-

Ari [00:11:07] To shtup.

Bob [00:11:09] You got married.

Ari [00:11:10] Of course you did. What did you imagine for your life?

Kathy [00:11:14] What I imagined for my life was very clear. It was a life like my parents', even though my parents didn't have a good marriage, not that part. But whether you would have called it a middle class or an upper middle class life, that we were going to live in the city and then we probably wouldn't be able to afford to send our children to private school because there was no indication that we were going to be able to and that we would. I mean, these were my goals. We'd own a house. We would probably be able to take a vacation a year. The my children could go to summer camp. It's embarrassing.

Ari [00:11:52] I don't know, they were.

Kathy [00:11:53] They were very middle values.

Ari [00:11:57] Modest goals.

Kathy [00:11:57] But that I just I didn't know another life. I mean, the first argument, well I say the first argument. We were, we were poor. We were living downtown. And there was this shoe store. I think it was I Miller on the corner of Fifty Seven Street and Fifth Avenue. And I wanted to buy a pair of shoes and the shoes were forty two dollars. I remember this and I asked Bobby if I could buy the shoes and he said I couldn't, that we couldn't afford it. And I started to cry. And I said, you know I just can't live like this. You know, you can't tell me I can't buy a pair of shoes. And I probably didn't buy them because I couldn't. So when we had the money, did I spend too much? I mean, it was always a big gripe with Bobby. And I remember saying to him, you are the most profligate spender. Houses, cars, beyond the beyond. And I said, you're acting like I bought France. I didn't.

Ari [00:12:58] Did you worry about raising kids with all this money, I mean, did you think, OK, I got to keep these kids from being spoiled?

Kathy [00:13:05] No, I was determined that they weren't going to be spoiled. And I know this sounds funny, but I actually don't think they are.

Bob [00:13:11] Here's the thing about Kathy. I was the spoiler of spoilers. If it was up to me, Liz would have had a car and driver when she was seven.

Ari [00:13:24] Yeah, yeah.

Bob [00:13:27] I'm exaggerating. Kathy was from the other school. Her father was very cheap and he had enormous influence on her and she passed that down to the kids. She would not spoil them. And I think in the end, I give her a huge amount of credit. I would have destroyed them.

Ari [00:13:47] Huh.

Bob [00:13:47] I mean, not meaning to. The effect wouldn't have been good. But she was the opposite. She was very tough.

Liz [00:13:54] My mom confuses me because on the one hand, she was like the biggest shopper I've ever seen in my life. And I'm sure she said that to you. That's the way I saw her. And I think that New York City saw her that way, because I think that must have been why my high school boyfriend's mother said, is it true that your mother has those Ralph Lauren cable cashmere knit sweaters in every color of the rainbow? She was totally like a consumer's consumer. But then I did feel like there was this really weird part of her that was down to earth is the wrong word, because both my parents were down to earth. They were very heimishe. But she had this weird thing about never having our lifestyle be too big, even though I don't quite know how to explain it because our lifestyle was big. But it wasn't like baronial. Like, you know, we got in our Jeep Wagoneer and drove to our house in Bedford every weekend, just us. And when I go to visit my uncle and also my dad's sister. So all the other siblings of my dad, they had like layers of help and like fanciness in their house. And just like a feeling of abbondanza. Like major abbondanza and our family just didn't. I don't know that she'd say the same, but I think it was some kind of WASP fantasy, I don't even know how she understood the WASP life because she had lived the sheltered life in the Five Towns, only knowing Jewish people. But somehow she understood that there was this other life that people who had money weren't just throwing it. Because WASP weren't. You weren't meant to just throw it around, that you were meant to be more like quiet about it, that their children wore, you know, party dresses and Mary Janes and gray flannel pants, that they didn't wear whatever they like from whatever the latest like Jappy store on Long Island was, although, of course, that's what I wanted to wear. They didn't wear like the purple outfit from Pumpkins and Monkeys, the store that I like.

Ari [00:15:40] Right.

Liz [00:15:40] They wore, you know.

Ari [00:15:42] Riding tweeds.

Liz [00:15:43] Sterile sweaters, tweed blazers. Yes. Even though I'm sure a WASP would have looked at her and been like, you are the loudest, crassest Jew I've ever seen, compared to the rest of my dad's family she was basically an understated WASP.

Ari [00:15:57] How did she even know that was a thing?

Liz [00:15:59] That's what I'm wondering. Like, I know it's a thing now, but I was born into it. I actually now looking back on it, I almost am like respect. Like, how did you even know to want those things and what they were and how did you learn it so quickly? Like, whoa.

Jane [00:16:13] Somehow she just knew.

Ari [00:16:14] That's Jane.

Jane [00:16:16] Where to spend your money, where you're supposed to vacation and that you don't go to the Acapulco Princess, you go to the Mount Laguna, you want to or Las

Brisas. Like she just knew. And there was a snobbism that I think we all, like, bought into. I mean, I still buy into it.

Ari [00:16:34] Did she treat you and Liz differently?

Jane [00:16:37] I don't feel like much was like demanded of me. Everything was demanded of Liz. Everything. You got an A minus. Why isn't it an A? You know, and I feel like for me it was like you got a C in French. Well, it's not your thing. You don't want to go to Hebrew school, don't go to Hebrew school. You know, with Liz it was like you are going to Hebrew school.

Bob [00:16:57] Well, Liz was very smart. She was a voracious reader.

Ari [00:17:02] Yeah.

Bob [00:17:03] I mean, the book, she also had great grades and she was always at the top of her class. We never heard from Jane.

Liz [00:17:12] They kind of had us in two buckets. My sister was the pretty one and I was the smart one. And so we kind of hated each other because I bought into that theory and I thought my sister again, it couldn't be further from true. And she is my best friend today. But I really I just agreed. I thought she might have been like the dumbest person on Earth. That's what I thought. And um. Genuinely. So I felt like I had nothing in common with this creature who was just obviously so stupid but so beautiful.

Ari [00:17:39] This hot dimwit.

Liz [00:17:43] Exactly.

Jane [00:17:43] I feel like I mentally wasn't there. I would play with my food, I would go to the bathroom a million times during meals to escape, I played with candle wax on the table like I did anything I possibly could to not be mentally present. Liz has different memories than I do because I just was like, I don't want to be here. She was literally like eyes wide, like feed me, give me more like what, like like on a Saturday she would walk Madison Avenue with my parents and go have lunch at the jewelry store at Fred Leighton.

Ari [00:18:17] So you didn't go to Uncle Murray's for those lunches?

Jane [00:18:19] No. Never in my entire life.

Liz [00:18:21] Like I looked at what they had and I liked it, Jane looked at what they had and she hated it. She was not looking to replicate it. And I was thinking, if I'm super lucky, I'll grow up and live this lifestyle. So I kind of liked it. I always thought if I went along with them on Saturdays, you'd never know. A little bubble might come my way, a little dress might come away. And she again, I really mean this to her credit, just didn't care. She'd be like, the price is too high. I mean, I don't know if that's what the word she's use, but I know that was what was in her head.

Ari [00:18:52] Whereas you were like a little hooker.

Liz [00:18:53] I was a hooker's hooker. Jane used to have this joke about me where she'd be like, ouch, does fire still burn. Ouch, does fire still burn. I had this whole thing. I was

always desperately trying to make our family kind of what I wanted it to be, what I thought the world thought it was. I was still trying to square that with like the actual experience. And Jane, I think saw from like a very young age, this is horrible. It's not fun. And I was somehow like, can I get more? Can I get more? I don't know. I was just always wanting to be attached to the family.

Kathy [00:19:27] The financial freedom was great. What was bad about it was that the money became too important. I used to say to Bobby, we have all form and no content, I don't need to be this rich.

Ari [00:19:41] Really?

Kathy [00:19:42] Yeah.

Ari [00:19:43] Because why? What was bad about being so rich?

Kathy [00:19:46] It was just about things. There were too many things.

Liz [00:20:00] So, like, I always had like a big fancy bedroom decorated by some famous decorator, and I never liked it that much, not because I don't like fancy things, I love fancy things. It was because it just wasn't really my little girl taste. It just wouldn't be my little girl taste. And whatever my little girl taste was, was considered tacky, not OK, not allowed. And again, I'm not complaining. Like, it's not sad. It's just like at the time, like I had this best friend, Lisa and Lisa's mother was divorced. In the nineteen seventies it wasn't that common. Like I didn't know a lot of people with divorced parents.

Ari [00:20:28] Oh no, it was a big deal in those days.

Liz [00:20:29] It was a big deal.

Ari [00:20:29] Yeah.

Liz [00:20:30] They were divorced and looking back on it, I'm sure her mother was kind of struggling. They lived in a one bedroom apartment and Lisa's mother slept in the living room and gave Lisa the bedroom. And they were like so tight, Lisa and her mother, because there was nobody else. It was just Lisa and her mother in this tiny little apartment. And I thought that was the coolest. That was my gold standard. Like, I just wanted Lisa's room. Sometimes Lisa got to sleep in the pull out couch in the living room and her mom slept in the bedroom. Sometimes they might have even slept together. And in my house, everything was I was in my room, my sister Jane was in her room. My parents were way down the hallway in their room. If I woke up in the middle of the night, this not poor little rich girl, it's just the way it was. If I were to be scared or upset in the middle of the night, I wouldn't have walked down the hallway to my parent's room. A housekeeper would have been the person that I would have gone to. To go back to that just enough thing. I think that was all just part of the craziness and the gaslighting and why I thought it would be easier if we all if we were just part of that just enough family.

Ari [00:21:32] Well, and it sounds like she had some fantasies about that, too, because she said to me, you know, the money got too important. There was just too much stuff. We had too many things. She told me that she once said to your father, we're all form and no content or we're all form and no substance.

Liz [00:21:51] I think she used to think that. I think they used to talk about that. I think she used to, that was a mantra. I think you're right.

Ari [00:21:56] But what the fuck does that mean?

Liz [00:21:57] I don't know. That we've got all the trappings, but I think maybe it is what I sensed. We have all the trappings, but things just aren't that good. Like I know. Again, that sounds like I'm not saying that, like, the trappings were good, they were fun, but somehow things were just off the rails. Things just always felt so out of control. And I know it's like, well, what do you mean? But it just felt like we were just hurtling and speeding towards something bad. Like I remember one of their friends once said about my parents shopping. I mean, even a train has to stop sometimes.

Melinda [00:22:43] The Just Enough Family is co-created and written by executive producer Melinda Shopsin, that's me, and Ariel Levy. our editor is David Klagsburn and our other executive producer is Laura Mayer. We had additional help from archival researcher Laura Coxson, 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.