



# Yellow Bird and Me

By Joyce Hansen



## Chapter 1 MY DEAR AMIR

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My Dear Amir,

163rd Street is dingy gray even though the leaves on the trees are gold and red and orange. I bet upstate is much more beautiful. I still feel sad when I think about how you had to go away. It was wrong that your foster family put you in a home and didn't take you with them to California. Anyway, at least Syracuse is closer to the Bronx than California is.

I'm glad you was put into the eighth grade where you belong. What is it like in the group home? Do all of you live in one big building? Like an institution or something? Did you find any of your brothers and sisters yet? Hope you do soon. Did you make any friends or do you stay by yourself like you showed me how to do?

Everything changed since you left. I don't be with Mickey and Dotty, the twins, and Lavinia much anymore. They all stuck up and mean this year.

Big Russell, T.T., and Yellow Bird haven't changed though. They the same – playing basket-ball and bothering decent people. Russell lost some weight but he's still the biggest kid in the sixth grade. And Yellow Bird with his pale, long-nose self. He still flies around like a little bird. Lately he's been acting silly as ever and bugging me about helping him with his school work.

Are you lonely, Amir? I guess you are. I am too. Seems like I have no one to talk to the way I could talk to you. I'm going to figure out how to come upstate to visit you. It ain't been the same here since you left.

It's imperative (new word we learned from our teacher) that you write soon. I don't have no one else to talk to. Anyway, I don't let things bother me the way I used to. I'm doing real good in school so far and I hope to make the honor roll. I haven't been under punishment for a month.

I'm sending you a poem. Maybe you can draw a picture to go with it. Do you still draw beautiful pictures?

Please, please, please write soon.

Your friend to the end, Love, Doris

I read over the letter, then folded it and slipped it inside of my bag. I needed to find a quiet place to write my poem for Amir, so I escaped into the library to get away from the schoolyard, where my friends played and teased and acted as if everything was the

same — as if Amir was still around. Even though Amir had been gone from our block for a month, I still missed him as if he'd only left yesterday. Losing a best friend is one of the worst things that can happen to you.

The clock on the wall said 8:15. Twenty minutes before it was time to line up for classes. The librarian allowed no talking above a whisper. The carpet on the floor even smothered the sound of footsteps. Three second graders at the table next to mine quietly read a picture book.

I sat at my usual spot by the window and tried to think up a poem for Amir. I stared out of the window and the building across the street stared back at me. A woman on the third floor opened her window and waved to someone passing in the street below. I wrote the first line:

*A friend is like a crown of rubies,*

"Yo, Doris!" Yellow Bird, whose name is really James Towers, called to me loudly from the library entrance. The librarian frowned at him and put her finger to her lips. He covered his mouth and opened his eyes wide. "I'm sorry," he croaked in a hoarse, loud whisper.

Why did he have to find me when I was in the middle of writing an important poem?

He burst through the doorway and made his way over to my table. His jacket hung off his shoulders and his elbows stuck straight

out like wings. I covered the line I'd written with my hand. "What you want, Bird?" I whispered.

"Nothing. Just come here to study."

I didn't believe him. Bird never studied unless he had too. "The only thing you study is a basketball," I said.

He spread his books and papers all over the table. He looked worried and more birdlike than ever. "My father said he's taking me off the basketball team if I bring home another bad report card."

"So you want help?"

"I didn't ask for help. I already did all of my homework. Just have to finish reading these last four pages. I don't need no help."

Before he came I'd had peace and quiet. I also had a nice, empty neat table all to myself. I tried to get back to my poem, but was distracted when he opened his social studies book and noisily rustled through the pages.

I picked up my things and started to move to another table. "Doris, stay here. I ain't gonna bother you. Promise. Just make believe I ain't here." He rustled some more papers.

"That's impossible," I said, standing up to move.

He batted his eyelashes. "Doris, please stay." He leaned into me and grinned.

"Bird, I'll pop you upside your head if you don't get out of my face." I put my papers back down on the table and tried to work again as he concentrated on his book, turning the pages quickly and noisily. I stared at the one line I'd written before he found me, and then out the window. As a large, puffy white cloud rolled across the sky, I wrote the next line:

**beautiful and rare.**

Bird tapped me on the shoulder. "What's this word?"

"Pharaoh," I snapped. "You said you wasn't gonna bug me."

"I know the rest." He cleared his throat, crossed his legs, and reared back in his chair.

I studied what I'd written so far. I could just see Amir now, reading my poem. He'd be so happy to hear from me. I knew he was lonelier than me in that home upstate, and my letter and poem would really cheer him up. I thought of the next line for my poem:

**You're the most precious jewel of all.,.**

Bird nudged me with his elbow. "Doris, what's this word here?" he whispered loudly.

"I thought you knew the rest."

"I do. I just don't know this word." His index finger dug into the page.

"Country," I said, turning back to my poem.

He put his head back in the book and then I felt another tap on my shoulder. I thought I was going to strangle Bird.

"Remember how you and Amir used to write down important dates for me to memorize when we studied for the social studies tests?"

"Of course I remember," I said.

"Why can't you help me now, like you and him used to when we was in the fifth grade together?"

"Because things are different now."

"How?" He frowned, and pouted like a little kid.

"Amir was the one who helped you, and he ain't here."

"You could do the same thing he did." He popped out of his seat and held my shoulders. "Doris, please. You're the only one who can save the basketball team."

I pushed him away. "Sometimes you talk crazy. What does the basketball team have to do with it?"

"If my father takes me off the team, they'll lose. I'm the star player. Help me, Doris. Do it for the team. For Dunbar Elementary School."

The librarian looked at us again. "If you two continue to make noise, you'll have to leave."

I threw a crumpled piece of paper at him. "See, you always make someone get in trouble."

"The team is in trouble. They need me to confuse our opponents."

I sucked my teeth. "You don't really want to study, Bird. You only want me to do your homework. You play around too much."

"I'm not playing around. I want to do better." He made a gloomy, sad face. "I want to do good this year, but the work is harder now. I can't do it. I'm afraid I'm not going to pass the sixth grade if I don't start doing better."

He lowered his head. "Doris, do you have time to help me until the bell rings? Please?"

I wouldn't be able to write the poem as long as he was around. I put it in my bag. "Just fill the bell rings. And this ain't gonna be no everyday thing."

"We only have ten minutes. You read the last two pages to me, and I'll remember it better."

"You want me to do all the work."

"No. I just want you to read." He shifted uncomfortably in his seat and rubbed his head. "It takes too long if I read it by myself."

I read the remaining pages about ancient Egypt while he followed along. The bell rang just as I finished. We raced out of the library, and Bird jumped down the steps, two at a time. Mrs. Barker, our teacher, hates us to be late lining up for class.

Most of the class was already on line in the cafeteria. The first ones on line were Mickey and Dotty, the un-identical twins. The only thing alike about them is that they're both short. Usually they don't dress anything alike; however, today they wore straight yellow skirts and red ribbons tied around a puff of hair on top of their heads. They looked like two lollipops. The twins were so busy gossiping with Lavinia, who was standing behind them, that they didn't see me.

As she talked, Lavinia bounced around with one hand on her hip while waving her other hand back and forth like she was conducting a band.

Lavinia lives on Union Avenue, and we call her The Daily News because she tells everyone about everything that happens in the five blocks between Union Avenue, 163rd Street, the playground, and the school.

Lavinia looks older than the rest of us. Her hair is braided with gold and silver beads that end in a perfectly straight row across her shoulders. I wish I had beads like those, I thought.

Towards the end of the line was Big Russell. He carried a basketball under one arm and his books under the other. He frowned when he saw Bird. "Where you been, man? We was looking for you all morning."



T.T., who also lives on Union Avenue, stepped out of line behind Russell and blocked Bird. "I wanted to show you some new moves I been practicing for the game," he said.

Bird surprised Russell and grabbed the basketball out of his hands. "The only move you can show me is to move out of my way," Bird answered, darting back and forth, dribbling the basketball.

"Where was you this morning?" Russell asked again.

"With Doris. She's going to help me study so I can save the team," he shouted for the entire cafeteria to hear.

T.T. snatched the ball from Russell. "I'm the one that's going to save the team," he said.

Before I could say anything, a short, fat shadow crossed the floor. "Class 6-3 QUIET ON THAT LINE!" Most of us stopped talking and clowning around, as we followed Mrs. Barker to our room.

I'd have to let Bird know, I thought, as I walked through the long hallway, that things had changed from the way it used to be when me and Amir helped him study. Amir was gone, and I was sad. I just wanted to be alone to remember how fine it was when the two of us was together. And Yellow Bird was the last person on this earth that I wanted to be bothered with.