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Tzipora “Tzippy” Bryer is anticipating her 80th birthday with mixed excitement and dread. She is thrilled that her three grown children will be gathering for a party in her honor, but worried about the strained relationships among them and between her and her youngest daughter, Shari. She hopes that her man friend, and soon-to-be fiancé, Stan will keep her grounded.

Tzippy is the daughter of Jewish immigrants who devoted much of her life and energy in overcoming what she perceived as shameful roots. She married a businessperson and tried to emulate her vision of a successful wife and mother. She and Benny had three children: Bruce, the eldest, took over the family coat business; Naomi, the middle child, was an easy-going cookbook author; and Shari, the youngest, struggled with eating disorders and alcoholism.

All her life, she had tried to rise above. Sure, her parents had been immigrants, but look what a catch Benny had been, even if he’d treated her meanly at times. She was a woman who lived a certain life; she was someone above bickering, who gave beautiful dinner parties, shopped at the finest stores, and went to the best restaurants. … But despite her good fortune, her life felt empty. Her husband hadn’t been faithful, and the children fought. (50)

As with most family reunion stories, old resentments were re-kindled when the family got together. Shari criticized Bruce for his mishandling of the business and claimed that she would have done a better job if her father has allowed women into the business. Tzippy continued to try to mold her children into her ideal of proper adulthood, which sent Shari into fits of recrimination, “Mom kept trying to turn me into a lay-dee.” (46) She blamed her mother for her eating disorders and for not noticing that she had a problem. And for every issue that was raised, the other sibling(s) chose a side and added to the tension.

It was in this atmosphere of stress that Tzippy decided to go shopping at her beloved Saks Fifth Avenue. While she was looking at lipsticks and stockings, a pin caught her eye, “She wanted that pin, was entitled to that pin. … Getting what she wanted filled up the emptiness inside her.” (56) So under the guise of returning a tissue to her purse, she slipped the pin into her bag. Unfortunately, the store guard saw her and called the police. The trauma of being arrested...
made Tzippy realize how far her life was from the one she craved. She was determined to make things better, starting with her relationship with Shari.

Suppressed memories started resurfacing. She remembered Shari at age eleven telling her that Tzippy’s brother Lenny has been coming into her room and touching her. Tzippy dismissed the story, even though Tzippy herself had been abused as a child by one of her parent’s boarders. She recalled other times when she had stolen items from stores, insisting that the young Shari help her. Finally, she remembered an evening out with her husband’s colleagues when Tzippy had colluded with one of the men to hide his affair from his wife. Shari was shocked at Tzippy’s behavior.

It was at the precise moment, Tzippy surmised, that Shari lost all faith in her parents and the type of upbringing they were providing for her. It was at the moment Tzippy realized, that Shari knew how Tzippy and Ben had tried to fool their daughter into thinking she had been given the best of all childhoods, when in fact she had been used, was a witness to the sordidness of wealth, to opportunity, to the double standard, and to the low position of women. That was the straw that broke the camel’s back; that was the moment when Shari gave up. (164)

Eventually, Tzippy found a treatment center for people with eating disorders and their families. She attended a support group and admitted for the first time out loud that her marriage had not been a good one and that her and her husband’s actions had adversely affected their daughter. She convinced Shari to join the meeting and convinced herself to listen to her daughter without judgment.

While Tzippy often feels inadequate and admits, “Maybe she was old-fashioned, but having a smart, powerful man on her side was something she had always craved.” (137) she finds that she has more strength than she could have imagined. Tzippy is able to admit that she harmed Shari over the years and recognizes that reconciliation will be a long process. She also recognizes that her own abuse of alcohol and prescription pills and her history of shoplifting needs to be addressed. While everything is not wrapped up tidily at the end of the book, Tzippy finds that making progress on her issues put her in a contented place.