



Prom Dress

BY LYNNE GOLODNER

“Butterfly dresses are the thing, Mom,” Eliana whispered. “Can you imagine if I went to prom in a butterfly dress?”

It was long and beaded, the blue of a shimmering pool. Sequin butterflies fluttered in bursts of color, one the deep golden of my daughter’s hair.

We were one mother-daughter pair of a dozen mother-daughter pairs in a tiny shop stuffed with racks of dresses pressed together so tightly it was hard to see each one. The proprietor kept track of the number of people in the store, as impatient women and girls waited outside in the lingering cold of late winter. Inside, we were masked and trying to distance, but urgency seemed to overshadow pandemic protocols: We hoped our teens would have their magical night. After a year of disappointment, death, painful politics and online school from stuffy bedrooms, we were desperate for a happy ending.

Still, I hadn’t wanted to go dress-shopping. I’d been struggling to relate to my daughter’s desperation for senior year excitement and glamor. For a month before our shopping date, she lashed out because I wouldn’t let her go to Florida for spring break: “I won’t die from COVID! But I’ll never have another senior year.” From our suburban home, as snowy wind swept the streets in clouds, she watched friends post pictures from beaches and parties. When her friends came home with COVID, I thought I’d be vindicated. But I wasn’t.

Eliana kept doing all the things kids do to become independent – insisting she knew best, chafing at having to follow my rules, rolling her eyes. She saw me as out-of-touch, as if I'd never been a teenage girl. Granted, I'd never been a teen in a pandemic, but it felt frivolous to want special occasions and expensive dresses as hospitals overflowed with patients gasping their last breaths, their families robbed of the chance to say goodbye.

The lack of generosity I felt toward my daughter didn't gel with my vision of myself as a mother. All I'd wanted was to birth babies, hold them close and raise them to feel so loved they'd never grow distant. But I was having a hard time letting go.

My sweet little girl slipped out in two pushes before my midwife could get to the birthing center. The next morning, she lay on the bed beside me while her father walked to synagogue to name her Eliana, Hebrew for "God answers", Greek for "daughter of the sun".

Eliana was the insistent newborn who stayed awake until late and slept until long after dawn's golden fingers gripped the day. She was the toddler who insisted I rock her at 2 a.m., the five-year-old who asked me to remove the training wheels from her bicycle and rode off in perfect balance. She was the child who never flinched when the nurse poked her with needles, the little girl who, before attending school, exclaimed, "I wrote my name!" and when I looked at the paper, there were those six letters, scribbled in crayon, with confidence.

She loved frills and tulle and pink and purple, layered strings of beads around her neck, painted her nails and preferred decorative ponytails for her silky hair. Eliana's cake pops won the neighborhood baking contest the first time she entered, at age 10. Now, at 18, she expertly applies a full face of makeup, looks impeccably beautiful in Doc Martens, ripped jeans and oversized sweaters, stunning even in sweatpants. My sweet girl, my tough girl, my strong girl. She came from me but she has never been of me – confident where I doubt myself, remarkably immune to criticism. For the first three decades of my life, I cared inordinately what people thought, longing for praise from family members, friends, teachers, even passers-by. My daughter is discerning about whose opinions affect her – select friends', her step-sister's, mine.

I admire her toughness, but sometimes it perplexes me. While my sons are sweet and snuggly, Eliana has a mind and mission of her own. Like me, she is defiant, and sometimes I don't do right by her. I regret words I've uttered in the heat of mother-daughter battle – accusing her of not caring about others' feelings, of focusing only on herself. When I was growing up, I felt my mother rarely listened to me; I believed she didn't see the real me. I never wanted a child of mine to feel the sting of silence.

* 1989: Our hair is big, our clothing bright neon. In shoulder pads and two-tone shoes, blue eye shadow and shiny lips, we are telling the world we are here; we don't need coiffures and ironed clothes, tucked shirts or slick haircuts.

Back then, I always had a boyfriend, but never believed I was lovable. I was too much for everyone, strong, intense, speaking my mind. I stood on the outskirts of popular, with friends in every clique, never belonging to one. How my family saw me influenced how I saw myself. Instead of calling me strong or a leader, they said I was bossy and had a big mouth. I vowed that when I became a mother, I would never discredit a daughter of mine for sharing opinions or defying societal expectations. I would love my daughter so much that she'd always believe in herself.

I went to prom every year of high school, and each time my mother bought me a pretty dress for under \$100. But for my prom, she spent \$500 on a snow-white strapless number with fitted bodice and peplum layers -- a dress everyone would remember.

"It's your prom," she rationalized.

I imagined walking in and everyone looking up, holding their breath at the sight of me, my curly hair blown straight, sparkly eye shadow and glossy lipstick illuminating my face. They'd smile, nod in approval. Someone might whisper, "Did you see Lynne's dress?" I would overhear, of course, and hold that moment as my high school grand finale.

Instead, five other girls, including the prom queen, showed up in my \$500 dress.

Eliana buzzed among long dresses in a rainbow of fabrics and colors. The first row held poofy gowns. The second offered sequins and beads. Beyond that hung shorter dresses, which Eliana insisted were not prom length, and the far wall showcased a mish-mash of styles – black-tie dressy, two-piece ensembles, ball gowns with strapless bodices.

She wanted something straight and form-fitting with subtle embellishment. The salesgirl surveyed Eliana's pink satin mini-dress, cropped sweater, white Doc Martens boots, and little red handbag. She had straightened her hair, applied wings at the corners of her eyes. Her nails were long and manicured.

"I have to show you this." She led us to a plastic-covered sheath. The butterfly dress.

We were browsing expensive, final-sale gowns, hoping our girls would have a chance to wear them. So far, the plan at Eliana's school was to hold prom at an empty farmers' market. Masks required, no sit-down meal, no dates from other schools.

My senior year had been grand, with a formal homecoming, full-contact powder puff football game, prom and graduation and an all-night party with blackjack, a bounce house and door prizes. For spring break, my parents sent me on an unchaperoned Caribbean cruise. My daughter had been stuck at home all year with only me for company. I loved all this bonus time with my kids, but for them, spending day and night with me was no longer enough.

Of course, teens are supposed to grow up and spread their wings, develop identities and ambitions and lives of their own. The pandemic highlighted how much I loved being with them, how in awe I am of my nearly-adult children, and how hard it would be to see them go.

By the time she stepped into the butterfly dress, Eliana and I were on our third store. In every shop, she had tried on stunning gowns, but hadn't found "the one."

As Eliana slipped into the delicate beaded gown, the saleswoman and I held our collective breath. This dress was so intricate, unique and different, I wanted it to fit. Eliana's senior year had started in lockdown and stayed that way until March. We barred mask-averse friends from our home. For a time when things looked really bad, we barred everyone. After a year of nothing, prom was everything to Eliana, and I wanted to make it perfect for her.

In normal times, a prom dress is a farewell, the dress you hope people remember you in -- IF they remember you. The dress you recall when you've grown thick around the middle and your hair has thinned and you're not sure if you want to attend your reunion. All your hopes and dreams for your life wrapped up in a piece of fabric, the boning of the bodice, the intricate lacework.

But in a pandemic, a prom dress is a symbol of freedom. A transformation from nightmare to dream.

The beaded fabric skimmed her slim curves; delicate straps hovered on her satin skin. Her eyes sparkled. She'd found her dress.

When I turned the tag over and saw that it cost \$700, my stomach clenched. It was so far beyond what I imagined spending. But I took a deep breath and pulled out my wallet.

“Are you sure, Mom?” Eliana said. “It’s so expensive.”

“I’m sure,” I said.

I bought the dress as an apology for not being enough and for being too much, an attempt to erase all our stupid fights. I bought the dress to show my deep and abiding love for my daughter and to compensate for how my imperfect parenting might have sent a different message.

Was this why my mother spent so much on my dress all those years ago? To cling to me? To win my favor? To buy a reprieve from our incessant fighting? In spending an unconscionable sum, did she hope that I’d view her with compassion, that we’d turn a corner in our relationship? Had she, too, planned to be a different kind of mother, and in the final hour, worry that she’d failed?

Prom happened on a May evening. Among 350 classmates, Eliana was the only one in a butterfly dress. She posed for pictures, including one with me. Then we all tramped to Prom Park, a gathering place in our neighborhood, where residents gaze at dresses, tuxedos, up-dos and electric smiles. My mother came, huddling close.

“Look,” I said, pointing to a boy in a gold and black tuxedo with ruffled shirt and wing-tips.

“So chic,” Mom said.

A girl strolled by in a curve-hugging satin sheath. “Elegant,” we agreed.

They posed for selfies – one girl wore a men’s suit, another a red ballgown, still another displayed sparkling sneakers beneath a sleek dress.

"I love how each kid has their own style," I said.

Mom nodded. "They have such a strong sense of self."

"I'm really glad you're here," I said.

"Me, too."

Eliana waved, seeming to hover off the ground. The butterflies glistened in the sun. They'd appeared in our lives fully formed, skipping the difficult metamorphosis of stumbling child to bright-winged adult. I watched my beautiful daughter as she inched away, eager to take flight.

A former journalist, Lynne Golodner is the author of 8 books and thousands of articles and essays. With an MFA in poetry from Goddard College, she lives in Huntington Woods, Michigan with her husband and a rotating combination of her 4 kids (ages 16-20), and works as a marketing consultant and writing coach, helping authors build their brands and promote their work. As host of the Make Meaning Podcast, Lynne interviews authors and those in the publishing realm on the stories of our time.