

Baby's Smile Out-Guns *The Wire's* Baltimore Stereotypes

by Joe Lapp
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When my wife told me she had business in Baltimore and I would need to entertain myself and my six month old son in the city for two weeks, I was worried.

What would I do, I wondered, to protect my baby from all the drug pushers, crazy cops, corrupt politicians, and psychopathic murderers who I knew ruled Baltimore's streets? Because the popular HBO show *The Wire* is a documentary series, right?

Despite growing up in a run-down, projects-dominated area of Washington DC's east side, I always considered Baltimore even more ghetto than my own District 'hood. And a recent can't-stop-watching viewing of all five seasons of *The Wire* in my current home of Accra, Ghana, hadn't done much – no matter how fictitious the street violence it showed – to dispel the "Baltimore = ghetto" equation echoing in my head.

I resolved to spend a lot of our September 2012 visit in the hotel.

True-to-TV, one of the first I-can't-stand-this-hotel-room-any-longer excursions my son and I took out into Baltimore turned very *Wire*-esque.

Following tourist guide recommendations to visit Lexington Market – great crab cakes! see the "real" Baltimore! – my stroller wheels were nearly under the market's facade when I stopped short. There, on the market's doorstep, a white cop was punching the daylights out of a black man. I gawked till the handcuffs came out. Then I strolled my son the heck out of there.

"Wow," I thought, "all that ghetto rep is *actually true!*"

But it didn't take me long to start noticing that, beyond the skid row stereotypes, the nickname Charm City isn't simply tourist-veneer hype.

For starters, nearly everyone I passed smiled at my son – and he smiled back. Many even paused to gush, "What a cute baby!" Any parent knows compliments like this go straight to a daddy's head, and soon my noggin swirled so full of baby-

praise it didn't have room for the Baltimore ghetto-prejudice I had brought in my mental luggage, all the way from Africa.

It helped that my hotel sat pleasantly next to the upscale Charles Street strip. The street's restaurants turned out to be so good even my California-cuisine, foodie-wannabe wife started singing Baltimore's praises. Waiters didn't quite take our baby, like many do in Ghana, and entertain him while we enjoyed dinner, but he did just fine watching September baseball and flirting with all the charming Baltimoreans at tables nearby.

But the best part of being in Baltimore with a baby was all the great destinations toward which my son and I could point our stroller. While my wife attended to business, we rolled all over town.

You should understand that, in my home city of Accra – the capital of the West African nation of Ghana – there are no parks, no sidewalks, and traffic is chaotic. Which means my son and I spend a lot of our day inside.

To us, Baltimore was a paradise of modern infrastructure. Parkland with grass! Smooth sidewalks! Drivers who stop so a man and his boy can cross the street unhindered!

I couldn't believe how easy it was to get out and see the city. Throw the kid in the stroller, grab the diaper bag, and we were off. We strolled over to the Thames Street Oyster house in Fell's Point, got artsy at the American Visionary Art Museum in Federal Hill, and slurped milkshakes from Potbelly's in the Inner Harbor.

Our favorite activity became rolling down to Preston Gardens Park, where I'd savor a Jack and Zach's sausage sandwich while my boy smiled at the friendly park attendant (there was a park attendant!). It was a little slice of heaven, and no drugs or police in sight.

When we tired of strolling, we could always hop on the free bus – a modern marvel that finally convinced me Baltimore was nothing like the cracked-out nation portrayed in that *Wire* TV show.

The first time I rode this complementary coach I had already boarded when the driver asked me to break down my borrowed stroller. In a moment of rising panic, I realized I had no idea how to do this. While everyone on the bus waited,

I held my son up on a seat with one hand and with the other struggled vainly to fold my strolling contraption.

An outgoing kid, my boy started fiddling with the sweater-hem of the stoic woman next to him, begging for attention. I was getting red-faced. And the stroller still wasn't down.

Then a shirt-and-tie type jumped up from his seat. "I have one of these at home," he said. Pushing some hidden lever, he had that thing folded in five seconds flat.

Further charm from a city I was rapidly falling in love with.

By the end of our stay, even Lexington Market had redeemed itself. Our stroller finally made it to those bustling aisles without incident, where I munched mouth-watering crab cakes and wondered who in the world eats crocodile steaks.

Afterward, taking my groaning stomach away, there stood the same tough-looking cop I had seen clobbering his arrestee a few days before. (For you *Wire* fans, he looked just like Herc.) As we walked past this macho man-maimer I heard him say – no lie – the words that had come to define my father's-eye-view of Baltimore, "What a cute baby!"