

# Yellow Bird and Me

By Joyce Hansen

## Chapter 4

### BIRD IN TROUBLE

It was early, and the crisp morning air tingled like ginger snaps. 163rd Street was empty except for a few people going to the subway. I walked quickly to the mailbox across the street from school and slipped my letter to Amir inside. I added a P.S. to my letter to tell him I got a job with Miss Bee. I wished that I could know right then and there what he'd say when he found out I was getting a job so I could come and visit.

I crossed the street and headed toward the school entrance. As I walked up the steps I saw Bird, T.T., and Russell playing basketball in the yard. Bird made a hook shot that completely missed the basket, and T.T. and Russell got hysterical laughing at his silliness. I entered the building quickly so Bird wouldn't see me.

I headed straight for the library and sat in my usual spot by the window. Every time someone came through the doorway, I looked up from my book, hoping it wasn't Bird coming to bother me.

When the bell rang, I adjusted my shoulder bag and walked slowly out of the library. I didn't want to face the rest of the day in class with my ex-friends.

"Hi, Doris. Let me help you carry all them books." Bird, sweating and holding a basketball, spotted me in the hallway and leaned up against the wall.

"I don't need your help."

He moved the basketball from one arm to the other and wiped his forehead with his sleeve. "You got all them books you carrying and that big shoulder bag. Here, let me help you."

I walked down the hall real fast. "Your help means trouble," I said.

"Aw, Doris, you still mad at me?" he said, sticking his head in my face.

I pushed him aside. "You need to be carrying your own books, instead of a basketball."

Bird was right on my heels when we entered the cafeteria. He bounced the ball hard and loud, and didn't stop until a teacher yelled at him.

Mickey's and Lavinia's mouths moved as soon as they saw me.

I stood on the end of the line, and Bird scooted behind me. Before he had a chance to say anything, the second bell rang and Mrs. Barker entered. She led us to our classroom, where a mysterious stranger stood waiting.

He was about six feet tall, had a perfect Afro, and the biggest smile with the prettiest teeth I ever saw. He didn't look like a parent or a teacher.

Everyone stopped talking when they saw him — except stupid T.T., who shouted, "Mrs. Barker, who's that?"

"Only two-year-olds point and yell," she said. "This *gentleman* is Mr. Washington. He is going to be conducting a special program at Dunbar Elementary."

The man smiled at us.

"Let's show Mr. Washington that we're ladies and gentlemen," Mrs. Barker said, staring daggers at T.T.

Everyone, except me, talked and whispered. I know Barker wanted to blow her top, but she had to be cool in front of Mr. Washington as he stood there next to her, checking us out.

"That's enough, class," she said. "Dunbar Elementary has been chosen as one of the schools to participate in a special program called Creative and Performing Arts in the Classroom. Professional artists, actors, musicians, writers, poets, and playwrights will spend time in the school throughout the year so you'll have firsthand knowledge about these arts. However, we're still involved with our regular work."

I knew he was someone different.

"Mr. Washington has written and directed plays, and he'll be with us for the entire year. He'll be conducting a drama club."

She smiled at him, trying so hard to look and sound sweet. She stretched her arms toward us like some Broadway star. "Mr. Washington, they're all yours now."

He put his hands in his pockets and smiled again. As soon as he got to the front of the room, Barker stood by the doorway with her arms folded, looking just like her old general self.

"I'll explain a little bit about the program," he said. "And then I'd like to hear from you guys. I want you to participate so I'll know who you are and where you're coming from." His voice reminded me of smooth, thick ice cream. He told us we'd be writing and acting in our own plays. Then we'd have a big play that we'd put on at Christmas for the school and all the parents. I wished he was our teacher. Even Bird paid attention.

"And now, class," Mr. Washington said, resting his foot on the seat of a chair. "Who can tell me what the word *improvise* means?"

Lavinia's hand shot up before anyone else had a chance. She waved her red fingernail hands in the air to make her bracelets jingle. She didn't care whether she knew the answer or not, as long as she was heard. "Doesn't it have something to do with acting?" she said proudly. Everybody knew it had something to do with acting.

"In a way." Mr. Washington wrote the word on the board. "*Improvise* means to create on the spot — to act or speak without notes or a script.

Mrs. Barker told me that you're studying ancient Egypt. Suppose I said let's improvise a scene about one of the famous pharaohs? You'd have to know your history. Which means you did your reading and studying."

Bird jumped out of his seat. "Mr. Washington. Can we impro-impro — ?"

"James Towers, sit down!" Barker came back to normal.

Mr. Washington laughed. "It's okay. I like his enthusiasm."

"Something tells me there are some real stars in this class." He looked at Bird. "Young man who wants to improvise . . . James, right?"

Bird nodded. "Most people call me Bird," he said.

Mrs. Barker cleared her throat. "Mr. Washington is not one of your little pals. Your proper name is James."

"Well, James, alias Bird, come on up here. We're going to do some improvisation."

Bird scrambled out of his seat so fast he almost fell.

"Any more volunteers?" Mr. Washington stared at me. "How about you, young lady?"

He took me by surprise. "Ah . . . I . . . I . . ."

Mr. Washington's eyes looked soft and kind when he smiled.

"I can't act," I mumbled.

"There are other aspects of the theatre arts besides acting," he said. "There's directing, lighting, writing, staging. ..."

"Oh" was all I said. I might like to learn about writing plays — but that didn't interest me half so much as my plans to see Amir.

"I want to act," Bird called from the front of the room.

"Okay, let's start," Mr. Washington said, walking over to Bird.

"Who else wants to improvise with us?"

Most of the class stood up, except me and a few other people.

"We need a dramatic situation to build on. We're going to create a one-act play on the spot," Mr. Washington said excitedly, interrupting my thoughts. He turned to everybody who had gotten up and now stood in the front of the room with him. "We need a suggestion for a scene."

Bird was staring at the ceiling, then he snapped his fingers.

"Hey, suppose two boys are lost?"

"That sounds like you and T.T.," a girl called out.

Bird, Lavinia, and the rest of them acted out a scene about lost boys and a town bully. Bird was so good, I believed he was really that lost boy. They did some more scenes, and Bird took over the lead in all of them. There was so much laughing, I guess they were having a good time, but I didn't pay them any mind. I just wished that Amir were still here and things was like they used to be.

When the lunch bell rang, everyone groaned and sighed. Dotty said, "We have to go?"

"Time flies when you're having fun," Mr. Washington said.

Suddenly they all acted so silly, tumbling over each other as they went to the clothing closet and then lined up. T.T. yanked a handful of Lavinia's braids and she yelled. Instead of walking to the closet like a normal person, Bird jerked his body stiffly like electric shocks ran through his toothpick arms and legs.

Mrs. Barker looked mad, but Mr. Washington looked so amazed that Barker didn't say anything. "What do you call that dance?" Mr. Washington asked.

"Electric Boogey," T.T. yelled, trying to do the same dance, but he couldn't move like Bird.

"James is a great dancer," Mr. Washington said.

Bird really got bold. That was all he needed to hear. He did The Moonwalk—sliding backwards right under Barker's nose while she glared at him. If looks could kill, Bird would've been a dead duck.

"Class, quiet," Mrs. Barker said through clenched teeth, trying not to yell. "Mr. Washington has an announcement to make."

"It's been wonderful meeting you. You kids are talented and I expect to see you all on Monday.

"I'll be in the auditorium signing up people for the Drama Club." He turned to Mrs. Barker and shook her hand. "I enjoyed your class, and especially that little character over there in the red sweatshirt."

Bird grinned a 200-watt smile.

"Thank you for coming," she said, smiling stiffly. She cut her eyes at Bird who started dancing again, sliding all the way to the back of the room.

He walked to the door and looked back at us again. "Remember, everyone can join," he said. His eyes caught mine, and I looked away. I didn't want to be in any club. When I saw Amir, we'd be our own club.

The class all babbled at once. "I'll be the first one there," Bird shouted from the back of the room. I never saw him so enthusiastic before.

"Where he say to join up?" someone else yelled.

Mr. Washington waved to us and left the room. Barker closed the door behind him, and like thunder follows lightning, I knew an explosion was coming. People were so excited about acting, they forgot they was in a classroom.

"Sit down!" she yelled.

Everyone scrambled to their desks—even me, who hadn't done anything. Mrs. Barker paced back and forth.



"After behaving so well and having so much fun this morning, you have to act like this."

T.T. poked Bird in his back and giggled. Why do Bird and the rest of them have to show off so much and make us all late for lunch?

"And you, James," Barker continued, pointing at Bird. "I'm not so sure you'll be joining that club unless you knuckle down and bring up your grades. Or you, T.T. "

T.T. shrugged his shoulders. "I wasn't joining no way," he mumbled.

Bird bounced out of his seat. "I've got to join, Mrs. Barker," Bird pleaded. "I'll be good. I've got to join. Please?"

"Extracurricular activities are a privilege, not a right. And one doesn't earn the privilege by cutting up like you do. Now sit down!"

Bird kept walking towards her, his arms outspread. Someone giggled.

Nobody but Bird would have messed with Barker now. Especially if they wanted something from her.

"Mrs. Barker, I promise I'll do better. I —"

She was getting red as a lobster. "How do you intend to spend time in a club when you're failing everything except recess? Now sit down."

Russell let out a rude laugh. Now, I began to feel a little sorry for Bird. I could tell how much he wanted to join that club. And she shouldn't have said that he was failing everything in front of the whole class.

Bird was mad. "You got to let me join, Mrs. Barker," he said desperately.

"If you're not in your seat in one second, you're not joining anything."

Bird walked past her to the door. She lunged after him, but he was too fast for her. He left the room and slammed the door — in her face.

Everyone gasped. No one ever walked out of the room, slamming the door in Mrs. Barker's face. She was so angry she stopped raging.

"Everyone on line," she said. "Quietly."

No one said a word as we marched silently down the hall behind her. When we reached the cafeteria, she told us that Bird was getting suspended. She left us and headed in the direction of the principal's office.

Russell watched her stomp down the hall. "Bird's really in trouble now," he said.

Everyone was dead quiet.