

BABY DOLL

BY NINA

BABY DOLL HAD A WANDERING EYE. Not that it ever really got him into trouble. Don Benigno let him get away with whatever he wanted because he was sturdy, reliable, and never talked back. Children approached him with their sticky hands intertwined, nervous glances at one another, cautious in their steps towards him in order to ask for one of the many colorful balloons that he held in his hand. He liked to find dirty spots on their clothes and wonder where the mess had come from, and he spent his shifts on carnival grounds counting how many children wore their shoes untied and how many wore velcro.

When he did get caught, on occasion, staring holes into the side or the front or the back of people's heads, he would smile – his crooked smile with its many crooked teeth, some his, some borrowed, some stolen – and imagine that it was a gentle smile, a soft one. He imagined that the pounds of white greasepaint and baby-pink blush surely made him human.

From the gilded cage of his own mind he would ignore his own clawed hand as it curled carefully around the string of a balloon, would pretend he could not feel the soft dirt give under him as he kneeled down to hand it over. At the right time of day, from the right angle, even his shadow could pass for that of a much smaller being.

Recently, he had nailed a strange new creature in-between his eyes. Don Benigno had rounded out the carnival's side-show performances with a fortune-teller, a fire breather, and a sword swallower. Hachaliah had arrived on carnival grounds a month ago around midnight. Sopping wet from the rain, with only the clothes on his back, and a worn rifle-case full of swords in his hand.

Don Benigno had shoved him unceremoniously into Baby Doll's tent, rumbling and mumbling about tardiness and irresponsibility. Hachaliah's long dark hair clung to the sides of his face, but he received the sight of Baby Doll's half-naked, ball-jointed body with a polite smile and only a bit of embarrassment. He spoke in a gentle tone, and when his

handsome face smiled it revealed two perfect rows of delicate white teeth. He was tall, but Baby Doll was even taller.

Don Benigno made the promise of getting Hachaliah his own cot, but Baby Doll knew he was more faithful to his shoe-string budget than to any man or woman, so they would not be seeing another cot anytime soon. They had squeezed together into the cot that night and every night since. Which Baby Doll did not mind. As it turned out, once Hachaliah grew past the initial embarrassment of bed sharing, he slept like a rock under Baby Doll's shameless staring.

They rarely saw one another during the day, busy all around with carnival duties, and more often than not Baby Doll came back to his tent at night to find Hachaliah already asleep. Hogging his blankets for that matter. Still, some nights Baby Doll returned to find him half-undressed. Hachaliah only sometimes wore shirts, but never at the same time he wore pants, and owned no underwear. Lithe and strong, ropes of muscle all carefully crafted to allow one, two, sometimes three weapons to slide right down past his heart to graze the bottom

lining of his stomach. Baby Doll wished he could turn into a broad sword. Baby Doll feared he would unscrew his head off his shoulders permanently, that the thick rubber band that held him together would snap, but his favorite part was the staring and he was content to maintain the narrow groove in their cot for as long as possible.

The first to go was Paulie. He had vanished as easily as he could twist and turn his body into all kinds of different angles. Francesca and the rest of the acrobats checked each and every chest, barrel, box, and drawer to no avail. He was gone. Francesca came to Baby Doll sobbing, staining his colorful overalls with her tears. He turned the big top tent inside out, peered down the mouth of the tiger, stalked any man he deemed suspicious to the edge of the lot, but there was no sign of Paulie anywhere. Wherever that little boy had gone, Baby Doll's wandering eye could not follow. Once two whole weeks had passed Don Benigno packed up all of his belongings into a box and drove into town to sell them for cheap.

Next was Warren, the fiddle player. Hachaliah appeared

over Don Benigno's shoulder one evening, wondering where Warren had gone. He was on duty to help with dinner. Couldn't find him anywhere, had asked around to no avail. When Don Benigno checked his tent he found all his things gone too, except for the fiddle, so in a fit he assumed that Warren had hit the road real sly. Fuming, Don Benigno handed the fiddle over to Baby Doll and instructed him to take over any of Warren's performances for the foreseeable future. Perhaps it was because his things had gone with him, or perhaps it was because Baby Doll managed to play a pretty good tune, that soon enough no-one could remember Warren nor Paulie at all.

Francesca was a sweet little thing. She led the acrobats not because she was the oldest, or the most beautiful, but because she was the best. She was turning twenty-seven soon, but Baby Doll had known her since he'd first found her pickpocketing on carnival grounds, many years ago. When she was young, she clung to him often, bumping her head into his side. He would lift her onto his broad shoulders where she would spend the next hour or so tangling his long orange hair until she fell asleep. He would never admit it, but he felt a sense

of duty towards her.

Francesca sat next to him while he turned out balloon animals for a gaggle of teenagers. She often hid in his large shadow to smoke without drawing too much attention. She liked to gossip about all goings-on, and she had chosen Baby Doll as her confidant due to his deafening silence.

"—so in the end I broke things off with her. I'm not very good at sharing, and apparently neither is her husband. You know how men are, Baby."

He did not, but he could imagine. He twisted the leg of a balloon giraffe into place and handed it over to a young girl. Francesca went on: "I wanted to take Lila out for dinner tonight but I haven't been able to talk to her. She's been playing doctor with the clowns all morning. Apparently Marnie, Vince, and a few others got into it. Your darling boy too, Lila wrapped his hand."

At that, Baby Doll frowned, which made Francesca laugh.

"Maybe you can kiss it better for him, if you watch your teeth." Baby Doll whacked her softly with a balloon sword. Francesca finished another cigarette, filling Baby Doll's ears with more gossip until her performance neared and she whisked away, leaving only a trail of smoke and glitter to follow.

Baby Doll found Lila inside the clowns' tent with Vince. He lay up to his neck under heavy blankets. His face was flush and sweaty, and his breathing was hoarse. Lila, who walked the tightrope, wrung out a small cloth into a bowl before placing it onto Vince's forehead again.

"Oh Baby Doll, I don't know what to do! He got caught between Marnie and Hachaliah earlier today. He's freezing cold," Lila said, "And I think Don Benigno needs to call for the doctor, look at this," she lifted the blankets off him, and Baby Doll's eyes widened at the sight of his arm. Baby Doll didn't bleed. He couldn't even cry. He found wounds all kinds of fascinating. It had swollen from his fingertips up to his elbow. In the middle he could see four thin scratch marks from which a thin spider-web of black veins bloomed. He imagined his own sharp nails

ripping into Vince's arm and shuddered. Baby Doll left the tent immediately to find Don Benigno. He cornered the man in the back of the big top tent, tightening a hand around the back of his neck until he agreed to call for the doctor first thing tomorrow.

He returned to his tent to find Hachaliah sitting in a corner, rearranging the swords he kept inside his rifle-case. All shapes and sizes. Hachaliah looked up at Baby Doll and smiled politely. "Evening," he mumbled.

Under the yellow gaslamp a row of black stitches crowned his brow. His skin shone with the sweat of infection. Baby Doll looked down to find Hachaliah's left hand was wrapped carefully in gauze. Hachaliah wrinkled his nose at him. "Marnie and I had a little run in, but it's nothing to worry about."

Marnie, one of the older clowns, doubled as the crew's tailor for any costume related business. He was broadly considered to be a functioning alcoholic. Baby Doll liked

Marnie enough, but he knew that catching him in a bad mood, especially if he smelled of gin, always spelled disaster. He figured that someone would have let Hachaliah know earlier, though.

Baby Doll walked over and sat down right by him, bumping their knees together. He twirled his finger in the air, motioning for Hachaliah to undo the dressing. Most of Hachaliah's hand was red and swollen, two of his fingers wrapped tight against popsicle sticks. There was no open wound for Baby Doll to gawk at, and he frowned. Hachaliah, perhaps under the impression that Baby Doll was upset on his behalf, patted him on the shoulder. "I'll be alright. You should go wash up, Baby."

Baby Doll emerged from their tent to wash the greasepaint off his face in the showers by the tiger's cage. He wandered over slowly, thinking of Vince's scratches and Hachaliah's broken fingers. It was then that he found Marnie by the showers, sobbing grossly and smelling of vomit and alcohol. He stared at Marnie for a while, until Marnie found it within

himself to focus his eyes on the towering figure in the dark next to him.

"*Baby Doll*," Marnie gasped, "Something's wrong with that boy."

Baby Doll tilted his head to the side, suddenly a thousand times more interested in their entire debacle. Marnie wiped his nose against the back of his hand. "He's got something wicked behind his eyes, Baby. Whatever came into my tent wasn't him. He said the others were looking for me and he grabbed me by the elbow with a strength like nothing else I ever felt. And his eyes were the devil's eyes. I was so scared, and I was fighting him off and he *bit* me," Marnie lifted his sleeve to try and show Baby Doll a bite mark in the darkness, "When Vince and the boys dragged me out and pulled me off him, there he was. Just a boy, thin as a whistle," Marnie let out a wet cough. Baby Doll sighed.

Yes, Marnie was a drunk and a short-tempered idiot, but he was nobody's fool. The bite-mark was there, hard to see as it

was in the night. For now the only thing he could do was wipe Marnie's face down with a wet rag, force him to drink some water, and carry him back to his bed. Finally, when he returned to his tent, he found Hachaliah uncharacteristically awake. Curled up into a little ball on his side. The rifle case tucked up against the edge of the cot.

"Evening," he said.

Baby Doll slowly nodded. He walked over to their shared cot, untying the silk ribbons that held his hair back from his face. He undid the buttons on his overalls, letting them drop to the floor before he kicked them to the side.

Hachaliah looked up at him through beady eyes, but said nothing. Baby Doll took his undershirt off as well, tossing it over his back. Then he turned off the gaslamp, and plunged them both into darkness. Hachaliah sighed, Baby Doll felt him curl tighter under their shared blankets, the groove in the cot shrinking. They lay in silence for a while, with only the song of the bugs outside to lull them to sleep. Baby Doll heard

Hachaliah shuffle even closer. The young man rested his cheek on Baby Doll's shoulder. "You're not upset at me, are you Baby? I know Marnie and Vince are friends of yours."

They were all long-time co-workers at best, acquaintances at most. Baby Doll took care of everyone he knew. Hachaliah continued mumbling, "I apologize if you are.

Rest assured it won't happen again."

Baby Doll thought about the fever Vince was nursing right now, and he stretched his arm under Hachaliah. With a small laugh, the young man went on. "You know, my grandmother used to say that quiet people are the best because they are like tombs. Sealed shut. And you can share all your secrets with them because nothing gets out." Under the cover of darkness, Baby Doll rolled his eyes. Hachaliah nuzzled in even closer. Baby Doll could feel his breath. It was cold. "He saw right through me. Occasionally people do. Those who are more in tune with their senses. Francesca doesn't like me much either but she can't put her finger on it just yet, and the animals steer

clear from me too. But you're big and dumb, lumbering around carnival grounds all day like the behemoth of old. Trailing the lace hems of skirts, and the footprints of children. Looking at *me*."

Well, yes. Still, Baby Doll only enjoyed others from a distance, he enjoyed *the staring*. He enjoyed Hachaliah's reflection in the cracked little mirror of their room, but not how Hachaliah slid his hand across his chest at the moment. In a single motion, Baby Doll rolled over and onto his knees, straddling Hachaliah underneath him. Pinned to the cot, Hachaliah smiled.

"It always starts this way," he said, digging his hands into the side of Baby Doll's thighs, "A small slip up, and then everything else around me begins to fall apart too. I ran from the last place because they found me out. I drank too much too often. I'm greedy by nature. And you're lucky, Baby. Lucky you're made of yarn and porcelain. You're so dang big I could have drained you down to empty and lived for a year," Hachaliah bared his teeth at him, and for the first time Baby Doll saw the

fluorescence of his elongated canines in the dark. Baby Doll reached to grab him by the throat.

"How did you find Marnie?" he asked, fighting off the grip on his neck, "Not too bad I hope. The first poisoning of the blood is always the worst part, but in a day or so he'll be over it. If his body is strong enough. Vince I'm not so sure about. I didn't mean to scratch him, I was just pushing him around."

Baby Doll frowned. With his free hand Hachaliah swatted at him. Baby Doll grabbed both his hands in one of his own and pinned them up above his head. He wriggled around underneath Baby Doll's grasp, kicking his legs out to no avail.

"Let me go, beast!" Hachaliah yelled, "Let me go!"

In their tussling, Hachaliah kicked the old rifle-case halfway across the floor, swords clattering about. Baby Doll held Hachaliah down with one hand and with the other he reached for the sword closest to him.

Without much care he plunged the sword into the first spot he found. Hachaliah let out a terrible scream as the sword sunk deep into his side, pinning his body to the cot. Blood began to pour out from the wound. Baby Doll grabbed another sword then, and sunk it into his chest. Another howl, Hachaliah attempted to pull the sword in his chest out but Baby Doll pinned one hand through the cot and then the other. He stopped only when all ten of Hachaliah's swords were impaled into some part of his body. He whimpered and groaned like a dying beast. For a second he sounded just like Wilhelmina. All around them there was blood. A deep, black blood that made Baby Doll's eyes sting. He sat down next to Hachaliah's skewered body, doing nothing but spreading the blood on his face around more as he failed to wipe it off.

All night Hachaliah moaned and pleaded with Baby Doll to be let go. He could not speak above a whisper, but he rambled about great riches and immortality, tempting Baby Doll with any and all earthly pleasures he could conjure. He whispered tall tales of blood drinking monsters that bathed in the moonlight. He whispered of the dead earth that had birthed his kind, of

debauched feasts of flesh and lust, and eternal life. Baby Doll grew tired of his nonsense. He sat down on his heels opposite the man's head. Looking at him upside down. Baby Doll framed Hachaliah's head with his thighs and grabbed his face in one of his hands. Hachaliah attempted to struggle, but it was no use.

Baby Doll tightened his grip on his jaw, forcing it open. Slowly, Baby Doll dug a clawed finger into Hachaliah's mouth, piercing into the soft flesh of his gums. Hachaliah lay helpless in his grip, his body convulsing on occasion if Baby Doll dug the finger in too deep. Blood began to pool at the back of his throat. Baby Doll hooked the end of his claw underneath the tooth he wanted and he slowly pried it loose. He did it again, and again, and again, until all four of Hachaliah's wicked canine teeth rested safely in his palm. Then he covered the young man's face with his hand until his breathing evened out, and he let him fall unconscious right where he was.

As it turns out, Don Benigno found a veterinarian to be cheaper than a doctor. She arrived the next morning with a leather bag full of terrible tools. First she lathered Vince's

arm in salve, and wrapped it up in gauze, instructing Lila and Francesca to make sure it didn't slip off. Then, she fed Marnie a bit of laudanum and she cleared a space on one of the dinner tables to set up shop. Baby Doll stared unblinking as the vet tied a strip of rubber halfway between Marnie's wrist and the crook of his elbow. The veins that ran down his arm all different kinds of green and blue-black. The vet took a crooked saw out from her bag and with one hand gripping Marnie's forearm she sliced back and forth and back and forth until a sick wet crack let everyone in the tent know it was over. Before the veterinarian left, Baby Doll handed her four canine teeth, much to Don Benigno's chagrin, and with Francesca's help asked to have his own replaced.

The day had grown long between performances, with Lila, Francesca, and himself rotating around Vince and Marnie's pain. Don Benigno, upset that he was down two more employees found Baby Doll tuning his fiddle behind the big top tent. He walked right up to him and poked him in the chest.

"You know I don't care about what you do as long

as your work is done and this carnival runs smoothly. Put Hachaliah back together by tonight and have him ready to go by tomorrow. You are all getting too expensive for me."

Baby Doll returned to his tent as the sun began to set past the horizon. Hachaliah lay where he had been left pinned to the cot like an atrophied butterfly, his face swollen and his skin pale. He stared up at Baby Doll with glossy eyes and wheezed. Baby Doll undid the ribbons in his hair and he smiled. Four wicked canines glowing under the gaslamp. Tomorrow he would unpin Hachaliah from the cot, carry his body to the showers and wash him down, put him in a nice little outfit and send him off with his swords, but for tonight Hachaliah was his to stare at for as long as he'd like.