

# Yellow Bird and Me

By Joyce Hansen

## Chapter 17

### DUNBAR ELEMENTARY PRESENTS (Continued)

Bird stepped out to the middle of the stage for the first song. The music teacher played a chord. I hoped Bird's voice wouldn't go into a squeak.

*Mean to us*

*Why is he so mean to us? It must be great fun to be mean to us.*

*He lets the roof fall on our heads. He won't give us any heat, and if we're late with the rent, he'll throw us in the street.*

Somebody in the audience yelled, "Sing it!" Bird spread his legs and arms:

*Mean to us*

*Why is he so mean to us?*

Now Lavinia sang her song. She stepped in front of Bird and pointed her finger in his face.

*Ungrateful, that's what you are. Ungrateful and a bore. Always demanding. Never understanding that My uncle is a shining star.*

Then they sang together:

*Mean to us*

*Why is he so mean to us?*

*Ungrateful, that's what you are. Ungrateful and a bore.*

They got a real big hand and I sneaked off the stage. Maybe since they were so good, people hadn't noticed how bad I was. Luckily, I didn't have to go on again until the second act, and I only had to say a few lines.

I was still trembling, but Mr. Washington was smiling. "Was it so bad, Doris? You really helped us out of a spot."

Bird finished his scene. He ran over to us. "How was I? Was I good?"

Mr. Washington gave him a big hug. "Man, I told you you could do it."

I kissed him on his cheek. "Bird, you was great and you saved my life too," I said.

Lavinia rushed off the stage and changed for her next scene. Dotty practiced her old-lady walk.

People laughed and clapped when the curtain opened again. Russell, wearing a burgundy velvet smoking jacket, sat with his legs crossed in a big overstuffed chair. He held a long cigar, unlit, of course.

Russell really looked like a fifty-year-old man, T.T. had taken a blackboard eraser and rubbed the white chalk dust from it on the sides of Russell's hair to make it look like he was graying.

"Ah, hum," Big Russell cleared his throat. "Anybody don't pay up their rent is losing the beautiful living quarters I provide."

Mickey was Mrs. Rancid, the man's wife. "But dear, it's Christmas," she said. Mickey wore one of her mother's wigs and a wide flair skirt.

"So what does that have to do with anything? I ain't Santa Claus. I have bills to pay too." Russell banged his fist so hard on the table that the lamp started to fall off, but Mickey caught it.

Mr. Washington put his face in his hands.

"They don't pay — they can't stay. That's my motto," Russell's voice boomed.

I wasn't as nervous for the scene in the second act. But I still wasn't no actress. All I had to say was, "My son, you're like a shining light on a cold, dark night." I got the words out, but my voice cracked a little.

Lavinia, Mickey, and the two other girls did a dance for the party scene. One of the girls accidentally tripped up Mickey, and Mickey's wig fell off. Lavinia did a spin reached down and slapped the wig, lopsided, back on Mickey's head.

The audience thought it was part of the dance; they loved it.

Then Bird, Lavinia, and the twins sang their number together.

*He has changed, Are you listening? He's not strange this Christmas.*

*He's a beautiful sight, He's happy and bright*

*The mean old man has changed.*

The audience clapped along while they sang.

Then the whole cast slowly walked on the stage singing.

*He's given us a new roof. He's gonna plaster all the holes. He's painting everybody's apartment and promises never to let us get cold.*

*He has changed and we love him.*

*No complaints about him.*

*It's a wonderful sight, We're happy tonight.*

*The mean old man has changed.*

Dotty, Bird, Lavinia, and Russell did their dance routine. The audience clapped them on. Dotty kicked her leg so high her left shoe flew off her foot. The audience cheered. I almost cried I laughed so hard.

When the number ended, the audience went wild. Cameras flashed, and a reporter from a local paper talked to Mr. Washington. Who would think that you could have singing, dancing, and acting like that at our school, in the Bronx?

The whole company, as Mr. Washington called us, took part in the finale. The first graders had their little candle lighting ceremony. Then we all sang "Joy to the World" and the audience joined in with us. The ending was superb. Mrs. Nicols even said so later.

The audience clapped, cheered, yelled, and stood up. Bird and Lavinia got the biggest hands of all. As long as people clapped, Bird kept bowing.

Mr. Washington got up on the stage and stood next to me.

"That boy's hooked," he said. "I see it in his eyes."

Bird nearly fell when he jumped off the stage. He was trying to get to his father, but everyone crowded around him. Then came the biggest shock of all. Mrs. Barker shook his hand. "You did a wonderful job," she said. "I'm impressed."

Mrs. Nicols hugged Bird and then stepped back and held him at arms' length, the flower on her hat bobbing back and forth.

"A star is truly born," she said.

Bird finally reached his father, and I saw Mr. Washington shake his father's hand and start talking to him. Mr. Towers actually smiled.

I found my mother and father talking to Mrs. Nicols. Gerald ran over to me, and I bent down and kissed him.

"Doris," he squealed.

"He got so excited when you stepped out on that stage," Ma said.

Daddy gave me a kiss and a red rose. "To my little star," he said. "And I don't care what nobody says, you were the best one up there."

I laughed, "Daddy, I was awful. I wasn't even supposed to be in it."

Ma gave me a kiss. "I'm proud of you, girl. You sure helped Bird get his act together."

I waved to the Nit Nowns, and looked for Miss Bee. T.T. had his whole family onstage showing them the scenery he made, but I didn't see her among them.

"Hi, Honey Bunch."

I turned around and there she was in her high heels and a beige suit, with her coat draped over her arms. "Hi, Miss Bee! You look nice."

"How are you, Miss Bee?" my mother said. Daddy smiled and nodded in her direction.

Miss Bee put her arm around my shoulders. "Mr. and Mrs. Williams, you should be proud of your daughter."

"We are," my mother said quickly.

"She's a wonderful young lady," Miss Bee continued. "I've missed her since she stopped helping me out in the shop. Even brought in a customer." She stopped to clear her throat. "Braided a little girl's hair and the child's mama came back looking for her."

"Doris is a good worker, huh?" Daddy said.

"Yes," Miss Bee said squeezing my shoulders. "She's a gem. If you ever change your mind about letting her work, "she's got a job waiting at the Hive. Me and the other ladies will look out for her." She winked at me, and my father shook her hand.

"We try to raise her right," he said proudly.

"Have a Merry Christmas," she called over her shoulder and tipped away on her high heels.

"That woman sure did like you," Ma said. "You made some impression on her for just having gone that *once*." She looked at me closely, and I picked up Gerald.

Daddy smiled. "Quite a character, but she seems like an okay lady." I agreed. Miss Bee really talked up for me.

Lavinia was on the stage having her picture taken. The twins were with their mother and one of the Nit Nowns. Bird's father still smiled and talked to Mr. Washington.

Whatever Mr. Washington was saying must've been good, because Bird was standing next to them, beaming like a flashlight.

My parents started talking to a lady who lives on our block, and I walked over to Bird. With his hair brushed back and his suit that fit right, he was kind of handsome.

"I told you that you'd be great in the play," I said.

His smile could've lit a dark cave. "Only 'cause you helped me."

Suddenly, a boy holding a camera came up to us. "You a good actor," he said to Bird. "Let me take a picture of you for the yearbook."

"Only if you take my co-star too," he shouted pulling me next to him. We grinned while we stood there side-by-side with our arms around each other's shoulders.

When he finished, the boy asked, "What's your names again, so I can write them for the caption?"

"Just write **Yellow Bird and me**," I said, and we laughed.

There was a smile everywhere I looked. This was truly a season of love.

January 30th

My Dear Amir,

I hope you are fine and happy. The sun is shining here on 163rd Street even though it's snowing. I hope the sun is shining where you are too.

Remember the letter I wrote you for Christmas where I told you how wonderful the play turned out? Well it must have been better than I

thought. Barker took Bird back in our class the beginning of this month. His performance must've *really* impressed her.

Mr. Washington explained to Barker what was wrong and now he gets special tutoring in reading. He's got something called dyslexia. It's really hard for him to read even though he's really smart. Barker doesn't pick on him anymore. She lets him tell her the answers to written tests and then he writes them down later. Bird does everything we do except it takes him a little longer.

Mickey says that Barker feels guilty because she treated Bird so mean. But I think she learned to see inside of Bird — remember you used to tell me about seeing the inside of things so you understand them better?

Bird is different. You wouldn't believe it if you saw him. He's got to work hard, but he's doing it. Passing everything. T.T. told him, "You ain't no more fun." Remember they said the same thing about me? Bird still makes us laugh, but not in class. And guess what else? I made the honor roll this term. All that time I spent helping Bird helped me, too. I guess I was studying more than usual without knowing it!

Here's the best news of all. My parents finally gave me permission to work at the Hive on Saturdays — if I don't have to help Ma in the house.

It's funny, Amir. I still think about you all the time. But it's different now. It's like you're here with me, even when you're not. You helped me to see inside Bird, and now he's a real best friend. Just like you.



It's like you said to me once. We're not really separated. Together we'll make things be. I know that some day we'll all live on the same block again. I just know it. Write soon.

Your friend to the end.

Love,

Doris

### ***About the Author***

Joyce Hansen is the award-winning and critically acclaimed author of fifteen books for young readers. Four of her books have received a Coretta Scott King Honor Book Award, and six of her books have been named a Notable Children's Trade Book in the Field of Social Studies. She has also received a Carter G. Woodson Honor Book Award, an African Studies Association Award, and a National Parenting Publication Gold Award.

Joyce Hansen grew up in the Bronx, the setting for *Yellow Bird and Me*, and was a teacher in New York City for many years. She now lives in South Carolina with her husband and writes full-time.