Billy Back in Baltimore

By:
The Urban Arts Leadership 2020 Cohort
This book is dedicated to the youth of West Baltimore. You are, and have always been, destined for greatness. Believe in nothing less.

Thank you to the amazing West Baltimoreans who have inspired Billie's Journey:
- Mrs. Susan T. King
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- Ms. Brenda Brown
My mother took me on a ride, the journey was not long.

And in the car, the radio played, an old familiar song.
On the way to Grandmas, we rolled down Pennsylvania Avenue.
We saw familiar faces, with oh so much to do.
We pulled on up to Grandmas, and I sprinted to the door. I smelled food wafting from the kitchen, because it was half past four.

She smiled when she saw us, and said:
“Come on in!
Go wash your hands Billie, so dinner can begin.”
I ran to the bathroom and did as I was told,

but as I washed my hands I saw something old.

Through the crack in the door,

Nearly three feet tall,

Stood a big brown chest at the end of the hall.
When I put on the dress it was crinkly and old, 
but I liked the way it made my skin look like gold.

The skirt felt stiff so I gave it a twirl, but just then, 
my sight was drawn to a flash of pearl.

I walked over to it and stretched out my hands. 
I pushed the lid upward so that it would stand.

When I opened the chest, I found an old yellow dress. 
That somehow still looked freshly pressed.

I picked up the dress, and it looked just my size. 
So I tried it on to see it with my own eyes.

When I put on the dress it was crinkly and old, 
but I liked the way it made my skin look like gold.

The skirt felt stiff so I gave it a twirl, but just then, 
my sight was drawn to a flash of pearl.
Down by my feet was an old pocket watch, with a silver button, and a luscious pearl top.

It looked worn and rusted, but I still pressed the notch, and a ticking came from inside the old clock.

I looked straight ahead towards the lid of the trunk, and saw a small poem that I tried to debunk:
"Take me to a place I know, where people smile and flowers grow. Let me see with brand new eyes. See no evil, see no lies. The Beauty that lives, beneath the shell. A magical place where stories dwell."
I read it aloud,

saw a great cloud,

full of bright colors

and sweet swinging sounds.

In the blink of an eye,

and as quick as a snap,

the colors blew towards me

and pushed me on back.
When I opened my eyes I looked at the watch,

and saw a change

on the hands of the clock.

The clock read 9am,

so I looked outside,

and to my surprise the sun

had just started to shine.
I turned around and saw a girl just my age, with a pink dress on and smooth finger waves.

But before I could get a word out of my mouth, she gasped and said: "Oh you must be my cousin visiting from down south."

"Mama told me you were coming, but you're here a little early. No matter, there's always something to do here girly!"
She grabbed my hand, and we ran out the door.
"My name is Billie", I said, as she pulled me across the floor.

"My name is Estelle but people call me Stella, it's real nice to meet ya. That dress is a real nice yellah."

But as we passed the kitchen, we heard a holler:
"I know I'm not standing here without a kiss from my daughter!"
"Sorry Mama," Stella said, "anything you need?"

She replied:"Yes flour, fruit, and some kidney beans."
Stella ran into the kitchen, gave her Mama a kiss, and grabbed the pencil and paper to write down her list.

"Make sure you're back before supper, so we can go for a ride!" her Mother shouted as we skipped outside.
Stella sat me down on the porch and as she wrote the shopping list, I saw some things that I just could not miss.

Her house was like Grandmas, but out on the street, were busy people, that started to greet, Stella and I, as if we were kin. "How’s ya sister, hows ya mama ’nem!"

I turned to Stella: “You have a lot of nice neighbors, all offering help, all offering favors.”

She said: “Billie, they’re not favors that’s just what we do, we have to look out for those, with skin like me and you.”

And why does that skin matter?,” I said caught off guard. “Billie, that skin is a part of who you are.
A few years ago Daddy served in the army, and after the second war, he moved up North, and wrote us that there was work galore! On trains, fixing planes, and even as a stevedore!

Stella grabbed my hand and pulled me along, and as we were walking she continued on:

“Do you know why we came here? We came for a new start! Mama said the South broke our families apart.

Too much work in fields and nothing to show. So that's why the rest of our family had to go.

A few years ago Daddy served in the army, and after the second war, he moved up North, and wrote us that there was work galore! On trains, fixing planes, and even as a stevedore!

We came up here to live, with Daddy and our kin, and when we got here, they took us all in.

When Daddy graduated college, we moved down the street, ya know, over where Smithson and North Carey meet.
So now we live with family and friends just like us, some came by foot, and some came by bus.

But each one of us who calls West Baltimore home, can tell you that we didn't get here alone."

“Hmm,” I said, “So you treat neighbors like family? Because they actually are?”

“No, silly!,” said Stella, “but they’re not too far.”

We all play a part in each other’s well being, so maybe that’s just what you are seeing.”

“So where are we heading?” I said out of breath.

She said: “We’re going to the market, you know Lafayette!”
So we kept on walking, and as we turned off Mosher, I saw a big bold sign as we got closer.

“What's that?” I asked Stella as we pulled to a stop.
“Oh why, that's the Royal! It’s a jumpin' spot!”

“The musicians rehearse here and play during the night. I hear seeing them is quite a delight.

The tempo is quick and the movements are fast; the musicians are at the top of their class.

Sometimes they take breaks during the matinee. I think Richie Bailey's supposed to play today!”

“Well who’s Richie Bailey?” was the question I raised. She replied, “he’s the smoothest cat that ever came this way.”
So as we moved closer, who did I see?
A man with a slick *konk* and shiny white teeth.

He walked up to us in his three piece suit,
tall and proud with his silver flute.

"Stella, Stella!" we heard him say from the crowd.
"There's only one person who can scream that loud."

"Hiya, Mr. Richie," Stella said with glee. 
Are you aware that your name is on the marquee?"

He said: "Why yes little lady I'm performing tonight."
"Oh, wow," Stella said, "if I sat in would that be alright?"

"Tuh," said Mr. Richie, "I'd like to see you try. 
Maybe in a few years..." was his reply.

"But in the meantime, let me show you a thing or two. If you keep practicing, on the marquee, will be you."
He passed her the flute and Stella squealed with delight: “Now push these two keys and blow ever so slight.”

Out came a shrill screeeeech, so I covered my ears.
Stella said: “Yeaaaaaaah...Mr. Richie, that might take a few years.”

He replied: “Well if it’s worth it you give blood, sweat and tears”
"Sometimes success comes over night, and sometimes it takes years."

"It took me so long to make it on this scene.
Performing here takes guts and self esteem.

So never give up, he said with a smile.
Even if the dream takes a while."

Stella said: “Well thanks Mr. Richie, but we've got to go
Oh by the way, good luck on your show!”

We turned around, and went up Pennsylvania Avenue,
because we still had things to do.
We walked through each aisle, and we took in the scene. But we couldn’t forget about the kidney beans.

Stella said: “We’re heading to the beans, so next is the flour. We really have to go soon, it’s almost been an hour.”
But as we shuffled along, taking in all the sites; from customers bargaining to all the scrumptious delights.

I saw a well dressed woman, walk past me. The satin of her lapels were truly something to see.
"Is it a special occasion?" I asked with confusion.
"What do you mean," Stella asked, "how'd you come to that conclusion?"

I replied: "Well everybody here is dressed to a T."
Stella asked: "Ain't that how people dress where you be?"

"Ah it's complicated." I said kind of quiet.
"Oh girl," Stella said "you're such a riot."

She continued: "Mama said we should always look our best, because we will always stand out from the rest. 
Put your best foot forward and good things will come. 
But no matter what you're wearing don't forget where you're from."
We continued marching along down Mosher Street, when I heard a sound bellow out that sounded quite neat.

“Watermelon watermelon, sweet red to the rind! Watermelon Watermelon!” with hooves clicking from behind.
We saw a red cart, with gold painted trim.
And a horse with ruby feathers bouncing on top of him.

Stella said: “Hear that call, and see those red feathers?
That must be Mr. Gold, he’s out in any weather.”

Here in West Baltimore Arrabers are on every block.
When it comes to feeding us, they’re our rock.”

As Mr. Gold approached, Stella greeted him excitedly:
“Good Afternoon Mr. Gold, any fruit for me?!”

He replied: “Good afternoon Stella, and how are you?”
“I’m doing well,” she replied “how about you?”
Mr. Gold said: "Well I’m doing fine, and who do we have here?"
“This is my cousin Billie!” Stella said with a cheer.

"Well, what can I get for you today?" he continued in a sing-song voice.
Stella exclaimed: "Watermelon!" as her first choice.

"Oh yes," she added "do you have cherries?"
"No my dear," he replied "only blueberries."

"Oh, and take some extra peaches for your neighbors too. They’re on their way out, but your Mama will know what to do."
"I almost forgot Mr. Gold," Stella said "how much do I need to pay?"
He replied: "For you, not one cent! As long as your neighbors get these peaches today!"

"Thank you Mr. Gold!" Stella replied.
We then took out our fruit, and sat on a marble stoop nearby.

"Does Mr. Gold do that often?" I asked with a start.
"Why of course," replied Stella "he has so much heart."

"He takes care of everyone whether they have money or not.
He always has our back, even if we're in a tight spot."

After we ate that delicious treat, we had to get right back on our feet.
We continued our journey to get the groceries inside. Stella's neighbors were out, and kids played on the curbside.

Stella pointed her finger and hurried her pace. Almost as if she saw a familiar face.

“Hey Mrs. Jameson!” Stella exclaimed. “She’s been my teacher since the 2nd grade.”
Mrs. Jameson stopped walking, and said with a smile: 
"How are you doing Stella? Haven't seen you in a while."

Stella replied: “I'm doing well! This is Billy, she’s my kin.”
“Well nice to meet you Billie, that’s a beautiful dress” Mrs. Jameson said with a grin.

Stella asked: "Mrs. Jameson, where are you going so quickly today?
There’s no school. Where are you rushing to on a Saturday?"
“Well,” Mrs. Jameson replied “I wait tables at Sampson's, where all of West-Baltimore comes to eat.”

She continued: “A better question is, will you have your homework done by Monday, when we meet?

This school year, I want you to do better. Sooner or later, you’ll be the neighborhood trendsetter.”

“Better than who Mrs. Jameson?” Stella asked. Mrs. Jameson replied: “Better than the generations that have passed.”
"Education has always been our people's key to success. You'll have a tool for the future that was once suppressed."

"Much like Thurgood Marshall, Juanita Mitchell, and Cab Calloway, with perseverance and persistence you'll be like them someday.

Finish school, find your passion, and your journey will go much smoother. These leaders and I came from Fredrick Douglass High school, and built a pathway to the future.

With education you will open many doors. With the proper tools the world is yours to explore!

“Thank you, Mrs. Jameson!” Stella said with a cheer. “I’ll have my homework done on Monday, I’m going to do my best this year.”

“Remember girls, you will always continue to grow. Make sure you tell your Mama, I said hello!”
With all of our groceries, we began down Mosher.
And with each step Stella's house grew closer.

Stella exclaimed with raw admiration:
“I love Mrs. Jameson! She makes me enjoy my education.”

Stella continued: “she's been teaching us poetry
and I think being a poet is the career for me.”

"We’ve learned about Zora Neal Hurston and Langston Hughes.
And if young Sam Cornish keeps working hard, he'll make big moves.”

I have written a few poems, though I have not shared them with many.”
Would you like to hear one I've memorized, I've written plenty!”

In awe of her passion, all I could say was: “Sure!”
Then imagine my surprise, when these were her words :

“Take me to a place I know,
where people smile and flowers grow.

Let me see with brand new eyes.
See no evil see no lies.

The Beauty that lives, beneath the shell.
A magical place where stories dwell.”
The ticking grew louder and just would not stop, so I found myself once again pressing the notch.

And before I could even say Goodbye, something strange caught my eye.

"I know those words!" I whispered aloud. And right then from my pocket, I heard that rhythmic ticking sound.

"Oh I'm sorry, was my poem too long?" Stella asked with doubt. "No, it was beautiful" I replied "you have nothing to be shy about!"
Full of bright colors and sweet swinging sounds returned that bright familiar cloud.
I opened my eyes and there I was,
in the familiar home I loved.

“Billie,” Grandma called, “Are you done washing your hands?”
I froze as I tried to understand.

It almost seemed as if time had stopped.
Because it was quarter to five when I looked at the clock!
I was in awe. Did I go back in time?
Did I really meet my Grandma, when she was in her prime?

I loved West Baltimore from back in the day!
I hope that my neighbors and I can care for each other that way.

I rushed to the chest to change out of my dress,
and to clean up any other sign of a mess.
"Billie..." I heard, as I stood there bewildered.
I can't tell Grandma, this story it's far too off-kilter.

I washed my hands and came downstairs and saw Grandma with a smile.
"You ok honey? You sure took a while."

And just when I thought my journey could not have been true.
Grandma winked and said: "By the way Billie, the fruitcake has always been for you."
The End