

Yellow Bird and Me

By Joyce Hansen

Chapter 17

DUNBAR ELEMENTARY PRESENTS

A half hour before show time I thought we'd never get it together. T.T. dragged out the wrong props for the first act. One of the younger kids was upset because he wondered what he'd do if he had to go to the bathroom in the middle of his speech. Russell told him, "Do it on the stage, man. The show must go on."

When Russell bent over, his pants ripped in the back. I repeated, "Don't worry, the show must go on." He started to frown, but then he laughed.

Mickey and Lavinia tried to act cool, like they was professional actresses. But Dotty and another girl bumped into each other and knocked down a picture.

And what was really making me nervous was that Bird wasn't here yet. Mr. Washington, looking as old and tired as the teachers at Dunbar, came over to me for the fifth time. "He isn't here yet? Where is he?"

"I don't know, Mr. Washington." I wouldn't tell him that Bird had been talking about leaving the play. I didn't want Mr. Washington to have a heart attack. I couldn't believe that Bird wouldn't show.

I walked over to T.T. who was hanging the picture of the cracked window. "Did Bird say anything to you about not showing up?"

He straightened out the picture. "Hey Miss Doris, you sure look fine, sweetness."

"Oh shut up, T.T. Did you hear from Bird?"

"No. He'll be here, unless he got sick or something." He took my hand and turned me around. "My, but I love your wine-colored dress and the beautiful braids in your hair. Are they real?"

I pulled away from him. "T.T., you act too foolish."

He lifted my hand like he was going to kiss it, but he kissed his own instead. "Oh, and are those new shoes you're wearing?"

"T.T., you better go back to your scenery." I jerked my hand away from his. Suddenly Mr. Washington leaped up on the stage.

"Doris, we have an emergency." He looked desperate. I knew it was something about Bird.

"We're in a serious jam. Marcia is sick, and she can't make the show."

I was relieved it wasn't Bird. "What you want me to do, Mr. Washington?"

"You gotta play her part. You're the only one who can do it."

I felt faint. My hands trembled and everything in front of me looked like a blur. "No, Mr. Washington. I can't. I'll make a fool of myself."

"Doris," he said, squeezing my hand, "you're the same size she is so you can fit into that long skirt and shawl and you read that part perfectly at rehearsal."

I shook my head and tried to swallow. "I can't do it. I'll forget

everything soon as I see the audience."

At that moment; Bird walked over to us. Was I ever glad to see him! Mr. Washington grabbed him by the arm. "About time you got here," he said. "Doris has to play the part of your mother. Make her get dressed and ready to go onstage." He stomped away angrily.

I was almost in tears. Bird looked happy. "What took you so long to get here?"

Bird made a funny little dance step, moving his feet back and forth quickly.

"My mother called to wish me luck. And she's coming home after the holidays."

"Bird, I can't do it. You and me onstage together? It'll be a disaster."

He patted my shoulder. "I'll help you."

"I'm supposed to be helping you," I said.

He put his arm around my shoulder. "We just mess up together, Yellow Bird and Doris. You know what?" He grinned. "My father might come too."

I walked backstage. "That's nice, Bird. Your father can watch me and you look stupid together." I forgot all about my nice words of encouragement to Bird.

"Come on, Doris," Bird said. "We can do it. We'll be great!"

I changed to that old long gray skirt and covered my nice hairdo with the shawl, and shook while I dressed.

Mickey said, "You'll be okay, Doris." Then she stifled a big laugh.

We didn't get ourselves together until seven o'clock and the show was supposed to start at six thirty. The audience was restless. I peeped from behind the curtain and saw my mother and father sitting in the front row with Gerald. Mickey and Dotty's mother squeezed herself down one of the other aisles.

There was a commotion in the middle row, where the Nit Nowns, those five sisters from Union Avenue sat looking like five Christmas trees. They wore red sequined hats and green coats and enough bangles and beads to open up a five and ten cent store. I didn't see Miss Bee yet and hoped she'd show up.

Mrs. Nicols didn't have chick nor child in Dunbar Elementary, but she sat there with her little flowered hat in December like she was at a Broadway opening.

A tall man walked slowly down the middle aisle. It was Bird's father, and as usual he didn't crack a smile.

The lights dimmed, and the audience was quiet. My heart raced like a jet. I'd die before the second scene. The curtain parted and six kindergarten students came to the middle of the stage.

We have two gifts for you tonight, Not the store-bought kind.

Our gifts are joy and laughter bright, Which can be hard to find.

Once you have received them, You will understand,

That gifts like these are placed within, Our hearts and not our hands.

So open up your hearts real wide, Accept our special offer.

Each of us will step inside, And give you joy and laughter.

They were perfect. The audience gave them a big hand, and they ran off the stage jumbled up together and all smiles.

Then the spotlight fell on Bird, who sat cross-legged in the center of the stage. "I wi-wish . . ." His hands shook a little and his voice quivered. I crossed my fingers. Please don't let him forget his lines. It was bad enough I had to come out there a nervous mess.

He started again, breathing deeply, like Mr. Washington had told us to do.

"I wish it would snow. I wish something would happen to show me that this is a season of happiness and love," he said in a loud clear voice. All his nervousness was gone.

Bird looked stage left in my direction. Lavinia said, "Go on Doris, that's your cue."

It felt like my feet had grown big rusty roots. Lavinia gave me a push, and I stumbled on stage. I opened my mouth but nothing came out. Then I heard Gerald yell "Doris!" I was too humiliated. Bird stood up like he was supposed to. He repeated his last line and walked over to me. "I wish it would snow!" he shouted in my ear. Then he whispered out the side of his mouth. "Say, 'Boy, you better stop wishing for snow.'"

I grabbed Bird's neck — anything to hold on to.

"Boy, you better stop wishing for snow," I mumbled.

Somebody in the back of the auditorium yelled, "We can't hear

you." It sounded like one of the Nit Nowns.

Bird said, "Mother, why you so upset?" That wasn't one of his lines. He turned his back to the audience. "Look in my face, Doris and make believe this is rehearsal," he whispered.

I stared at Bird like I was in a daze. "We have enough problems," I shouted. "You better stop wishing for snow."

He put his hand on my arm and smiled, and I only looked at him.

"We have enough problems," I repeated.

Bird held my shaking hand. "Isn't it supposed to snow this time of year? Isn't this supposed to be a season of love?" Bird was perfect.

"Snow and love don't go together," I yelled stiffly.

"Son," Bird whispered.

"Son!" I shouted. "I hate snow."

I forgot to point to the window. Bird pointed and said my line for me. "If it snows, it will fall in this apartment. Through that crack in the window."

"Yes, son. It sure will." We were ad-libbing now. I stared in Bird's face.

There were three knocks. That was my cue. "Who is it?" I tried to say with feeling.

"It's me! Mr. Rancid's niece." That was Lavinia. She was stage right. I saw her whip off the scarf she'd been wearing just before she made her entrance on stage.

If there was an academy award for students in elementary school plays, Lavinia would've won it. Her hair was cornrowed in a beautiful circular design with tiny red beads. Some people clapped as soon as she walked on. Guess it was her family.

Lavinia put one hand on her hip and the other in my face. "I come for the rent."

"The rent's not due until tomorrow," I said, still looking at Bird, even though I was supposed to be talking to Lavinia.

"Tomorrow is Christmas. Nobody's collecting rents tomorrow," Lavinia replied.

All I had to do now was cry. I cried for real, because I felt like crying anyway. "We don't have the money right now."

Lavinia spread her arms. "How can you expect to live in a wonderful place like this for free?"

"Wonderful place?" Bird leaned in her face. "You call this a wonderful place?"

"It has a roof, doesn't it? Look, kid, you know my uncle's motto — if you don't pay, then you can't stay in this building."

The way she said it, the audience clapped and laughed. She didn't have a nervous bone in her body.

Bird pointed to the ceiling. "The roof is falling." He put his arm around me. I still boo-hooed. "And my poor old mother is ill."

"My uncle says I have to get the money today." Lavinia stamped her foot and crossed her arms.

"Have a heart, miss," Bird said. "Look at my dear old Mom."

I cried louder. I couldn't wait for the scene to end.

"You are ungrateful. You want to live in a lovely place like this for free."