

CAT BAUER

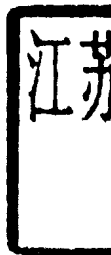
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— *The Horn Book Magazine*



FAREY  
LIKE A PERSON

by  
**CAT BAUER**



**LIKE A PERSON**



**Alfred A. Knopf**



new york

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Published in the United States by Alfred A. Knopf, an imprint of Random House Children's Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York. Originally published in slightly different form by Winslow Press, New York, in 2000.

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*  
Bauer, Cat.

Harley, like a person / by Cat Bauer.

p. cm.

SUMMARY: Fourteen-year-old Harley, an artistic teenager living with her alcoholic father and angry mother, suspects that she is adopted and begins a search for her biological parents.

ISBN 978-0-375-83735-7 (trade pbk.) — ISBN 978-0-375-93735-4 (lib. bdg.)

[1. Family problems—Fiction. 2. Alcoholism—Fiction.

3. Adoption—Fiction. 4. Parent and child—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.B32585Har 2007

[Fic]—dc22

2005032005

Printed in the United States of America  
February 2007  
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to my agent, William Clark, and to my first editor, Francesca Crispino, who helped make Harley into a person. Thank you to Joan Slattery and everyone at Knopf, to Susan Raboy, and to my attorney, Ira Selsky, for bringing Harley back to life. Special thanks to Sue Alexander, Walter Dean Myers, and the SCBWI, early believers, and to Chris Crutcher, Arthur Levine, and Barry Goldblatt for their help. Also, to my family and friends, especially Andrea Castione, Spencer Davis, Samangelo Ciervo, John Dajani, Marley Klaus, Cynthia Keltner, and Sara Jane Boyers. Most importantly, *grazie mille* to Paolo Trentinaglia de Daverio, who breathed new life into the dream.

Also by Cat Bauer

# HARLEY'S NINTH



Sixteen-year-old Harley Columba knows that October 9th won't be an ordinary day. At 8:00 a.m. she stands on the pier and gazes at the Statue of Liberty, framed by the morning sun and the fading moon. This is the day her first art exhibit opens in a gallery in New York City. The day Harley and her friends will visit

the Broadway set designed by her newfound father, the famous Sean Shanahan. The day she returns to her hometown, Lenape Lakes, New Jersey, in stifling suburbia—with Sean, who hasn't been back for fourteen years.

The fact that it's the ninth also means that she's five days late. She and Evan were careless that *one* time, and she could be about to make a mess of her life. October 9th—Harley's ninth—promises to be a monumental day as Harley reexamines herself as an artist, a girlfriend, a daughter, and a person.

In this second novel by award-winning author Cat Bauer, the unforgettable Harley Columba returns with a tough and touching story of the way life can change so unexpectedly—in a single day.

I'm under the bed. They don't know it. They think I've run away again. And I have. Only this time I'm under the bed.

I can see their shoes as they walk around my room. There are my mother's small fat feet squished into a pair of blue Kmart specials. My father's cowboy boots stampede across the linoleum floor. In the corner, my tiny sister, Lily, flutters her pink ballet slippers against the metal bed frame. She whispers, "Row, row, row your boat," over and over.

My mother's sneakers zigzag as she paces. "Where does she go? That kid will give me a heart attack!" My father doesn't answer. My father doesn't talk when he's mad. He roars.

My mother shakes my little sister. I crane my neck, straining to see. She grabs Lily's face. She squeezes her cheeks. She is angry at my father, but Lily gets it. Whoever is in the room gets their anger; this is why I'm under the bed. I want to yank my mother's hands away, make her stop. "Where is she?" Her words are hot and Lily gets burned. "Where is Harley?"

My sister knows what's coming. So do I. She starts to tremble. "I . . . I don't *know*." She speaks the truth. She doesn't know. I feel bad that Lily is being

tortured because of me. But although she is only five years old, she is a strong prisoner and does not break.

“Let me handle this, Peppy.” My father speaks softly. Not a good sign. Lily is caught in the cross fire; the battle is between the two of them. My father rumbles over to Lily. He removes his belt. It has a big silver buckle in the shape of Texas, even though we live in New Jersey. He never hits people with the belt, only furniture; it is a leather threat. He is a lion tamer and Lily is a kitten. “I’ll whip you, girl, if you keep lying like that. I’ll give you something to lie about.”

Lily wilts. She starts crying. "I'm not lying! I don't know! I don't know where Harley is!" I want to pop out from under the bed and rescue her. Like Superman. Unhand that child!

A pair of black Nikes bounce into the room. My brother, Bean. I hear the *tap, tap, tap* of Riley's paws right behind him. Riley is a good hunting dog; I hope he doesn't sniff me out.

An apple crunches. "Whatcha doin'?" Bean eats apples.

“Get out and mind your own business, Bean.” My father pulls in the reins when he talks to my brother.

**"You gonna beat the crap outta her? Can I watch?"**

"Bean—"

"Come on, Dad. Let's have some action. You go on and on about beating the little runt, but you never do." Bean loves Lily, too.

I think about calling out to Bean. A daring rescue. We transform ourselves into shining knights and

capture the drunken dragon and his fire-breathing wife. We lock them in the dungeon in the basement and rule the house with peace and kindness. But although Bean is tall, he is not strong.

"Bean. Get out. Now." My father puts on his Commander voice.

It works. Bean's black Nikes hesitate, then shuffle out the door. "I'm goin' over to Earl's."

I hear the drawer of my night table open. I turn my head quickly, silently, to the left. My mother stands right next to me. Those sneaky rubber soles have steered her over to my secret drawer. My safe place. My treasures. I try to breathe without making a sound. I could grab her leg and really give her a heart attack, I think. A monster from under the bed. I start to giggle. I force my mind to think of something else.

My mother is rooting through my drawer. She makes noises like a curious raccoon. My heart pounds. I know what she will find. "Roger, look at this!" My father's boots turn away from Lily. I can see the tip of the belt dangling at his side. I peek up at my little sister. She is crying softly. I want to pull her under the bed with me and keep her safe.

"That kid is grounded for six months!" My mother's voice is nails on a blackboard.

**"Calm down, Peppy. What's the matter?" *Clomp. Clomp. Clomp.* The cowboy boots join the Kmart specials.**

**“Look at these!” I know what she has in her hand. I keep my birth control pills hidden in my night table**



drawer under a pile of my drawings and my poems. My pills, unopened and waiting. I always thought they were safe there. My pills and my poems.

"Listen to this." Papers rustle. My mother reads out loud. "'My House,' by Harley Columba. 'My house is a place of pain/ A sea of shame/ A hurtful chain/ My house is awash in gloom/ A desperate room/ A dying bloom. . . .'" I hear a ripping sound. Pieces of white notebook paper sigh on their way to the floor. My poem. I blink away my tears.

"Where did she get them? Where does a fourteen-year-old girl get birth control pills?" My father seems bewildered.

"Well, you're no help—"

"Damn it, don't start! Don't start in on me!" The lion tamer curls the belt in his hand.

My mother won't stop. My mother never stops; she has no brakes. She is a man-eating beast that refuses to jump through the fiery hoop. "What are you going to do? Oh, ho, ho. Just try it." I hear a scuffling sound and a shout. My easel in the corner crashes to the floor. I watch my oil painting of Strawberry Fields skid along the linoleum and stop inches away from my fingers. I want to cry.

I close my eyes and soar up to the quiet, peaceful place. Up, up, up I go. Their voices grow dim and hazy. The three-ring circus begins, but I can barely hear it. It's safe up here, all flowers and rainbows. I stand in the middle of my painting of Strawberry Fields. In my mind, I paint a crystal-blue pond in the

center of the meadow. Far away, I hear the crack of the belt as it cuts through the air and strikes the bedpost. I dip my paintbrush into a jar of yellow and sprinkle the meadow with sunshine. The man-eating beast growls; the lion tamer laughs. The pond. Into the pond. I try to dive into the smooth blue water, but it is canvas, not water, and I am falling. . . .

I open one eye. Lily has curled into a ball in the corner. My arm is asleep. I change positions. There is so much racket, no one hears me. I stretch. A dust ball floats under my nose. I have to sneeze. I try to hold it back. I squish my nostrils shut. The sneeze erupts from me. My eardrums have been blown right out of my head. I lie absolutely still. My body pulses against the floor. *Thud. Thud. Thud.* The Telltale Heart.

"What was that?" my father asks. "Did you hear something?"

"Harley, is that you?" My mother coughs.

I hold my breath. I am a mannequin. I am not human. I do not move.

"Harley Marie?" My father crosses the room and opens my closet door. He peers inside. I have hidden there before. He shoves my clothes to the side. My favorite red dress tumbles off its hanger into a heap on the floor. I want to snatch it and drag it under the bed with me. Lily, my painting, and my red dress.

I brace myself. They will kill me, I think. They will find me and kill me and that will be the end.

Instead the telephone rings. My father's boots hesitate, then turn and walk out the bedroom door.

My mother's Kmart specials shuffle right behind. "Lily, clean up this mess." She slams the door. I take a deep breath. Saved by the bell.

I count . . . eight . . . nine . . . ten. I come out from under the bed. Lily does not seem surprised to see me. I walk to the corner and set my easel on its wobbly legs. I wipe a smudge off my painting and place it back on the easel. There is no crystal-blue pond in the center of Strawberry Fields, only grass. One edge of the canvas is loose.

I gather the tatters of my poem from the floor. I dig through my night table drawer and pull out some Scotch tape. I sit on the edge of my bed. I tape the jagged edges back together. All the king's horses and all the king's men . . . I find all the torn pieces except one. There's a hole in the center of my poem.

I hear a tiny sob. I turn and hold my arms out to Lily. She feels damp and trembly. I rock her until she grows quiet. I take her hand. Gently I pull her under the bed, together with my painting and my favorite red dress.

I am Rapunzel, locked in my tower. Too bad my hair's not long enough to reach the ground. I pass the time gazing out my bedroom window and dreaming of escape. I do this a lot. Every house on my block is exactly the same, only a different color. Willoby Court. Tract homes, built in the fifties. Everyone calls it the new development, even though it's more than fifty years old.

I am adopted. They tell me I am not, but I know that I am. My parents' eyes are brown. My eyes are blue. Lily's and Bean's eyes are also brown. Plus, I saw my mother's belly full with them, so they are her children, no doubt about it. It is not unusual for people to have a baby after they have gone out and adopted one. When I found the harlequin, I was convinced.

Last week, I was in the storage area inside my bedroom. I am not allowed in there; don't ask me why. In Lenape Lakes, New Jersey, what we call a storage area is sort of like an attic, only it's not above the ceiling; it runs behind the wall. The door is as high as my chest, painted the same color as the bedroom, Peppy pink. You can't stand up inside, you have to squat; it's very long but not too deep. It's where we stash the junk of the House of Columba—old baby clothes, rugs, broken lamps—and me. It is my hide-away, where I go to get some peace.

Bean was in his bedroom playing Nintendo. He's addicted, I swear. Lily was downstairs watching MTV. She's wild for rap and hip-hop. Peppy was running the vacuum cleaner. Every Sunday night, my mother gets this ancient monster of a Hoover out of the closet and starts sucking up dirt. The Hoover is truly frightening—it has a headlight for eyes and steel jaws for a mouth. She drives it like a maniac, smashing into furniture and banging against the walls.

I left the storage area door open a crack because it latches on the outside. I yanked on the cord of the



wanted to know what it was. I took off my headphones and set down my drawing.

I wriggled over sheets and curtains, jars of mothballs, and forgotten clothes. I knocked a stack of old *National Geographics* over. Uh-oh. I hoped no one heard that. I stopped and listened hard. *Vrrumph! Bump. Vrrumph! Bump.* The Hoover drowned out all other noise on the face of the earth.

I climbed over a pile of tablecloths, then past a rusted electric train. I remember thinking, Maybe if I crawl in deep enough, I will find a secret door, a door that opens to another world, a world of sunflowers and kaleidoscopes—anywhere out of this house.

I squeezed past a wooden stepladder and then I saw it. There, wrapped inside a plastic bag with a big faded bow on top, was what looked like a doll. It was dark back there, so I grabbed the top of the bag and dragged it toward the light. I was careful. The plastic was old and brittle. I sat down on the rolled-up carpet and took off the bow.

I heard my bedroom door open and realized the vacuum had stopped. I was fast. I yanked the cord and switched off the light. Peppy shuffled into my room. She hollered, "Harley! Harley Marie, are you in here?" I froze into a statue, cold and Roman. I watched her through the crack in the door. "Harley?" I held my breath as her rubber soles headed straight for the storage area. In an instant, she would fling open the door. Tag, Harley. You're *It*.

Instead she slammed the door. Great. I was locked inside. Now I'd have to wait for Lily to show up.

I heard her go down the hall into Bean's room. Her voice was muffled. "Do you know where your sister is?" I couldn't hear what Bean said. Damn, that was a close one.

I sat for a moment in the darkness. I got a chill, like a ghost had sat down next to me. I shivered and tugged the cord to the bulb, and the shadows were softened by the light.

My hands were shaking as I opened the plastic and took the doll out of the bag. Oooo. I smiled. It was a clown. Not a circus clown, more like the joker in a deck of cards. He had a soft body, but a porcelain face and hands. He wore a mask and a costume of diamond-shaped patches, like a colorful quilt. Underneath the mask, his eyes were two glowing embers. They were made of glass; they almost seemed real. It was crazy, but I thought I knew this clown. It was like looking into the eyes of an old friend. In one hand he held a wooden baton. Dangling from the collar around his neck was an old-fashioned greeting card attached to a faded ribbon. I squinted and tried to read the handwriting. On the outside of the card was a balloon with the words "Happy Birthday Two-Year-Old!"

I flipped open the card. It was so old, the edges were yellow. The handwriting was a scribble. The words slanted in every direction. I strained to read: "A . . . har . . . harlequin for . . . my Harleykins. Papa loves you for . . . forever and a day."

The words were a jolt. I almost dropped the clown. I read the card again and again. A tear fell from my eye and splashed a tiny pond onto the crooked handwriting. *Papa loves you forever and a day.*

It was not the handwriting of my father, Roger Columba.



## 2

It is dinnertime and Bean is late. The steaks are getting cold. I wait for my parents to bring up the birth control pills, but they say nothing. We sit in denial at the family room table, pretending everything is normal. Lily kicks the table leg and hums. I yawn. I am exhausted.

"Get your elbows off the table, Harley."

"Can't we eat, Dad?" I am whining. "I'm about to die from starvation."

"We will eat when your brother gets home." Roger sits there, calm on the outside, but his brown eyes are boiling. He wears his uniform to the table. He owns a gas station in the next town over, and smells like oil changes and tune-ups. "We will wait until he arrives."

"But, Dad—"

"We'll wait, I said. You're lucky you're getting supper." The Commander has spoken. No one dares pick up their fork. We sit in silence except for the *bump, bump, bump* of Lily's feet and her hushed "Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily . . ."

"Lily, knock it off!" Roger's voice is a sledgehammer. Lily stops singing and starts crying. "Oh, for crissake."

"We're doing genealogy in history and I'm going