

King Baby

A Short Story by Paulette Livers

Martha Stimms squinted at the Baby Ben on her nightstand then squeezed her eyes tight in disbelief. Three twenty-three in the A.M. on the dot, five days running. She pictured the old man's bladder wired with its own alarm clock.

By the time she'd gotten around to buying her brother slippers that fit, he'd been shuffling through the house in shearling mules two sizes too big for so long he'd forgotten how to lift his feet off the floor. She could hear him coming a mile off, *sz ssssz sz ssssz*, the right leg always rushing slightly to keep the weight off the bum hip.

A man his age had no business chasing around after chickens.

Martin Stimms's handsome old rooster, his pride and joy, had gone from randy to mean. The old Nankeen had taken to flogging the hens every two minutes like it was his royal right and duty. Martin, concerned for the damage the cock was doing to the ladies' neck feathers, wasted most of the day running him off, trying to keep the bird penned up away from the hens. That was how her brother had landed himself a mouthful of dirt and chicken poop and a fractured hip. Martha could just imagine that blood-red comb flopping in Martin's face like a victory flag.

To top it all off, Martin's mind was leaking like a rusty bucket, and getting worse.

One of the filthy and nameless Alvarez children, having snuck around behind the henhouse to steal half a dozen eggs for his mama, had come across the old man writhing in pain by the cistern wall. The Mesa County Sheriff managed to track Martha Stimms down three towns away. One of his ancient deputies drove all the way to Ponder Oaks to pick her up. She took time only to throw a few housedresses and pairs of underpants into her overnight case, lock up the little house on which she'd made the final payment not two months before, and fold her considerable bulk into the back seat of the patrol car.

She couldn't say why was she still out here on this scraggly knot of land, all that was left of the old Stimms Ranch where she and Martin had grown up. It had been five hundred and forty-one days since her brother had been released to Martha's care. He was eligible for some long-term rehab at the VA up in Lexington. Which would have been paid for almost in full. But naturally he refused to go. And all this while her cute little house in Ponder Oaks was inhabited by a dried up pair of lesbian nuns who no doubt had not taken the time out of their busybody social work appointments to wax her hardwood floors even once in all this time. These were the kinds of thoughts that tormented Martha's pre-dawn hours, lyrics to the rhythmic pacing of her brother's sliding and lurching toward the bathroom at the end of the hall.

"Pick up your feet, for God's sake, Martin!" she imagined shrieking so loud the skin flaps in the back of her throat burned with the phantom effort. Martha bit down and ground between her molars the silence that had become a sacred refuge. Did he even say thank you for that pair of moccasins, genuine suede uppers, non-skid soles? No, he did not.

Old Doc Forsee's superior granddaughter was the doctor who had signed the forms saying Martin was able to go home. In her head, Martha called her Little Doc. Girl walked around like she was holding a pencil between the two hard little cantaloupes of buttocks stuck to her backside.

"But shouldn't he be somewhere they can keep him out of trouble?" Martha had protested. "Somewhere he can't hurt himself?"

"Only if you want to go through the courts," Little Doc said. "Declare him incompetent. Besides, Mr. Stimms says his chickens will starve out there on that ranch without him." Little

Doc smirked into her folder, scribbling. The arrogance of people nowadays. Martha could see her having a good laugh with the other stuck-ups who worked at the hospital, making fun of old country people like her and Martin.

“It’s just a crack to the femoral neck. I’ve seen way worse,” Doc Forsee’s granddaughter said. “People your age tend to recover faster if they can be in familiar surroundings. It’ll be better for your brother’s Alzheimer’s, too, if you can stay with him for a few months, keep him in active conversation, encourage him stay mobile . . .” Her voice trailed off as she went back to her notes. She seemed to forget Martha was in the room.

Martha flared her nostrils with the intake of a long and patient breath, let it out again, and closed her eyes. “Mother of God,” she whispered.

To which Little Doc only offered a distracted, “Beg pardon?”

Seventy-one years before, Martha had bawled her way into this same house, into this very same bed in fact, on April Fool’s Day. Eleven months later her new baby brother was pushing her off the claim she’d staked on The Bounteous Bosom. Doc Forsee—just sober enough that night to make his way all eleven miles out to the Stimms Ranch—slobbered out the obligatory jokes about Irish twins and assured their mother she would have ample milk for the both of them if she just kept it up. But when push came to shove, Martha was pawned off to suck on the Alvarez woman down the road who around the same time had lost her own baby. Stillborn. Looked just like a tiny shriveled-up old man, people said. Every morning the Alvarez woman stumbled out of the falling down sharecropper shack and up the dark road to the crowing of the roosters and lowing of the cows. She nursed Martha, then stuck around the house on the pretense

of doing odd chores, feeding the red-faced and squalling girl every few hours. Never mind the thin blue stream of milk that was probably more corn liquor than dairy.

No matter how many people said she couldn't possibly remember such things, Martha was sure that when she closed her eyes on certain nights, she would be trapped inside her infant self, rocking on her hands and knees, back and forth, behind the bars of her old crib, raging at the corona of Martin's blond curls lighting up the other side of the room. The golden boy. A little king baby.

Their mama had liked to pretend they were twins. Held Martha back from first grade so she and her brother could start school together. Even made Martha share her name with him. Martha and Martin. Martin and Martha.

"I'm going into town," she told him that Saturday around ten. "Groceries."

Martin didn't look up from where he'd just flung a fistful of coarse ground corn around his ankles. The hens, crazed, fought one another to get at it. The old Nankeen craned his neck at the ruckus and, seizing the opportunity, flapped his wings in the dirt and danced a fierce jig and pounced on the back of the closest hen. Poor little banty squatted low and let the rooster have his way, him chewing the already sparse feathers on the back of her head. King of one sad harem. Martha saw the barest curve upward on her brother's lips. She grimaced and turned away.

"That has to be the horniest, most arrogant rooster ever to lord it over a barn lot," Martha said. "It's time we name him Supper."

"Sugar Daddies," Martin said under his breath.

"Lunch is on the counter," Martha said without acknowledging the request. "I'm eating at

Hungarian Gardens with the girls.” She started toward the barn where the Rambler waited for her, then came back. “You haven’t seen Mother’s pearls have you, Martin?”

She thought his back stiffened, but he didn’t look at her. Martha stomped off to the barn.

She crossed off the last item on her list at the Superette and made her way to the checkout lane. Who was in front of her but Caroline Segar, whose father had been the mayor of Olathe back when they were all girls. Now Caroline was a withered cartoon of an old woman, rouge caked in the creases of her jowls, blued eyelids at half mast.

“Caroline, you look marvelous, honey—how do you do it?” Martha said, and hated herself, hated the easy way she fell into the deplorable conventions demanded by this backwater excuse for a town. (Ponder Oaks was located in one of the better parts of Grand Junction, and operated by more modern sensibilities, where you were expected to smile in silence, not comment on every little thing about another person.) Martha tried to envision Caroline Segar at Ponder Oaks, nicely dressed and sitting at the Lawrence Welk Community Center listening to the Friday night program. But Caroline was coiling back as if Martha were about to slap her.

Had Caroline always been so short, so stooped over, so—*old*?

Without waiting for a response, Martha rushed on. “The girls are meeting at Hungarian Gardens. We’d be tickled to death if you’d just go ahead and join us!” She was gushing, knowing Caroline would do no such thing. Martha stole the moment of Caroline’s obvious confusion to look over the sorry pile of groceries. Such a stereotype. Purina in every flavor.

“Goodness, Caroline, has that old cat of yours had another litter?” Martha excused and accepted her own meanness at the same time. A person almost had to be mean these days, she

told herself, the way the world is. She got her items out of her buggy and crowded them up to Caroline's cat food, separating the piles with a flat stick. She threw Martin's Sugar Daddies on top. Thought better of it and tucked the pack of caramel lollipops on the shelf between face-out copies of *National Enquirer* and *Globe*. *Hitler Clones Pick Up Hitchhikers in Arizona Desert!* *LBJ's Porn Star Girlfriend Tells All! Old Men Don't Need Caramel Candy!*

Caroline peeled several ones from a filthy change purse and struggled out the door with her sack of cat food. Martha could see her standing outside the sliding doors of the Superette. She had the horrifying thought that Caroline might actually be waiting for her. She paid the cashier for her own groceries and rushed out the door, nearly knocking Caroline down. She shoved two grocery sacks onto the backseat of Martin's old Rambler and peeled out up the street to Hungarian Gardens.

She had the urge to look over her shoulder, but was afraid of what she would see—Caroline staring after her, her chin moving up and down, no sound coming out.

Hungarian Gardens offered a rare taste of the exotic to a place like Olathe. Foreigners had been moving into the area for a while now, colonizing, Martha thought with a shudder. Still, Martha swallowed the extra saliva that built up in her mouth when she thought about the menu. There were the things she always intended to try, the gomba gombaban and the wild cherry soup. If pressed she could never explain why she always resorted to the tuna salad stuffed into a tomato, forlorn on its bed of limp iceberg shards. She would go out on a limb today, darn it. For dessert she was going to order the crepes with walnuts and rum raisin sauce if it killed her.

In the restaurant, Eileen and Alice waved at her from the window table.

"I just saw Caroline Segar at the grocery," Martha huffed. "Invited her to come on over. But she wouldn't."

“Of course not,” Eileen said.

Alice said, “Poor little old thing.”

They all sighed together.

“How’s that brother?” Eileen was always the first to check in on Martin’s status. She’d gone to senior prom with him and still owned a piece of him that way.

“Blood pressure up to here,” Martha indicated with a chopping motion at her forehead.

“He’s going to blow a gasket any minute and then where will I be? Taking care of a vegetable, that’s where.”

“You’re a saint,” was the perfect thing Alice always said. “A lot of people would have let him rot out there on that ranch a long time ago. Him and his big Louisville lawyer cutting you out of the land. And what for? All so he can keep that bunch of dirty fornicating birds out there.”

Martha hoped the girls didn’t see her wince. Raising the spectacular game birds had been her mother’s hobby. Martha felt the familiar and confusing mix of jealousy and disgust at her brother’s undying connection to their mama.

They all looked out at the street and sighed again.

Martha thought about spilling it. Telling the girls how bad things had really gotten.

Waking up in the middle of the night to Martin pawing through her things. Finding shoeboxes stuffed with the ripped pages of magazines, *Poultry Journal* photos of Asian chicken breeds in one box, alien creatures torn from supermarket tabloids in another. One shoebox contained only women, the pictures clipped neatly with pinking shears so that all that was left were their private parts. Filthy images she could barely keep out of her eyes at night. Then the other day she’d come across him pooping in the corner of the dining room.

But during their last few visits she’d gotten the feeling the girls were fed up with her litany

of complaints. She'd caught Eileen looking over at Alice as if to say, See I told you she'd dominate the conversation with her Evil Alzheimer Brother Stories.

The girls chattered about something cute a grandbaby had done, about a sale on slacks, about so-and-so's husband's colon cancer. And had she heard about that housekeeper so-and-so hired, the one who left in the middle of the night last week with every piece of silver in the house? Just threw it all in a pillowcase and *Vamoose!* Martha didn't recognize half the names anymore. She thrummed her fingers on the table.

Without meaning to, she blurted it out. "Mother's pearls are gone."

Alice and Eileen stared at her like she'd dropped down through the ceiling. "No!" they both said. "Martin?"

Martha alternately nodded and wagged her head from side to side in an uncommitted way. "All I'm saying is, he goes into my room."

The girls sucked in a unified breath.

"At night," Martha said. Their eyes grew wider as Martha imagined them imagining her, trembling in her thin gown in the dark.

"He's got my pinking shears." She paused to let it sink in. "And there are other little things missing." Martha gazed out the window for effect and said, "But Mother's pearls. The ones Mama gave me. Y'all recall those pearls were a gift to my grandmother from the outlaw Vicente Silva. He was sweet on her before he became a notorious killer. Came back in the middle of the night and carved his initials on her windowpane with a diamond. You can still see those initials when the sun hits it just right." The girls all stared at the restaurant window as if they might laser Vicente's mark there with their own eyes. "Mama always said Grammy Stimms would have wanted me to have those pearls," Martha said.

There was a long silence and Alice broke it with, "You've got to lock him up, Martha."

Martha drew back in horror. "I am *not* putting my brother in jail over a string of pearls," she hissed. She glanced around the restaurant to make sure no one had heard.

"No, but you could lock him in his room at night," Eileen said. "From the outside. Little hook-and-eye latch probably isn't more than a dollar forty-nine at Ace. If he's walking in his sleep, he won't even know. You just wake up before he does and unlatch it."

"And even if he isn't sleepwalking," Alice said, "the Alzheimer's'll make sure he forgets about it."

All three allowed themselves a small giggle then sat back in their chairs and studied the lunch dishes.

On the way out of town Martha pulled into Ace Hardware. The latch was nearly three dollars. She hesitated, but then carried it up to the cashier. JESUS, the nametag on his sunken chest said. Under his first name in smaller letters: ALVAREZ.

"I think I knew your grandmother," Martha said. "Her people lived out on the Stimms Ranch? I'm Martha Stimms."

The young man's eyes looked out from under a cliff of bushy black eyebrows.

"Do they still make potties?" Martha put on the sweet and helpless voice that usually made clerks fawn over her, climbing ladders to fetch her every need, taking her packages out to the car for her. She followed the silent Jesus Alvarez up and down the aisles until he came to several shelves of children's supplies. He pointed to a training potty with a slide out cup.

"No," Martha said. "One of those old fashioned chamber pots is what I'm looking for. Sort of a bucket-shaped thing with little side handles? From back when we didn't have indoor plumbing?" Martha blushed under the boy's blank gaze. A light went on behind his eyes and he

twirled on his heel and led her to a storage area in the back of the store. There it sat, on a crowded shelf behind mismatched kitchen canisters and fireplace tools, dustpans and hundred-packs of wooden clothespins. A white enamel pot with a fitted lid.

“You’re a sweet boy,” she said, handing Jesus a twenty. Unimpressed, he made change, but no eye contact.

That night Martha heated some leftover lamb stew and fixed up two TV trays. She folded cloth napkins into triangles and put a sprig of mint on each plate. She brought the trays into the den where Martin was watching *Jeopardy!* He looked up at her in alarm.

“I thought we could have our supper in here together!” Martha said, smiling too hard. She was making Martin uncomfortable. She couldn’t help herself. She tucked his napkin into the bib of his Dungarees like he was a small boy. He bent over his bowl of stew and began shoveling it in, never moving his eyes from the television. From time to time his spoon hovered midway and he screamed a question at Alex Trebec.

“I bought you a present today.” Martha pulled the sack from where she’d stashed it by the sofa. Her brother pulled the chamber pot from the sack slowly like it was a live animal. He turned it over and the lid clanged to the floor. “You remember when we were small? Remember when we had to use that old potty in the middle of the night? White, with the red rim and the little red top? Before Daddy built the indoor toilet?”

Martin stared at Martha and looked into the pot and again at his sister’s face as if comparing the two.

“Well, now you have one of your own again!”

Martin put his head in the pot and said in a melodious voice, “What. Is. Monrovia?” He pulled his head out and looked at the television. Alex Trebec was saying, “That’s right! The capital of Liberia is the answer to the question: *What is Monrovia?*”

She sat by her brother while they ate their stew. Martin would be glued to *Jeopardy!* for the next twenty minutes. Martha fetched a hammer from the shelf in the mudroom and went upstairs. She stood on a chair and tapped the hook into Martin’s bedroom door near the top where he’d be less likely to spot it. She screwed it in tight and closed the door and marked the spot on the doorframe level with the hook. She tapped and screwed in the little round eye. She latched and unlatched the hook several times to make sure everything fit right.

Later, after noises had quit coming from Martin’s room, she tiptoed out into the hall in stocking feet and locked her brother in.

Martin was becoming a danger to himself. This was a compassionate measure, purely for his safety. And for her own. It was the right thing.

The sun woke her up to the immediate worry that she’d overslept. Seven twenty, Baby Ben said. She crept down the hall and listened at Martin’s door. Nothing. Martha got up on the chair and unlatched the hook, taking care to not make a sound. Downstairs, she put the bacon on and began whisking eggs in a metal bowl. She banged the lid on the cast iron skillet and opened and closed the squeaky oven door a few times. Martin didn’t come down. Martha ate her breakfast. Around nine, she took a tray of food up to his room and tapped on his door.

“Are you upset with me, Martin?” When had her voice started to warble like that? She sounded old. Martha left the tray on the floor and went about her housework. Lunchtime came

and went, and still Martin didn't leave his room. He was just punishing her. He had to get hungry eventually. She wasn't going to coddle him. Martha did two loads of washing and hung them on the clothesline.

Around four o'clock, several thunderheads converged over the mountains, quietly threatening western Mesa County. Gusts of wind picked up billowing wads of dust and hurled them down again. Martha rushed out to gather the laundry. She looked toward Martin's bedroom. The window was open. The wind's sucking action had pulled the curtain out so it flailed, the giant hanky of a damsel in distress. The chamber pot lay on the ground beneath the window, and when she walked over to it, it rolled toward her like a small eager pet.

"Oh, Martin," she said. Suddenly the rain pelted the ground in great sheets and Martha picked up the potty and her laundry basket and ran into the house.

Upstairs, she opened his door. The room was empty. A wet breeze came in through the open window, upsetting the lamp. Martha set the lamp back on the nightstand and shut the window.

She thought about calling the sheriff. He'll just say wait for Martin to come in, she told herself. He's no doubt pouting somewhere in one of the outbuildings. Probably tinkering with a project in the old tack room. Let him pout. Let him poo in the barn for all she cared. He couldn't punish her. She hadn't committed any crime.

She cut a muskmelon in half and scraped out the seeds. She filled the hole with a dollop of cottage cheese and salted and peppered it good.

When it got dark, Martha took off her clothes and slipped her nightgown over her head. She opened her window a crack so she could hear the rain, then she slid between the sheets. She pictured Martin in the barn, stopping whatever he was piddling with to listen to the tattoo of rain

on the barn's tin roof. It was their favorite place to play during a storm, back when they were kids. He would come in when he was done sulking. She drifted off.

The sky let loose a sound like the wet throat-clearing of a very old man, and Martha sat straight up in bed. She looked for the numbers on the Baby Ben, but could see nothing. She pulled the chain of her bedside lamp. Nothing. She drew her chenille housecoat from the end of the bed and rooted through the drawer of giant brassieres and underpants until she found the little flashlight they'd given her when she opened her checking account. Downstairs in the mudroom she stepped into Martin's rubber boots by the back door. She went out into the driving rain, holding the umbrella above her, angled like a shield.

The gate to the chicken lot was all cattywompus on its single hinge and wouldn't budge. Martha tried to keep the umbrella upright in the crook of her elbow while she hoisted herself up to the top fence rail. But it was no use. The umbrella toppled over, its handle hanging from her wrist like a gentleman's cane, making itself into a ridiculous bowl to catch the rain. She tossed it into the mud and flung one leg over the fence. Too late she felt three wicked talons of chicken wire hook themselves into the flesh of her inner thigh. She jumped down from the fence, shredding the back of her housecoat. Long claw marks, as if she'd narrowly escaped a marauding mountain lion. If the girls could see their saint now.

She crossed the mud of the chicken lot and pushed a meaty shoulder against the swollen henhouse door, allowing herself one small and useful curse word. The door shot open the way doors do in horror pictures, the trick of a smart-aleck ghost, sending Martha into a pratfall on the henhouse floor. One of the buff-colored Cochin banties bawked a protest on behalf of the flock,

but none of them moved from their roost. Martha threw the beam of her flashlight over their blinking faces. It landed on Martin, squatting on the old wooden brooder box in the corner. It was the same one their mother had ordered by mail when she bought the hatchlings, decades back, the great great ancestors of these same birds. Martha remembered her father stringing the electric wire out to the henhouse to power the four light bulbs that kept the chicks warm and alive in the brooder box. She must have been around six or seven, and the squeaking balls of russet-colored fluff followed her around the dirt yard as if she were their mother. She remembered the way they circled around, begging to be held under her shirt, pressing their furious little hearts to hers. She remembered watching helplessly as they grew into ugly pullets with long legs and patchy feathers. The revolting adolescents soon forgot who she was altogether. She was almost glad when her family ate them.

Martha let her beam of light rest on her brother's bewildered face. She moved the light down to where he cupped something in his left hand. He was tossing what looked like white corn into the straw at his feet. Wishing she didn't have to, she moved the flashlight down his body and as her eyes grew accustomed to the dark, she could see that her brother was naked, but for the new moccasins. The shaft of light struck a dark shape moving near Martin's ankles. The bantam king's tail feathers fanned into a glistening bouquet of green tapers. Ignoring her, the bird alternately plucked at the moccasins' leather tassels and at the grains scattered in the straw. The rooster gave an arrogant toss of the head to flip his comb to one side, the better to get a look at the source of intrusive light.

The flashlight's beam caught the dull glimmer of a single white pearl held delicately in his beak. The Nankeen flicked his head once and the pearl slid down his gullet.

Martha took off her housecoat and draped it over Martin's shoulders. He looked up at her

and said something indecipherable. It might have been Thank you, Mother, or it could just as easily have been Fuck you, Martha. She couldn't be sure and didn't want to be.

"Stand up, Martin." Her voice came out a whispered prayer. He obliged like a child caught out, eager to please. Martha prised what remained of their mother's pearls from his balled fist and let them slide into the housecoat pocket. When she opened the henhouse door, the old Nankeen rushed at the dim moonlight outside. Martha gave the rooster a sound kick and it slinked off, a pathetic pretender. The one vocal banty protested a final time before Martha ordered the flock back to sleep.

When Martha and Martin reached the gate, it seemed to have sunk another three inches into the mud. Martha pulled and pushed at it with a strength she hadn't found earlier. Her ham-like arms flopped with the effort until the lone hinge popped out of the post and the gate fell with a soft plunk into the mire. She would have to rig something up at daylight to keep the Alvarezes' dogs out of the chicken lot. She looked at her brother. They were more like twins now than ever, two mounds of flesh gleaming in the flashlight's low wattage, glistening like raw meat in the occasional flashes of far off lightning. Her sleeveless gown was drenched through. Martin's nakedness glowed from under the chenille sash.

"Let's go in," she said, but he stood there, planted like a post. Martha looked down at his feet. The new moccasins were barely visible, only the tassels peeking from the mud.

"Pick up your feet, Martin," she said. He stepped out of the moccasins. She took him by the hand and led him into the house.

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