



Book One: Martin Series
2nd of 3 short stories
2,800 words

FASTER BLASTER

by Jessica Scott Kerrin

“Better go feed Ginny,” reminded Martin’s mom. She always did her reminding right in the middle of a *Zip Rideout* show. Cripes.

Ginny was Alice’s pet hamster, and Alice lived three driveways down. Martin was feeding Ginny while Alice’s family was on vacation. But just then, Zip had crash-landed on an unknown planet. It was orange. Martin sighed.

“Are they coming back today?” he asked as Zip stepped out of his rocket and tested the air.

“Yes,” said his mom. She set down a bucket of cleaning supplies and handed him their neighbor’s house key. “When you get back, I’ll need you to go through your closet. See if there are some clothes that no longer fit or toys you don’t play with anymore.”

Zip pulled out his blaster.

“Say, have you seen my Zip Rideout H₂O Faster Blaster?” he asked. His Auntie Joan had bought it for him during her last visit.

“For goodness sake, Martin! No for the hundredth time!”

His mom did not like toy guns, even harmless water pistols. Zip began to blast warning shots at a gigantic green-scaled monster that had charged him from behind a pile of orange boulders. The monster stopped and held up its claws in surrender, but Martin knew that Zip was suspicious. He could tell by the way Zip narrowed his eyes as the monster slowly moved toward him.

None of that mattered to Martin’s mom, who flicked off the television.

Martin groaned. She shot him her no-nonsense spring cleaning look, grabbed her bucket and disappeared upstairs.

Martin knew better than to turn the television back on. He wandered into the kitchen where his dad sat at the table.

“Hi Dad,” he said.

“Hi Sport.”

“Mom’s spring cleaning today,” warned Martin.

“Uh-oh.” Martin’s dad looked up from the newspaper. They both knew it would be safer to tackle a gigantic green-scaled monster than to get between her and their stuffed closets.

Martin jerked open the refrigerator door and pulled out some crisp lettuce.

“I’m going over to feed Ginny,” he said as he headed out. He whistled to himself as he counted the driveways, before turning up the one to Alice’s house. He unlocked the back door and paused. Strange. It was quiet. Usually he could hear the whir of Ginny’s running wheel. She must still be asleep.

Martin continued to whistle as he walked down the hallway and into the family room. Phew! What an odd smell! Like gym lockers after soccer practice, only worse.

Inside the cage, Ginny lay on her back, dainty feet in the air.

“Morning Ginny,” called Martin.

He pulled out her food tray and tore the lettuce into hamster-sized bites.

“Rise and shine,” he called, sounding like his dad. “Breakfast time, sleepyhead.”

Ginny didn’t budge.

“Not hungry?” he asked. He took a closer look at Ginny. He blinked. She did not blink back. A bone-numbing chill grew from deep in Martin’s stomach and spread all the way to the tips of his fingers and toes.

“Ginny?” he squeaked.

Ginny didn’t answer.

Oh no! Martin backed away, then bolted for the door. When he got home, he tore from room to room until he found his mom upstairs scrubbing a cupboard in the bathroom.

“What is it, Martin?”

“I think Ginny’s sick.”

“Sick?”

“Really sick.”

“Really sick? What do you mean?”

“You know,” Martin leaned forward and whispered. “Dead.”

“Dead?”

Martin straightened up. “I’m pretty sure.”

Martin had seen dead things before. Like flattened porcupines on the highway. Or squished jellyfish washed up at low tide. Or the robin that flew against their living room window last year. But never someone's pet.

"We'd better go see," said his mom, as she snapped off her scrubbing gloves.

Martin followed her back to Alice's house. Together, they peered inside Ginny's cage.

"She hasn't moved," whispered Martin. His knees wobbled.

His mom gently tapped the cage. Bells rang and the running wheel rattled, but Ginny still didn't budge. Martin turned away from her empty black eyes.

"Oh dear," said his mom in a hushed voice.

"Should we call a vet?" asked Martin, even though he already knew the answer.

"I don't think so, Martin," said his mom.

Martin found it hard to swallow past the tight lump that rose in his throat.

"Did I do something wrong?" he forced out in a creaky voice.

"No! You took excellent care of Ginny," she said, giving him a firm hug.

"Sometimes these things happen no matter what."

Martin nodded, but then he had another alarming thought.

"We'll have to tell Alice!" A fresh wave of guilt washed over him.

"Yes, little Alice," she said thoughtfully. "I'd better call her mom before they leave."

Martin took his mom's hand as they walked back home. They went into the kitchen, and she looked up the telephone number where Alice's family was staying.

As she began to dial, Martin quietly left the room. He didn't want to hear any of their conversation so he turned the television back on. Zip's theme song told him the show was over.

Martin heard the kitchen door shut. He got up and went to the window. Outside, his mom talked to his dad in the yard. His dad nodded, disappeared into the garage, and then headed out the driveway with a shovel and a little box tucked under his arm.

Martin sat down again when he heard the kitchen door open. His mom joined him on the sofa and patted his knee.

"Alice's mom told me that Ginny was a very old hamster."

"Alice will still be sad," said Martin shaking his head.

"Yes, about that," she said. "Alice's mom would like us to buy a new hamster before they get home."

"A new hamster?" repeated Martin. "But it won't be the same as Ginny."

"No," agreed his mom. "But they want it to *look* like Ginny."

"*Look* like Ginny?" repeated Martin. "Why's that?"

Martin's mom didn't say anything.

Martin gave her a long look. "Oh, I get it," he said at last. "They don't want Alice to find out that Ginny died."

"You're right," she said carefully. "They don't."

"But it's lying," said Martin gravely.

Martin's mom took his hand in hers. "Well ... perhaps we can think of it as fibbing."

"Same thing," said Martin. His words fell out like stones.

“I suppose they think Alice is too little to understand,” his mom suggested.

Martin’s jaw dropped.

“Too little?” he repeated. “*Too little?*” Horrified, Martin pulled his hand away. “I was little once. Did you ever lie to me?” he demanded.

“Of course not. I’d never lie to you.”

Just then a Zip Rideout H₂O Faster Blaster commercial came on. Martin frowned.

“What about my Faster Blaster?”

“I told you. I haven’t seen it. But perhaps it will show up while I’m spring cleaning.”

Fat chance, thought Martin. She hated that Faster Blaster. Said so a hundred times. Now it had mysteriously disappeared. He narrowed his eyes like Zip Rideout.

Just then Martin’s dad came in and scooped up his wallet and keys from the hall table. “Come on, Sport!” he called. “We’re off to the pet store.”

Martin didn’t budge.

“You two go,” said his mom, ruffling Martin’s hair. “I’ll keep working.” She went to kiss Martin, but he dodged her and ducked out the door.

“Dad?” asked Martin after they drove in silence for a while. “Do you think we should be doing this?”

“What do you mean, Sport?”

“Buying a hamster. Not telling Alice.”

“Well, I suppose Alice’s mom thinks Alice is too young to understand.”

“But it’s not the truth.”

“I’m sure her mom will tell Alice when she gets older.”

“Really? How old?”

“Old enough to understand.”

Martin mulled this over. He’d always been told to tell the truth. Now his dad was buying into this fibbing thing, too. Martin slumped in his seat.

“Are you okay?” asked his dad when they pulled into the parking lot.

“I guess,” muttered Martin. But when they walked into the pet store, Martin followed his dad with squinty eyes all the way to the hamster section.

“That one,” Martin announced grumpily after peering from cage to cage. He pointed to a hamster spinning on a wheel.

Martin’s dad waved the store clerk over.

Once the purchase was made, the store clerk asked, “What will you name her?”

“Fake-o Ginny,” said Martin bitterly.

“That’s unusual,” said the store clerk.

Martin’s dad hurried Martin out the door. They got in the van and drove home with Fake-o Ginny in a box on Martin’s lap. Martin’s dad chatted about this and that while Martin stared out the window. He was running through a list of all the things his parents might have fibbed to him about. Would broccoli really make him strong? Did soap really kill germs? Were there really no gigantic green-scaled monsters under his bed?

At that thought, Martin sat up. He wouldn’t have to worry about monsters if he had his Faster Blaster handy.

“Have you seen my Zip Rideout H₂O Faster Blaster?”

“No,” said his dad, keeping his eyes on the road.

Martin thought he had said “no” just a little too quickly. His dad did not like toy guns either. Martin frowned out the window.

Back at Alice’s house, Martin and his dad watched as Fake-o Ginny sniffed around the old Ginny’s cage. Then she jumped onto the running wheel for a spin.

“Seems happy enough,” said his dad. “I suppose we should head home. See if your mom needs help.”

Martin’s mom came downstairs when she heard them arrive. Bags of old clothes and other assorted oddities were piled at the kitchen door.

“How’d it go?” she asked, looking anxiously from Martin to his dad.

“Good,” said his dad.

Martin ignored the question. He eyed the bags. “Did you find my Zip Rideout H₂O Faster Blaster?” he demanded.

“No, Martin. Sorry.”

“And you’ve cleaned absolutely everywhere?” he pressed.

“Try to think of the last place you had it,” she suggested.

Whoa! thought Martin. She hadn’t answered his question. Something was definitely up. Martin said nothing, but his eyes were narrow slits.

Martin’s mom reached for a cookbook.

“I think I’ll bake cookies,” she said. “We can take some over to Alice’s family when they get home. What kind should I make?”

“Chocolate chip,” said Martin suspiciously. He knew she was trying to distract him. But still, he loved cookies, and chocolate chip was his favorite.

“All right,” she said. “Chocolate chip it is.”

Martin took a deep breath to get back on track. The last time he had had his Faster Blaster was when he played Park Rangers at Alex's. But he was sure he had brought it home after that. If his mom had cleaned everywhere, then there was only one place left to look.

Martin headed outside to his tree house. He climbed up the ladder and through the hatch door. Then he searched every corner. Empty juice glasses. Stacks of Zip Rideout comics. A butterfly net. Dad's hammer.

Oops, thought Martin. His dad had been looking for that for days.

Martin looked around one last time just to be sure.

Well. That was it. He had looked absolutely everywhere. It meant he had been right all along. Martin's ears began to burn.

Martin clambered back down and stormed across the lawn. He flung the kitchen door open. His mom was at the counter pouring chocolate chips into the cookie batter.

"Mom!" he yelled.

"Martin! You scared me!" she gasped, whirling around.

"You threw out my Faster Blaster!" accused Martin.

"I did what?"

"You threw out my Faster Blaster! I know you did!" said Martin, finger pointing.

"Martin, I haven't seen —"

But Martin didn't wait to hear. He rifled through the bags at the kitchen door, one by one, certain of what he would find. His mom watched, arms crossed, as Martin searched the last bag.

But no Faster Blaster.

Martin stood up, confused and empty-handed. All he could do was run upstairs and fling himself onto his bed. But there was no escape.

“Are you going to tell me what’s going on?” his mom demanded from his bedroom doorway when she caught up.

Martin curled to face the wall. He knew she wasn’t going to go away so at last he spoke.

“I just thought, well, the whole thing with Ginny, and then my missing blaster ...” His voice trailed off.

“You thought I was lying?” Her voice softened.

Martin nodded. She sat down beside him and rubbed his back.

“I already told you. I wouldn’t lie to you.”

“Then what about Alice?”

“We went along with her parents’ wishes and bought Alice a new hamster. But if you feel you must tell Alice about Ginny, then I think you should.”

“Really?” he asked, rolling over.

“Really.”

“Tell the truth?” he asked, sitting up.

“Yes, if you think that’s the right thing to do.”

Martin let this sink in for a moment. And then he remembered his own loss.

“So, you really haven’t seen my Zip Rideout H₂O Faster Blaster?” he asked one last time.

His mom sighed. “No, Martin. I really haven’t.” She gave him a hug and he believed her.

“Now come downstairs. Help me bake some cookies for Alice.”

Martin nodded and followed her to the kitchen. Later, he got to lick the beaters while his mom arranged warm cookies on a plate. Then they headed over to Alice’s house and rang the bell. Martin’s heart began to pound as he thought about what he was going to say.

Alice opened the door clutching an upside-down doll.

Martin took a step back. He had forgotten how little she was, and it rattled him.

“Hi, Martin! Mmm! Cookies!”

“Come on in,” called Alice’s mom as she came toward the door.

“Cookies, Mommy,” said Alice. She stared at the plate with big eyes.

“How lovely,” said Alice’s mom. She turned to Martin, who now stood half hidden behind his mom.

“Thank-you so much for taking care of Ginny.”

“You ... you’re welcome,” Martin stammered. He shuffled his feet and glanced at Alice.

“Why don’t you two take the cookies to the picnic table out back?” Alice’s mom suggested.

“Goody!” cheered Alice, jumping up and down. Before Martin could say anything further, she grabbed his hand and led the way. They sat in the shade and munched on the still-warm cookies.

Martin prepared himself again. He’d start off with some small talk. Ease into the truth.

“Are you ... glad to be home?” he asked between bites.

“Yes. I missed Ginny. She’s my best friend in the whole world.”

Cripes. Martin set down his half-eaten cookie. He was no longer sure what to say.

Alice reached for another cookie but stopped midway. She studied Martin’s face.

“Are you sad?” she asked.

“No. Yes,” said Martin, shifting on the bench.

Alice looked up at him with her springy little-girl pigtails and crooked pink barrettes.

“I’ll miss taking care of Ginny,” he said at last with a whoosh. Even as the words came out, he knew they were the right ones to say.

Alice nodded and patted his hand. “Hey, what’s that?” she asked as she jumped up. She ran over to a little tree-shaded mound that was covered by freshly cut flowers.

“Those are for Ginny,” Martin blurted before he caught himself.

“For Ginny!” Alice gushed with excitement as she bunched up the flowers. She ran inside with the bouquet.

Martin sat alone at the picnic table. After a moment, he smiled. Everything had worked out.

He finished his cookie and waved at his mom in the window. Then he headed for home.

When he saw that his dad was vacuuming the van, Martin stopped to watch.

“Did everything go okay with Alice?” his dad asked over the noise.

“Yes,” said Martin. “And she really liked the flowers you left for Ginny.”

His dad nodded and turned off the vacuum.

“Hey! What do we have here?” His dad pulled out something wedged behind the seat cushion. A Zip Rideout H₂O Faster Blaster. He gave Martin a friendly squirt. Martin grinned.

His dad poured some soap into a bucket and filled it with water.

“Need some help?” asked Martin happily.

“That’d be great!” His dad put an arm around Martin, and they stood together taking in the cheerful welcome of spring peepers.

Martin thought about the beautiful spot his dad had picked out for Ginny in Alice’s backyard. He thought about his mom’s plate of homemade chocolate chip cookies. And he thought about the look-alike hamster he had found at the pet store that needed a good home.

“I’m sorry about Ginny,” Martin’s dad said softly. “But you did a very kind thing today.” He squeezed Martin’s shoulder.

“We all did,” said Martin. He dipped a rag into the soapy water and started to wash.