

Big Sister

BY: BRENDA BLACKHAWK

Get up before the sun; quietly wake up the other girls; whatever you do, don't disturb the madam; start boiling water for the washing while the two little ones gather up the dirty linens from the day before; you'll be in charge now; make sure everyone stays busy; avoid the sting of cords against your back; make sure everyone gets something to eat; prepare the madam's meal; save the best scraps for her bitch because she'll know if you don't; keep the rest for you and your sisters to eat later; always make sure they eat every bite of their food; they'll need their strength to get through the day;

when the madam enters the room, keep your head down; serve her and the bitch; be silent; remind the girls to be silent; avoid the slap of the leather belt on the back of your thighs; when the madam leaves, choose a girl; send her after the madam into the room with the red door; keep the girls busy at all times; sweep the floors with the broken straw brooms; bend low and use the ones without the handle because they get up more dirt; hang the laundry out to dry; slosh the soapy water from the washing onto the floor; don't be afraid to get down on your hands and knees like a dog; you're a mangy, scrawny thing that no one wants to love; don't be afraid to break your back when you scrub; the madam likes this creaky wooden floor to be clean when the customers arrive; when the first girl comes out, send another one in; make sure every girl goes in for her meeting; save yourself for last;

what if I want to go first and get it over with?;

never go first or she will hurt you; always go last or she will hurt one of them; you're in charge of them now; you look out for them now; in your meeting kneel on the floor at the madam's feet; do not look up at her; do not speak; avoid the purple bruises that will blossom along your ribcage each time she kicks you; listen to her words; don't

pretend because she will know; listen to her soft voice tell you again your own story; listen to her remind you of the day you came here; listen when she reminds you how kind she is to feed you, clothe you, and provide shelter; listen to the way she won't let you forget you have nowhere else to go because your own father sent you there; he sold you for \$200 so he could feed your brothers and send them to school; he sold you; never forget she owns you; if you cry, don't let your nose snot or your chest heave or your cries come free between your lips; if you cry don't let her see; never let the other girls know that you cry;

listen to the madam's wishes and do all you can to make sure they come true; take the pills she offers you and give them to the girls so they don't feel so much; keep some for yourself if you can; sometimes there won't be enough; you're in charge now; you have to think about the girls; you want to know how to make it through without the pills?; learn to shut down; drink as much of the alcohol as you can; learn to shut down; you have to learn to shut down or you won't survive;

when the men come in, help direct the younger ones toward the cleaner looking men; if there are no clean looking men, direct them toward the nicer looking men; if there are no nice looking men, direct them toward the older men because they have more money and they might be more generous; never forget that the madam wants money; you have to make money; this is how you smile to make a man come towards you; this is how you touch a man to make him want to pay for you; this is how you touch a man to make him want to pay more for you; this is how you look at a man to figure out what he wants from you; this is the best way to lay on your back without disturbing your tender flesh; this is the best way to lay on your stomach to hide whatever tears might escape; remember that some men want you to be terrified;

remember that some men want you to be helpless;
remember that some men want you to stroke their ego
and make them feel special or skilled; remember that
some men want you to be lifeless, like a thing, so they feel
less guilty; give the men what they want; avoid the knife
that leaves pink, puckered patterns on your skin; watch
the men leave; stop yourself from begging them not to
leave you behind; always stay silent;

try to stay numb as the day goes on; try to keep the
younger ones from crying too much; never let them see
you cry; when the madam offers more drugs, give them
to the girls; keep them numb; when the men offer you
alcohol, drink too much; eat the scraps the men give to
you, but don't eat too much or you'll get sick;
try to stay numb;

after the madam closes the doors and goes to bed, make
the tea; make sure each girl drinks their entire cup; don't
let them get pregnant; don't let them have babies; if they
get pregnant, remind them of Sahira; remind them that
the men asked for her more when her belly started to
bulge; remind them that Sahira's baby was taken from her
arms soon after she was born; remind them that Sahira's
baby was sold the day she turned six and no one has seen
her since; you cannot get pregnant because the other
sisters need you; if you get pregnant you drink more tea;
if that doesn't work, you will need to leave to protect your
baby; if you get pregnant, run away if you think you can
survive; if you get pregnant but cannot escape, consider
death to protect you both; either way make sure you find
a new girl to be the big sister; make sure it is one of the
girls who have tough skin; make sure you tell them what I
am telling you;

always give the girls a story before they dream; this is how
you tell a story to the girls—it can't be too hopeful; never
let them think one of these men will take them away;
never let them think that their fathers will come back

for them; never let them think they can leave this place
in any way other than the death that is coming for us all
anyways; never give them hope because you never lie to
your sisters; before you close your own eyes you must
make sure they are sleeping; now, you can cry if you need
to, but only when they sleep; make sure they get their rest;
it is always best to sleep without dreams;

you're in charge now; this is how you take care of them;
this is how you pretend you don't see the split-open skin
on their backs; this is how you pretend you don't see their
tear-stained faces; this is how you pretend that you don't
see their hollow, haunted eyes; don't let these things get
to you because if you do, the world will feel heavy like a
man, pressing you deeper and deeper into a stained little
mattress; you cannot let it get to you because they need
you to teach them to survive; this is how you love them;
this is how you forget you are just a girl too; each day you
will feel the emptiness fill you up a little more; you might
think that that emptiness will feel light but it will be
heavy and it will weigh you down and make you feel like
you cannot breathe; you must keep breathing for as long
as you can because your sisters need you; but someday,
you will not be able to go on and that is okay; remember
what I've told you because someday you will have to
explain all this to the next big sister;

But, Big Sister where will you go?;

you mean to tell me, after all this, you do not understand
that the only way to leave this place is as a ghost?

Brenda Blackhawk is a senior with an English major
and three minors. She plans to pursue a career as a book
editor and writer. She also plans to start a non-profit
organization to help indigenous urban women in her
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