

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Martin Bridge: Sound the Alarm  
2 of 2 short stories

3,599 words / Sept 19, 2006

*Props*

by Jessica Scott Kerrin

Martin waited for his eyes to get used to the gloom before moving further inside the props shed that stood in Stuart's backyard.

Usually it was locked. But today, Stuart had the key.

The props shed was packed to the rafters with all kinds of stuff. Colossal dragonfly wings, marching penguins, a suit of armor, a giant beanstalk, a red go-cart, a disco ball.

"Watch out for spiders," said Stuart, imitating his mom's voice. He chuckled.  
"Mom always says that. Spiders give her the creeps."

"Your mom has the best job in the world," Martin marveled, ignoring the spider warning and taking a step forward. He reached up and gently touched the pink flamingo hanging above him. It started to twirl in slow motion.

Stuart's mom made stage sets for the Velvet Curtain Theatre. In between plays, she often decorated display windows for department stores. She was so good, crowds would stop on the sidewalk to watch her as she worked on her creations behind the glass.

"Mom said to look near the plastic campfire," said Stuart matter-of-factly. For Stuart, there was nothing unusual about having mother who made magic or a props shed in his backyard filled with theatrical leftovers.

At first, Martin had been annoyed when Stuart's mom called, interrupting their water-sprinkler game. She was working on a window for a store called The Toy Box, and she had forgotten to bring the remote control for her robotic dolphin.

But now Martin nodded to Stuart, eager for the chance to rummage through the shed. Shoving aside a bicycle built for two, he wormed his way past a pile of overstuffed sheep, then squeezed around a roly-poly punching-bag clown.

Good thing Stuart's on the other side of the shed, thought Martin. Stuart hated clowns.

Martin was thoroughly enjoying his romp through wonderland and hoped they wouldn't find the remote control any time soon.

Then he gasped.

"What's wrong?" asked Stuart, his voice muffled by a rack of fairy tutus.

"Nothing!" choked Martin. He struggled to push back his mounting panic, but he was unable to look away from the thing he feared the most.

Not a spider. He liked things with eight legs.

Not the clown. He liked happy-go-lucky characters.

No, it was a mannequin. Lurking in the nearby corner. Staring straight at him with those cold, unfeeling eyes. Reaching out to touch him with those stiff, plastic fingers. Screaming silent words at him with that half-open mouth.

Martin couldn't breathe. His palms started to sweat. He swallowed hard, then frantically shoved his way back out, all the while fighting the prickly feeling that the mannequin was in hot pursuit.

To Martin, mannequins were the most loathsome things on earth. He had nightmares about them. And even though he knew they couldn't possibly move in real life, Martin was absolutely convinced they did.

But only when he wasn't looking.

"Found it!" called Stuart happily from somewhere deep inside the shed.

By now, Martin was safely outside, taking slow, calming breaths. Stuart emerged, remote control in hand.

"You okay?" he asked, a puzzled frown on his face.

"Yes," said Martin shakily, hands on knees. But he stood up to stop Stuart from asking any more embarrassing questions. "Let's go."

Stuart gave him a funny look, then locked the shed. Martin double-checked it to make sure the mannequin couldn't escape. He felt better after that.

The boys jumped on their bikes and headed to The Toy Box, six blocks away. Only it was getting close to dinner. Martin could tell because his stomach was growling. He decided he would run the errand with Stuart, then head straight home.

They wheeled into the parking lot. It was full of cars and scattered shopping carts. As they pedaled by the onlookers, the boys waved to Stuart's mom in the second-floor window.

Martin got a quick glimpse of the underwater scene she was building to go with the water toys displayed in the first floor window.

"The bike rack is at the side," Stuart called over his shoulder.

They locked their bikes together, then headed through the front doors of the store.

The Toy Box was so big, it had two floors. Little kid stuff on the main floor. Big kid stuff upstairs, along with the magnificent display window Martin had seen from outside.

"This way," said Stuart.

They climbed the stairs and then marched to the window, which was blocked off from the rest of the store by panels.

"Abracadabra," said Stuart as he knocked on one of the panels.

A hidden door opened, and his mom climbed out.

"One remote," reported Stuart, handing it to her.

"Thank you, honey." She glanced at her watch. "Oh, no! I'm really behind, and I have to get this window done before the store closes. As soon as you get home, will you please remind your dad to start dinner?"

"Sure," said Stuart.

Suddenly, she screeched and dropped the remote. "Is that what I think it is?!"

The boys took a step closer and inspected the remote. A small spider crept across the control buttons.

Stuart flicked the spider off and stepped on it while rolling his eyes at Martin.

Stuart's mom gave him a quick kiss. Then she grabbed the remote, climbed back into the window display and shut the door.

"You weren't kidding. She really *does* hate spiders," said Martin.

"I know," said Stuart. "It's silly. It's not like they're *clowns* or anything."

Martin was about to tell him that being scared of clowns was even sillier. But then he remembered his own peculiar fear of mannequins, so he said nothing.

Stuart turned and surveyed the second floor. "Want to look around for a minute while we're here?"

Martin's stomach rumbled again. But still, they *were* standing inside a toy store, the biggest in the city. He couldn't resist.

"Let's check out the Zip Rideout aisle," Martin suggested.

*Zip Rideout: Space Cadet* was their favorite cartoon show. Zip had become so popular, he now had an entire aisle of merchandise all to himself. Rocket kits, space goggles, H2O Faster Blasters, Solar System Explorer Sets, movie posters, lunchboxes, jackets, watches. Even pajamas, sheets and toothbrushes!

The boys bounded across the store, dodging noisy swarms of kids. They cut through the puzzles and games aisle, which was empty except for a few grandparents, then past the bicycles and the all-pink girly aisle.

The next aisle was for action figures.

"Getting close," said Stuart with authority.

They turned the corner, and there it was. The Zip Rideout aisle.

"Ready and steady," said Martin, giving Stuart the official Zip Rideout salute.

The boys zigzagged their way down the aisle, trying space toy after space toy. They were having a blast, but stopped in their tracks when they came to the end of the row.

There, looming in front of them, stood an enormous model of Zip Rideout's rocket. It had Zip's signature flames painted in blazing reds and oranges with the name of Zip's rocket in bold letters: "The Zipper."

"Look! There's even a hatch door," said Martin, fully impressed. "Let's climb on board."

"I don't know," said Stuart hesitantly. "Maybe we're not allowed."

"But that's what a hatch door is for!" insisted Martin. "And we could act out episode twenty-four: 'Zip Rideout and the Wormhole.'"

Martin knew episode twenty-four was Stuart's all-time favorite.

A wave of excited anticipation crossed Stuart's face. "You first," he ordered.

Martin pried open the hatch as fast as the speed of light. Stuart clambered in right behind him.

"Wow!" exclaimed Martin, looking around. There were flashing control panels and maps of galaxies and everything.

He closed the hatch door and all was silent. Just like being in a real space ship. The two acted out the entire wormhole episode, with the crash landing from episode sixteen thrown in for good measure.

When they were done, Martin sat at the helm, enjoying the starry view on the screen above.

“I’d give anything to have The Zipper in my backyard,” he said wistfully. The thought of home made his stomach start up again. It must be getting late.

“We’d better get going,” agreed Stuart, rubbing his own stomach.

And that’s when the lights inside the rocket went out, plunging the boys into total darkness.

“Quit fooling around,” said Stuart.

“It wasn’t me,” insisted Martin. “Someone must have pulled the plug.”

He began to grope the walls in search of the hatch door. The blackness pressed against him, and the boys kept bumping into each other as they fumbled about.

“Here’s the hatch,” said Martin at last, feeling something familiar. He twisted the handle and pushed the door wide open.

They poked their heads out.

“What’s going on?” whispered Martin.

The store lights were also off. And everything was as silent as it had been inside the rocket.

“I think the store is closed,” Stuart whispered back. “H-h ... hello?” he called tentatively.

No answer.

They scrambled away from the rocket and stood uncertainly in the dim, vacant aisle.

“Let’s get out of here!” urged Martin, and they wove their way back to the stairs.

It was Martin who first noticed that an accordion-type gate had been pulled across the top of the stairwell. It reached from floor to ceiling. Stuart tried to slide it open, but it wouldn't budge.

"It's locked," said Stuart in a shocked tone.

"Let me try," said Martin. He rattled the gate several times.

Nothing.

He looked at Stuart, and Stuart looked at him.

Cripes!

"Now what?!" said Stuart, his voice several notches higher than usual.

"A telephone!" said Martin. "Let's call for help!"

"The telephones are downstairs by the front doors!" Stuart wailed. Like Martin, he pressed his face to the gate, clinging to it with both hands.

"Okay, okay," said Martin. Stuart's rising alarm was beginning to get to him.

"We'll have to think of something else. Go to Plan B."

"Which is?" demanded Stuart, keeping his grip on the gate.

"Which is for you to be quiet so I can think," said Martin irritably.

He glanced over at Stuart, who now looked so distraught that Martin immediately felt bad.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "Let's go sit down and figure this out."

Stuart followed Martin to the car aisle. Martin sat in a push-pedal convertible. Stuart chose a station wagon with fake wood-paneled doors.

They parked in silence.



“Wait a minute!” Martin shouted. “Our bikes! Someone will spot them and realize that we’re trapped in here!”

“Our bikes are locked up around the side,” said Stuart glumly, forehead on steering wheel. “Remember?”

“Oh,” said Martin. “Right.” His voice trailed off.

Suddenly, Stuart sat up tall, eyes wide open.

“The clowns!” he squeezed out. “The *clowns!*”

“What?” asked Martin, confused at the outburst.

“Which aisle are the clowns in?” Stuart dropped his voice to a whisper, as if he feared being overheard by them.

“Ah!” Now Martin understood. “Clowns are downstairs, next to the birthday party aisle. Not up *here*,” he said reassuringly.

Stuart sagged with relief.

The mention of clowns reminded Martin about his own fear. But since this wasn’t a clothing store, he was happily sure that there weren’t any mannequins lurking around. Good thing, since he had had a nightmare about them only a few sleeps ago.

Still, he didn’t like the idea of spending the entire night in The Toy Box.

Not one bit.

Then he spotted the display of Park Ranger Super-Charged All-Night Flashlights. It gave him a fabulous idea.

“We won’t be here for long,” said Martin triumphantly. “We’re going to *signal* for help.”

“Signal?” repeated Stuart, hope creeping into his voice. “How?”

“With one of these,” said Martin, climbing out of the car and picking up a flashlight from the display. “We’ll beam a light from the window. I know how to signal S-O-S, which means ‘help’. Someone’s bound to see us.”

“That might work,” said Stuart cautiously. “Except Park Ranger Super-Charged All-Night Flashlights never come with batteries. And they need a gazillion, don’t they?”

“No problem,” said Martin, now thinking on his feet. “All we need to do is visit the battery aisle.”

“Bingo!” exclaimed Stuart. He slapped Martin on the back.

They dashed over to the battery aisle and inserted a fistful into the flashlight. Martin switched it on. It worked!

“Let’s get to the window,” he said eagerly.

They ran back to the wall of panels that covered the underwater scene Stuart’s mom had been working on. Stuart pushed open the hidden door and they climbed inside.

Martin froze.

It was very dark.

Too dark for a window.

Martin flashed his light to where the window was and discovered that the bottom half was now painted with starfish and seaweed. He slowly slid the beam up the window. Above their heads, the glass turned clear.

But that wasn’t what made Martin scream.

“What?!! What?!!” yelled Stuart, charging for the door without bothering to wait for an answer.

“Mannequins!” Martin choked out. The beam of his flashlight shook violently. Martin’s recurring nightmare was coming true!

Stuart poked his head back in and looked up. Above them, mannequin children in bathing suits swam and dove in the painted water scene. A robotic dolphin frolicked alongside them, its tail turned off in mid-flick.

Stuart climbed back into the display area and stood beside Martin, surveying the scene above.

“Are you worried that the mannequins will fall on us?” asked Stuart. “Because I’m pretty sure my mom would have tied them up well.”

Martin couldn’t say anything because his throat was squeezed tight with terror. Instead, he slowly backed out of the window display, keeping a constant eye on the mannequins in case any of them tried to follow.

“Martin? Where are you going?” demanded Stuart, trailing behind the shaking flashlight beam all the way back to the top of the stairs.

Martin pressed against the gate. But there was no escape.

“Here’s the thing,” he huffed, doubling over, hands on knees once again. “I hate mannequins.”

“You hate mannequins?” repeated Stuart. “Why?”

“Why? I don’t know why! Why does your mom hate spiders? Why do you hate clowns?”

Stuart thought a minute. “Well, I don’t know about spiders, but clowns? Come on! That frilly thing they wear around their neck? Those really big feet? That honking sound they make? What’s to like?”

Martin thrust the flashlight at Stuart. "Fine. *You* signal. I'll wait here."

"But I don't know S-O-S."

"It's three short bursts, three long, three short. Then keep repeating the whole thing."

"But they're just *mannequins*," Stuart persisted.

Martin shot him his very best death glare.

"Oh, all right," said Stuart gruffly. He grabbed the flashlight and climbed back inside the window display.

Martin stood with his arms tightly wrapped around himself.

Less than a minute later, Stuart returned. "It's no use," he said. "The paint on the window is blocking the flashlight beam. You'll have to boost me up so I can shine the signal out the top where the glass is clear."

"No," said Martin flatly. "I *won't* go back in there."

But then Stuart said something really mean. "So, you're okay spending the night with mannequins? They're locked in with us on *this* side, you know." He shook the gate for chilling emphasis.

No response from Martin. Stuart's comment had turned his knees to pudding. He sat down beside the gate.

Stuart plunked down beside him.

"Come on, Martin. We need to work together to get out of this one," he said sincerely.

Martin shook his head, and Stuart sighed. They sat there for a long, long time. Finally, Stuart spoke again.

“Hey, Martin. Shine the light on my hands.”

“What?”

“Go on. Do it.”

Martin shone the beam while Stuart twisted his fingers to cast a shadow that looked like a spider crawling up the wall.

“Your mom would hate that,” observed Martin, not amused. He handed the flashlight back.

That got Martin thinking about his mom and how nothing much frightened her.

In fact, she often told Martin that the only thing she feared was losing *him*. She said so because when Martin was little, he had once gotten lost during a downtown shopping trip.

Martin never liked recalling that event, but now, stuck here in the empty toy store, that haunting memory rushed back to him in vivid detail.

He remembered he had frantically charged up and down the aisles looking for his mom, until finally he had spotted the back of her coat as she stood in the women’s jacket department. He darted up from behind and grabbed her hand in relief.

Only her hand was cold and stiff, and when it fell to the floor, several fingers snapped off.

He had grabbed hold of a mannequin wearing the exact same coat as his mom!

Martin’s nonstop screams rang out through the entire store, bringing not only his mom, but six others to the rescue.

Yet, as frightening as that had been for Martin, it was his mom who had cried while she hugged him, then again when she later told the story to his dad.

“What a nightmare!” she had sobbed over and over.

Martin’s stomach complained some more. It must be way past dinner. And he still wasn’t home. Would his mom be crying now?

Yes, he told himself sadly.

Martin got up. He finally understood why he hated mannequins so much, and now he knew what he had to do.

Martin took a deep breath. And another. And another.

“Okay,” he said a bit shakily. “Let’s do it.”

“Great!” exclaimed Stuart, leaping to his feet. “You boost me and I’ll signal.”

“No,” said Martin as evenly as he could. “Let’s do it the other way around.”

“Me boost you?” asked Stuart. “But you’ll be closer to the —” Stuart paused and pointed up with quick jabs.

The thought of his head near all those mannequins gave Martin a fresh wave of the willies. But he shook it off.

“Signaling will keep me busy,” Martin explained.

He grabbed the flashlight before he could change his mind, and they climbed back into the window display.

“Ready and steady?” Stuart asked in a bold Zip Rideout voice.

“Onwards and upwards,” Martin replied, and Stuart boosted him.

Martin rose above the painted window scene and could see clearly into the empty parking lot. He began to signal.

Three short bursts, three long, three short. Three short bursts, three long, three short. Three short bursts, three long, three short.

And all the while, he pushed away any nightmarish thoughts of the mannequins that were floating a hair's breadth above him.

It felt as if he had been signaling forever when he spotted two people strolling along the far sidewalk. He turned his beam right on them. They stopped.

"I think someone sees us!" Martin cried out.

He signaled madly and banged on the glass.

"Help! Help!" yelled Stuart from below.

When the couple crossed the empty parking lot and got really close, Martin turned off his flashlight and waved furiously. They waved back. Then one stayed put while the other dashed away to get help.

"We're saved!" said Martin with relief.

Not long after, someone opened the main doors to the store and flicked on the lights. It was blinding.

"We're here! We're here!" called the boys, rattling the gate.

The store manager and two police officers strode across the main floor and up the stairs to where the boys stood prisoners.

"Stuart!" exclaimed the manager, unlocking the gate. "Oh, my! Your mother must be worried sick!"

One officer radioed the police station to report that they had found the missing boys. The other officer took notes as the boys told their story.

"Why didn't you sound the alarm?" he asked, looking up from his writing.

"What alarm?" the boys asked together.

The officer pointed to a fire alarm on the wall nearby, clearly visible now that the lights were on.

“Oh,” the boys said sheepishly.

“Still, it was good thinking to signal at the window,” said the manager.

“They’re smart boys, all right,” said the officer taking notes. “I’ll put that in my report.”

The boys beamed.

When they left the store, Martin and Stuart retrieved their bikes. Then they climbed into the backseat of the police cruiser while one of the officers loaded the bikes into the trunk.

“Want to hear the siren, boys?” the other officer asked jovially as he turned around to face them.

They nodded eagerly.

*Wee-woo! Wee-woo!* went the siren. Martin’s heart jumped at the short, shrill bursts of sound.

It was then that Martin realized he was glad he and Stuart hadn’t sounded the alarm back in the store. After all, if they had, he would still be afraid of mannequins.

Martin squared his shoulders proudly at that thought.

Stuart was dropped off first. His parents were pacing on the porch when the cruiser pulled up. The officers let Stuart out, and he bolted across the lawn. Martin saw lots of hugging.

Then they drove to Martin’s house. When they turned into the driveway, he saw that his mom and dad were waiting on the front steps. They leapt to their feet.



"Looks like *their* nightmare is over," said the driver officer who was driving.

"Mine, too," said Martin as he bounded out of the cruiser. "Mine, too," he repeated with conviction.