

Yellow Bird and Me

By Joyce Hansen

Chapter 10

YELLOW BIRD DOES IT AGAIN

I pulled my coat tight as I walked to school. It'd soon be time for heavy winter boots. I passed the Beauty Hive as I crossed the street to the playground so I could take the shortcut to school. I had to go to the Beauty Hive again on Saturday to tell Miss Bee I couldn't work. I had more time to earn money to visit Amir since he wasn't ready to see me. By the time he was ready, I would be able to convince Ma to let me work at the Hive and go to visit Amir.

When I got to the library, I was surprised to see Bird waiting for me at the table by the window. The only person missing now was Amir. Even though helping Bird almost brought Amir back — the way we used to help him together.

"Hi, Doris," he whispered loudly.

"Hello, Bird," I said, putting my books on the table.

He opened his math homework. "Doris, will you help me with these fractions?"

While we went over the fractions, I expected him to suddenly be the old Bird, but he never even looked around. It was funny.

While I helped Bird I began to feel as if I was doing something important and grownup — the same way I'd felt the first time I worked at Miss Bee's.

"Bird, you're doing the steps correctly, but you keep getting the wrong answer," I said. He frowned and started erasing.

"Oh, I see what it is," I said. "It's like you said. You're twisting them numbers around." I pointed to his paper. "That should be twelve, not twenty-one. You're doing the problems right and you're getting the right answers. You're just getting mixed up when you write them down."

Bird grinned like I really understood him. As soon as we finished, the bell rang.

Bird was on his best behavior in class. He didn't ask for a pass to the bathroom or play around with T.T. Barker made us go over the English homework. We had to discuss and read out loud in class the same story we read for homework.

Bird buried his head in his book, like an ostrich burying its head in sand. He could read a few of the words, and he probably remembered all the story, but I knew he was praying Barker wouldn't call on him.

Fortunately for Bird, Barker didn't bother him. When we came to the end of the story, there was a short paragraph left to read. Some students volunteered, and Bird raised his hand a little as if he wasn't sure that he really wanted to try.

I looked over the paragraph quickly. The words weren't too hard, but Bird might still have trouble. He raised his hand higher. Barker glanced at him and called on a girl in the first row. She wouldn't even give him a chance to try. Bird put his hand down and didn't raise it again for the rest of the day.

Barker acted like he wasn't in the room. She didn't even fuss when he tried to write a composition and never finished. She didn't collect his paper either. I wondered what she had up her sleeve.

Bird came home with me again that afternoon. He didn't even ask, but just walked with me to 163rd Street and kept walking with me as I climbed the stairs to my apartment. "Don't you have to let your father know you home from school?" I asked.

Bird looked at me like I was crazy. "No. My father works nights and he glad I ain't there disturbing him while he sleeping in the afternoon."

I guess no one else has to deal with the old-fashioned rules my parents think up.

The delicious smell of a roasting chicken greeted us when we walked in the house. Gerald almost fell on his face running toward Bird. I wondered what Ma would say about Bird coming over again.

He sat at the kitchen table and immediately took out his books. Guess he didn't want my mother to misunderstand why he was there.

Ma pushed the bowl filled with apples and oranges toward him.

I relaxed.

"No thank you, Mrs. Williams."

"Boy, go on and take a piece of fruit. You-all come home from school hungry."

"He don't like fruit," I said.

She patted Gerald's head as he clung to her leg. "Fruit's good for you."

Bird took a loud bite out of an apple. He'd do anything to stay on my mother's good side. Even eat fruit. Ma left the kitchen, and we began our homework.

"Let's go over the dates for the social studies test tomorrow," he said, flipping the pages of his book.

"We better get the homework done first. You already know those dates."

"I never do good on tests. Especially if I have to remember dates."

"You'll do fine, Bird. You worry too much about them dates."

I looked through my notebook for the English homework.

Bird looked down at the table. "I know people be laughing at me when I can't read and stuff," he said out of the clear blue sky.

I sucked my teeth. "They're just stupid. Always laughing at somebody. You wasn't trying before and concentrating like you are now. I bet you start reading better." I didn't think that Bird worried about people laughing at him.

After we finished the English homework, Bird insisted that we practice the dates again. He got them all correct.

"You know those dates like you know your name," I said.

Ma came in the kitchen. "Okay, Professor Doris," she said, "let's clear this table. Your father'll be home soon."

She watched Bird when he stood up. "Boy, you still wearing that piece of a sweater in this cold?"

"I'm all right, Mrs. Williams."

She started to say something when Daddy put his key in the door.

"Whatever is in them pots smells good," he called from the living room. When he walked into the kitchen, Gerald tripped on his own feet running to him. Daddy picked him up and swung him in the air.

"Hello, son," he said to Bird. "How's your old man and your mother? Ain't seen them in a long time."

"They okay," Bird said quietly and picked up his books. "Good night everybody," he said. "See you tomorrow, Doris."

Ma gave him one of her mind-reading looks. "I haven't seen your mother in a while. How is she?"

He stared at the floor. "Okay. She's . . . she's taking care of my grandmother in Virginia."

Daddy lifted up the roasting pan. "Have dinner with us," he said.

I could tell Bird wanted to say yes, but he buttoned his sweater.

"No, sir, I'm not hungry."

Ma said, "Don't your father work nights?"

"Yes."

"You're in the house alone. Don't be shame. Eat with us. One more mouth ain't gonna send us to the poorhouse," Ma said.

It was funny how Ma took to Bird. Daddy liked everyone, but Ma was harder to please.

Bird peeped at me shyly while we ate. He acted like a different person around my family. When we finished eating, he helped me clean the table and wash the dishes. He played with Gerald and acted like he didn't want to go home.

After Gerald had laughed himself silly at Bird's clown faces, Ma said, "Son, Doris will see you tomorrow. It's getting late."

"Okay, Mrs. Williams," Bird said as he put Gerald on the floor.

"What time does your father come home from work?" she asked him. I don't know why she was giving poor Bird the third degree.

"When I leave for school."

"He doesn't notice how you don't dress for the weather?"

"I'm not cold, ma'am."

As he walked out of the door, she yelled after him, "Better put on a heavier jacket tomorrow."

"Yes, ma'am," he called back.

Bird stood on my stoop when I came downstairs in the morning.

Pretty soon he'd started meeting me every morning and coming home with me every afternoon. I was spending so much time studying with Bird, that I was really learning everything too.

When the day of the big social studies test rolled around, he rattled off the dates for the test as we walked up the block, huddling close together for warmth against the wind.

Bird seemed happy and confident when we went to class.

Mrs. Barker gave us time for last-minute study. Bird concentrated quietly. Russell volunteered to give out the test. He slowly squeezed his big self between the rows of desks.

Barker stood in front of the room. "Everything away. Close all books and put them under your seat. Do not pick up your pens until I tell you to. Mickey, spit out that gum." She stared at T.T. "Sit up straight, young man. Okay. Begin."

The test was about Egypt, and the room was quiet except for the sounds of pens scratching on paper. Barker sat at her desk marking our homework. Even though her head was down, I was sure she saw everything.

Suddenly, there was a big crash. She stood up so quickly that her chair fell over. "James Towers, what are you doing?"

Bird jumped up as Barker barreled towards him, red as a sunset. Bird got paler and the little patch of hair on top of his head looked like it was saluting.

"Give me that paper. I saw you!"

His mouth moved back and forth, but nothing came out.

"We don't cheat on tests in this class. I want the paper now." She snatched his arm and a piece of paper fell to the floor. She picked it up.

Bird stammered. "I . . . I . . . studied. It was the dates. I mix up the numbers. I wr-wr-wrote the dates so I wouldn't mix up the numbers. They're just the dates. I didn't write down what they was for."

"Don't make excuses, young man. This is intolerable behavior."

I wanted to raise my hand and tell her that Bird knew the dates this morning. If only I could explain to her what was wrong with Bird and how hard he tried. That he wasn't really a cheat, even though he had a paper with the dates on them. Why couldn't she see that there was something smart and good in Bird? The way Amir taught me to see. I wanted to tell her all those things.

"Sit in the back, young man. You'll be taken care of later."

Bird walked slowly to the back of the room and sat down. I continued working on the test, but I couldn't concentrate. I had to speak. Barker never gave Bird a chance to show what he could do. My hand shook a little as I raised it. "Mrs. Barker?"

She was still in a red rage. "Yes."

"Mrs. Barker, you don't understand Bird," I said. "He wasn't cheating."

Mrs. Barker glared at me. "Young lady, I don't need *you* to tell me

what I don't understand. Let's not forget which of us is the teacher."

Someone giggled as I slid down in my seat as far as I could. My face got hot. I felt like a fool.

I lowered my head and tried to continue, and noticed Mickey staring at me. If Barker only knew how hard Bird had studied.

I turned around and quickly glanced at Bird, who covered his face with his hands. All I could see was the top of his head. I felt like putting my arms around his shoulders — the way I do with Gerald when he's upset. The feeling surprised me.

Suddenly Bird left his seat and ran out of the room, slamming the door in Barker's surprised face. I closed my eyes and shook my head — Bird did it again.