



Book Two: Martin Series
3rd of 3 short stories

3,586 words

POLLY

by

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“Have a seat, boys,” ordered Mrs. Hurtle curtly, pushing her half-moon glasses up on her nose.

Martin hesitated. He had never heard the school secretary use that cross tone with him and his friends before. She nodded to the bench outside Principal Moody’s door, then returned to the work that cluttered her desk.

Having been dismissed, Martin had no choice but to lead the way to the bench. Alex and Stuart plunked down beside him.

Once they were settled, Martin glanced up to make sure Mrs. Hurtle wasn't looking, then leaned over and whispered, "Well done!" But he didn't mean it. He just wanted to remind Alex and Stuart of Polly, their beloved class parakeet.

"Well done!" she'd say over and over, just like their teachers did.

Polly was the reason they were in trouble.

Martin replayed the terrible scene in his head. They had come into homeroom before the first morning bell so that Alex could show them his new Zip Rideout comic. Polly squawked from her cage when she saw them, which reminded Stuart that he had crackers in his lunch bag. While Stuart dug the crackers out, Alex came across a mysterious container in his desk.

"What's this?" he asked as he pried off the lid.

A rotten smell filled the room like a low note on a piano long after the key has been played. It was last week's half-eaten tuna sandwich.

"Phew!!" yelled Martin, and he ran to the window. As he pushed it wide open, something flapped by his ear.

He whirled around.

There stood Stuart by the empty birdcage, its door as agape as Stuart's mouth. Stuart was still holding out the crackers.

"Polly! Polly!" Martin called frantically.

"Well done!" was Polly's fading response. "Well done!"

Up, up, up she flew, squawking and flapping, until she was only a speck in the blue sky.

And then there was just blue sky.

Martin slowly backed away from the window, eyes wide in disbelief. He loved Polly.

Cripes, everyone did. And the tragic news had traveled fast. It felt like the whole school had lined the halls to watch as the boys reported to the principal's office.

Martin shook his head at the memory of slinking by all those hostile crossed arms. He squirmed on the hard, unforgiving bench beneath him.

When the principal's door swung open moments later, Martin jumped.

"Come in," Principal Moody growled.

Martin shuffled in first, followed by Alex, then Stuart. They lined up in front of Principal Moody's desk. He did not invite them to sit. Instead, he launched right in.

"I am very disappointed. Polly's been with our school for as long as I can remember." He scratched his gray beard.

Martin hung his head. His friends did, too.

"Who had rotting food in his desk?"

Two fingers pointed at Alex.

"Who let Polly out of her cage?"

Two fingers pointed at Stuart.

"Who opened the window?"

Two fingers pointed at Martin.

"Well then! Since you've all had a hand in this, it's a detention for everyone. Report to the study hall at lunch."

Alex groaned. They played soccer at lunch, and he was their team's star player.

“Make that two detentions each,” said the principal, giving Alex a level stare. Then he shuffled through a pile of papers, already moving on to the next problem of the day.

The boys filed past Mrs. Hurtle, heads still down. But in the hallway, Alex shoved Stuart. “Why’d you go and open Polly’s cage?”

Stuart shoved back. “Why’d you smell up the class?”

“Stop it! Both of you!” snapped Martin before either of them could mention his part with the open window. He whirled to face them. “We have to find Polly!”

Alex and Stuart shot each other sideways looks, but neither spoke. Martin knew what that meant. They thought finding Polly was hopeless.

The second period bell rang before Martin could say he disagreed, and his friends escaped down the empty hall. Martin hung back, listening sadly to the echoing footsteps until they were gone.

Gone, like Polly.

Martin trudged to class, only to find Alex and Stuart pressed against the blackboard, staring at a sea of angry faces. All conversation had stopped. Nobody moved. Then Laila Moffatt got up and rattled the parakeet’s empty cage.

Martin gulped as he and his friends quietly slid into their desks. There they squirmed and picked at their fingernails until Mr. Duncan, the language arts teacher, walked in carrying a stack of papers.

“Take your places, everyone,” he said.

Laila gave Polly’s cage one last shake before returning to her seat.

Mr. Duncan began to walk up and down the aisles, handing back last week’s quiz.

“Well done,” he said kindly when he came to Martin.

Martin barely glanced at his test. Not even a good mark could cheer him up today.

And it was hard to concentrate as Mr. Duncan reviewed spelling rules.

“*I* before *E* except after *C*.”

At least Martin knew that one by heart.

So did Polly.

Polly recited spelling rules with the class all the time. She would even call them out during spelling bees. Sometimes she’d help too much, and Mr. Duncan would have to cover her cage so she’d nap.

Martin looked over at Polly’s empty cage and her folded blanket near the window. His stomach tightened at the quietness of her corner.

The next thing he knew, the bell rang and their math teacher walked in.

“Let’s keep working on our multiplication table,” said Mrs. Chesterton.

Together, the class called out equations while she pointed to numbers on the blackboard.

“Four times four is sixteen. Four times five is twenty.”

“Well done!” cheered Mrs. Chesterton.

Martin remembered how Polly repeated the multiplication table in that squawky voice of hers. She never made mistakes. Smart bird.

But not that smart.

Why hadn’t she turned around and come back when she heard Martin calling?

Martin could still see her, a little bundle of brightly colored feathers flapping high beyond the schoolyard.

Then recess came. Martin spent the entire time on the look-out. He wandered along the school fence, searching the empty sky. Alex and Stuart followed. They were still grumbling about detention.

By the time Martin entered the art studio for the last class of the morning, his stomach was a tight ball. And although the walls were covered with colorful paintings, all he could see was gray.

“Let’s review the color wheel,” said Mrs. Crammond as she poured paint into trays. The class gathered around. “Blue and red make ...” She pointed to Alex.

“Purple,” he muttered.

“Red and yellow make ...” She pointed to Stuart.

“Orange,” he mumbled.

“Yellow and blue make ...” She pointed to Martin.

“Green,” said Martin wistfully. Polly was all those colors.

“And that’s the color I want you to work with today,” said Mrs. Crammond. “Use as many shades of green as you can in your pictures. Begin.”

Martin picked up his paint tray and paper and quietly slipped to the far corner of the studio. Then he stared at his blank sheet for a long, long time.

Later, Mrs. Crammond walked about admiring each student’s work.

“Well done.” She nodded to Alex, who had painted a bright green soccer field with two teams battling it out for the championship.

“Well done.” She nodded to Stuart, who had painted an ominous green dinosaur he had seen at the science museum.

She stopped when she got to Martin.

“It’s beautiful, Martin,” she said in a hushed voice. She stood close to Martin as they studied his painting. The class gathered around and solemnly nodded at his tribute.

Martin had painted a picture of Polly with her exquisite emerald green feathers.

On the way to detention, Alex stopped Martin in the hall. “I really liked your painting,” he said.

“Me, too,” said Stuart. “Maybe you could put it up by Polly’s cage. You know, for all of us to remember her by.”

Martin smiled at the compliment. And then it came to him.

“I know what we can do!” he exclaimed. “Let’s use my painting to make a lost-and-found poster. Then we’ll have copies made and put them up all over the neighborhood!”

“Bingo!” said Stuart.

“Maybe we can work on it during detention,” suggested Alex. “And I’ll call my mom to see if you can both sleep over. That way we can put up the posters tonight.” Alex lived only a few blocks from the school.

“If we bring our bikes,” added Stuart, “we can cover more streets.”

They rushed to study hall. There sat Mrs. Hurtle at the teacher’s desk. It was her turn to be the monitor.

“Can we work on a lost-and-found poster?” Martin asked eagerly. Alex and Stuart pressed in beside him for an answer.

“Great idea!” chirped Mrs. Hurtle in her old, familiar voice. “Let me know if you need any help.”

Alex led the way to a corner of the room and pulled three desks together.

“Here,” said Martin, rooting through his knapsack for a pen and paper. “You have the neatest printing.” He handed the supplies to Stuart.

“Okay,” agreed Stuart. “Tell me what to write.”

“Lost,” dictated Martin. “One parakeet. Answers to the name Polly.”

Stuart began to write in big letters.

“L ... O ... S ... T,” he spelled. “How’s that?”

“Perfect,” said Martin. Underneath he glued his picture of Polly.

“How will people tell her apart from other parakeets?” asked Stuart.

“Polly’s smart,” said Martin confidently. “Write ‘Knows spelling rules.’”

“And the multiplication table,” added Alex, “and the color wheel.”

Stuart wrote as fast as he could.

“Now add the name of our school,” said Martin. “And the phone number at the bottom.” He was surprised at how quickly the poster was coming together.

Stuart held it up for them to see.

This will work, thought Martin.

Shouts drifted through the window from the soccer game outside. But even Alex ignored the noise. Instead, he and Stuart nodded intently as Martin reviewed their plan to put up the posters that evening. And knowing that they had a plan made the rest of the school day bearable.

“Hi, guys,” Martin called out as his dad helped him unload his bike and sleeping bag at Alex’s house after dinner. Stuart was already there.

“Got the posters?” asked Stuart.

“And the duct tape,” said Martin, holding up his knapsack. “This stuff sticks to everything!”

The boys jumped on their bikes. They rode around the neighborhood taping Polly posters to everything they could think of. Lampposts. Store windows. Even bus shelters.

They still had some posters left when Stuart looked at his Zip Rideout Rocket Watch.

“It’s getting late,” he announced.

Martin and Alex nodded and they headed for Alex’s. The next morning, the boys biked to school after a noisy pancake breakfast with all of Alex’s brothers. Martin had ignored the clatter and spilt syrup, focusing instead on the mission at hand. When they arrived, he went straight to the school office, Alex and Stuart in tow.

“Any word on Polly?” Martin asked.

Mrs. Hurtle shook her head.

A wave of disappointment hit Martin so hard that he took a step back, bumping into Alex and Stuart. He had been sure their posters would work.

“We still have more posters to put up,” reminded Stuart. Martin nodded glumly.

Later, the entire class watched as Mr. Sadler, the school janitor, removed Polly’s cage for good. Martin struggled against the lump in his throat. It felt like Polly was flying out the window all over again.

It was Mr. Duncan’s turn as monitor during their second detention. Martin sat in misery, barely noticing when Mrs. Hurtle came into the study hall. She whispered to Mr. Duncan, then came over to where the boys were sitting.

“Principal Moody thinks it might be a good idea if you spent your second detention putting up more posters,” she said softly, “so he called your parents for permission. Just be back in time for class.”

Martin nodded with new determination while Alex and Stuart grabbed their things.

They continued their tour of the neighborhood by bike, plastering posters everywhere. When they pedaled by the front doors of Beaverbrook Junior High, Martin pulled over.

“I think we should put up our last poster here,” he suggested. “The more kids looking for Polly, the better.”

They entered the front doors of the school to get permission, but since it was lunchtime the hallways were quiet. They spotted the sign for the office and were about to enter when Martin clutched Alex’s arm.

“Look!” he gasped.

A boy was carrying a birdcage down the hall.

“Holy cow!” exclaimed Alex.

“It’s Polly,” said Stuart in stunned amazement.

“Stop!” Alex called out.

The boy turned. “Are you talking to me?”

“What have you got there?” demanded Alex, pointing to the cage.

“Our class parakeet,” said the boy.

“*Your* class parakeet?” said Stuart. “What’s its name?”

“Polly.”

“*Our* class parakeet was named Polly,” declared Alex. His eyes narrowed and he crossed his arms. “She escaped yesterday.”

“Lots of parakeets are named Polly,” said the boy matter-of-factly.

“But she looks exactly like our Polly,” insisted Alex.

“That’s where you’re wrong. This Polly is a he, not a she.”

Alex and Stuart eyed the bird’s feathery body suspiciously.

“Does this parakeet talk?” asked Martin, who had finally found his voice.

“Sure. Polly repeats all kinds of things in class.”

“No kidding,” said Martin, fuming.

“Well, good luck finding your parakeet.” With that the boy disappeared around the corner, birdcage and all.

“Polly,” whispered Martin as the parakeet disappeared.

“That’s Polly, all right,” said Stuart. “Let’s report this to Principal Moody.” He turned to go.

“Wait,” Alex said under his breath, eyes darting left and right.

Stuart rejoined the huddle. “What’s up?”

“We’re here, aren’t we?” whispered Alex.

“So you think we should rescue Polly?” Stuart gulped. “Now?”

“You got it,” answered Alex. Suddenly he straightened up.

The boy had returned and was walking right by, empty-handed. “Still here?” he asked.

“Just getting permission for our poster,” said Martin, holding it up.

The boy nodded and went out the front doors. Martin turned back to his friends.

It was a crazy plan, but Martin knew they couldn't just abandon Polly. And besides, he had seen Zip Rideout carry out dozens of successful rescue missions.

Martin took a deep breath. "I'm in," he announced.

Together, the boys turned the corner and began to sneak down the hall.

"Think to the brink," whispered Martin, just like Zip Rideout would say when he was right at the edge of danger.

They slipped into the first classroom they came to. One quick look and Martin declared, "No Polly. Let's go."

As they were about to leave, they heard footsteps. The boys scrambled back into the classroom and shut the door with a quiet click. The footsteps grew louder and louder and then stopped right outside the door. Martin held his breath, heart pounding and panic fluttering in his stomach. Someone called out, and a faraway voice answered. The footsteps continued and faded away.

"Maybe this wasn't such a great plan," whispered Alex.

"Yeah," Stuart jumped in. "And who knows? Polly's probably happy learning all kinds of new things in junior high."

But, frightened as he was, Martin was certain it would feel even worse to give up. And he was sure he had never seen Zip Rideout quit. Not once.

"No!" he said with surprising force. "We're here now. And I'm not leaving without Polly."

Alex and Stuart stared at each other and then nodded. Martin slowly opened the door and peered out.

“All clear,” he whispered. “Let’s split up. That way we can cover more classrooms.”

Alex and Stuart took their cue and stepped into rooms on either side of the hall. Martin pressed on and entered the farthest class.

Inside, a teacher’s desk stood by the blackboard, piled high with papers. Martin scanned the rows of desks. There was a large map of France on the wall, and everything in the room was labeled with a French word. The bookshelf. The wall clock. Even the recycling bin. Then Martin spied something in the corner.

Something very familiar.

A covered birdcage! Martin carefully lifted a corner of the blanket and peeked underneath. He smiled and ran to the hall.

Alex and Stuart were sneaking toward him.

“I found her!” Martin whispered as loud as he dared. He led the way back to Polly.

Alex reached to lift the blanket, but Martin stopped him.

“Keep the cage covered,” said Martin. “If we wake Polly up, she’ll start squawking and give us away.”

“Good thinking,” said Stuart.

The boys ferried the covered cage outside to their waiting bikes.

“Here,” said Alex, yanking off a length of duct tape. He fastened Polly’s cage to Martin’s handlebars.

“Blast off!” shouted Martin.

They jumped on their bikes and started to pedal as fast as they could.

“Stop!” someone called out.

Martin hesitated, feet mid-pedal. But after one glance at Polly’s cage, he stood up and pumped even harder.

When they arrived back at the school, they hurried to their class and set the birdcage in its familiar corner. Then the end-of-lunch bell rang. The boys rushed to their seats as students began to trickle in.

Laila was the first to notice.

“Polly!” she squealed. “How’d she get back?”

“We rescued her,” said Alex as a crowd of students gathered around the cage.

“Let’s see,” begged Laila, jumping up and down.

Martin was bursting with pride. “Ta-da!” he cheered as he pulled off the blanket.

“Hello, Polly!” everyone cooed.

“*Bonjour!*” chirped the strange parakeet. “*Comment t’appelles tu?*”

Smiles faded instantly. Martin’s ears began to burn.

“That’s not Polly,” declared Laila, backing away from the cage.

“*Très bien! Très bien!*” chirped the parakeet.

It wasn’t long before Martin led the way to the now familiar bench outside Principal Moody’s door. Alex and Stuart plunked down beside him. They frowned at the parakeet perched in its cage as it mocked them in French from the secretary’s desk.

“Ka-boom!” whispered Stuart. It was the word he used whenever something went wrong.

Mrs. Hurtle was on the telephone. “May I please speak to the French teacher?”

Yes, I’ll hold.”

Martin sank onto the bench. So did Alex and Stuart. And all three jumped when the principal's door swung open.

"Come in, boys," Principal Moody growled. "And have a seat."

Martin's heart sank. Have a seat, he thought. This was going to be a long one.

"Let's have it, shall we?" the principal demanded as he put the cage on his desk and sat down.

Stuart muttered something, and Alex tried not to laugh.

"Pardon me?" Principal Moody stopped drumming his thick fingers on the desk.

"Maybe Polly flew to France and picked up a few words," blurted Stuart. He tried to smile at his joke, but withered under the principal's glare.

"So you're still insisting this is Polly?"

Martin glanced at Alex and Stuart, who were staring at their feet, saying nothing.

"Well then. Suppose you explain this." The principal reached down behind his desk and pulled up a second birdcage. He placed it beside the first one.

"Polly!" exclaimed Stuart, forgetting himself.

Martin knew Stuart was right.

"Someone found her?" guessed Alex.

"Yes," growled the principal.

"And they saw our poster and called?" Martin joined in.

"This very noon hour," the principal confirmed.

"*I* before *E* except after *C*," chirped Polly.

"Four times five is twenty," chirped Polly.

"Yellow and blue make green," chirped Polly.

And she kept on chattering until the French parakeet shimmied across his perch to have a better look. Then he began to make soft whistling sounds — the kind Martin’s dad made when Martin’s mom came down the stairs in a new dress.

“*Ooh la la*,” sang the French parakeet to Polly as she preened her feathers.

There was a tap on the door. Everyone turned as Mrs. Hurtle slipped in with her car keys. She picked up the French Polly.

“Beaverbrook want their parakeet back *tout de suite*,” she said and headed out the office.

“What do you have to say for yourselves now?” demanded Principal Moody.

“We’re sorry,” said Martin, and he braced himself for what was to come.

The principal launched into his predictable speech about not leaping to conclusions. About how stealing was wrong, even if they did think it was Polly. And about not fessing up when the evidence was clear.

“So that’s a week of detentions for each of you,” said Principal Moody.

Alex and Stuart groaned, but all Martin could do was smile.

“Can we take Polly back to class now?” he asked in his best manners voice.

The principal heaved a sigh, and yet Martin thought he spotted the tiniest of smiles.

Martin beamed as he picked up the cage. He remembered the words Zip Rideout spoke on the final leg of every mission.

“Ready and steady,” Martin said as Polly looked at him with one eye and then the other. With that he marched out the door, cage held high.

Alex and Stuart followed, shoving each other playfully down the hall.

“Well done,” squawked Polly when they entered the class in triumph.

“Well done!” cheered the class. “Well done!”