



Martin Bridge: Untitled
Book 6: 1 of 2 short stories

3,488 words/August 19, 2007

BICYCLE

by Jessica Scott Kerrin

Martin heard the dull thump of suitcases being set down on the driveway, so he knew he should finish up in the garage.

Instead, he continued his attempts to un-jam the gears on his bicycle, while trying to ignore the disconcerting sounds.

“Martin,” his mom sang out. “Your Aunt Laverne has arrived.”

“Be right there,” Martin replied as politely as he could muster.

At dinnertime only two days earlier, he had been told that Aunt Laverne would be coming for a three-week visit. Martin could barely finish his chocolate pudding when he heard *that* unhappy news.

Aunt Laverne was really Martin's great-aunt on his father's side. But there was nothing great about her.

Aunt Laverne was the kind of aunt who did things only when she wanted to. Her voice sounded all rusty. And she had blue hair the color of lawn-mower smoke. Even worse, Aunt Laverne always seemed to be wagging her knobby finger at Martin whenever she came for a visit.

Aunt Laverne was not Martin's favorite family member.

Martin sighed, then trundled into the house.

"Hello, Aunt Laverne," he said, dutifully giving her a hug. Her thick lavender perfume almost made him choke.

"Hello, Martin," returned Aunt Laverne. "You've grown," she added, like an accusation.

It was true that Aunt Laverne and Martin were almost the same height. Either Martin had shot up, or Aunt Laverne had shrunk, the way old people do.

"What's that on your hands?" she demanded, interrogation-style.

"Grease," said Martin apologetically. "I was trying to fix my bike."

"Martin's bike keeps breaking down," explained his dad. "As soon as there's a good sale, we've promised him a new one."

"Youngsters these days get way too much," grumped Aunt Laverne, shaking her head. "They need to learn a thing or two."

"Come. Let's sit down," said Martin's mom cheerily as Martin's dad helped Aunt Laverne with her coat and hat and matching purse.

Martin dawdled in the front hall, hoping he could slip back to the garage unnoticed.

But no such luck.

“Martin!” his mom called from the sofa.

Cripes!

Martin sighed audibly, then joined them, flopping down on the armchair nearest the escape route. He sat in agony while the grown-ups had a terrifically boring conversation that had nothing to do with him. It went on forever.

“You should sit up properly, Martin,” barked Aunt Laverne at one point. “Posture is important for a growing boy.”

Martin grudgingly sat up straight.

“You’re slouching again,” Aunt Laverne nagged moments later, interrupting his misery once more.

And that was exactly the kind of nit-picking that went on for the next few days.

“Cut your meat into smaller pieces.”

“Did you comb your hair? You missed the back.”

“Is that your coat on the floor?”

Martin tried to get away by playing outside. But as often as not, she would follow him. Then Martin’s ears would burn while she told the garbage collectors not to dent the trash cans, and the postal worker not to be late again with the mail, and the paper carrier not to fling the newspaper onto the porch.

“These workers need to learn a thing or two,” complained Aunt Laverne.

Fortunately, Aunt Laverne could not climb ladders. So Martin found himself spending more and more time in his tree fort.

Then one morning, Martin looked out of his bedroom window and spotted his dad wheeling Martin's bike to the curb and leaving it there. What was he doing?!

Martin flew down the stairs to find a shiny new bike in the front hall.

"Surprise!" his mom sang out as she and Martin's dad hurried in, all smiles.

"For me?!" gasped Martin. He ran his hand over the cushiony seat and racy handlebars, then crouched down, eager to examine every detail.

"You bet, Sport! The bike shop finally had their big sale," Martin's dad explained.

Martin jumped up and hugged both his parents.

"Thanks, Dad! Thanks, Mom!"

He climbed on the bike to get a feel for the ride.

"What's that bike doing in the house?" Aunt Laverne demanded in her rusty voice as she flapped down the stairs in her gray felt slippers.

"This is Martin's new bike," said Martin's dad proudly. "The only thing that worked on his old one was the lock!" He pointed to Martin's lock and chain wrapped around the new bike's seat stem.

"What does he need with a fancy bike like that?" she said, wagging her knobby finger. "You're spoiling this child."

"Can I take it for a ride?" asked Martin, ignoring her dire warnings.

"Of course," said his mom. "In fact, why don't you run an errand for me at the mini-mart and pick up a few items for breakfast."

"Sure thing," said Martin, delighted to help out.

“We need eggs, coffee cream, dish detergent and raspberry jam,” she said as she handed him some money. “Oh, and brown sugar.” She paused. “Do you want me to write this down?”

“No, I’ve got it,” said Martin, feeling very grown-up. “Eggs, coffee cream, dish detergent and raspberry jam.”

“And brown sugar,” reminded his mom.

“Right,” said Martin. “Brown sugar,” he repeated.

Martin grabbed his helmet and knapsack.

“Onwards and upwards,” he said, saluting like his favorite cartoon superhero.

Martin wheeled past Aunt Laverne, who stood clucking her tongue, and he headed out the front door. After a few initial wobbles, he quickly settled into the steady rhythm of pedaling up the street.

Martin he tested everything. The brakes. The shocks. The gears.

He even got to try the bell when Scoots, the neighborhood cat, dashed in front of him. The bike worked perfectly!

All too soon, Martin pulled up to the mini-mart. He carefully locked his bike to the rack so as not to scratch the pristine paint job.

Once inside, Martin picked up a basket and tried to concentrate. What was on that list again?

Eggs for sure. And then there was something for toast. Butter? Honey? Butter. He was quite certain. And something about coffee.

Martin went to the coffee aisle and was overwhelmed. There were so many different types! Decaf sounded fancy, so he put that in his basket.

He walked right by the dish detergents, instead adding a box of laundry soap to his purchases. And he completely forgot about sugar of any color.

Martin marched confidently to the check-out counter. The clerk rang his items through, and Martin loaded the groceries into his knapsack. He couldn't wait to jump back on his new bike for the glorious ride home.

Martin charged out the door in high gear. But when he got to the bike rack, he stopped dead in his tracks.

Where was his bike?

Confused, Martin checked the entire rack. His new bike was definitely not there.

Martin whirled around, heart pounding, and frantically scanned in every direction. All he saw were customers going in and out of the mini-mart, some pushing shopping carts, others loaded with heavy bags.

But his bike was nowhere to be seen.

Martin broke into a frenzied run, dodging back and forth across the parking lot, around the rear of the store, and up and down the street. His bike had to be somewhere!

It *had* to be!!

But it wasn't.

At last, Martin doubled over, gasping to catch his breath.

When he recovered, he walked stiffly to the rack where he *knew* he had secured his bike. He bent down and scooped up the chain for his lock. It had been cut in half.

With awful certainty, Martin came to the obvious, terrible conclusion. His bike had been *stolen*.

The bike he had so carefully locked up. The bike he had gotten to ride only once. The bike his parents had taken so long to save up for.

Anger flared. Who could have done this? Who would steal a kid's brand-new bike? And why wasn't anyone in the parking lot paying attention?

But anger quickly gave way to crushing sadness.

My poor bike, thought Martin, hanging his head. He would have taken such good care of it.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered to the space where his beautiful bike had once been.

Martin trudged home.

"What's wrong?" asked his mom when she came to the door. She was smiling at first, but then looked alarmed when she saw Martin's expression.

"My bike was stolen," Martin croaked. His throat was so tight, he had trouble speaking.

"What?! No!" exclaimed his mom, one hand on Martin's shoulder, the other over her mouth.

"What's going on?" asked Martin's dad, who had come to the door.

Aunt Laverne was close behind.

Now Martin's throat was so clenched, he couldn't say anything at all. Instead, he stared at the ground with watery eyes.

"He says his bike was stolen," said Martin's mom in a hushed voice.

Martin braved a glance at her. Her eyes were filling up, too.

"What did I tell you!" Aunt Laverne barged in. "That bike was way too extravagant for a boy his age. You parents need to learn a thing or two!"

“Not now, Aunt Laverne,” said Martin’s dad crossly.

It was the first time Martin had ever heard his dad challenge her.

“Well!” exclaimed Aunt Laverne, and she huffed back inside.

“Did you forget to lock your bike, Sport?” asked Martin’s dad gently.

“No, Dad. I didn’t.” Martin dug out the chain from his knapsack as proof.

His dad inspected the evidence. “Bolt cutters,” he muttered.

“Oh, Martin,” said Martin’s mom, giving him a hug.

Martin gulped hard.

“I better get breakfast started,” said Martin’s dad sadly, and he took Martin’s knapsack into the kitchen.

Martin said nothing. He plunked down on the front steps, knowing that it was going to be a long time before his parents could save for a bike again. His mom sat down beside him.

After a few bleak moments, Martin’s dad returned with the keys to the van.

“Where are you going?” Martin’s mom asked.

“The mini-mart,” said Martin’s dad. “There are a few more things we need.”

Breakfast, when it finally came, was a glum affair. Everyone poked at their eggs, lost in thought over the morning’s tragic events.

It was Aunt Laverne who finally broke the silence.

“Someone in a truck picked up Martin’s old bike from the curb this morning,” she remarked. “And it wasn’t the regular garbage collector.”

“Really,” said Martin’s dad, barely looking up.

“So I demanded to know what he was doing. It turns out that he was taking it to a place that makes new bikes from old ones.”

“Oh, I’ve heard of it,” said Martin’s mom. “The shop is run by a retired police officer. He rescues broken bikes that would be going to the dump, salvages the working parts and builds new bikes out of them. And then he gives those bikes to kids from families in need.”

“Maybe you should go there,” said Aunt Laverne to Martin, “and see if the shop can help you build a new bike. Then you’ll learn a thing or two.”

Martin scooped up the last bit of his eggs, mulling this over. He liked tools. He liked fixing things. And rebuilding his old bike would definitely be better than having no bike at all.

“What’s the place called?” Martin asked.

“Bicycle Recycle,” said his mom. “Or something like that.”

“Can we go after breakfast, Dad?” asked Martin.

“Sure, Sport,” said his dad. “It wouldn’t hurt to check out the place.”

“I’m coming, too,” said Aunt Laverne.

And because of Martin’s fledgling new hope, for once he didn’t mind her tagging along.

The next thing Martin knew, he was sitting in the van, holding a piece of paper with Bicycle Recycle’s address written on it.

“There,” said Aunt Laverne, pointing with her knobby finger. “That looks like the place.”

Martin was disappointed at what he saw. The big sign in the window was hand-made, and the building itself was rather shabby. The steps to the door were crumbling. The outdoor light fixture was missing its shade.

“Are you coming, Sport?” asked Martin’s dad as he slid open the van door.

Aunt Laverne was already climbing the front steps.

Martin nodded reluctantly and undid his seat belt.

Once inside, Martin was surprised to find Aunt Laverne in high gear, chatting with the man behind the counter.

“That’s my sister’s grandson,” remarked Aunt Laverne, scarcely glancing Martin’s way.

“Hi. My name’s Darby,” said the man in a deep voice, and he came out from behind the counter to shake Martin’s hand.

Darby’s hands were huge, and he was practically bald, except for a few tufts of hair behind his ears.

“So, you’re a police officer,” said Martin’s dad.

“*Retired* police officer,” Darby corrected him.

“What made you get involved in this?” asked Martin’s dad, nodding at the shop.

“When I was on the beat, I saw a lot of poverty. Kids with nothing to do. No parks to play in. No bikes.”

Martin nodded sympathetically. He remembered all the times he had ridden around his neighborhood park, having one adventure after another with his two best friends. And now, he didn’t have a bike.

There was nothing worse.

Just then, a creaky pick-up truck filled with bikes pulled into the parking lot. Martin could see that many of the frames were twisted and rusty beyond hope.

“You fix *those*?” said Martin in awe.

“Not just fix,” said Darby. “I rebuild.”

He ducked into the back room and came out wheeling a shiny bike, complete with training wheels.

“It looks brand new, but this bike is made from the parts of about six others,” said Darby proudly. “And all my bikes get paint jobs. I build three or four a week, and when they’re ready, I call the agency. They send the kids over to pick up their bikes. The kids on the agency’s list are pretty special,” he added.

The truck driver started to unload the bikes, and Martin spotted something familiar.

“You were right, Aunt Laverne! There’s my old bike!” Martin turned to Darby. “Do you think I could have my old bike back and you could help me rebuild it?”

“Well, sure,” said Darby. “But first I’ve got to build bikes for the kids on my list.”

“What if I helped you build some?” offered Martin, thinking that if he did, it would speed things up a bit.

“Volunteer? Great! How about you help out on Saturday mornings for the next couple of months?”

Martin nodded vigorously.

The next Saturday, Martin reported for duty just as a truckload of cast-off bikes arrived.

“Come outside and help unload,” said Darby.

They brought the bikes into the shop, and Martin watched carefully as Darby disassembled them. Martin got to know the names of all the parts, and then he took his old bike apart himself and sorted the pieces into bins.

“Front forks here. Calipers there. Cranks over here. Shift levers in there. Derailleurs here,” he recited proudly.

After a couple of Saturdays, Martin could hand the correct tools to Darby as he needed them. And it was always fun to be the first to see the finished bikes when they came out of the paint booth in the back room. They were masterpieces!

Best of all, Martin loved watching Darby give the bikes away. Eager kids would burst through the door, and after Darby checked their names on his clipboard, he would wheel out bike after shiny bike. The kids were thrilled.

“But Darby never wants anyone to make a fuss over thanking him,” reported Martin back at home over dinner. “Darby’s the best.”

Later that evening, Martin stood at the doorway of the guest room.

“Aunt Laverne,” said Martin. “Thanks for telling me about Bicycle Recycle.”

“Darby does good work,” she said gruffly.

Aunt Laverne was packing her suitcases. She stopped what she was doing and turned to Martin.

“I wished I had a bike, growing up,” she said in a voice a little less rusty than usual. “But I never got one.”

“That’s sad,” said Martin, remembering Darby’s words about the kids he’d seen on his beat.

“I never had a lot of things. You’re one lucky boy,” she added, back to her old rusty tone.

Martin nodded. He returned to his own room, wondering what Aunt Laverne might have been like if she had gotten her childhood wish.

Aunt Laverne left the next morning.

“This flight better be on time,” she warned the ticket agent at the airport, nit-picking to the end. “Your pilots need to learn a thing or two.”

Weeks went by, and Martin showed up faithfully at Bicycle Recycle every Saturday. He was becoming quite a pro at the job. Darby even cleared a space so that Martin could have his very own workbench.

Then one Saturday, Darby stopped what he was doing and turned to Martin. “This bike we’re working on includes parts from *your* old bike. How about we say this one belongs to you when it’s finished, and you can have it on your last day here?”

“Really?” exclaimed Martin, his heart leaping.

Darby nodded to confirm.

All week Martin talked excitedly about getting his new bike. Because he had helped work on it, this bike somehow felt even more special than the one that had been stolen.

When Martin arrived at Bicycle Recycle for his last day, there was already a family waiting.

Darby checked his clipboard to see if their name was on the list, and then handed over a lime-green bike with purple racing stripes to a boy a few years older than Martin. The boy whooped repeatedly as he eased the bike out the door.

Later that morning, another family arrived. A girl in pigtails squealed in delight when Darby presented her with a tiny bike on training wheels. She especially liked the wicker basket on the handlebars and shoved her teddy bear in it for a ride.

The last bike to be handed out went to a family with two boys. The older brother had received a bike a few months back, but he was there to share his younger brother's excitement.

"I really love my bike," he told Darby. "My little brother can't wait to get his."

Out came a red bike with gold flecks in the paint.

"Wow!" said the younger brother, all eyes.

Darby beamed.

After they left, he turned to Martin. "Well, I guess you're ready to see your bike now."

Martin nodded eagerly.

Darby returned to the back room and came out wheeling a gorgeous blue bike with flame-orange decals.

"It's perfect!" exclaimed Martin.

"You've been a great help," said Darby, patting Martin roughly on the back.

Martin was so pleased, he couldn't speak.

Just then, a boy about Martin's age burst into the shop, his dad tagging along behind.

"See, Dad! We made it!" shouted the boy.

"Truck broke down," explained the dad with a tired shrug. "Didn't think we'd get here in time."

The boy rushed over to Martin's bike.

"Is this it?!" the boy exclaimed, pulling the bike right out of Martin's hands.

"Look, Dad, look!"

Martin didn't know what to say. He glanced at Darby, who was busy flipping through papers on his clipboard.

"Is your name Cameron?" Darby asked kindly.

"That's me!" said the boy, practically hopping.

"I'm sorry, son," said Darby, "but you're on the list for getting a bike *next* week."

"*Next* week," the boy repeated in a little voice as his face collapsed.

"I'm so sorry," Darby repeated, his booming voice reduced to a whisper.

The boy reluctantly let go of the bike and stood staring at the ground, blinking hard, hands shoved into his pockets.

Martin could tell that this was a boy who didn't get a lot of things.

Just like Aunt Laverne when she was young.

"I think you'd better recheck your list," Martin said to Darby, "because I'm pretty sure this one *is* Cameron's bike."

The boy raised his head, hardly daring to believe Martin's words.

"Really?" he asked.

Martin nodded, and the boy hugged him fiercely. Then he took hold of the bike and wheeled it over to his dad, who ran his hand over the frame in a way that Martin could tell was deeply grateful.

Martin and Darby watched proudly as the bike was lifted gently into the back of their old truck.

“Think you can help out one more Saturday? I’ll have a really nice bike for you then,” said Darby.

“That’d be great,” said Martin.

“Why’d you do it?” asked Darby. “Give that bike away?”

Martin shrugged with immense satisfaction. For just as Aunt Laverne predicted, he *had* learned a thing or two.