

# Yellow Bird and Me

By Joyce Hansen

## Chapter 3

### PLANS (Continued)

As I slowly walked up the stairs to my apartment, I wondered how I was going to break the news to Ma about my job. She should be happy since she's always telling me about responsibility. But she also hardly ever lets me out of her sight.

When I opened the door, I nearly bumped into her as she put on her jacket. "Doris, you ain't doing anything. I saw you walking up the block slow as a snail. Stay here with the baby for me while I run to Third Avenue to do some shopping. He's sleeping now."

Here was my chance to get on her good side. "I'll go for you, Ma."

"No. You can't shop like me. I'm looking for specials. Gotta save some money, you know. Be back soon."

I listened to her heels click down the hallway. After I heard the front door bang shut, I went to the kitchen to find a snack and checked on Gerald on my way to my room.

My room was really a hallway between my parents' room and the rest of the apartment. It was only big enough for my bed and a monstrous old-fashioned chest of drawers that I used as both a

dressing table and a desk. A small low bookcase stood under the window. I made a clearing on the top of the chest — barrettes, comb, and blouses to one side, books, papers, and pencils to the other. I did some homework for a while, and then took Amir's letter and the crumpled poem out of my notebook. I read them over and over again. My stomach hurt as I thought of the whole class reading my personal poem. I wasn't sorry I wrote it, though. Maybe people in class would think I was the biggest fool in the world, but Amir would understand and he'd feel good. The next time I see Yellow Bird ... I thought.

As soon as Ma walked in the door, Gerald started to cry. "Doris, go get that child and keep an eye on him while I fix supper," Ma called to me from the kitchen.

I went and got Gerald, and then ran around behind him as he tore around the house. I pulled him out from under the table as he grabbed for a piece of raw onion that must have fallen off Ma's cutting board. I sat down at the table across from her with Gerald on my lap as she diced onions.

"Ma," I began, wincing as the smell of onion stung my nose. "What do you think about — ?"

The doorbell rang.

"Get that, Doris," Ma said, as she dropped potatoes into a pot of boiling water.

With Gerald in my arms, I went to the living room and opened the door. Mrs. Nicols, who lived in the apartment upstairs, floated in with a big false-tooth smile. Once a week she came downstairs to visit Ma.

Mrs. Nicols and I sat at the table, and I sat Gerald next to me making sure he didn't splatter the walls with orange juice.

"Have some coffee?" Ma asked Mrs. Nicols. "Just put up a fresh pot on the stove."

"Yes, darling."

Ma handed her a water glass full of coffee. That was the only way she drank it. Once I asked Ma why Mrs. Nicols didn't drink coffee out of a cup like everyone else. Ma said, "Because she's not like everyone else."

Mrs. Nicols crossed her skinny legs and smiled at me. "Doris, you're a wonderful little mother's helper."

Ma put the onions into the frying pan, and she put a lid over the steaming pot of potatoes. "She's a good girl," Ma said. "Been real responsible lately."

Now was the time to say something about the job if I could get a chance to open my mouth.

Mrs. Nicols sipped her coffee loudly and put the glass on the table. If I'd have done that, Ma would have yelled.

She reared back in her seat and dangled her hands over the back of the chair. They were wrinkly and old, but her fingernails were long and pretty, sparkling with red nail polish. She reminded me of an older Lavinia. Mrs. Nicols hands spread like a fan, which meant that a speech was coming.

"This girl is precious," she said. "It's a cruel, vicious world out there. And there's no love like a mother's love, darling. Keep her close to home."

Ma smiled proudly as she gave the sizzling onions a stir. Ma said, "Yes. Doris is a good kid. And it ain't easy raising children nowadays. You have to watch them all the time."

I wished Mrs. Nicols would go back upstairs. She put her hand out as if she were waiting for someone to hand her something. "Girl, don't talk. You know, when I was a young lady, you went from your father's jurisdiction to your husband's."

She smiled, and even though she was old, something young happened to her face. "But, of course, I always had my own mind. Made sure I saw some of what happened between Daddy's house and my husband's house, God rest both their souls." She winked at Ma and picked up her coffee glass, her pinkie standing straight out like a soldier.

"These women liberationists need to come and see me," she continued. "I was a feminist long before they had a name for it."

Ma laughed at Mrs. Nicols' chatter. Maybe I'd say I was a feminist, too. That's why I wanted a job, I thought to myself. I wiped Gerald's mouth, still wondering how I could get one word between Mrs. Nicols' ten.

She took another long swallow of coffee and turned to my mother. "Talking about trouble youngsters get into, some of these old folks round here worse than kids. For instance, have you heard what folks around here saying about that woman upstairs on the top floor?"

Ma looked at me. "Doris, thanks for helping with Gerald. You can go and finish your homework now."

Now that Mrs. Nicols was getting to the good part of her visit, they wanted to get rid of me.

"Between me and Mrs. Nicols, we'll watch him." Ma gave me one of her fierce looks, and I knew I had to leave.

I heard Ma and Mrs. Nicols' voices in the kitchen while I tried to do my homework. Sometimes their voices would get really loud, and then they'd fade right when they got to the good part. They sounded like two young girls — gossiping and giggling. I wished Mrs. Nicols would hurry up and leave, but she didn't go until Daddy finally came home.

My father has the kind of face that looks like it's always crinkled in a laugh, but he came home an hour late, and his face was lined

and tired. "I did the work of four men in that factory today," he complained as we all sat down at the dinner table.

Ma said, "When Gerald gets a little bigger, I'm going back to work."

"I want you to stay home with these kids," Daddy said, piling mashed potatoes and roast onto his plate. "I'll manage."

I sat up straight in my chair. "Suppose I get a job?"

Daddy didn't smile. "You already got one," he said. "Helping you mother."

Ma looked kind of amused. "Why do you want a job?" she asked.

"To make some money," I said.

She put a spoonful of mashed potatoes on my plate. "You're too young," she said and continued eating.

"Ma, I'm not too young," I said. "You always tell me I should be responsible."

Daddy stared at me. He still wasn't smiling. "We ain't that bad off. We give you everything you need," he said. "The junk you think you want ain't important."

"But, Daddy, I don't want to buy junk."

Ma rested her fork. "Doris, you better concentrate on your school. You have the rest of your lifetime to work, believe me."

"It won't interfere with school."

"No!" they both said at the same time. Daddy added, "You got work to do right here in this house." He patted my head like I was a puppy. "You stay in here and help your mother."

"But Daddy, suppose it was only on Saturdays?"

Ma didn't even let him answer. "We manage to give you any money you need for school, or to go out with your friends, and you ain't walking around in rags. We rich compared to half the people in this world," she said. "You working is a ridiculous idea. All we need is for the neighborhood to see us putting our eleven-year-old daughter to work," she continued.

"Can I have an allowance then?" I figured since we were so rich, they could give me a regular allowance.

Daddy wiped his mouth and put his napkin down. "Allowance?" he said. "You already get an allowance. I allow you to eat, sleep, and live here for free. That's your allowance. Allowance ain't nothing but bribery for getting a kid to do what she's supposed to do anyway. You live here. You part of this family. You supposed to help." He sounded exactly like my mother.

Ma didn't say a word and she even smiled a little. She always complained that Daddy was too soft with me, and I could tell she was glad to see him being tough.

I said no more. We ate quickly and quietly, and then they went to the living room to watch television. I washed and dried the dishes. It isn't fair, I thought. I wouldn't have a job or allowance.

Even Mickey and Dotty get an allowance and there are two of them.

After I cleaned the kitchen, I stayed in my room for the rest of the evening. My parents never even asked what kind of job I was talking about. I sat at my table and stared at Amir's letter. Usually I did everything that Ma and Daddy told me to do, but they were wrong this time. It wasn't fair that Amir got taken away from his home on 163rd Street. And it wasn't fair that I lost my best friend. He only brought happiness and good things to everyone he was ever around, and now I was going to bring some happiness to him. I was going to visit him and cheer him up, and I was going to keep my job at the Beauty Hive. I'd prove to them that my going to work was a good idea.