

IN HIS TUX, TRANSFORMED

She had been reminding her son about the prom for several weeks. “You can’t rent a tuxedo at the last minute,” she said. “It may need alterations. I’ll go with you if you want.” “Mom, I’ll take care of it,” he replied, waving his hand like he was swatting away a fly. Sometimes Kate felt that talking to her son was walking in a minefield—one false step and there’s an explosion.

She was surprised when Josh mentioned the tux spontaneously on a Sunday, nine days before the prom. “OK, Mom, let’s rent the tux,” he mumbled. Masking her delight, Kate tried to act cool—otherwise he’d withdraw, a bird frightened by sudden movement. She pulled out the yellow pages from the hall closet. Josh rolled his eyes. “Nobody uses the yellow pages anymore, Mom. You look it up online,” he said, exasperated.

They took a cab downtown to Eisenberg & Eisenberg. The store was almost deserted. There were two employees (the Eisenbergs? Kate wondered) wearing name tags (Irv was older and Sam was younger). Irv was helping two customers, a mother and her teenage son who towered above her. The son gazed into the full-length mirror at his image in a tuxedo with white athletic socks.

The younger of the two probable Eisenbergs, Sam, looked at Josh. “Prom?” he inquired. “Yep,” said Josh. “C’mere,” Sam grunted, and Josh complied.

Sam explained that there were six decisions to make in renting a tux: number of buttons on the jacket (one through four), lapel style (more information than Josh could handle), vest or cummerbund, tie (bow or long), shirt, and shoes. Josh chose the three-button jacket (Kate preferred two buttons but didn’t comment). Sam brought pants, shirt, long tie, vest, and shiny black shoes. Josh disappeared into the dressing room, and emerged in full prom glory.

Kate looked at her son. The last time he’d worn a tux was at his aunt’s wedding, when he was 12. She remembered how she and Josh rented that tux six years ago, laughing as he tried on pants that were either too long or too short. Now he was getting ready for his senior prom, and she had to be silent. Why is it that they used to love to talk, but now the sound of her voice irritated him?

She wanted to tell him how proud she was of him for so many things. Graduating from high school. Picking a college. Tutoring third-graders. Looking out for his kid sister. How could 18 years pass so quickly? She wanted to tell him that she would always love him. That if he was ever in trouble he could come to her. Maybe in his tux, transformed, he would hear it. She opened her mouth to speak.

“I’ll pay,” she said, reaching for her credit card.

Laura Liberman, 2008