

Yellow Bird and Me

By Joyce Hansen

Chapter 5

WORKING GIRL

My no-fail plan began smoothly on Saturday. When I finished my chores, I told Ma that I was going outside to play. All she said was, "Be in before dark." Since I had no friends, I didn't have to worry about anyone coming to my house looking for me, and Daddy would be at work. Ma would be in the house with Gerald, so they could never find me at Miss Bee's.

As I walked down the street past the empty lot, I saw Mrs. Nicols stepping quickly by the Beauty Hive. Her little feathered hat was cocked to the side of her head. The feather bobbed each time she stepped. She'd ask a million questions if she saw me going into the Hive. I relaxed when she disappeared around the corner.

The usual cloud of smoke rose out of Miss Bee's booth as she curled another customer's hair. There was a lady under the dryer and another woman was in the back having her hair washed. Two other customers sat on chairs reading fashion magazines as they waited to have their hair done. A hairdresser was in the booth next to Miss Bee's.

"Hi, Honey Bunch!" She seemed surprised to see me, like she forgot I was coming.

"Hi, Miss Bee. I'm here to help out."

Miss Bee looked puzzled.

"Remember, you said I could come today?"

"Oh, yes. Yes. Things are a little slow. You can observe, so you learn something about the business of beauty." Her gold tooth gleamed.

"Miss Bee, I—"

"This is the little lady I was telling you about, girls," she called to the other hairdressers. How could she be telling them about me when she forgot I was coming? I wondered.

The young, pretty hairdresser in the last booth was putting curlers in her customer's hair. "Hi," she said to me, "my name's Carol. You want to learn about beauty, honey? Come on and pull up a chair."

Miss Bee said, "If she wants to learn about beauty, then she's pulling up to the wrong booth." Everybody laughed, including Carol. There was another hairdresser in the back, washing someone's hair. She looked over at me. "That child don't look like she want to be no hairdresser. She's going to college."

I wondered how she knew that, since she'd never seen me before. Then one of the women who was waiting said, "Women

can do other things these days besides hairdressing, nursing, teaching, and wifing."

Miss Bee clicked her curling iron. "Don't start talking about wifing and husbands again." They all joked and teased while I stood there feeling out of place, waiting for someone to tell me what to do.

People came in and out. A man walked in selling perfume. "Ladies, add some sweetness to your life," he said.

Miss Bee said, "Junior, the sweetest thing could happen to us is you leave."

A woman came in selling little glass animal figurines. "They don't make this kind of stuff anymore," she said.

Miss Bee looked at the figurines so hard I thought they'd turn to ash. "They don't make horse and buggies anymore either, darling," she said. There was more laughing and I just stood there, probably looking stupid.

Finally, Carol said to me, "Take these papers off the rollers and separate the pink, blue, and yellow ones." She handed me two bags full of rollers. After I did that, the other hairdresser asked me to fold some towels for her.

I finished that real fast and then I had nothing to do. There's nothing more boring than sitting around a place — especially when everyone else is busy. I sat down near Carol's booth again, looking around for something to keep me busy.

"Do you know how much it would cost to go to Syracuse?" I asked.

"Why on earth would anyone want to go there?" Miss Bee called out from her booth.

"No reason. I just wondered," I said. "I have a friend there."

"My sister lives upstate," Carol said. "It might run you around fifty dollars."

My heart fell when I heard that. I'd never earn that much. I had to get busy at Miss Bee's.

Later, a woman with a little girl came in to have her hair done. The little girl looked at me, and I smiled back at her. "Hi, cutie," I said.

"How old are you?"

Her bright, round eyes sparkled. "Five," she answered.

"She'd look real pretty with a nice cornrow-design hairstyle," I said to her mother. Miss Bee shot me a look. I was only expressing my opinion.

The little girl's mother said, "Can you do it?"

"Sure. I can cornrow." I couldn't lie and say no. I *do* know how to cornrow.

"Good. You braid her hair while I get mine done. Keep her quiet for a while."

It seemed like a tremendous mushroom cloud of smoke rose out of Miss Bee's booth, but she didn't say a word, except, "Times do change." I fixed the girl's hair in a circular design. It looked

beautiful, if I must say so myself. Miss Bee knew it looked good too, though she wouldn't admit it to me. The girl's mother gave me \$3.00.

After I finished the girl's hair, Miss Bee asked me to clean her counter and get out the sprays, gels, and combs and irons so she'd be ready for the next customer. I did that and then she asked me to water that sickly spider plant in the window.

As I climbed onto the window ledge and watered the plant I realized that I was standing right in the window. I hurried before anyone I knew walked by and saw me. The kids, as usual, were running up and down playing. I didn't notice anyone else. The telephone rang.

"Honey Bunch, answer that," Miss Bee hollered from her booth.

I put on the most adult voice I could find. "Beauty Hive," I said. "It's for you Miss Bee: a lady wants an appointment."

"Take it for me," she said, pointing to the table. "There's my book."

I picked up the phone again. "When would you like an appointment? Next Saturday at four?"

"Check my book and see what I have open for Saturday," Miss Bee yelled.

"Excuse me," I said, "let me check her appointment book." I rested the phone and looked through the book. Miss Bee, you got a

Mrs. Brown coming at four."

"Okay. See if the lady can come at five. I try to schedule them an hour apart."

"Can you come at five?" I said to the customer. "Okay, that's October 31st, at five o'clock." I hung up the phone and wrote the appointment in her book.

The phone rang again, and I really showed out this time. "Good afternoon, Miss Bee's Beauty Hive. Can I help you? Yes. When would you like the appointment? One o'clock Tuesday? Let me check, hold on, please. . . . Okay, Mrs. Jones. You have an appointment for one o'clock next Tuesday. Good-bye."

"Very nice, Honey Bunch," Miss Bee said. "You make a good little receptionist. Bring some class to this joint."

The next time the phone rang, I made an appointment for Carol. The Hive was buzzing. People were coming and going. Every chair in the place was taken — even the one I sat in, by Carol's booth. For all Miss Bee's scheduling, she had two people waiting for her. All three dryers were occupied. Curling irons were clicking. And every time the phone rang I answered it. That was my job. I was truly a part of what was happening.

The phone rang again and my voice sang out, "Good afternoon, Miss Bee's Beauty Hive. Can I help you?"

"Doris, girl, that you? You better bring your hind parts home this minute." The song left my voice, and my throat closed up.

"Yes, Ma. I'll be right there," I whispered.

"Who was that, Honey Bunch?"

I tried to keep my voice from trembling. "It was the wrong number. What time is it, Miss Bee? My mother said I shouldn't be too late."

"It's four thirty. Things'll be slowing down soon." She dug in her pocket. "You was a good help. See you next Saturday." She handed me \$5.00.

"Thank you, Miss Bee," I said softly.

I started putting on my jacket. Carol said, "Here, baby. You a nice girl and smart, too." She gave me \$2.00.

The other operator wiped her hands on her smock. "Yeah. It's nice having you around. A real little lady. Know how to follow directions too. Some of these kids, you tell 'em turn left and they go right." She gave me \$2.00 also. I couldn't tell them that my career at the Hive was probably over. "See you next week," I said softly as I walked out.

"Tell your mama to come in for some curls," Miss Bee called after me.

My mama's hair is probably already curled I thought to myself as I walked slowly up 163rd Street to my building.