

Yellow Bird and Me

By Joyce Hansen

Chapter 9

A NEW OLD FRIEND

"Hi, Ma," I yelled as we entered the living room.

Bird seemed a little nervous. He knew how strict my mother is.

"Mrs. Williams?" he asked as politely as he could. "Can Doris help me with my homework this afternoon?"

Ma walked into the room with Gerald toddling behind her. Gerald scrambled into my father's big, raggedy leather chair and jumped up and down grinning at Bird. Ma picked him up and put him back on the floor. "Doris has her own homework to do."

"But Mrs. Williams, Doris is the best student in class. No one can help me like her." Bird made his face sweet as sugar.

"Sometimes Doris can't help her own self." Ma smiled. "Go on in the kitchen, but you can't stay too long."

Bird knew just what to say to Ma. She took it very personal whenever I got a compliment. "How's your mother?" Ma asked as Bird followed her into the kitchen. "Haven't seen her in a while."

"She's okay," he said quickly. He spread his books out on the table and I sat across from him.

When Ma took Gerald inside for his nap, I whispered to Bird. "You in a lot of trouble with your father?"

"No. He just said I better not mess up again." Bird tried to look like everything was okay, but his eyes were scared.

"What your mother say?"

"Nothing." I could tell he didn't want to talk about her.

We had to write one of Barker's one-page compositions for homework. The theme was future plans. I pushed a sheet of paper in front of him. "Guess we better get the composition out the way first," I said.

"Doris, I can't do it."

"Barker will know if I do it for you."

"Let me say it and then you write what I say. Only print so I can read it when I copy it in my own writing."

"You can't read script?"

He shook his head. "Takes me a long time to figure out what the words are. Sometimes it seems like the letters run together."

"Maybe you need glasses," I said.

He shook his head. "No, it ain't like that. My eyes are fine. There's just something wrong with me. I see words sort of backwards. Like this word here." He pointed to the word was.

"Sometime I read it as saw."

I stared at my notebook. "I used to do that when I was little and just learning how to read."

He avoided my eyes. "But you don't do it anymore.

It ain't normal for someone old as me to still be doing that."

"I saw a television show once about a girl who had trouble reading, but she was very smart."

"That's not like me; I ain't so smart." He hit himself in the head and stuck his tongue out at the same time. "See, something's wrong."

He looked so silly I couldn't help laughing.

"You play too much — that's why you have trouble in school," I said. "Come on, Bird, composition time."

He dictated to me and I wrote. "My future plans are, I want to sing and dance and act and have a good time in life."

"Bird, you know that's going to make Barker mad. You supposed to say something serious."

He stared at me with his round eyes, and I expected any minute for him to cross his eyes or make a funny face, but he wasn't joking.

"I am serious. Actors, and singers, and dancers. Ain't they serious about what they do?"

"You better take out having a good time, then," I said.

"Why?"

"Because it ain't serious if you enjoy it. You gotta say something like 'I want to be a doctor so I can cure diseases. Help sick people' — something necessary."

"Actors, singers, and dancers ain't necessary?"

"If someone is laying down sick as a dog, who do you think they gonna call, Bird? A doctor or a singer?"

"Well, the singer or actor make you forget how bad you feel. The doctor remind you how sick you is."

"Bird, you just saying this to get on Barker's last nerve."

"No." He twisted around in the chair. "I mean what I say. That's what I want to be. Nothing else. Anyway, I hate everything else. Especially anything where I have to read or write. 'Cause I can't do them so good."

"You can do it when you concentrate," I said. "Now, Bird, say something that ain't gonna send Barker to ape city."

Bird dictated again: "I want to be an actor, and a dancer, and a singer because I'm good at all of them. When you're an actor, you can be different people — not just one boring person. And you can make people happy. Make them forget their problems — Is it good so far, Doris?"

"Yeah, yeah," I said. "Just don't say nothing about having fun."

He picked up his pen and began to copy what I'd written for him.

He stared at me, but it was like he was seeing something else. "My mother took me to see a play on Broadway when I was little. It was the first time I saw real people on a stage — not like television. Mama said, 'They're real people, like you and me.' "

He continued copying while I started my homework. It was strange being in my kitchen, studying quietly with Bird. We heard my mother in the living room singing to Gerald all out of tune. Bird looked up from his paper. "My mother is gone," he said.

"Gone? Where?"

"Went to Virginia. My grandmother is sick. She has to take care of her."

"That's too bad. She's gonna be there a long time?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. I miss her. Just me and my old man in the house."

I guess it was hard on Bird to be there alone with his mean-looking father. His mother was a nice, quiet lady. I used to wonder how she could have a wild child like Bird.

We went over the reading assignment. I had to tell him almost every other word, but he tried hard. I remembered how patient Amir was when he helped Bird. Giving him a chance to figure out the words himself.

Then not making Bird feel bad when he had to end up telling him the word. Some people make you feel very stupid when you make a mistake. I treated Bird the same way Amir would've treated him.

After I practically read the whole story to Bird, he could recite it back to me like he'd read it by himself a hundred times. Ma came into the kitchen just as Bird finished. "How're the scholars doing?" she said, looking at Bird. "I didn't know you was so serious. And Doris, I didn't know you was such a fine little teacher."

She put on an apron. "You-all almost finished?"

Bird stood up before I answered. "We finished, Mrs. Williams."

"I'm not rushing you," Ma said smiling.

She seemed to like him, which surprised me. Ma could be so fussy sometimes — especially about my friends, but she liked Amir also.

I walked Bird to the door.

"Thanks, Doris." He looked down at his shoes. Here comes the shy person again, I thought.

"Doris, you know, you real nice. That's what I keep telling people."

"What people?"

He looked up at the peeling paint on the ceiling. "You know, people in the class. When they say you hinkty and stuck-up."

"I ain't thinking about them people in the class. Especially you-know-who."

He looked down at his feet again. "I'm going to do better in class so I can join the Drama Club. Why don't you join too?"

I shook my head. "No way."

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "Maybe you'll change your mind, huh, Doris?"

"I doubt it. I'll see you tomorrow, Bird."

I went back to the kitchen to finish my homework. Bird left a piece of paper that he'd started to write on, crumpled up on the table. I picked it up and read it. He had a nice way of printing, but when he copied he left out words and forgot to cross his t's.

Bird was funny. Sometimes he seem so silly and immature. But when he got serious, he was a whole different person. Sometimes he'd say things that were so intelligent I'd wonder if there was really a regular person inside of him. Amir would be pleased with me if I could keep Bird serious long enough to get him into the Drama Club and pass his studies for the year. But you never knew with Bird.