

Yellow Bird and Me

By Joyce Hansen

Chapter 8

YELLOW BIRD AND ME

There was a light knock on the classroom door as Mrs. Barker finished taking attendance Wednesday morning. She opened the door, and in walked Bird behind his father. He didn't look as happy as he did when I saw him on Saturday.

I'd seen Bird's father on the block sometimes. He never spoke much to anyone and looked like he'd get angry if you said hello. He was a tall version of Bird with the same light skin and long nose. His clothes kind of hung on him, too. I wondered why his mother didn't come. Then it occurred to me that I hadn't seen her since summer ended.

Barker tried to smile. "Let's go outside, Mr. Towers."

She turned to us. "Open your spellers and study your words for this week." Everyone was quiet. I guess we all wanted to hear what Barker was telling Bird's father. I didn't hear Bird's voice at all.

Suddenly his father yelled. Then came the sound of a big slap. It stung me. Seemed like the whole class stopped breathing. General Barker marched in the room. Bird followed her, his head nearly touching the floor. I felt sorry for him. Getting slapped in

school by your parent was one of the worst things that could ever happen.

We had to write a composition for English. Usually Bird got himself a pass to leave the room when it was time to write. He picked up his pencil and notebook and scratched something on the paper. He spent most of the time staring at the topic on the board.

I was feeling real bad for Bird. Maybe Amir was right. Bird really did need help, even though he always seemed so silly. Hadn't he acted like nothing at all was wrong last time I saw him? If I'd just gotten suspended, I wouldn't have been out playing and acting the fool like I seen him do on Saturday. He'd been a friend to me then, and he kept me off punishment. Maybe it would be a long time before I could see Amir again. But if I could help Bird, Amir and me wouldn't be separated, because I'd be doing something that we used to do together.

Mrs. Barker peeped at Bird over her glasses, but she didn't say anything. I guess she was so happy Bird's father slapped him she decided to give him a break. I noticed T.T. whispering to Bird, but he ignored him.

Barker collected the compositions, and then we had our reading lesson. She called on people to read aloud. The boy sitting next to Russell volunteered. Bird's face was practically inside his book. I figured it was about time now for him to do something crazy to get himself thrown out of the room or ask for a pass to the bathroom.

When the boy finished reading, I raised my hand. After I read, Barker looked around. A lot of people raised their hands because it was an easy short story. Barker liked to catch people who looked like they wasn't prepared. Her eyes scanned the room, ignoring the waving hands. "James Towers," she called.

"Y-yes, Mrs. Barker?"

"Read the next paragraph."

Someone snickered. I wondered whether he'd do a tap dance or spin on his head. Anything but read aloud in class. He cleared his throat.

"The boy re-re —"

I began to feel so embarrassed for Bird I wished he'd act silly like he usually does when he doesn't know his work.

"Remembered," Barker called sharply.

"The boy rem — I mean, remembered to ... to . . . look in his pac — I mean, poc —"

I tried to ignore what was happening to Bird, but I couldn't. I remembered how much he improved last year when Amir helped him.

"Pocket!" The boy behind me yelled.

"No calling out," Barker said. Then she looked at Bird. "See, this is the result of always playing around, young man!"

"Mrs. Barker, I wasn't playing. ... I —' Lavinia giggled loudly and shook her head. "If you refuse to do the work, you'll be put out of this class." Bird tried again. "The boy remem-remem —" "You read that already," Barker sighed.

"Oh. I'm sorry." Then Bird just made up a whole paragraph that wasn't even in the book. A girl whispered loudly, "Oh brother."

The boy behind me said, "Dog, he can't read nothing."

Barker stopped Bird. "That's enough. You'd better get serious, young man. I'm not putting up with your foolishness much longer."

Other people continued reading. I thought of what Amir had said in his letter. This time Bird wasn't clowning. Seemed to me that he was trying to read. Barker just didn't understand him.

She stood at her desk. "Now, class, we'll form groups to study for the end of the unit social studies test. Those of you who want to study alone may do so."

Lavinia raised her hand right away. "Me, Mickey, and Dotty will study together."

Barker nodded. The twins jumped up and sat at the table by the window with Lavinia.

Russell yelled, "Come on back here, T.T." T.T. asked the boy who sat behind me to study with him and Russell. Not even his buddies wanted to bother with Bird when it came time to study. No one picked him, and no one picked me either.

I didn't mind because I knew all the work and didn't need anyone to study with anyhow. Bird took his textbook out of the desk and turned the pages slowly. There wasn't a smile anywhere near Bird's face. I thought about Amir again and what he'd do if he were in the class right now.

I raised my hand. "I'll study with Bird," I said. Seemed like the whole class stared at me. Bird looked shocked, and even Mrs. Barker was surprised. A girl in the front of the room said, "Miss Smartness and Yellow Bird?"

Barker hushed her. Then she turned to Bird. "This time is for studying, James, not playing."

Bird still looked shocked when he sat down near me at Mickey's empty desk. "Why you pick me?" he whispered.

"Because I wanted to."

Bird looked at me like he didn't believe I meant it.

"Really?" he said.

I nodded.

He looked over at Barker, who was at her desk doing paperwork. "If you just explain the main things, I'll remember and write the dates down," he said. "But I mix up the numbers sometimes."

I opened my book. "Let's read this part here. It's important."

"Can you just explain it to me? Or . . . or . . . read it to me? See, sometimes I can read the words.

But it takes so long to figure them out, I forget what I read in the beginning by the time I get to the end."

"You probably forget when you fool around." I looked at him cautiously. "But you serious now, right?"

He nodded. "I always have been, Doris. But I get confused. Most times I think which words make sense and just guess. Sometimes all the words look backwards."

"How did you know all the answers to the questions, like when we studied King Tut?"

"I remembered everything you read to me. And it was interesting. Sometimes I can read long words better than short ones because I remember how the long ones look. Like I can read the word *electricity*" he said proudly.

Barker looked over at us. "Come on, Bird," I said, "Let's read before she starts fussing."

I read to him quietly while he followed along in his book. He copied the important dates on a piece of paper. I wrote a word or name to go with them. He memorized the names. It took a long time to go through that, but he was happy when we finished.

"I think I know it now, Doris. Thank you."

"Okay, Bird. Let's go over the dates again to make sure you still remember them." I noticed Lavinia and the twins peeping at us. Let them wonder, I said to myself.

Bird didn't come to the cafeteria at lunchtime. I didn't see him again until the afternoon class. I expected that any minute he'd be his old self again—throw a wad of paper at T.T. or make a funny noise during the science film. He was quiet all afternoon. A new Bird, maybe . . .

At three o'clock, he stood next to me when we lined up for dismissal. "Doris, can I study with you this afternoon?" He stared at the floor.

I couldn't believe this new shy person standing in front of me.

"But we already studied for the test."

"Doris, I mean, like, can we do homework together?"

I searched his face for a grin on his lips or a smile in his eyes. He was dead serious. "Okay, Bird. But you gotta come to my house."

We left the room and walked down the stairs. "Your mother won't mind?" he said.

"Not unless she needs me to mind Gerald."

When we were outside of the school, T.T. pulled Bird by his arm.

"Come on the playground, man."

Bird shook his head. "I got to study."

"Study what?" T.T. looked puzzled.

I sucked my teeth. "You never heard of doing homework?"

T.T. grinned at us. "Now this a strange combination. Doris and Yellow Bird?" He hooted like an owl and ran across the street to the playground.

I didn't care what T.T. thought. He could tell the whole school if he wanted to. Yellow Bird was a good person and maybe he was even my friend. And besides, since I decided to help Yellow Bird, I was starting to feel like Amir was back again, right here on 163rd Street.