

ANNE PANNING



THE MOTHER

Narrative
But still
Reaction

What is the feeling
I want
It's sign, heard?

After I give birth to my son, I reach for my eyeglasses so I can see him. There's a photograph of me crying immediately post-birth, and I'm wearing nothing but a blue and white hospital gown and my tiny brown glasses that people—total strangers—used to always compliment me on back when they were still in style.

But life with baby wears on me. Nursing in the middle of the night in the near-dark, glasses off, all is a blur. In fact, day and night bleed into one cloudy gray. I lose the baby weight but also lose all energy or insight. I simply want to eat potato chips and watch reruns of *Providence* and cry.

When the baby is almost a year old, I fly to California for a friend's wedding. I'm so unused to a lack of responsibility for others that I'm giddy just to ride solo on the airplane. I fall asleep before we're even out of my time zone. When I wake

up, mountains and buttery sunshine fill the window. In the taxi, I sit back and imagine staying here forever. I will live in a bungalow, wear linen pants, and eat salad every day.

I stay in a hotel with fresh cedar shingles that's located next to a mall. (This is Marin County, which I've heard about and have associations: wealth, convertibles with their tops down, women wearing white, fancy sunglasses, health food stores.) I am not incorrect. But it is also sunny and warm and invigorating. Somehow living in the grim gray cold of New York State seems to be the reason for much of my exhaustion. I have been missing simple sunshine.

The day before the ceremony, I walk over to the mall and pass a vitamin shop. What catches my eye is the display case of eyeglass frames advertised for twenty-five dollars. "Latest styles from Italy," a sign says, and I am perplexed. Thinking they must be drugstore magnifying lenses, I almost pass, but hesitate. The frames are so stylish, so rich in color, so differently shaped that I want to own a pair and start over and not look like a "mom."

Inside, the clerk explains that the owner takes a yearly vacation to Italy and brings back last year's models at deep discounts. There's no catch, she says. It's just something he does. I pore over the black velvet tray of frames, finally deciding on an elongated rectangular pair in a color much like toffee with a tiny tiny hint of orange blended in. When I try them on, even without my prescription lenses, I think I look European.

On the plane ride home, I keep the red velvet glasses' case in my carry-on. I am torn: a deep, almost primal urge to get

back to my child, smell him, hold him, feel his small soft hands, and another competing urge to live in California in a light and airy house with eucalyptus trees and an open porch and childless friends who mix sangrias on Saturday afternoons and eat tapas.

Back home, my husband and I both teach and tag-team with our child. When the winter gets particularly unbearable, I take my son to the community toddler gym to let him blow off steam. Before we are allowed entrance into the stark, padded room, we must pose for photo ID cards. When mine is handed back to me, I'm flummoxed, out of focus, and feel I'm looking at a stranger. I've got my "pimp" coat on, a black Persian lamb's wool with shiny buttons, which is really an old-lady Presbyterian church sale coat I got for three dollars. My bangs are cut very short and my California eyeglasses look almost bright orange, too European, too West Coast, too something. Holding a toddler in flannel shirt and overalls in my arms, I am completely mismatched with my life—an impostor, a stand-in, a woman I barely recognize.

JOANNA MCNANEY



CLEAN SLATE

In the photo my parents nestle on a square blue couch that looks about as comfortable as plywood. They are not yet who they will be. There are no rings on fingers, no wedding cake, no kids, no mess.

In a few months my father will be the valedictorian of their high school class, and, by the looks of him, belongs in the cast of *Revenge of the Nerds*. His glasses are mason jars with thick black frames and his hair is parted halfway down the side of his head, by his ear. Luckily his sideburns give him a dorky kind of charm. He wears a light blue shirt with a black necktie, vest and jacket. His brown glasses' case is tucked into the jacket pocket. He is tall and extremely thin, with a long face, a crooked nose, and later in life his kids' dentist will compare his chin to Jay Leno's.

But not yet.