



Book One: Martin Series
1st of 3 short stories

2,288 words

RIDDLES

by Jessica Scott Kerrin

Martin held his breath as he slowly poured Zip Rideout Space Flakes into his official Zip-approved cosmic cereal bowl. Maybe this will be the morning a prize falls out! Zip promised one in every box. Martin's bowl started to overflow, but no prize today.

Oh well. Martin added milk and began to munch on the sugary star and comet shapes. He turned the cereal box around so he could look at his hero while he ate.

Martin was three-quarters of the way through his breakfast when his dad came into the kitchen.

“Better get a move on, Sport.”

Martin looked up at the wall clock with a jolt. Cripes.

He whipped open the hall closet and yanked his raincoat off the hanger. He tugged on his rubber boots and stood up.

Cripes. Wrong feet.

He pulled them off and tried again.

“Mrs. Phips is going to kill me,” he muttered to himself. Mrs. Phips was his cranky-pants bus driver. Martin had had her since first grade. He often complained about her, but his mom and dad always said the same thing.

“So, don’t keep her waiting then.”

Martin grabbed his knapsack and charged out the front door.

“Make the bus late. Make the bus late,” Martin chanted to himself. Raindrops dimpled the puddles as he splashed down the driveway. When he rounded the corner, the grumble of the waiting bus drowned out the swish, swish, swish of his raincoat.

Cripes. Mrs. Phips was sure to yell at him for being late again.

The bus door folded open with a whoosh. Martin took a deep breath and scrambled on board.

Only, it wasn’t Mrs. Phips.

“Hi there. I’m Jenny.”

Martin couldn’t believe his luck. He looked around. As usual, his best friend Stuart sat at the back along with the rest of the passengers.

“Where’s Mrs. Phips?” Martin asked.

“She’s in the hospital. Hurt her hip. I’ll be your driver until she gets better,” said Jenny. “So, what’s your name?”

“Martin,” he said.

“Martin,” repeated Jenny thoughtfully. She pulled the lever to close the door, then smiled at his reflection in the rearview mirror.

“Say, Martin. Do you like riddles?”

“Sure,” said Martin. He shrugged at Stuart and then sat across from Jenny. Truth was, he loved riddles. The bus lurched forward, and the windshield wipers flapped against the rain.

“Okay then. What do clouds carry after they stop raining?”

“I don’t know,” said Martin. “What do clouds carry after they stop raining?”

“A sunbrella,” said Jenny. “They carry a sunbrella.”

Martin laughed.

“So how come everyone’s sitting way at the back?” asked Jenny.

Martin knew that the passengers sat as far away from Mrs. Phips as possible.

“They probably didn’t know you had a riddle,” he said. Jenny nodded.

“What was so funny?” Stuart asked when they got off the bus at school.

Martin told him the riddle.

“Good one,” said Stuart.

“What’s good?” asked Alex, Martin’s other best friend. He lived too close to take the bus, but he always met them at the front door of the school. Even on rainy days.

“We have a new driver,” said Martin.

“Where’s Mrs. Phips?”

“Hospital,” said Martin. “I don’t know for how long.” He told Alex the riddle as they splashed their way up the steps to the school.

“I don’t get it,” said Alex.

Stuart rolled his eyes. Martin explained it and Alex laughed, too.

Martin told the joke all day to anyone who would listen, and he was first on board for the ride home.

“My friends liked your riddle,” he told Jenny, water dripping from his raincoat to a puddle at his feet.

“I’m glad,” said Jenny. “How was your day?”

Martin had planned to sit at the back, but now he paused. *How was his day?* The only thing Mrs. Phips ever asked was if he’d forgotten to wear his watch.

So Martin sat across from Jenny. He told her about the Junior Badgers and how they were going to build model rockets. He told her about Ginny, his neighbor’s pet hamster. He told her about Clark, who ate anything on a dare, and Laila, whose big curly hair blocked his view of the blackboard.

He talked about his two best friends, Stuart and Alex, and about how Alex had too many brothers and wanted his own room. He told her about his favorite cartoon, *Zip Rideout: Space Cadet*, which he watched every day after school. He even told her that one of his paintings had been selected for the display case at school that week.

Martin usually only bragged to his mom, but somehow this last tidbit just popped out. Jenny whistled at his good news. Martin shrugged modestly.

“Here’s your stop,” said Jenny, as she pulled over at Martin’s driveway. Martin looked around, surprised. Rides with Mrs. Phips always took forever.

“I’ll have a new riddle for you tomorrow,” said Jenny, as Martin jumped off.

She waved good-bye and closed the door.

Mrs. Phips never told riddles, thought Martin. He waved until the bus disappeared. Then he noticed something else. It had finally stopped raining.

The next morning, Martin gathered his things.

Knapsack?

Check.

Lunch bag?

Check.

“Good-bye!” he called and headed out the door in plenty of time. He stood at the top of the driveway and watched as headlights rounded the corner. It was Jenny.

“Good morning, Martin,” said Jenny.

Well! Mrs. Phips never remembered anyone’s name. Mostly she’d yell, “You kids!” as in “You kids better keep it down back there!”

Martin waved to Stuart and sat across from Jenny again.

“What smells so nice?” he asked.

“A little air freshener,” said Jenny. “It’s supposed to smell like a spring meadow.”

Mrs. Phips always smelled like old bus seats.

“Ready for today’s riddle?”

Martin nodded.

“What did the jealous rain cloud say when the sun burst through?”

“What?” asked Martin.

“You stole my thunder!” said Jenny.

Martin laughed. So did a few passengers who had moved closer to the front to listen.

Jenny’s purple jacket shimmered in the sun as she turned the wheel. Mrs. Phips always wore gray. Martin wasn’t sure if gray was even a color.

That afternoon in art class, Alex visited Martin at his easel. They had been told to paint a spring scene. Martin had decided to paint a meadow of flowers in his new favorite color.

“Holy cow!” said Alex. “That’s a lot of purple!”

Martin nodded and stood back to admire his work. This was his best painting ever.

Each day, Jenny offered a new riddle. More and more passengers tried to guess the answer, and one by one they moved to the front with Jenny. Her laughter filled the bus.

“Jenny is the best driver in the world,” wrote Martin in thick red pencil in his notebook. And it wasn’t just the riddles. She played Eye Spy games, led sing-alongs and told terrific stories about backpacking around the world. Her bus always arrived at school before the bell. No one ever kept Jenny waiting.

“I want to do something nice for Jenny,” Martin told his mom when he got home from school.

“I’m glad you like her,” said his mom. “I wonder how Mrs. Phips is doing.”

Martin stiffened. He hadn’t thought of Mrs. Phips in ages. “Mrs. Phips doesn’t tell riddles,” he said dully.

“I know,” said his mom, “but she’ll be out of the hospital soon. Perhaps you could do something nice for her, too.”

Martin almost laughed out loud at that crazy suggestion, but his mom crossed her arms.

“Zip’s on,” mumbled Martin, and he turned to the television.

Later, Martin went upstairs to think. As he brushed his teeth, a wonderful idea came to him. He spit the toothpaste out and called Stuart.

“Let’s decorate Jenny’s bus!” suggested Martin.

“How?” Stuart asked.

“With tissue paper flowers,” said Martin. “Like the ones you see on floats in parades. If everyone makes a few and tapes them on, Jenny’s bus would be covered.”

“Great idea,” said Stuart. “My mom’s got left-over tissue paper from the last store window she decorated.”

“Perfect!” said Martin. “We can hand out the paper tomorrow.”

At morning recess, Martin and Stuart handed out tissue paper to Jenny’s passengers.

“Remember,” explained Martin. “Stick your flowers on the bus tomorrow morning.”

“Just before you get on!” added Stuart.

“That way it will be a surprise!” finished Martin. The schoolyard buzzed with excitement.

At home that night, Martin made the best decoration of all. He painted a sign that read “World’s Best Driver.” The letters were huge. And purple.

After a hasty breakfast, Martin rolled up the sign and tucked it under his arm. He bounded to the top of his driveway and looked for Stuart.

Stuart was supposed to get up extra early and walk to Martin’s stop. But, he wasn’t there. Martin passed the rolled-up sign from one sweaty hand to the other.

There! Stuart rounded the corner and ran full-out toward him. “Sign?” was all Stuart could ask as he gasped for breath.

“Got it,” said Martin. “You had me worried. Look!”

The bus rumbled into view. Its side was covered with a colorful bouquet.

“Wow!” said Stuart, still puffing.

“Remember the plan,” said Martin. His heart pounded.

Whoosh! The bus door folded open. Stuart slapped on two flowers, one from each pocket. Then he bent down and pretended to tie his shoe right in front of the door. This gave Martin the time he needed to secretly tape his sign to the side of the bus.

“Done!” whispered Martin.

Stuart nodded and stood up. They grinned at each other before Stuart bounded up the steps. Martin followed right behind but bumped into Stuart, who had stopped short. Confused, Martin took a step back. As he looked down the aisle, his smile faded.

Rows and rows of faces stared straight ahead. Everyone was crowded at the back, just like the old days. Nobody spoke. Stuart bolted to join them, leaving Martin alone with the driver.

Mrs. Phips was back.

“Shake a leg,” growled Mrs. Phips, “or we’ll be late.”

Martin stumbled past the staring faces. He plunked down beside Stuart. Thick silence filled the bus all the way to school except for the one word Stuart whispered to Martin.

“Ka-boom,” he said, throwing up his arms. Stuart said “ka-boom” whenever something went wrong.

When they got off, the passengers pressed together in a huddle and watched Mrs. Phips park. They all spoke at once.

“Are we in trouble Martin?”

“This was all your idea!”

“Do you think Mrs. Phips will notice the decorations?”

“Quick! Let’s go before she sees us.”

Everyone scrambled up the steps and disappeared inside.

Martin slid behind his desk. He opened his notebook and read “Jenny is the best driver in the world.” Martin closed the book and sank further into his seat. His stomach felt like it was filled with rocks.

“Today, class, I want you to paint something you see every day on the way home from school,” suggested the art teacher.

Martin set up his easel. He dabbed his brush into all sorts of colors but he couldn’t stop worrying about Mrs. Phips.

“What happened?” asked Alex near the end of class. He stared at Martin’s picture.

Martin shook his head. He had mixed too many paints and now everything was the same dull gray. His sky was gray. His tree-lined street was gray. Even the school bus pulling up to his driveway was gray, gray, gray.

Martin sighed. He put his paints away without a word. For the rest of the day, Martin’s mood stayed the same color as the drive-home picture he had crumpled into a ball.

It was easy to spot Mrs. Phips's bus from the plain yellow ones lined up for the ride home. It still wore a million colorful flowers and had "World's Best Driver" plastered on its side.

Martin pulled his shoulders to his ears and climbed on board. He was heading straight to the back when he heard his name.

"Hello, Martin," said Mrs. Phips.

Startled, Martin looked around, saucer-eyed.

"You ... you know my name?"

"I do now. Everyone's been talking about you."

"Oh," said Martin in a little voice. He saw Stuart waving frantically for Martin to join him at the back.

"Thanks for the flowers," continued Mrs. Phips. There was less gravel in her voice than usual. "And the sign." Her eyes softened. "I never knew you kids felt that way."

Cripes.

Martin's ears burned. His feet began to sweat in his runners. He turned to leave.

"When Jenny came by with the bus keys, she told me you liked riddles," said Mrs. Phips.

Martin turned back slowly. "Do ... do you know any?"

"No," said Mrs. Phips. "But Jenny gave me this." She reached down beside her seat and pulled out a book of riddles. Martin remembered Jenny's first riddle. He smiled.

"I have one," said Martin. "What do clouds carry after they stop raining?"

"I don't know, Martin. What *do* clouds carry after they stop raining?"

He told her.

“Good one!” said Mrs. Phips. She laughed. Mrs. Phips actually laughed!

Martin shrugged at Stuart and sat across from Mrs. Phips. The bus rumbled out of the parking lot. Outside the rattling window, the view was the same. Inside, the smell of old bus seats filled the air. Mrs. Phips was still dressed like a foggy meadow. But when car horns toot-tooted at the decorated bus, everyone cheered and whistled.

“Toot back, Mrs. Phips, toot back!”

And before Martin knew it, he was home.