

Yellow Bird and Me

By Joyce Hansen

Chapter 7

BIRD TO THE RESCUE (Continued)

How was I supposed to quit my job if Miss Bee wouldn't let me talk?

I hesitated at the door and then stepped quickly outside. As I crossed 163rd Street, I heard a familiar, "Yo, Doris!"

"Bird. I ain't seen you since you been suspended," I said.

He made a silly face and started dancing on the street. "I've been making my debut on Broadway," he joked. "I just saw your mother. Asked me if I knew where you was."

I closed my eyes. Oh, no. If she saw me running an errand for Miss Bee, she'd think I was still working.

She'd put me back on punishment until I was twenty. "Where was she?" I asked.

"Going to the store on Third Avenue."

I stopped walking.

"Why you look so upset, Doris? You still mad at me?"

At first I didn't know what he was talking about. He didn't wait for me to answer. Seems like no one was letting me talk.

"What did I miss in school last week? Is Barker still mean? Is Russell still big? Is —"

"Bird, will you quit talking?" I walked toward my building. Here I am in desperate trouble, and he's bugging me about school.

"Where you going? The twins and them went to the candy store."

I sucked my teeth. "I don't care about where the twins and them went."

"You still mad huh?" he said. "It was T.T. who stole your note." He sat next to me on the stoop. "I was only trying to help you that day."

"Bird, you can help me by leaving me alone."

"Come on, Doris, don't be like that." He kicked a rock into the gutter.

"Say you ain't mad at me no more." He poked his bottom lip out like a baby fixing to cry.

I smiled, even though I didn't want to.

"Say you ain't mad no more." He grabbed me by the shoulders.

"Bird, please." I pushed him away.

"I'll do anything to hear you say it. Let me do something nice for you."

He stood up. "What you want? Just say, 'Bird, I forgive you.' " He clutched his hands to his heart. A woman walking by saw him and smiled. "Doris, I'll do anything for you. Just say 'I forgive.' "

"Bird, you silly, and you getting on my nerves."

He sat down again. "Well, at least you talking to me. Come on,

Doris, let me help you with some-thing — anything, okay? Let me carry your books for you." He grinned, "I'd like to do your homework for you too, except it'd be wrong, but I'd do it."

"You making me smile when I don't want to smile, Bird. I want to think."

"Let me help you. There must be —"

"Could you go to the store for me?" Soon as the question left my mouth I was sorry I asked it. How could I ask Bird to do something important?

"Yeah. You can't leave the block?"

"It's a long story. Think you can do it without messing up?"

"How could I mess up going to the store?"

"You know how you are. And don't tell nobody you going for me." He looked at me real strange when I handed him the money and told him what I wanted.

Soon as he left, I started worrying. Suppose he came back with the wrong thing? Four rolls of toilet tissue or four boxes of Kleenex. Suppose he lost the money? I began to think that sending Bird to the store might have been the dumbest idea I ever had. I wished Bird would hurry.

I didn't foresee what happened next. Bird walked down one end of 163rd Street, and my mother down the other. Ma peeped in the Hive when she passed it. Luckily, she got to me first, because Bird

stopped to talk to some little boys that were playing on the street.

"I was looking for you to go to the store for me," Ma said.

I frowned and shook my head slightly as Bird started walking toward us carrying a large bag.

"Where was you?" she asked.

"I went around the corner. ..." I wished she'd hurry upstairs. Bird was still walking toward us. Ma had her back to him. She was smiling at the kids playing stick-ball on the street and looking around like this was the first time she'd laid eyes on 163rd Street.

I stared at Bird, then rolled my eyes toward my mother. He looked slightly confused, but he must have understood because he stopped walking. Holding the large package tightly, he turned around and sat on his stoop.

"Ma, I'm going up the street, okay?"

"All right. Don't let me have to come and look for you."

When she went in the building, I raced over to Bird. "Thank you," I said as I took the package and the change. "Bird, you saved me. I was almost under punishment for the rest of my life."

"Bird, where you been?" Russell yelled to him from the other side of the street. T.T. was with him.

"We going to the playground," T.T. said.

"You mean I did something good for you?" Bird said. "You mean I didn't get you into trouble?"

"You just got me out of a lot of trouble, Bird," I answered.

Bird grinned like he was tickled. I guess he doesn't do too many things right. "Then you forgive me?" he said. "And you ain't mad at me no more?"

"Well, I didn't exactly say that."

"Come on, Doris, say it. Say I. Forgive. You. Bird. I. Ain't. Mad. At. You. No. More."

I sighed. "Okay, Bird, I say both."

"Say it out loud. I forgive you, Bird."

"I forgive you, Bird."

"I ain't mad at you no more," he said.

"I ain't mad at you no more," I repeated.

Without any warning, Bird hugged me and almost knocked the package out of my hand.

"See you around, friend," he said grinning, and then tore across the street to join Russell and T.T. while I went to the Hive.

Bird isn't all that bad. In fact he's beginning to grow on me some. I wondered why he didn't say anything about being suspended. Everything must have turned out okay for him, because he was acting like his old Bird self again. Maybe Barker was just trying to scare us.

When I got back to the Hive, Miss Bee's bride-to-be customer was already there. She looked almost as old as Miss Bee.

Every kind of shampoo, dye, lotion, and conditioner was laid out on the counter. Like my mother would say, she had everything out except the snake oil.

Miss Bee was as excited as the bride. "Honey Bunch, I'm glad you back. Now, clean these for me." She handed me two brushes.

"Miss Bee, I don't think I..."

"Before you clean them brushes, Honey Bunch, take a look at this."

She held up her customer's hand for me to see her engagement ring. "Ain't this something? Dazzles just like the bride." Her customer grinned from ear to ear over Miss Bee's compliment, and Miss Bee chattered on about weddings and all about the two times that she was married.

How could I interrupt her now to tell her I wasn't coming back? I thought while I was cleaning the brushes. Miss Bee's stories were better than Mrs. Nicols.

And best of all, there was no one there to send me out of the room. After I finished, Miss Bee said, "Thank you, Honey Bunch." She reached into her smock pocket and handed me \$2.00. "You was a good little helper. Don't know what I'd have done without you. Ain't no point in sitting around here all day, though. Things is quiet."

"Thank you, Miss Bee. I ..." I tried to hand the money back to her, but she was putting some gooey white stuff in the woman's hair and she didn't see me.

"Yes, Honey Bunch?"

"Miss Bee. I —"

"I'll see you next week," Miss Bee said.

"I guess so," I said, wishing I'd had the nerve to tell her I wasn't coming back. I would have a week to figure out how to tell her, but Ma would be some kind of angry if she knew that I hadn't quit my job.

I put on my jacket and left. There seemed to be more kids on the block than before. A bunch of little girls played on Mickey and Dotty's stoop. I continued walking to my building and sat down on the steps. I touched the \$2.00 in my pocket. I shouldn't have let her pay me. But now I had \$14.00. Still a long way from the \$50.00 I needed.

"Doris!"

I looked up to my window. "Glad you still there," Ma said. "I forgot to get milk. Get me a large container."

Ma wrapped the coins in a handkerchief and tossed it out the window. "And by the way," she yelled, "You got a letter from Amir."

I nearly fell off the stoop. "Let me read it before I go to the store." I started racing up the stairs.

"Go to the store first, Doris. I need that milk now."

Instead of going all the way to Third Avenue, I was going to go to the small grocery store on Union Avenue, which was closer. I couldn't wait to get upstairs to read Amir's letter.

"And Doris," Ma called after me. "Don't you go to the store on Union

Avenue. It's too expensive."

After I bought the milk, I flew into the house and yelled, "Ma! Where's the letter?"

"Calm yourself, Doris," she said, taking the milk and counting up the change. She wiped her hands on her apron and handed me the letter. I dashed to my room, so that I could read it in private.

October 29th

Dear Doris,

I was happy to get your beautiful poem and your letter. The colors of the leaves here in late October are more magnificent than anything I ever saw. Like someone with big buckets of red and orange paint splashed the trees. One day, I want to paint a picture of them myself.

I hope the other kids on the block ain't mad at me for not saying goodbye or telling them I was going. I thought I was used to not having real parents and being moved from place to place. But I guess I wasn't. It hurts leaving places, and I was real hurt when I had to leave 163rd Street – especially because I had to leave you, Doris.

I don't think it's a good idea for you to come and visit me up here just yet. It's hard to explain, but my counselor told me that I need to get used to being here by myself. I made some new friends here. It's not like 163rd Street, but everyone here is kind and friendly, and we live in small cottages that are each like little families. And best of all is I saw one of my brothers. We haven't seen each other in five years. He

lives with a family that wants to adopt him. The Smiths. They said that even when they adopt him that they going to let us be close, like brothers.

Maybe when things get settled more here you can come and visit. But until then, we not really separated. You should help Bird again like we used to. That will help me feel good if you can do that for him. He once told me that the reason he played so much and acted so silly was because he didn't want people to know he couldn't read and do his school work well. You got to see inside of Bird to see who he really is. I bet if you helped him, Doris, he'd be a good student. Remember how he was beginning to change?

Love, Amir

I couldn't answer Amir's letter right away. I wasn't sure what to say. I thought he'd want me to come up right away. Instead, his letter made me feel sad, the way I felt when he'd just left. I wished that I could do something to cheer him up and to make the hurting in me go away, but Amir didn't need me now. He just needed to be alone and take care of himself. I put his letter under my pillow, and lay there staring at the peeling paint on the ceiling. I wondered what I could do right now to help cheer up Amir.