

Martin Bridge: Out of Orbit
Book Five: 1 of 2 short stories

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CROSSWALK

by Jessica Scott Kerrin

That's strange, thought Martin as he jumped off the bus.

A group of teachers stood bunched together on the school steps. When Martin got closer, he could hear angry voices, one on top of the other.

"Just look at how fast the traffic is clipping along!"

"It's outrageous!"

"Drivers are completely ignoring the school zone signs!"

The crowd gasped as a car sailed toward Mr. Avalon, the crosswalk monitor. He jabbed his stop sign at the zooming car and waved his fist when the driver didn't even slow down.

Martin stood off to the side, but close enough to listen in. It was a technique he often used around grown-ups.

“We need traffic lights,” said Martin’s homeroom teacher, Mrs. Keenan. “That will stop the speeders.”

“It would,” agreed Principal Moody. “And I’ve written countless letters to the city. But no one will listen.”

“We’ll just have to try a new tactic,” Mrs. Keenan replied. She paused to watch Harper, one of Martin’s classmates, get off his bike and cross with Mr. Avalon after a stream of motorcycles gunned by. “What about a parade?” she suggested.

A parade! Martin had never been in one before! He almost whooped, but then remembered to keep quiet.

“You might be on to something,” said Principal Moody, stroking his gray beard. “Parades *are* hard to ignore.”

The crowd buzzed in agreement. Martin nodded, too. Then the bell rang, and everyone bustled inside. Martin couldn’t wait to tell his two best friends, Alex and Stuart.

“A parade!” they exclaimed. “Really?!”

“That’s what I heard,” said Martin with authority.

Several days later, Mrs. Keenan announced the details of the parade. It would happen first thing Monday morning. Mr. Avalon would lead the march, and everyone was encouraged to wear costumes.

Laila’s hand shot up. As usual, her big curly hair blocked Martin’s view of the blackboard.

“Can I dress up as a fairy princess?”

“You can go as anything you want,” said Mrs. Keenan, “The more attention-grabbing, the better. We need to make the news.”

Laila wheeled around to beam at Martin. She did that about a hundred times a day. It was annoying.

“Martin,” said Mrs. Keenan, “perhaps you could wear your lobster outfit.”

Martin’s mom had made it for last year’s school play. *Everyone* loved that costume.

“Sure thing,” said Martin.

And for the rest of the morning, he had happy thoughts about wearing his lobster suit again.

Lunch talk orbited around costume ideas for the parade. Even Alex and Stuart wanted to come up with something new. They had been underwater boulders in last year’s play and did not want a repeat performance.

The boys were deep in conversation when Harper sat down beside them. Martin stifled a groan.

Harper drove Martin crazy. He was always telling impossible stories. And whenever Martin challenged him on the details, Harper would say, “You’ll see.”

“My costume is going to be out of this world,” boasted Harper.

Martin rolled his eyes. “Sure, Harper. What are *you* going to be?”

“You’ll see,” said Harper, and he turned away.

“What could be out of this world?” asked Alex curiously.

“He’s exaggerating,” said Martin. “Again.”

Alex and Stuart looked perplexed.

“It’s just like his bike,” said Martin. “Remember?”

Martin could not forget. Last month, Harper had gone on and on about how he was getting a new bike that could actually fly. But when he finally rode it to school, his bike looked just like everyone else's.

"I thought you said your bike could fly," Martin had called out.

"My dad took off the jet packs," Harper had explained, "until I get a little older."

The crowd had murmured in admiration.

Martin remained highly skeptical. "Old enough for jet packs yet?" he taunted whenever he spotted Harper on his bike.

"Not yet," Harper always replied without missing a beat. "But soon. You'll see."

It was infuriating.

And now, listening to Harper brag about his costume made Martin lose his appetite. He set down his sandwich.

"Hey, Stuart," he said under his breath. "Alex might believe Harper's out-of-this-world malarkey. But you know he's a phony, right?"

"You never can tell," said Stuart between bites of his apple.

Martin stared at Stuart in disbelief. Surely he was joking. Martin was about to say so when Harper turned back to the group.

"Hey," he said, switching topics, "I almost got hit in the crosswalk once."

"Really?" asked Alex and Stuart together. They were all ears.

Not Martin. He drank his milk noisily and kept sucking on the straw long after the carton was empty.

Harper waited patiently for Martin to stop.

“Yes, and I had to leap out of the way,” he continued when Martin finally put down the carton. “I jumped so high, the car passed right underneath me.”

“There!” blurted Martin. “Did you hear that?! It’s ridiculous!”

“Really?” Alex said to Harper, ignoring Martin. “How’d you jump so high?”

“My mega malted energy shake,” said Harper, oblivious to Martin’s outburst. “I drink one every morning.”

“Mega malted energy shake,” Alex repeated carefully. “How do you make it?”

Martin watched in horror as Stuart scrambled for a pencil and paper. Was he really going to write down Harper’s made-up recipe? Cripes!

Just then, the bell rang, and Martin was thankful to escape.

Martin was glad Harper was not his friend. He couldn’t stand listening to Harper’s outlandish claims. And he couldn’t figure out why others didn’t seem to mind.

Martin tossed his carton into the garbage, thinking he’d like to chuck Harper’s stories in there as well.

On Friday, Mrs. Keenan went over the final details for the parade. Everyone was on board, including the school’s bus drivers, who were going to decorate their buses and flash their lights as they followed the marchers.

Laila’s hand shot up. “I have an extra costume at home,” she said. “Maybe others do, too. If we bring them in, more kids can dress up.”

“Great idea, Laila!” said Mrs. Keenan.

Laila wheeled around, but this time she beamed at Harper in the next row over.

It was then Martin realized that no one was talking about his lobster costume anymore. Instead, more and more classmates had joined in the speculation about what Harper would wear.

Unbelievable! Martin fumed.

Later that morning, Mrs. Crammond, their art teacher, launched into her lesson “I’ve put up the paintings of your houses that you did last week. Let’s have a look at them, shall we?”

The first thing Martin noticed was that all the houses looked alike. Each one had a door with windows on either side, a smoking chimney and a picket fence. Some had a tree or a blazing sun or a bird flying by. Pretty ordinary stuff.

Then he happily observed that *his* painting was a cut above the rest. It featured his mom’s flower boxes, his dad’s lawnmower in the driveway and Martin’s bedroom window with rocket-covered curtains.

“Wonderfully realistic details,” observed Mrs. Crammond as the class gathered in front of Martin’s painting.

Martin shrugged modestly. He was used to compliments about his artwork. But then something in the display case caught his eye.

“What’s that?” he asked. He knew Mrs. Crammond reserved the case for the very best art.

“That’s *my* house,” announced Harper proudly.

Harper’s painting featured turrets, a drawbridge and a moat.

“You don’t live in a castle,” said Martin with a level glare.

“Well now, Martin,” said Mrs. Crammond, an amused look on her face. “Harper’s just being imaginative. Aren’t you?” She smiled at Harper.

Harper beamed.

Cripes! “Harper doesn’t live in a castle,” insisted Martin. “I’ve ridden my bike past his house a million times. It’s just a house!”

But despite Martin’s protests, the class continued to admire Harper’s work.

At lunch, Harper sat near Martin and his friends once again. Even though Harper’s back was to them, Martin could see that he was tilting his head slightly, listening in on their conversation. It was a technique Martin was familiar with.

Martin was about to suggest they move, when Stuart spoke.

“Guess what?” he said. “My dad ordered the wood for my tree fort. We’re going to start building it this weekend!”

“What’s your tree fort going to have?” asked Harper, worming his way into the conversation.

“A trap door, a rope ladder and a sign that says ‘Keep Out’,” listed Stuart as he counted off on his fingers. “Just like Martin’s.”

Martin smiled at Stuart’s compliment.

“What about secret spy things?” asked Harper. “Like cameras and motion detectors. Does Martin’s tree fort have those?”

“You bet,” said Martin dryly, anger flaring. “And laser guns and a pool of sharks swimming around the base of the tree.” He clucked his tongue. It was just like Harper to suggest that Martin’s tree fort wasn’t all that special.

“My dad can get those for you, Stuart,” said Harper, ignoring Martin. “Cameras and motion detectors, I mean.” Then he lowered his voice and darted his eyes left and right. “That’s because he’s a spy.”

“What?!” demanded Martin. He squeezed his carton so hard, it burped milk all over his hand.

“Your dad’s a spy?” repeated Stuart. He and Alex looked at Harper in awe.

Harper nodded.

“Your dad’s *not* a spy!” Martin exclaimed. He grabbed some napkins to soak up the mess.

“He is too,” said Harper with absolute conviction. He didn’t even blink.

“I happen to know your dad owns a hardware store!” Martin argued. “Whenever we buy paint, he’s at the counter. And he wears one of those paint smock things and a name badge.”

“That’s his disguise,” explained Harper. He winked at Alex and Stuart.

“Wow!” they said in hushed admiration.

“He’s *not* a spy!” yelled Martin. “And you *don’t* live in a castle. And your bike’s *never* going to get off the ground!” Martin snatched up his lunch and stormed out.

At recess, when Mrs. Crammond stopped Martin in the hall to ask if he would paint the parade banner, the black cloud over his head moved off for a bit.

But by the end of the day, Martin had a full-blown thunderstorm raging in his head. Lightning struck when he spotted Harper blabbing with Alex and Stuart on the school steps. Martin could make out snippets of their conversation as he huffed by.

“Is your costume *really* going to be out of this world?” asked Stuart eagerly.

“I bet it will be a blast!” said Alex.

Harper grinned and rocked on his heels.

Martin couldn’t help it. He stopped in his tracks and whirled around.

“Enough already!” he yelled. “Your costume will be ordinary, just like everyone else’s!” He stomped over and stood nose to nose with Harper. “And when you *do* show up, we’ll *all* see what a big phony you are!”

“Take it easy, Martin!” said Alex, putting his arm around Harper’s shoulders.

Stuart also took a supportive step toward Harper, but he was stopped by Martin’s hostile glare.

“Harper makes things up!” Martin shouted. “Why can’t you all see that?!” He wheeled back to Harper. “I suppose you’ll be wearing jet packs? Just like your bike?!”

“You’ll see,” said Harper calmly.

Martin felt as if his head would explode.

That night, Martin lay awake loathing Harper. Even worse, he was certain that Harper was fast asleep, not a worry in his head.

Martin angrily punch-fluffed his pillow. How could Harper do it? Make such wild claims?

Unless ...

Martin sat bolt upright.

Could there be any truth in Harper’s words this time? Could he really have an out-of-this-world costume that would make Martin’s lobster suit look like yesterday’s catch?

Martin's head began to spin. It *couldn't* be true. But just in case, Martin needed a costume even more spectacular than whatever Harper had dreamed up.

He flopped back down on his bed.

But what?

Staring across the dimly lit room, he could barely make out his rocket collection.

Then it came to him like a shooting star.

"Can I be an astronaut for the parade?" he asked his mom as soon as she came down to breakfast Saturday morning. "Like Zip Rideout?"

Zip Rideout, Space Cadet, was Martin's favorite cartoon hero.

"What about your lobster outfit?" she asked.

"We're supposed to bring in extra costumes so everyone has one," he said, for once grateful to Laila.

His mom took a sip of coffee as she considered his request.

Martin held his breath.

"When's the parade, again?" she finally asked.

"Monday."

Martin's mom sighed in a way that told Martin he had won.

Together, they bought silvery space age fabric and badges and flashing lights. For two days, Martin heard the whir of the sewing machine. It took his mom all weekend to build the new costume — a space suit, a helmet, and even a rocket booster that he could strap to his back!

"Onwards and upwards," said Martin proudly while she adjusted his shoulder pads. It was something Zip Rideout said at the start of every mission.

“You look out of this world!” said Martin’s dad, coming into the room for a look.

Mission accomplished, Martin thought with a satisfied smile.

On Monday morning, Martin scrambled out of bed. After donning his space gear, he dug out the lobster costume from his closet. But with his knapsack and lunchbox, it was too much to carry.

“I can drive you,” offered his dad.

Martin gratefully tossed him the keys.

“There’s my banner!” said Martin as they pulled up to the front of the school.

Mrs. Crammond had taped it across one side of the steps from railing to railing.

“Well done, Sport,” said Martin’s dad.

Martin got out and waved good-bye. He lumbered up the other side of the steps with his gear. He was about to step inside when the sound of another vehicle made him turn around.

It was Harper’s dad. No one could miss his van. It had enormous hardware store logos plastered on its sides.

Some disguise, thought Martin.

Then he realized that if he waited, Harper would be the first to see Martin’s *truly* out-of-this-world costume. And surely that would put an end to Harper’s ludicrous fabrications once and for all.

Martin set down his cumbersome things just inside the door, then confidently stepped back out and stood at the top of the stairs. His astronaut suit sparkled in the sun.

The van door flew open. Martin smiled radiantly as Harper climbed out. One silver leg, then two, then a rocket booster and finally, a helmet.

Martin gasped and quickly ducked behind his banner.

Harper was an astronaut.

Just like Martin.

“Wait, Dad!” called Harper before the van door slid shut.

He reached in and pulled out a light saber.

Harper was an astronaut with a light saber. He turned it on. A light saber with batteries! He bounded up the steps and into the school.

Martin stood up slowly.

“No fair!” he shouted.

Furious, Martin whirled around to go inside. But his rocket booster got caught on the banner, and the banner ripped in two.

Martin staggered backward, devastated. His world was spinning out of orbit.

“Hey!” called a fairy princess who had just rounded the corner of the school and was flouncing toward him. “Why’d you do that?”

Martin didn’t have time to explain. He decided it would be far better to wear his old costume than to go as a lesser version of Harper. So he bolted inside, scooped up his belongings and dashed to the boys’ locker room.

Sadly, Martin took off his rocket booster and climbed out of his space suit. It puddled at his feet, a flattened pool of shimmering gray. Then he reluctantly put on the lobster costume. As he did, he accidentally kicked his helmet across the floor. It rolled away, hit the wall and bounced back toward him.

Martin stared at the helmet as it landed at his feet. He reached for it.

A-ha!

Instead of the lobster head, he put the helmet back on and looked in the mirror. He needed one more thing. A rocket booster! He strapped it into place and saluted himself.

Perfect!

Martin was no longer an *ordinary* astronaut like Harper. Now he was an astronaut *from Mars!* A slow smile crept across his face.

The bell rang as Martin paraded into the classroom.

“Holy cow!” said Alex appreciatively.

“Terrific Martian costume!” agreed Stuart.

Martin saluted them with a giant red claw. Smugly, he took his seat, then turned to gloat at Harper. But Harper’s seat was empty.

“Where’s Harper?” asked Martin.

“Principal’s office,” whispered Stuart.

“What’d he do?” Martin whispered back.

“Ripped your banner in half,” Alex said in a hushed tone.

“What?!” exclaimed Martin.

“Laila caught him red-handed,” said Stuart.

The fairy princess in front of Martin wheeled around in her seat and grinned at him.

Martin slid his giant red claws under the desk. He realized with awful certainty that Laila had seen *him* rip the banner, not Harper. Cripes.

“When we asked Harper why he did it,” continued Alex, “he said he didn’t know what we were talking about.”

“But we didn’t believe him,” said Stuart. “You know how he makes things up. You were right about Harper all along.”

Martin said nothing.

“Attention, class!” called Mrs. Keenan, stepping smartly into the room with her clipboard.

Martin struggled to focus on her instructions about the parade, but his ears were on fire.

She was almost done when there was a sharp knock at the door. Mrs. Keenan stepped outside, then motioned for Martin to join her. He got up nervously.

Mrs. Hurtle, the school secretary, stood in the hall. She turned to Martin and said gravely, “Principal Moody wants to see you.”

“Why?” he squeaked, his stomach flip-flopping madly.

She lowered her voice. “I think he wants to give Harper the chance to apologize.”

Martin’s heart began to pound. He marched stiffly down the long empty hallway, Mrs. Hurtle clickety-clacking beside him. Harper sat waiting on the wooden bench just outside the principal’s door.

Martin’s pangs of guilt quickly dissolved. Seeing Harper as an astronaut with the added bonus of a light saber made Martin mad all over again.

“Shove over,” he said gruffly.

“I didn’t touch your banner,” said Harper glumly.

“Well, that’s not what everyone thinks,” said Martin, staring straight ahead.

The telephone rang, and Mrs. Hurtle picked up the receiver. From the way she was answering questions, Martin could tell she was talking to a reporter.

“No one will believe me,” said Harper pitifully. His shoulders sagged.

“Why would they?” demanded Martin. “You exaggerate all the time.”

They sat in silence for a while, Harper mulling this over.

But Martin had something to mull over, too. And it was making his hands sweat under the claws.

“Martin?” Harper finally said in a small voice as he took off his helmet.

“What?” Martin replied coldly. He readied himself for Harper’s next impossible story.

“My dad isn’t really a spy.”

Astounded, Martin turned to Harper.

“No kidding,” he said, eyebrow raised.

“Sometimes I say things ... well, you know, for attention.” Harper scuffed at the floor. “Of course my turrets and jet packs aren’t real like your rocket-covered curtains or your tree fort with its ‘Keep Out’ sign.”

He shrugged and gave Martin a quick, apologetic smile.

Martin was silent. Somehow, Harper’s confession had softened Martin’s anger.

So what if Harper embellished? At least his stories didn’t hurt anybody. And besides, Martin had to admit that it was kind of fun to think about a bike with jet packs, even if it *was* a long shot.

Martin pulled off his helmet, too.

“I know you didn’t ruin my banner. I did,” he admitted. “Accidentally,” he added.

“Are you going to tell?” asked Harper.

“Yes,” said Martin with relief.

More silence, and then Harper turned on his light saber. It blinked.

“I don’t suppose astronauts carry light sabers,” said Harper sheepishly, “but Martians might. Do you want to borrow mine?”

Gingerly, he held out the saber to Martin.

Martin didn’t hesitate. “Sure!” he said, mesmerized by all the flashing lights.

Outside, the school was gathering for the parade. From the window, they could see Mr. Avalon taping the banner back together. Brightly costumed students were milling about on the sidewalk. And decorated school buses were slowly moving into position.

Mrs. Hurtle put her hand over the receiver. “I have a reporter here who wants to interview a student about the crosswalk.” She held the telephone toward them. “Does one of you want to speak to her?”

Martin thought quickly. He knew the school badly needed traffic lights. He knew how important it was to get reporters out to the parade. And he knew he was sitting beside someone with enough imagination to get them to come.

“You do it, Harper,” said Martin as he turned off the saber and settled back on the bench.

He was ready for a good Harper story.