

ONE

When the call came for Elise Feldman Connelly, she was in Costco.

Elise—mother, wife, friend, shopper—eyed the checkout lines from her spot in the outdoor furniture aisle, which were growing even longer as she studied them. She hated queuing in stores, all that extra time to ponder the contents of her cart with the twin forces of desire and guilt. She should know better than to go to Costco on a Sunday, when the lines were always eternal. Maybe she'd put her cart aside, ask her favorite store manager, Jeff, to watch her stuff, and then return tomorrow when she could swipe and dash. But no, then the thrill would be gone.

How Elise craved that soaring spike in adrenaline that shot pins and needles to her extremities and sent butterflies to her stomach. She sighed and looked back at her cart, fighting off the urge to calculate. The total couldn't be much. She had tossed in maybe eight or nine hardcovers at most, three frozen cakes, a few packages of T-shirts for Darius, and a bunch of sports bras she'd need now that she'd signed up for ClassPass. Underneath, reading glasses, an electric screwdriver, a terry cloth robe, rubber flip-flops for the whole family (they appeared to run small so she'd chosen two sizes for everyone), new cutting boards, a set of knives, a Magic Bullet, a yoga mat, a George Foreman that looked more advanced than her

current George Foreman, and a delicate fourteen-karat gold necklace for Rachel. Plus the faux ficus tree that was being held for her at the register.

“Elise,” came a familiar voice barreling toward her. She felt her pulse quicken, that brief pleasant feeling of being recognized in a crowded place. She turned around to find Jeff, her Costco bestie, driving a flatbed down the wide aisle.

“You look like you found some good stuff today,” he said, throwing an approving nod toward her cart.

“Not sure I’m going to take it all,” she responded, watching Jeff’s smile slide into a droop. “I probably will, though.” And like that, his expression lit up again. He didn’t work on commission. No Costco employees did—she’d once looked it up. Perhaps she and Jeff just shared something, a special satisfaction from knowing items were going to be purchased, bagged, put into a trunk, and taken to a new home. It was like a form of adoption—making things into possessions.

She was probably the first person to wax poetic in a discount big-box store. But she had a million dizzying thoughts tunneling through her mind that needed expression or she’d have a stroke. And these thoughts, they were like dough going through a pasta maker (she owned three), coming out in ribbons. There. She’d managed two euphemisms in one breath, putting a pretty face on both her crippling addiction and her runaway mind.

“Elise.” Jeff’s voice again. While she was lost in her reverie, he’d come off his perch and was standing rather close to her. She wanted to ask him to let her sit in the truck so she could see the aisles from a different vantage point, but she hadn’t worked up the nerve yet. “I’m not supposed to tell anybody, but the mesh shorts you buy for your son are going ninety-seven cents this afternoon.”

Prices at Costco ending in ninety-seven cents. It was the holy grail of shopping at the big-box retailer. It meant a product was

getting discontinued and therefore going on sale. Elise felt an actual shiver running down her spine, forcing her to twitch with nervous energy. Had they just cranked the air? Or was that simply her body's visceral reaction to commerce, her *raison d'être* of the past year? She glanced at her watch, an irresistible Apple with a white band for which she'd waited in line for nearly six hours like a teenager staking out concert tickets.

"It's only another two hours," Jeff said, sensing her hesitation. "We're about to set up a frozen pizza station. You could eat lunch here while you wait." It was thoughtful of Jeff to consider that it was lunchtime. When was the last time her husband had checked to see if she'd eaten? She was so used to being the caretaker that the very suggestion from another human that she do something for herself made her eyes sting with tears.

Elise considered what waited for her at home. Her son, Darius, was out with friends, so she couldn't harass him about the college stuff, and Mitch was at work, like he was every Sunday. Rachel, though. Smart, social, and oh-so-distant Rachel. She was home for another month before going back to school, but her daughter was acting like she'd rather hang out with a rotting jellyfish than her mother. Supposedly that was how all kids were on their college breaks. Or so her friends assured her to make her feel better. But they all told white lies sometimes to spare each other's feelings. Hadn't she recently assured Kate Willing, the bake sale coordinator, that her monkey bread was outstanding and promised her neighbor Susan Shifter that the sleeveless dress she wore to the July Fourth barbecue was quite à la mode?

Who could be sure of anything? Life in the suburbs was so mottled with artifice and carefully concocted stories, so busy with get-togethers and fund-raisers and board meetings, that actually knowing what went on behind the picket fences was impossible. Nobody she'd ever met in the flesh, not her husband, her best friend,

or her rabbi, knew her dirty secret. Only an anonymous “doctor” (air quotes necessary since she hadn’t been able to validate Dr. Margaret’s credentials) in an unknown location knew the depths of her current plight, and even with Dr. Margaret (the use of first name being the primary reason Elise questioned whether an actual advanced degree had been obtained) she wasn’t totally honest. Not about how she’d gone and ruined everything for her son. Not about how she’d maybe even capsized her marriage as well. Elise headed in the direction of the frozen food aisle, following the scent of the pepperoni warming on a hot plate.



Twenty minutes after Elise had settled herself into a vinyl chair with a half dozen pizza bites arranged in muffin tin liners on her lap, her mother’s face appeared on her watch along with an appropriately shrill ring. Last time the Feldman clan was together, Yom Kippur nearly a year ago, Darius had taken pictures of everyone and uploaded them to her phone so that when her family members called, their faces announced themselves before their voices. It was a warning, their mug shots reminding you why you might be better off letting the call go to voice mail.

Her mother was all done up in the picture, reddish bob hair-sprayed to withstand a tornado, face lacquered like an expensive piece of furniture. Annette Feldman was a decidedly attractive woman. Even now, with the deep ravines around her eyes and the gentle curve of sagging flesh under her chin, she still fit into the category of women deemed pretty, which meant an inordinate amount to her. Elise had her mother’s broad cheekbones, the same auburn hair that looked vaguely on fire in certain lighting, even the slanted nose, a combination that for whatever strange reason worked. Perhaps it was the favorable ratio of eyebrow to forehead or the color wheel compatibility of skin and hair tone. Scientists were forever trying to explain what makes someone appealing to look at. Elise

couldn't figure it out, but she and her mother both had it, a possession that couldn't be bought, unlike everything else around her.

It had to be said that Annette did much more to enhance her natural beauty than Elise, with weekly hair appointments maintained with Velcro rollers nightly and consultations with makeup artists who swore they could erase a decade with the sweep of a contouring brush. Elise's father, David Feldman, a respected Long Island obstetrician who had delivered several thousand babies over the course of his four-decade career, strongly opposed plastic surgery, so Annette was forced to make do within the limits of powders, dyes, and creams.

Annette always tried to share her beauty tips with Elise, who would humor her mother by listening, and then never try any of them at home. She'd yet to show up at her mother's doorstep wearing that shade of lipstick Annette swore was flattering for their shared complexion or text a picture of herself wearing the denim blazer from the Gap that supposedly would do wonders to minimize the birthing hips that were the female Feldmans' calling card. Poor Rachel already had them, and while she attacked the spin bike with ferocity, they didn't whittle down even so much as a centimeter. And she didn't yet have children upon whom she could blame their girth. It made Elise reflect on the curse of motherhood: to feel your children's shortcomings so much more acutely than the children themselves felt them. A needle in the heart of a child is a dagger to the parent. Maybe that was why Annette was so relentless with her tips. If Elise gained five pounds, it was as though Annette had gained twenty.

The Feldmans had been on their way to synagogue in Elise's hometown of Great Neck, the Long Island setting of many a privileged rat race, when the photo appearing on her phone was taken. And they were all fasting, or at least Elise, Rachel, and the senior Feldmans were, so everyone was crankier than usual. On full stomachs, the Feldman family was known to clash over matters as small

as whether the day's weather was "mild" or "temperate," but without even water to drink or a morsel of food since sundown the night before, all bets were off.

Mitch, her Irish Catholic husband, had downed a granola bar, mercifully in the bathroom so nobody with an empty stomach would have to ogle him, but Darius—her thoughtless teenage son—had marched right into his grandparents' kitchen that morning and filled his cereal bowl so high it might have reached heaven faster than their prayers. Such chutzpah, Elise had thought. Just like his uncle Freddy, who was, of course, a few thousand miles from Temple Beth-Am that day, not living up to a single family obligation.

"Who chooses Yom Kippur to visit?" Annette had whined en route to services. "The entire holiday is only twenty-five hours long. And you're not even staying for break-the-fast at the Goldfutters'."

"It's the Day of Atonement, Grandma," Darius said. "You can tell us what you think we need to atone for."

"Darius, keep quiet," Elise said. "Mom, this was the best we could do this time around. Junior year is critical for Darius. And Rachel has midterms. Plus Mitch needs to work." *And me? Well, I just can't bear to be back home for longer than a day,* Elise continued in her head. *Negotiating with your self-absorption and little "suggestions."* *Facing Dad's disappointment head-on, which is not unlike staring directly into the barrel of a flashlight first thing in the morning.* "Besides, we're together. Not every holiday has to be about a meal." But as with many families, the Feldmans' currency was comestible, and being together without generous platters of gefilte fish, eggplant spreads, and deli meats arranged on the good china was like entering a mall without your wallet, the feeling of pointlessness rising to the absurd. Chewing kept the Feldmans' mouths occupied, which saved them from myriad arguments, misunderstandings, and offenses. Perhaps Annette was right and Yom Kippur wasn't the best time to visit.

Elise swallowed her second pizza bite before answering the phone. Jeff hadn't been wrong about the mesh shorts. The powers that be were walking down the aisle at that very moment with their omnipotent price guns, and Elise felt a flutter of excitement that nearly eclipsed her fear of answering her mother's call.

"Hi, Mom," she said in a deliberate clip.

"How are you, honey?" Annette asked in a purr, which immediately made Elise suspicious. Her mother wasn't much of a question asker, unless it was self-referential, the most frequent being "Does this make me look fat?"

If Annette was another kind of mother, the nonjudgmental, anything-goes type, Elise might have considered opening up to her, though not right then in the aisles of Costco. Dr. Margaret said there was no such thing as a nonjudgy, relaxed mother and Elise felt at once that she wasn't conveying the essence of Annette convincingly through the written word. Their sessions were timed to exactly fifty minutes and since Elise wasn't the fastest typist, she was essentially communicating her problems in Twitter-like shorthand. Their next session was going to be devoted to Elise's father and she thought she ought to book a double. Dr. Margaret was undoubtedly a Freudian.

"I'm fine. Just doing some errands. I think Darius grew three—"

"Anyway." Annette cut her off in midsentence. "I'm calling because I have exciting news to tell you. As you know, I've got something big coming up next month."

Shit, thought Elise, feeling the kick of the pepperoni rise in the back of her throat. What had she forgotten? A medical procedure, possibly, though she couldn't recall hearing anything of the sort. It was probably another award getting bestowed upon her parents. The Feldmans' synagogue was often feting its long-standing members with vaguely named honorariums, like the leadership, charity, and fellowship awards. These types of events, whether at the temple,

the hospital, or the Rotary Club, always involved a crash diet for her mother, a frantic search for the perfect dress, and then, after the fact, complaints about the seating. One year it was being placed too close to the booming speakers, then, after letting her dissatisfaction be known, it was being put too far away from these very same offending instruments of amplification.

Sometimes, if the occasion warranted, it meant Elise and Mitch had to fly across the country to be there, as they had done when her father had received a lifetime achievement award from the hospital upon his retirement two years ago. Mitch had a smile on his face the whole evening, legitimately happy to see his father-in-law presented with a bronze plaque and a crystal paperweight in the shape of a baby (which Darius and Rachel found exceptionally creepy). And why shouldn't he be? Mitch, with his inquisitive mind and endless questions, was always eager to learn the workings of another profession or partake in the rituals of other cultures. He was a born journalist, a student of human nature, gifted with an open mind. And, more to the point, he didn't have to endure having David whisper in his ear, as Elise had after she'd wished her father hearty congratulations, "This could have been you."

"Dad, you, or both this time?" Elise didn't mean to sound so callous, but a horde of people was crowding around the shorts and Elise recognized one of them as the father of a tall, lanky boy in Darius's class. Which meant he might be competing for the same size. It would be nearly impossible to maneuver the cell phone and her cart and to rifle through the pile at the same time. Elise had fancy footwork in retail outlets, but she wasn't an acrobat.

"What are you talking about?" Annette asked, already exasperated. "I'm referring to my seventieth birthday." And here she dropped her voice to a stage whisper, Norma Desmond announcing she was back at last. Elise would bet the entire stack of size larges in front of her that her mother was alone, the theatrics simply because

she couldn't help herself. Annette conducted herself as though there was an audience around at all times, her performance carefully crafted to please adoring fans who, as far as Elise could tell, lived inside her own mind.

"You know how I detest birthdays, of course," Annette added without a trace of irony.

Her mother was the epitome of etiquette when it came to discussing age in public. Growing up, Elise and Freddy were strictly forbidden from telling any of their friends how old she was. It was another miscalculation of Annette's, wasting her parenting capital to impress this upon her children. To anyone eighteen years of age and under, anyone forty-plus falls into the unspecific category of ancient. Any age differences between Annette and other mothers in their neighborhood were indistinguishable to the students at their high school, who saw all they needed to know in the mom jeans and dorky pocketbooks. Freddy and his friends would have been too stoned to even remember, had they actually learned the closely guarded secret that was Annette Feldman's age. And she, Elise, had more important things on her mind in high school than her mother's vintage. At the time, Ivy League acceptance loomed ahead of her, and it seemed every A she garnered was as necessary as a vital organ.

"Ah, yes," Elise said, realizing that in fact August did mean another birthday in the Feldman family. The four nuclear Feldmans had their birthdays dispersed across the seasons, as though God had spread it out that way to ensure they communicated at least once a quarter. She hadn't given the matter of her mother's milestone birthday much thought, other than considering it was a legitimate occasion for her to be shopping. Once Rachel's college layette was fulfilled and Darius was chock-full of boxers and deodorant, Elise would get a little desperate to find things she or her family "needed." Thankfully need was a subjective conceit, though she wouldn't relish having to defend some of her purchases in front of a jury.

For Elise the upcoming month meant a serious return to dealing with Darius and his college applications. So little had gotten done over the summer. Every time she went to nag him to write his personal essay, or even start the far less daunting task of filling out the basic information on the common application, she stopped herself, unable to force her son to work on something that she might have rendered moot.

The irony was that Darius's leaving for college had triggered all the turmoil, the shot heard round the world. Dr. Margaret had helped her see that, though she was unwilling to let the matter of Elise's problems freeze at the proximate cause, hence the sessions devoted to the senior Feldmans. Together, in the safe space of their private internet chat, they revisited that fateful day when all the parents of high school juniors had gathered in the cafeteria, reduced to sitting on those backless benches and sipping bitter coffee, to learn about . . . *the college admission process, dun dun dun*. She'd attended the very same meeting when Rachel was a junior, quite calmly, but the finality of her youngest leaving the nest had affected her in ways she couldn't have foreseen. Mitch's face, which she kept stealing glances at, was mostly blank during the talk. He took some notes in the reporter pad he always carried in his back pocket, but generally looked glazed over, clearly not experiencing the combustion of emotions that was making her heart feel like an egg cracked into a sizzling pan. Mitch had gone back to work afterward, taking his own car, but she'd gotten behind the wheel of her minivan and sobbed for nearly an hour.

Once her tears ceased, but with her cheeks bearing the telltale stains, she'd driven to the mall—anything to avoid returning home, where life would be all but silent before she knew it. She found herself in the dressing room of a midpriced dress shop and tried on a black sheath just for the hell of it. When Elise emerged from the dressing room, the salespeople predictably gushed, but even she had

to admit the cut *was* very flattering and the hemline hit in the perfect spot (generous thighs hidden and slender calves on display, such that she felt like she was carrying a secret beneath her dress). She'd swiped her credit card and left with the weight of the folded garment bag over her arm, but paradoxically feeling lighter. Then she'd gone next door and chosen a pair of matching heels.

By the time she was done, closing time at the mall (she'd never been there when a voice came on the loudspeaker to tell shoppers it was time to wrap it up—how depressing that sound was), she had five bags divided between two hands and a spring in her step. If Darius's leaving for college was the catalyst for her addiction, then the purchase of that black dress was her first taste. What difference was there really between white powder and black thread when the end result was that the buyer couldn't get enough of it?

Unable to look herself in the mirror anymore without crippling guilt, which was especially difficult given how often she was in a dressing room, last week she did what she should have done back in June. She called the school guidance counselor, a smug little thing named Janice who talked to her in code about "reach schools" and "safety schools." Darius was a solid B-minus/C-plus student, with a B or B plus sprinkled in here and there, typically in his English classes. And his SATs were in line with his grades, even though she and Mitch held out hope that his natural ability would shine through on a standardized test. Fortunately he was doing a retest this fall.

Privately, they thought Darius might even be smarter than the self-motivated Rachel, but what difference did it make if he never applied himself? The guidance counselor and she cobbled together a list of places where Darius stood a fighting chance and agreed to meet again in late September, with Mitch and Darius as well.

Elise knew it was fruitless to ask herself the age-old question that parents with disparate children ask themselves. Elise and her own brother were diametrical opposites, so why should she be

surprised that Darius was unmotivated and Rachel the golden child in spite of receiving the same love and nurturing, both of them seeds tended to with equal diligence and care? Her children's dissimilarity was the slap in the face she deserved for ever questioning why her own parents couldn't get it right with Freddy. Still, she held firm to an optimism that Darius would not turn into her brother.

"Anyway, you know me, I don't like to be the center of attention," Annette went on, snapping Elise back to the present. She had to smile, even as she noticed the dwindling pile of mesh shorts left for the taking. *I know you*, Elise thought. It seems *you* don't know you. "But, well, given the circumstances, I thought it would be really nice if we all got together to celebrate."

Elise felt her face grow hot. How did her mother know about her circumstances? And why would getting together help? Unless . . . unless Mitch had in fact found out what was going on with her and reached out to her parents. And this birthday celebration was just a ruse to do some kind of intervention, like on reality TV where everyone sits on a couch looking very serious and the unsuspecting target walks into the room to find their loved ones terribly disappointed in them. But no, it couldn't be. Mitch may have been onto her, but he'd never tell her parents without confronting her first. Even if she'd squandered so much of what they'd built together, treating their bank account like it was a toy funnel, he owed her at least that much. Not to make her a fool in front of her parents, especially her father, the esteemed David Feldman, M.D.

"What did you have in mind?" Elise said, tallying a list of ready excuses why the trip home to celebrate the milestone birthday couldn't be longer than a day or two. Moving Rachel back into the dorms. An appendectomy. A crisis at work for Mitch. She'd let her husband, the writer, select the final story line and together they'd flesh out the details.

“A five-day, four-night cruise to the Caribbean. We leave in three weeks.”

Elise felt a hole in her stomach so cavernous a thousand shopping bags couldn't fill it.

“And Freddy agreed to this?”

“He's my next call. So I've got to go.”

She pictured her brother, cell phone tucked in the back pocket of tattered jeans slung low around his hips, so unprepared for what was coming. Nobody ever does see the Mack truck before impact, do they?