

Just Visiting

It is not an easy city to love, people told me. Though they didn't quite phrase it like that.

"There's no way in hell I'd spend one minute in that shithole," were the exact words of one American.

And I could see his point. It is not a beautiful city: a brooding mass of generic concrete, glass and steel flanked by endless rows of shabby red-brick rowhouses and scarred by the giant highways that whisk suburban Americans away from urban decay. And that is not, to be frank, the worst of it. The true darkness that has stained Baltimore's reputation permeates the city in a powerful cocktail of poverty and social exclusion, feeding a never ending cycle of drugs and violence. With almost one killing per day, on average, Baltimore records more than twice as many murders per year as London. With a population that is less than one tenth of the British capital's. It is a city where you will see small children playing in the rubble of demolished houses; where whole streets have been abandoned to rot and decay; where businesses as innocuous as steamed crab shops place their cashiers behind metal grills and bullet-proof glass, and where, in 2009, the mayor was convicted of embezzling gift cards intended for the city's poorest residents.

Yes, objectively, it is hard to argue with the man who called Baltimore a shithole. It is a city that has suffered; a working class town that lost its work, where the heavy industry moved out and the grit and grime stayed behind. And yet, when I moved here, I found a city that was somehow unbroken. A city that did not attempt to hide or downplay its problems, but a proud and resilient city that was unashamed of its past and prepared to fight for its future. And to do so on its own terms.

A city where the giant wheels installed to remove rubbish from the rivers draining into the harbour have been given googly eyes and affectionate names; where non-profit organizations have occupied the hulking monuments to industrial America that dominate the most desperately deprived neighbourhoods; where the most celebrated resident is a man who happened to die here while en route from Virginia to New York, and where the second most celebrated is a one-eyed matchstick man from a 1930's beer commercial.

There are pockets of beauty too, among the industrial debris and concrete boxes. From the endless book-lined balconies of the Peabody Library in stately Mount Vernon, to the cobbled waterside alleys that provide paths to America past. From the murals that transform intimidating empty buildings into welcoming works of art, to the repeating rhythms of rowhouses and the salt splashed quays, this city had got under my skin. I could see its problems, but I could see hope, I could see determination, I could see charm. And most importantly, I could see my place in it all. I had become part of this city, and this city had become part of me.

And then it happened.

I left. Pulled, as if by gravity, to another world. A world that I had also loved, but a world that seemed now somehow lacking. A world that seemed uptight, that lacked vibrancy, that was, well, grey. It took me years to realise that there was nothing actually wrong with this old world; that the problem was with me. That I was missing something.

I can still visit Baltimore, of course, and I do. I am here now, sitting on a bench overlooking the harbour. It is a scene that I have seen a hundred times before; that I can picture with my eyes closed. The sunlight sparkling on the water beneath the downtown skyscrapers; the little boats scuttling between the waterfront neighbourhoods; the stars and stripes fluttering overhead. Not much has changed, it seems, but I know that everything has changed. I may still be the same person, and this may still be the same city, but we are both older now. We have both grown and been transformed, subtly but unmistakably, in the time that we have spent apart. Our lives, once so intimately and absolutely entwined, have diverged.

A woman sits down on the bench, making small talk in that way that friendly Baltimoreans do.

“Are you visiting from overseas?” She eventually asks.

I pause, a wave of memories washing through my mind: of people and places; of friends and food; of laughter and loss. Of a life I loved and left behind.

“This is my city,” is what I want to tell her. But I know that that’s not true. Not anymore.

“Yes,” I say. The only thing I can say. “Just visiting.”