



Martin Bridge: Sound the Alarm
1 of 2 short stories

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MOON EYES

by Jessica Scott Kerrin

Martin's dad was humming a familiar tune when Martin came down for breakfast. It was the theme song from *Zip Rideout: Space Cadet*, Martin's long-time favorite cartoon.

Martin joined in the humming, and then he caught on to why his dad was doing it.

"Hey! Isn't that the new *Zip Rideout* movie?" Martin asked. He peered at the newspaper over his dad's shoulder and pointed to an advertisement. Zip was soaring across the sky in his flaming rocket.

"Sure is," said his dad, who paused to take a long sip of coffee. "How about we go this weekend?"

Martin whooped, then sat down to pour himself an extra-large bowl of *Zip Rideout* Space Flakes. He ate them every morning.

"Want to come, Mom?" asked Martin between spoonfuls. But he already knew the answer. Martin's mom was not a Zip fan.

"I'll pass," she said with a chuckle. "You boys have fun."

"Can we go tonight, Dad?" asked Martin. "It's Friday."

"Not tonight," his mom cut in. "Your dad and I already have plans."

"You're going out tonight?" asked Martin. "What for?"

"It's our anniversary," said his dad, "and I'm taking your mom to dinner."

"And dancing," said his mom. She gave his dad moon eyes, then stood to clear the dishes.

"Dancing!" repeated Martin to his dad. He made an icky face, but his dad had gone back to reading the newspaper. Martin shrugged and dug into his cereal.

"I've arranged for a new sitter," Martin's mom announced while she clattered at the sink. "Her name is Darla."

"Darla!" exclaimed Martin, setting down his spoon with alarm. "Why not Bruce?"

Bruce was his regular sitter. Whenever Bruce came over, he and Martin filled up on potato chips and home-made milk shakes. Then they would fly paper airplanes from the top of the stairs and watch bad-guy movies until way past Martin's bedtime.

"Bruce went away to university, remember?" said his mom. "I got Darla's name from a mom at work. She comes highly recommended."

Martin groaned. He knew what that meant. Darla would be one of those sitters who thought fruit was a perfectly good snack. There would be no flying airplanes in the house, he was sure of that. And she would insist that he go to bed on time.

A real drill sergeant.

“Better get a move on, Sport,” said his dad, checking the wall clock. “You’ll be late for the bus.”

Martin looked up with a jolt. Once again, he had lost track of time. Cripes!

He ran upstairs and brushed his teeth, then grabbed his knapsack and jacket before bolting out the door.

Too late. The school bus stood waiting. Martin knew that Mrs. Phips, his cranky-pants driver, would mutter something in that gravelly voice of hers as he climbed on board.

She was grumpy, all right.

Martin made out the words “punctuality” and “thankless” as he tried to scoot by.

“Sorry, Mrs. Phips,” Martin replied dutifully.

As he scrambled toward the back, he noticed that Thomas, one of the older passengers, was smirking at him.

Martin paused to look down and check himself out. He was wearing his superhero jacket like always, but it wasn’t zipped up funny or anything.

Martin continued down the aisle. When he passed by, Thomas called out sarcastically, “All systems ready, Captain?” and gave Martin a mocking Zip Rideout salute.

The older boys on either side burst out laughing.

Martin fumed. He knew perfectly well that Thomas used to love Zip Rideout. Thomas was one of the few kids who owned a complete set of Zip Rideout cereal cards, and he could act out entire scenes from Zip’s television show completely from memory.

But now that he was almost in junior high, Thomas made fun of anything to do with Zip — and anyone who liked the space cadet.

Martin was about to defend his superhero when Mrs. Phips hollered at them to settle down.

Martin shot Thomas a hostile glare, then slid in beside his best friend, Stuart. Stuart was scowling, his Zip Rideout lunchbox tucked at his side.

“Thomas got you, too?” whispered Martin. He could feel his ears burning.

Stuart nodded, lips pressed tight.

Martin shook his head. He *loved* his Zip Rideout jacket with its star-shaped zipper pull, extra padding at the elbows and badge of honor on the front. And he thought Stuart’s lunchbox was a blast with its rocket-shaped handle and the entire galaxy painted on its side.

Martin crossed his arms. Absolutely no amount of growing up would make *him* change his mind about Zip. And with that, Martin recited the extended version of Zip’s loyalty pledge in his head.

When they arrived at school, Martin and Stuart met Alex, their other best friend, at the front steps. He was sporting his Zip Rideout space goggles.

“Onwards and upwards!” said Alex. It was something Zip Rideout said at the start of every mission.

Together, they headed inside, and Martin had a good day. But on the ride home, he received another mocking salute from Thomas.

“Keep it moving!” hollered Mrs. Phips before Martin could respond.

That night, Martin went up to his room right after his mom fixed him a quick dinner. He wanted to rearrange his rocket collection, and he was halfway done when the doorbell rang.

“Martin!” his mom sang out.

“Coming,” answered Martin. He sighed and trundled down the stairs into a cloud of his mom’s perfume.

“Darla, this is Martin,” said his mom, whose hair was all done up. Martin could see the dangly earrings his dad had given her.

“Hi there,” said Darla, all breezy and smiles.

“Hi,” Martin replied gruffly, both hands stuffed into his pockets.

Too bad about Bruce. He would have play-punched Martin by now.

“You look beautiful, Mrs. Bridge,” cooed Darla.

“Why, thank you, Darla,” said his mom, gently tugging a few curls at the back of her neck and turning to Martin.

Martin knew he should also say something nice about her, but the way his evening was shaping up made him too grumpy for that.

When Martin’s mom opened the closet to hang up Darla’s coat, Darla spotted Martin’s jacket.

“A Zip Rideout jacket!” she said, turning to Martin.

Well now, thought Martin. It seemed that Darla knew about his superhero. Not all was lost. He began to smile, but then she continued.

“I bet it looks sweet on you.”

Martin’s smile collapsed. There was nothing *sweet* about a Zip Rideout jacket.

Martin's mom saw his face and quickly steered Darla away. She proceeded to give Darla a snappy tour of the house and wrote down a list of telephone numbers.

Martin's dad joined them in the kitchen, and he whistled at Martin's mom. "Ooh la la," he said, giving her moon eyes, then winking at Martin.

Martin scuffed at the floor.

"And you must be Darla," said his dad, shaking Darla's hand.

"Nice to meet you," gushed Darla.

"Well, we'd better get going," said his dad. "Have fun, Sport."

"And be good," said Martin's mom while his dad helped with her coat. She gave Martin a loud kiss good-bye, then wiped the orange lipstick smudge from his cheek.

Martin shut the door behind them, rubbing the spot to make sure nothing was left. He turned to Darla.

"They're going dancing," he said and rolled his eyes.

"How romantic," said Darla in a breathless voice. She clasped her hands and looked up with a dreamy gaze.

Martin looked up, too. All he saw was the ceiling fan. He decided then and there that Darla would be no fun whatsoever.

"I'll be in my room," he said and headed back upstairs before she could say anything else.

After Martin had rearranged his rocket collection just so, he lay on his bed with a smile. He was thinking about going to the new Zip Rideout movie. Then he thought about how Thomas probably wouldn't see it on account of being too old for Zip.

Cripes!

Martin rolled over. Well, it would be Thomas's loss, and too bad for him since the movie promised to be spectacular!

Martin reached over and grabbed Admiral, the furry stuffed turtle he slept with. They stared at each other. It was then that Martin noticed how the fur had worn off Admiral's cheeks.

Martin patted Admiral's head. He had had Admiral ever since he could sleep without a night-light. But now Admiral looked threadbare.

Martin gently placed the turtle on the bookshelf where he kept old toys that he wanted to save. Besides, he reasoned, he didn't need a sleeping buddy anymore. Martin was all about rockets now.

Laughter from the living room interrupted his thoughts. He slid down the railing to investigate. Surrounded by teen magazines, Darla was painting her toenails in front of the blaring television.

"Hey, Martin," she called. "My favorite show is on. Come join me."

As soon as Martin sat down, he wished he hadn't. It was one of those kissy shows that made him cringe and want to change the channel. But there were funny bits, too, so he stuck it out.

"My school's having a dance next week," said Darla in that breezy voice of hers during a commercial for shampoo.

"Hmmm," said Martin, barely answering. Even shampoo was more interesting than listening to Darla gush about some stupid junior high school dance.

"So I brought over a dance demo," she continued unfazed. She dug so noisily through her knapsack that Martin had to turn up the volume.

“A-ha!” She held it up, blocking Martin’s view of the screen.

Martin was about to ask Darla to please move over when she added, “My brothers would tease me if I practiced at home. And I really, really like to dance.”

Martin paused.

He thought about Thomas, and he thought about Zip Rideout, and something inside him softened.

“You want to watch it now?” he asked with resignation.

“Oh, yes, please!” she chirped, handing the demo to him.

Martin trudged across the living room and popped it into the machine. Music began to play. Straight away, he liked it. He watched as a crowd gathered around two dancers moving to the beat.

“Ooooh! I wish I could do that. Quick, Martin! Help me move the coffee table out of the way,” said Darla.

Martin lifted his end and they carried the table to one side.

Once the dance floor was clear, Darla began to practice. Martin returned to his chair, half watching her, half watching the screen and picking at his fingernails all the while.

“Rats,” said Darla. She kept messing up.

“You’re doing it wrong,” remarked Martin, head now resting on his hand. “It’s your feet,” he added.

“What do you mean?” puffed Darla.

Martin got up to replay the demo. “See his feet,” said Martin, pointing to the screen. “They go: Front. Side. Then cross, cross, tap.”

“Front. Side. Cross, cross, tap,” said Darla, trying again. But she still couldn’t do it.

“Front. Side. Cross, cross, tap,” Martin instructed, as he tried the move himself. Only it was harder than it looked. “Hang on,” said Martin, more to himself than to Darla, as he repeated the steps.

It was the *cross, cross* part that was tricky. But Darla cheered him on, so he kept trying.

“Martin!” Darla exclaimed at last. “You’re doing it!”

Martin performed the whole dance move again for good measure. It felt great.

“If you keep this up,” Darla continued, “all the girls will want to dance with you!”

Martin froze, suddenly aware of what he was doing. Dancing!

Alarm bells went off in his head.

He plunked onto the sofa, arms crossed, ears burning.

“Hey, Martin,” said Darla. “I didn’t mean anything by that. It’s just, well, girls like guys who can dance.”

“Cripes,” muttered Martin. He didn’t give a hoot about that.

Darla gave him a long, sideways look, then ejected the dance demo from the machine. She settled on the sofa and began to flip through the television channels.

Click. Click. Click.

“There!” said Martin eagerly.

Zip Rideout: Space Cadet lit the screen.

“Zip it is,” she said quietly.

They watched for a bit until Martin’s ears returned to normal.

“Say, Martin,” said Darla, all gushiness gone. “I bet *someday* you’ll want to learn a few more dance moves.”

“I don’t think so,” said Martin firmly, keeping his eyes glued to his show. “I like rockets.”

“Well, if you do change your mind,” said Darla gently, “you can always borrow my dance demo. Here.” She handed him a piece of paper. It had her name and telephone number written on it. “Just give me a call.”

“Sure,” said Martin without interest. He held the paper awkwardly and returned to the show. Zip Rideout had just discovered the lost planet of Astro.

“I’ve seen this one before,” said Martin. “He meets his archenemy, Crater Man, for the very first time.”

“I know,” said Darla. “And Zip frees the Astronians from Crater Man’s evil grip.”

“You’ve seen this one, too?”

“Sure,” said Darla. “I’ve seen all the *Zip* shows. I think I still have a Zip Rideout poster plastered somewhere in my room.”

Martin turned to her in amazement.

“Wow!” he said. “I’ve got an almost complete set of Zip Rideout cereal cards.”

“Let’s see them!” said Darla, gushiness returning, but somehow less annoying.

Martin raced to the front closet and hauled out his jacket. He pulled the cards from his pocket, shoved Darla’s paper in, then rushed back to the living room. He proceeded to lay the cards on the coffee table in their groupings while Darla picked up individual ones for closer inspection.

“Zip’s first rocket. Wow! This card is rare.”

Martin nodded proudly, then allowed her time to admire each and every one before scooping up his collection. “Say, do you want me to make us some milk shakes? I know how.”

Martin had not made them by himself before, but he had helped Bruce plenty of times.

“That would be great,” said Darla, and they headed to the kitchen. “I’m thirsty after all that dancing.”

It took a while to gather the ingredients and clean up the mess, but the milk shakes were delicious. Darla and Martin were just finishing up when they spotted headlights in the driveway.

“Quick, Martin!” she said, sounding the alarm. “It’s way past your bedtime!”

“I’ll show you my rocket collection next time,” he promised as he flew up the stairs.

With only seconds to spare, Martin jumped into his pajamas and slid between his sheets with their pattern of orbiting satellites.

After clickety-clacking up the stairs, his mom peeked in to check on him. Martin breathed deeply as if he was sleeping, until she gently closed the door behind her.

“Good night, Admiral,” he whispered. Then he rolled over and fell asleep, dance music still playing in his head.

“So, how was Darla?” asked Martin’s dad merrily at breakfast as he cracked some eggs.

“She’s all right,” said Martin, pouring his Zip Rideout Space Flakes.

“What did you two do?”

“Watched television,” said Martin, “and stuff.”

Best not to mention the dancing, he thought as he added the milk. His dad seemed too playful this morning, and Martin wasn't up for any teasing.

Martin reached for his spoon as his mom twirled into the kitchen. Her housecoat billowed around her.

“Good morning, lamb chop,” his dad said as he placed breakfast in front of her.

They exchanged moon eyes.

Martin dug noisily into his cereal to break the mood. “How was your evening?” he asked between mouthfuls.

“We had a lovely time,” said his mom happily. “Your dad is quite the dancer. He remembers all the moves.”

“Darla is going to a dance,” Martin remarked.

“Well, yes. She is in junior high, after all,” said his mom.

“I don't see what the big deal is.”

“Oh, it *is* a big deal. You'll see. Someday.” She leaned over to kiss him on the forehead.

“I like rockets,” said Martin firmly. And then he remembered that he and his dad were going to see Zip's new film. “What time is the movie?” Martin asked.

“Two o'clock,” said his dad. And they both started to hum Zip's theme song.

Zip Rideout: All Systems Ready turned out to be the best movie Martin had ever seen. Intergalactic aliens. H2O Faster Blasters. Earth-shattering explosions.

Best of all, no kissing.

“How about some ice cream?” asked his dad as they were leaving the theater.

“Roger!” said Martin, like his superhero. And Martin was in such a good mood, he said “Roger” as much as he could for the rest of the weekend.

On Monday morning as Martin finished his usual breakfast, he looked up at the wall clock.

“I’d better get moving,” he announced.

“Well! That’s a first!” exclaimed his dad.

“What do you mean?” asked Martin, bringing his dishes to the sink.

“I didn’t have to remind you about the bus,” said his dad, ruffling Martin’s hair.

Martin shrugged modestly. It was true. For once, he wouldn’t be late.

“You’re on time,” observed Mrs. Phips as Martin climbed aboard. “Fancy that!”

“Roger,” replied Martin, giving her a wink. But his face fell when he spotted Thomas ready to pounce with his tired one-liner.

“All systems ready, Captain?” Thomas taunted in that annoying tone of his.

“Settle down back there!” was Mrs. Phips’s immediate response.

Martin shifted his knapsack higher on his shoulder and kept walking. A piece of paper fluttered from his jacket pocket.

“What’s this?” Thomas called as he plucked the paper from the floor.

Martin turned to see what Thomas had.

It was Darla’s name and telephone number, written in her girly writing.

Thomas looked up, eyes wide. “You have Darla McGonagle’s number?” he asked in amazement. “*The* Darla McGonagle?”

Martin shrugged.

“What are *you* doing with *her* number?”

The others stared at Martin, jaws agape.

“She gave it to me,” said Martin matter-of-factly. “On Friday night,” he added.

Jaws dropped even farther.

“Friday night?” repeated Thomas in amazement.

“Sure,” said Martin. “Right after we danced.” He snatched the note back.

There was total silence on the bus. A sea of passengers stared at Martin in awe.

Even Mrs. Phips turned around.

At first he couldn't figure out why. And then he understood.

Oh, thought Martin.

A slow smile spread across his face.

Martin stood tall. “Darla says girls *like* guys who can dance,” he boasted. And right there in the aisle he performed the dance move he had learned.

Flawlessly.

Front. Side. Cross, cross, tap. Front. Side. Cross, cross, tap.

With that, he sauntered to the back and sat beside Stuart. The bus pulled out.

“By the way,” Martin called to Thomas. “You know who else Darla likes?”

Thomas gave the tiniest shake of his head.

“Zip Rideout,” declared Martin, pointing to his jacket with both thumbs.

Silence returned as Thomas slunk down even farther into his seat. Then murmurs began to fill the bus.

Stuart chuckled and placed his Zip Rideout lunchbox proudly on his lap.

“Well,” said Martin. “I guess he won't be making fun of Zip anymore.” He tucked Darla's telephone number back into his pocket and gave it a pat.

“Sure,” said Stuart. “But now you’ve got a whole new problem.”

“What do you mean?” asked Martin. He looked up in alarm.

Every single girl had turned around to stare at him. And each one wore the same soft expression.

Moon eyes.