

Yellow Bird and Me

By Joyce Hansen

Chapter 2 THE POEM

Barker stood in front of the room taking attendance, looking like a general in her navy blue suit.

Mickey sat with me and Dotty. Lavinia was on the other side of the room, running her mouth to the boy sitting next to her.

Mickey turned to me. "So, you going to tutor the Bird?"

"No," I answered.

"Why did he say you would?" she asked, looking at me slyly.

"How should I know?" I snapped.

Mrs. Barker clapped her hands. "Doris, no more talking. Class, your attention."

I sat sideways, turning my back to Mickey. The twins and I had classes together since the first grade. Anytime they talked to me, I got caught with my mouth open. When classes started in September, I sat in the front of the room to get away from them. The second day of class, Barker rearranged seats, and I ended up in the middle of the first row near Mickey and Dotty again.

Mrs. Barker put her roll book on her desk. "Class, we will now review the social studies homework. Who can tell me when King Tutankhamen reigned?"

Bird's hand shot up in the air before anyone else even opened their books. He sat one row away from me. "I know. ... I know it," he yelled excitedly.

Mrs. Barker looked annoyed, but she said, "Okay, James." I guess she thought he was going to say something crazy, as usual, to make everyone laugh.

"King Tut reigned in the Eighteenth Dynasty of the New Kingdom," he shouted and then peeped at me. I made believe I didn't see him.

"Thank you, James." Her eyes swept the room. "Is it known how the king died?"

Bird's hand flew in the air again. She nodded toward him.

"No one knows for sure how he died. Maybe he was killed." He'd remembered everything I'd read to him.

Mickey leaned over to me. "What happened to Him?"

I ignored her and gazed out of the window. Poor Amir, I thought, all by himself in that home. I had to figure out how I was going to save some money so I could go upstate and visit him. I didn't get an allowance. I was too young to work in a restaurant like the high school kids. I could baby-sit, maybe. Except I helped my mother mind my baby brother, Gerald. Maybe I could —

"Doris Williams! Do you know the answer?" Barker interrupted my thoughts.

I hadn't heard a word she'd said. "Oh, ah. . . what was the question again, Mrs. Barker?"

"Young lady, get your mind back here in this room. Now tell me the year his tomb was first discovered."

"Whose tomb?" I asked, my face going blank.

Big Russell let out a loud hoot from the back of the room.

"Doris, you're supposed to be a good student. I'm disappointed."

I hated for Mrs. Barker to do that. Next thing Mickey and them would be talking about Miss Goody-Goody Two Shoes. Someone moaned, and Lavinia sighed real loud.

Bird waved his hands wildly. "I know what it is. I know. ... I know."

Barker stared at me. "I'm waiting, Doris."

Bird couldn't hold it in. "1922," he blurted.

Barker wheeled around and got red in the face. "You can't behave for more than five minutes, young man. Don't call out." Then she turned to me again. "I expect better than this from you, Doris." She swung her gaze away from me and found another victim. A sleepy-eyed boy who couldn't remember anything about Tut's tomb either.

The next time I looked up, Barker had written out fractions from one end of the board to the other. I hated math, but at least she didn't talk as much for a math lesson as she did when she taught history and English. After she'd finished writing, she asked for a volunteer to solve the first problem.

Lavinia's the math whiz. She strutted up to the blackboard, sucked her lips into her mouth, and cocked her head to the side like she was solving the hardest math problem in the world. Her numbers were large and clear as she quickly worked out the problem.

The light from the window fell on her gold and silver beads. They jingled as she wrote, and sparkled like tiny round pieces of sun and moon. I'd get beads for my braids too, I thought. Except mine would be red and orange and rust, like the fall leaves.

Suddenly the idea came to me. Beads. Hair. Braids. Cornrows. Miss Bee, the hairdresser on 163rd Street. A girl about my age who used to live on the block once worked for her. After school I'd ask Miss Bee if I could work there. If she'd let me, I could pay for a trip to see Amir.

I took the poem out of my bag and placed it between the pages of my notebook. I needed something to rhyme with beautiful and rare. As I watched Russell slowly divide $2\frac{3}{4}$ by $1\frac{1}{4}$ the rest of the poem came to me. I wrote it quickly and read the whole poem.

A friend is like a crown of rubies,
beautiful and rare.

You're the most precious jewel of all
the one, the only Amir.

With all my love, Doris

"Psst, Doris. What you reading?" Mickey asked, leaning over me and nearly toppling off her seat. I almost choked from her perfume. It was probably her idea to dress like a lollipop.

I quickly closed the book. "Nothing," I said.

"Don't lie. You was reading a letter. A love letter?" She smirked.

Barker stared at me. "Doris Williams, if you're not talking math, then you shouldn't have anything to say."

Mickey and Dotty giggled.

"And why is your notebook closed, Doris?" Barker continued.

Lavinia stared at me from the other side of the room. When I opened the book, my poem fell out. I snatched it off the floor, and Barker saw it.

"What's that?" she asked. "You know you're not to pass around notes. Now give me that."

"But Mrs. Barker, I wasn't passing notes. . . . I—"

"Give. It. To. Me." Barker was death on note passing ever since she found one that Big Russell wrote saying that she looked like a

construction worker in a dress. She either destroyed notes or read them aloud.

"I wasn't doing anything," I pleaded.

She stretched her hands out for the poem and moved towards me. I didn't know which was worse — her tearing up the note, or reading it to the class. Bird raised his hand and stood up.

" 'Scuse me, Mrs. Barker, ma'am. That's my note. See, Doris helped me study this morning in the library cause she's smart and all, and anyway, she was helping me read a note someone sent me and see, she put it in her bag then by mistake when the bell rang, and —"

"Sit down and be quiet!" Bird sat down fast like someone had pushed him back in his seat. I wish he'd mind his own business.

"The brave Bird tries to save Doris," T.T. called out.

"But he cannot help her," Russell finished.

Barker slammed her ruler on her desk, and everyone got quiet. I decided I'd tear the poem up if she tried to make me give it to her. I'd die of embarrassment if anyone besides Amir read my poem.

"Give James his note and let me hear no more of this."

Barker turned back to the blackboard and wrote more fractions. I handed Bird my poem. At least he wouldn't tear it up, and he never read anything unless he had to. I almost hollered at him

when he scrunched it in his back pocket, leaving part of the paper sticking out. I saw T.T. eyeing it. Mickey leaned over to me again. "That ain't really Bird's note. Who'd write him?"

"Why don't you mind your business, Mickey?" I mumbled. I nervously watched Bird's pocket and my poem and tried to get his attention so he'd pass the paper back to me. He was furiously erasing. I tried to concentrate on the numbers and keep track of my poem at the same time. It seemed as if every time I looked away from my paper or the blackboard, Barker saw me. Finally, she said, "Doris, do the next problem."

As I walked to the blackboard, I saw T.T. pass a piece of paper to the boy sitting alongside of him. Seemed like every pair of eyes in the room was pasted on my back. I didn't hear any talking, but I knew someone was sure to say something about my out-of-style pleated blue skirt or the way my hair was braided.

I finished the problem and walked quickly back to my desk. When I sat down, I saw that the paper wasn't in Bird's pocket. My blood went cold when I heard giggles and whispers throughout the room. I tried to act as though nothing were wrong, but I couldn't help looking in horror as I watched my poem going from hand to hand. A boy sitting next to Russell blew kisses at me. My hands shook as I copied another problem. I'd destroy Bird. Wring his scrawny neck. I twisted in my seat again to see where my poem was.

Mickey tapped me and handed me a wrinkled piece of paper.

"The one, the only Amir. With all my love, Doris," she said breathlessly, fluttering her eyelashes.

I snatched my poem out of her hand and stuffed it back into my notebook. "I'm getting you for this, Mickey."

They'd stolen my words. My eyes began to water, but I couldn't let the tears spill over. I leaned over my notebook and scribbled in the margins. I didn't care if Barker checked my book either. The worst thing had already happened. Nothing could be more embarrassing than everybody seeing your personal and private thoughts.

"Class, finish the problems and then take out your readers for silent reading. Turn to page 21." The teacher sat down at her desk, arranged a stack of papers, and started writing.

I opened the book and didn't care what page it was. I stared at blurry words running together, too ashamed to raise my head.

I didn't look up until the lunch bell rang, and I saw Bird reaching in his pockets and rummaging through his desk. I stood on the back of the line. Mickey, Dotty, Lavinia, and a couple other girls were at the head of the line whispering and giggling. It felt as if everyone in the room was laughing at me, and I couldn't look anyone in the eye.

I couldn't even go near the cafeteria. I sneaked to the schoolyard and sat on the steps while everyone ate lunch.

It wasn't until the end of the day that Bird came over to me as we walked down the hall to go home. "Doris, I can't find your note."

"Don't say nothing to me, Bird. I'm two minutes away from the side of your head. You let them get their hands on my poem."

He had the nerve to look at me like he didn't know what I was talking about.

"Who got your poem?" He looked confused.

"Don't give me any more help, Bird. All you did was make things worse!" I left him and ran downstairs. When I got outside, I raced across Cauldwell Avenue, took the shortcut through the playground, and didn't stop until I got to Miss Bee's.