

Episode 5 – The JUST ENOUGH FAMILY

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

Liz [00:00:08] I somehow just always felt in my heart that things were going to be OK. Going back to my childhood, I was obsessed, like oddly obsessed, because it certainly wasn't my generation either. It was like my parent's or grandparent's generation with the old movie star Hayley Mills, who you probably don't even know who she is.

Ari [00:00:29] Parent Trap.

Liz [00:00:30] Parent Trap. She did the original Parent Trap and she also did a movie called Pollyanna. I was obsessed with the movie Pollyanna.

Pollyanna [00:00:39] What is all this glad business you talk about? Oh, just a game I play. What kind of a game? Helps sometimes. Helps what? When things aren't going so well. Are you going to start that all over again? Glad this, glad that. If you know how to play the game, then you could find something to be glad about, too.

Liz [00:01:03] I am a bit of a Pollyanna. I now have discovered that as an adult. I am crazily optimistic, like it's literally impossible for me to see things as not working out. People joke that I have Prozac running through my veins. It's really hard to bring me down.

Ari [00:01:22] I'm Ariel Levy, and this is The Just Enough Family. What did you think of Jeff when you first met him?

Jonathan [00:01:31] I could not believe it. It was like she had conjured him.

Ari [00:01:37] That's Liz's friend, Jonathan Adler, talking about her first husband, Jeff Lange,

Jonathan [00:01:43] He was handsome, incredibly brilliant, incredibly brilliant.

Ari [00:01:49] Funny, right?

Jonathan [00:01:50] Funny af in a very dark, surly way. More on that later. But he was just hilarious and great and I really liked him and I thought Liz had literally created him.

Jane [00:02:06] I thought he was a genius and I was like, Liz won the fucking lottery.

Ari [00:02:11] That's Jane Liz's sister.

Jane [00:02:13] I mean, I love him, but like, I was like I married my little idiot and she married like he's going to take over the world because he's so smart.

Ari [00:02:23] How'd you meet him?

Liz [00:02:24] I went to dinner with with a friend, the friend brought a friend. I was single in my 20s, and this stranger sits down next to me and said, I think I know someone perfect for you. And I said something like, I like someone that's very, very funny. And she said, he's the funniest person I've ever met in my life. He's also the smartest person I've ever met in my life. And I was like, oh, and so what makes him smart? How do you know he's

smart? I thought I was really smart. And she said, well, he has a applied mathematical graduate degree from Stanford and a law degree from Yale. I was like, oh that's smart. We liked each other immediately on that blind date.

Ari [00:02:54] Where'd you go for your blind date?

Liz [00:02:55] It was funny. I mean, he was such a rude blind date. First of all, he didn't call me for months. Then when he did call, he said, well, I actually work above Barney's on Madison Avenue and Sixty First Street. And at that time there was a restaurant in the basement level of Barney's called Mad Sixty One. So he said, I guess we could go for lunch at Mad Sixty One, which I also thought was extremely rude. But we go on this lunch date. We liked each other immediately. We sat there for like three hours. We basically spent every day together after that. We got engaged three months later.

Ari [00:03:24] Did you have a big like a wedding's wedding?

Liz [00:03:28] We had a wedding's wedding. It was multi hundred people. We had many engagement parties leading up to it.

Ari [00:03:35] Where was it? Where was-.

Liz [00:03:36] The wedding was at the Metropolitan Club. We took over the entire place. We redecorated the entire place. Even though the Metropolitan Club comes with its own in-house caterer, we brought in our own caterer. We had layers and layers of things going on, like the the big band was there till midnight, and then I had this idea that at midnight the entire thing needed to turn into a nightclub. So at that point, whoever the famous deejay was back then, he came and then the whole place had to be transformed again from like opulent ballroom with orchids to dark, sultry nightclub.

Jonathan [00:04:10] The wedding was OTT. It was like anything and everything a fantasy wedding was meant to be complete with a group of drag queens coming out at the end to get everyone dancing. It was kind of like hilarious, outrageously deluxe and really lovely.

Liz [00:04:32] I think maybe everybody thought I had won the lottery. I think that's the way it seemed. Like I felt as a very competitive child growing up and still extremely competitive, that my wedding was basically like to everybody else in that room, like game over. Like as if I had just served like an ace. At our wedding, his best man who gave you know the big speech, I guess, was one of his law school professors who at the time was just a very famous Yale Law School professor. Who basically was saying I'd never had a student like Jeff. There's never been another Jeff. I had never seen an intellect like this. I thought of my father and Saul as like so smart and knowing everything. Then I met Jeff and then I was like, oh, my father's not the smartest person I know. And I was like, oh, no, Jeff is that. I must have just been someone who really needed that.

Ari [00:05:17] You needed someone to be in awe of.

Liz [00:05:19] Exactly. There was nothing that Jeff ever said or did that I ever questioned.

Ari [00:05:27] Jeff wasn't dysfunctional at first, was he?

Jane [00:05:31] There were signs of it.

Ari [00:05:32] That's Jane.

Jane [00:05:33] I mean, like like the day of the engagement party, I think was the first time I had seen it, this infamous engagement party with all the fancy people. We were renting a house together. And I remember going into their bedroom and Jeff was lying under the covers in bed in the afternoon with the covers pulled up. And he was just like, do I have to go to this? And we were all like, get the fuck out of bed and get dressed. I didn't realize it at the time, but that was sort of the first indication of the dysfunction. And then the next summer we rented a house and Jeff was like this scratch golfer and they had joined, you know, Atlantic or some fancy golf club out here. And Jeff was out golfing every single day of every weekend. And there was like a big tournament at the end. You know, the big joke all summer was like, you better come home with the gold. You better bring us that friggin trophy. You've left the three of us alone all summer.

Liz [00:06:29] Then the day of the tournament comes, just going to win it handily, first of all, it's just some stupid Jewish club and Jeff basically was on the team at Stanford. I mean, Jeff is you know Tiger Woods. And uh, next thing we know, he's home like really early. We're like, wait, what? And he's like, I didn't like the way I was playing. I walked off.

Jane [00:06:47] You know, so it was just like his craziness started to-.

Ari [00:06:50] Reveal itself.

Jane [00:06:52] Reveal itself. I felt like he was always like this mad scientist growing moss in the closet. You know where you can find a piece of paper and it literally was covered in just crazy algorithms and numbers and stuff.

Liz [00:07:04] There were so many crazinesses in Jeff. I always thought he thinks he's better than all my friends, that's why he never wants to hang out with them. That's why he's so weird and quiet around my friends and family. But I realized, no. Oh, my God, the Jeff that I worshipped was painfully insecure, like cripplingly so. Like he would never have said it to me. But that was very clear to me later.

Ari [00:07:27] That he was genuinely suffering,

Liz [00:07:29] Genuinely suffering in a way that was was a mental health issue. Like not not it was way beyond the word shy. It was way beyond the word uncomfortable. Like one summer I wanted us to go to Capri. So I sort of floated this by Jeff. And Jeff had like very little appetite for any sort of travel or any sort of plans. Like we basically saw no one did nothing. So I was like, this would really mean a lot to me. I really want to take this trip, like, please, can we take this trip? And he finally said to me, and I do think this was honest and it really was like when I was beginning to understand who he was, but this is like 10 years into our marriage. He said, I want to explain something to you. The thought of going to Capri is like, if you said to me, do you want to dangle by your ankles off of the top of the Empire State Building? That's the feeling I have right now. I didn't understand how mentally ill he was. Even though I was living with him, probably all the signs were there, but I think that says it all about my ability even as a child and then later in life to kind of just paint over things. And make them kind of what I want and need them to be.

Ari [00:08:37] So that's the downside of Pollyanna. Most of the time, having a really positive attitude and having Prozac in your veins is really great and makes you really happy and wonderful to be around. But sometimes you're going to trick yourself.

Liz [00:08:52] Exactly. And I have a I've noticed now that I have an extraordinarily high capacity for it.

Ari [00:08:57] I think it's not unrelated to growing up with a liar.

Liz [00:09:01] I think it was both that and also like the house was scary. So, Jane, instead of being me, Jane just had a realistic thing. She's like this house is a little scary.

Ari [00:09:09] I'm going to get through this.

Liz [00:09:10] I just want to get through this. I'm going to get through this as unscathed as I can. I'm going to hang out with friends as much as I can. I'm not going to spend more time with the scary people. And I was kind of like, la la la, no, no, no. It's just a great family. I mean, everybody wants to be us. I mean, I want to be with my parents all the time. It's fantastic. Look at us like we're flying on private planes and we're staying in suites at the Ritz in Paris. And everywhere we go, people are kind of whispering about us. We walk into a store and everyone's like, oh, how can we help you? How can we help you? How can we help you? And Jane hated every second of it. And she was right.

Ari [00:09:41] Liz carried over this kind of idealization from her childhood into her marriage with Jeff.

Liz [00:09:47] I knew that there were things that were true that I couldn't say. The things that were unsayable in our relationship were sometimes like I'm more successful than you are. I had built this like very well-known brand and he was really foundering in his career, which was shocking to me. It wasn't what I expected of him nor what he expected of himself. But I remember once we got in some kind of argument because he wanted to move out of the city and I really didn't. And I felt like that was like the ultimate like, if he gets me alone, like in the suburbs, like maybe I'll kill myself. We're not going to make friends because he hates everyone, and I know I said that I don't like a lot of friends, but I like a few friends. So I knew that I couldn't do that. And at some point I just let it slip. I was like, well, I make more money. Like, I'm not moving to the suburbs. And the closest he came to physical was that that night he broke two of our kitchen chairs. And I was scared. And I always think back on that. Like could that night have gone a different way? Could have grabbed a knife and killed me? I mean, it wasn't like he was- that didn't happen. Not even close. But then I really understood, like, I will never say anything even close to that. And I just kind of went back to our, like, you know best Jeff.

Jonathan [00:11:04] I remember going on vacation with Liz and Jeff to Capri, and he was just on his BlackBerry all the time and kind of like grunting and we were all sort of dancing and trying to just you know be buoyant, happy little sprites. And it was just clear that he was just a really, really dark person. Also, you know, I decorated their, they bought a country house in South Salem, New York, which again was a little off script. It wasn't the Hamptons. It was sort of separate from her family. It was like a weird place. But we tried to make that a very, very, very happy home. And I can remember her telling me that he would just, like, lie in his room, extraordinarily depressed, complaining about pain, complaining about depression, and she would do everything she could to try to, like, get him to come out. And it was just it became clear that even even the Jeff I saw in Capri was the the uppy as good as it gets, Jeff.

Liz [00:12:10] His favorite form of torture, because he knew there was nothing I couldn't bear more would be like, oh, we can't afford that. I feel like I'm constantly being gaslit, first by being told that we're so rich that nothing could ever happen, that like we'll just always be rich. And then cut to the next thing I know, I've got a husband where we actually like do have money. And like, he's super smart. I'm smart. We both have businesses. There's no reason to believe that we won't be very successful. But instead, he's like Mr. Gloom and Doom. He's the opposite. I was always hiding bills, afraid of spending, thinking that I was overspending and feeling like we had no money. Always. I could not bear it.

Ari [00:12:45] And then when you sold your business, first of all, is that public? How much you sold it for?

Liz [00:12:51] I never really say. But it was like multiple mil. Multiple millions.

Ari [00:12:55] Over ten?

Liz [00:12:56] Yeah.

Ari [00:12:57] But not over a hundred.

Liz [00:12:59] Not over a hundred.

Ari [00:12:59] You know that to me. I can't even conceive of ten million dollars. So one hundred million dollars is the same thing to me.

Liz [00:13:04] Right.

Ari [00:13:04] But. So somewhere.

Liz [00:13:05] Somewhere in that, in that-.

Ari [00:13:07] Ten to one hundred million dollars.

Liz [00:13:08] In that ninety million dollars which I can't believe I was able to do that math range is what I sold or for. I must sound like I'm crazy. But somehow if someone tells me forcefully enough, especially about numbers and money, I'll believe them.

Ari [00:13:20] Amazing you ran a business.

Liz [00:13:21] I know. A very successful business, but still at home somehow I was like, OK, well, if Jeff says that and he's like a genius, then it must be true. And actually he convinced me to sell the business, which I'm not saying I shouldn't have done. I don't know. But he was the one that was like if someone offers you money for your business, you take it. And that is true if you need the money. But my business was a lot more than just money to me.

Ari [00:13:47] Do you remember when she decided to sell the company?

Jonathan [00:13:51] I remember talking about it with her a lot.

Ari [00:13:53] And what did you think about it?

Jonathan [00:13:54] Well, her decision to sell the company, I think really is about her comfort, one's comfort, her husband's comfort with risk. It's an ironic thing because I guess insurance companies are really sort of all about risk reward equations. And I think that decision to sell the company was about being risk averse. And I don't know if she thinks it was the right or wrong thing to do.

Liz [00:14:25] It took like a year or two for it to all kind of just like wind down.

Ari [00:14:29] Wind down.

Liz [00:14:29] Yes.

Ari [00:14:30] And then what did that feel like?

Liz [00:14:32] Yeah, like I didn't love that. You know what I mean? Like I.

Ari [00:14:35] It felt like a loss.

Liz [00:14:35] It felt like a loss. Felt, I felt like I was almost like grieving, like mourning that whole part of my life. And it took me a really long time. I don't think I am now, but for a really long time, I think I was.

Ari [00:14:50] Liz started her company with a brilliant idea, hard work and 25000 dollars in seed money from her father, which she turned into a maternity wear revolution that sold for somewhere between 10 and 100 million dollars. But she did it thinking she was safely wrapped in a security blanket of enormous wealth. There was no real risk in her starting a company because she had the best fallback plan. She was young and she was from one of the richest families in America, or so she thought. Did you feel the way Liz felt that like the wealth was completely dependable and not precarious?

Jane [00:15:33] I felt like we could lose it any single minute. I didn't trust it for one nanosecond,

Ari [00:15:39] Tell me everything.

Jane [00:15:42] I literally, it was the scariest thing to me. I like saved every penny. I can't believe she thought that because I feel like one year we would be, you know, like suites at, you know, Sandy Lane hotel and living whatever, flying private. And then the next year they'd be like companies doing really badly. We have no money. We're selling our apartment. Moving down meant moving to 71st and Park. But I didn't know that. My dad would be like I didn't buy a pair of socks for a year. It felt like it went up and down my entire childhood. I always thought that it was going to come back because it always did, but I didn't grow up thinking that this was like a sure thing.

Liz [00:16:26] I worshipped my father as a child. I think on some level, I knew that there were a lot of weird, tense moving parts, even when my mother, she made me tense. There was just a lot of weird stuff in my life. And my father just I just decided that my father was like, I don't know the word like the beacon. I just needed that as a child. So then I wasn't giving it up. I just kind of moved it over. I just took all that worship on to Jeff, and it was just like, no, if he said it, he knows everything.

Jonathan [00:16:55] I do think that Jeff wittingly or unwittingly eliminated all of the anchors in her life that made her her. The funny thing is he he could have been this. He could have been that. And I think that Liz and her family and her personality and her loyalty could have been the light they could have gone towards to lead a really, really happy and fulfilled life. It could have had a very, very different outcome if he had allowed it. And I think she did everything she could to try to lead him into the light. You know, she was sort of loyal and constant and reliable. She did anything and everything in her power to keep it together. But I think when his horrible, horrible fathering became really clear and it became clear just how damaging it was going to be, I do think that was the final straw.

Liz [00:17:52] There were signs about Jeff that like were so obvious and anybody else would have either just cut bait or been like, I'm not dealing with this. I went along with some really weird shit for way longer than somebody of sort of my who I am and my intelligence, all of it would ever do. And I'm positive somehow I was primed for that. Like, I was sort of made for that.

Jane [00:18:21] Once I started to see his true colors, I didn't like it, and once they split up and I realized how abusive he was and she would still kind of talk about him with this kind of reverence, I just found it really frustrating. But I mean, I was scared for her life, actually not scared about money. I was scared he was going to kill her. I mean, honestly, if I couldn't reach her one day, I would actually be like, you just have to text me that you're OK. I thought he was going to come back and kill her.

Ari [00:18:50] Jane said when you left, she was afraid Jeff was going to kill you.

Liz [00:18:54] I don't think that's unrealistic. I think that it is an absolute miracle that I didn't end up dead. And I just always felt later on in life that, like he took his own life, but it so easily could have been that he took the whole family down.

Ari [00:19:23] So what happens to your Pollyanna perspective?

Liz [00:19:30] You know, like you were asking me, like, so was everyone always asks me, like, were you devastated? Like, how did you take this? Must have been that rich fantasy life I had as a child between Pollyanna and all these other stories.

Liz [00:19:48] I don't want to make myself sound like I'm a moron. I understood full well what was going on. I mean, eventually, you know, who wouldn't of? But I just somehow thought it was all going to be OK. I remember I once said, you know how people say, dad, that you should save for a rainy day and he was like, yeah, but it never rains. In our life, it never rains. So I always think of it that like almost like the game I used to play at child birthday parties, of like musical chairs. There was always another chair to sit in. But then one day the music stopped and we were the ones standing.

Liz [00:20:48] They 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 our 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, The Just Enough Family dot com.