



When Multiplied by the Imagination

By K. L. Barron

My seventeen-year-old daughter is helping me wash windows. I let her choose the outside or the inside of the pane and I take what is left. We will work gradually around the two stories of the house until all the windows look like mirrors. She sees this chore as a punishment, just as I did when I was on the other side of the window from my mother. It takes years to think of spending time in such a way.

I'm cheerful about the task, thinking of the crystal clear view we'll enjoy for the short while before we put on the screens for summer. This may be the last time my daughter and I will wash these windows together. She is graduating from this life to move into one of her own and then who knows what may happen. With a burst of energy I gather the aluminum telescoping ladder, a couple of trash cans, two bottles of Windex and a huge stack of newspapers, dividing everything indoors and out to make it easier to begin.

My daughter appears inside the living room window, yawning, a ball cap on backward with her low bleached blonde ponytail grazing the neck of her t-shirt. She grabs her bottle of Windex, aiming from the low hip of her jeans as if challenging me to a draw. I squint my eyes like Clint Eastwood, reach for my bottle, and we both fire away.

We make large, sweeping movements with our arms as if waving to get the attention of someone in the distance, the same frantic motion I used when mopping creamed carrots spewed from the lips of my daughter all over the full moon of her baby face.

This first window is disappointing or overwhelming, depending. It is the indicator of how long and relentless the work is actually going to be when multiplied by the imagination. The obvious dust, debris, and droppings are quickly dispatched with the Windex and newspapers only to be followed by obscure smudges in the corners, and streaks that disappear and then reappear like those trick birthday candles that look like they're extinguished only to continually re-ignite. My daughter looks at her watch that is pink and shaped like an electric guitar.

She had an infection when she was born, nothing that an antibiotic wouldn't cure but they didn't figure that out until after she'd had a spinal tap and had begun to turn yellow. For the next two weeks I stayed at the hospital, pumping milk and feeding her by bottle through special holes in the sterile bubble around her bassinet. That was what inspired me to wear this apron with a holster that has Windex on one side and Clorox on the other that I ordered from The Clean Team catalogue. My daughter wouldn't be caught dead in an apron. She drags her bottle from window to window.

She is frowning at a spot I said she missed and I see the deep groove between her eyes that one day will not disappear. This is what concentration looks like at seventeen. No, concentration has a dreamier consistency at seventeen. It is gazing into the eyes of your first love and thinking you are seeing what he thinks and finding it exactly the same as what you think. Flight. She is not concentrating now, she is simply going through the motions.

I take off my sunglasses to see her better. She doesn't seem to notice me studying her, holding her within the frame of the window as if she were a photograph of herself. Her skin is smooth and pale because she has always used sunscreen. I told her once that she should wear it whenever she's outside in the sun for any length of time and she has,

believing that this will protect her from wrinkles and from cancer, which I also told her because I have to believe that it will.

My mother took off her glasses only when she cried. Once when my brother crashed into a tree on his sled and broke his neck when he was little, and once when I ran away from home in high school. I didn't witness it the time I wasn't home, but I hear her now. She has been crying in my ear for seventeen years.

I'm on the side of the glass that has been exposed to the weather. My daughter might think she has the easier job, cleaning the inside of the glass which hosts only the occasional leavings from a rolled up newspaper and the almost imperceptible prints of someone else's hands, rather than dust mixed with spattered rain. The inside would seem so protected, so contained and benign but she has yet to fail in love, the remains of a transparent wing can hold on to a window like super glue, or a fossil. Sometimes it can destroy a person.

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We spray and wipe the glass three times before we really get down to it. I have a critical eye and am probably too particular to be washing windows with anyone but my own mother. But my daughter is a perfectionist so when I criticize her side of the pane, it is impossible for her to ignore it. Even if I don't actually point out a flaw, she can see it in my face. Our anger cycles with our menses and we have, until recently, been synchronized. We never argued often, but when we did, we would yell over each other at the same time.

We stand at our respective vantage points and look at the window, which now resembles Mylar, and move on to remove the surface layer off the next pane. "Clean Team products make you more efficient so you can get back to what you'd rather be doing!"

My husband and I locked our bedroom door at night when my daughter was young. A psychologist on the radio recommended telling the restless child through the locked door that they would be all right and to go back to bed. I was delirious from sleep deprivation. I look at her face and can't see any damage but it might be there, some invisible anger or a deep loneliness.

She has a boyfriend but I don't think they are in love. I told her once not to fall in love too early. I think she thinks that love is something one can control like sex or sucking one's thumb. She might have thought that I meant sex and I did, that too. When she was four her dentist insisted she stop sucking her thumb—this to a girl who had been sucking her thumb her entire life. But she found his reasoning sound, chose the date she would quit, and did it, cold turkey. I sewed a rainbow-striped mitt for her to wear at night. One morning she told me I had put the mitt on the wrong hand, but even in her sleep she had known what I meant.

My mother always cleaned when she was upset. She said it was a positive way to use up negative energy. I don't remember much about washing windows with my mother except that it was long and tedious and at the age of seventeen, I felt quite beyond it. I was more self-involved and less considerate than my daughter. My mother and I already had our own lives. I had fallen in love too soon, without her, and then fallen out, without her, too. Washing windows with my mother would not have been a consideration if I had not been numb. We, too, faced each other on opposite sides of a transparent pane. I could not focus on the window or on my mother's face, couldn't tell you if she were wearing her glasses or not, but there was something comforting in going through the motions. My mother was looking at the window, or through the pane at me. She was wiping the window over and over to touch my hand through the glass.

My daughter disappears from the window and I plaster my ear against the frame checking for streaks from an extreme side angle. She comes back with a razor blade and I think how well do I really know her? The invisible core that makes some people cut or starve themselves, destroy or run away from themselves, or deny themselves to rise to something higher. She angles the blade against the glass and pushes firmly to remove some debris, but gently so as not to mar the surface. She sprays and wipes the glass once more and moves on to the next window. As I did when washing windows with my mother. ()