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Viewing the City Through a Broken Prism

The city of Washington, D.C. attracts swarms of tourists every year; as Americans, the District is the one city that truly resonates to all of us. Not everyone will recognise Cincinnati's the Son of Beast or Graeter's shops or the city of San Francisco's cable cars, yet for many Americans, Washington's icons - buildings, events, and institutions - are instantly connected with this city as being the belonging of *all* of us collectively as Americans. Who but the most unenlightened in the United States would not recognise the Capitol Building and its majestic aura which only radiates clearer as the sun sets? At the National Cathedral, we Americans may all feel communal awe at the stained glass and perhaps at once repulsed and intrigued by the gargoyles who guard it. Even the most cynical among us have a childlike curiosity rekindled the moment we set foot in the authoritative Library of Congress. There exists no other place that has held more conflicting partisan energies than the fun Freedom Plaza; in addition to being near the location where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. recorded his "I Have a Dream" speech, a cursory Google search shows that it has been a favourite gathering spots to protest virtually anything: taxes, teacher layoffs, and that evil, damaging policy idea that is extending marriage rights to the homosexuals.

All of these landmarks are featured prominently in the formulaic novel *The Lost Symbol* by Dan Brown. Brown's protagonist, Professor Robert Langdon, a scholar at Harvard, too believes in the charisma of the city. As he lands in the District from his home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the narrator observes, "even from the air, Washington, D.C. exuded an almost mystical power" (Brown 25). I definitely agree with his assessment - especially with my love for trains and politics being rather obvious - yet as a wheelchair user, my specific perceptions of the city vary greatly from Brown's repetitive descriptions of its landmarks. Still, I am excited to bring you what I'm sure will be a great commercial success, *Crippled Capital*, which aims to juxtapose my dorky views of the District with Brown's rambling recreations and produce a disabled-friendly tourist guide.

As a bibliophile, I was deeply concerned that I would end up refusing to leave the Library of Congress. Yet after a few hours, I actually left (if only because it was getting dark soon). In chapter 46, Brown notes that the Library of Congress houses "over five hundred miles of shelves - enough to stretch from Washington, D.C., to Boston," yet he notes that everyday, it expands and catalogues over ten thousand new materials (Brown 251). He plainly states that it represents America's commitment to knowledge (Brown 251). These are all accurate observations, albeit perhaps a little redundant and flowery at times, and I hold that the Library of Congress is a treat to visit for any tourist, whether you're an avid reader or not.

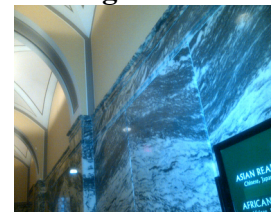
The library is divided into three buildings - Adams, Jefferson, and Madison - and I somehow inadvertently visited all of them due to a combination of geeky excitability and poor navigation (not to mention abysmal lighting in the tunnels - at least in some parts). I was chastised by a librarian for trying to take pictures, but I was able to get a picture of a hallway. Forgive me as photography is not a skill I possess, so the photo at right (see Figure 2.1) is

slightly lopsided and of poor quality, as I used my BlackBerry. I'm sure they won't be getting any sort of Pulitzer nominations -- at least not for my photography!

Aside from the predictable details about the library being full of books (really? who would have guessed?!), Brown crafted an elaborate escape scheme with Langdon and his trusty sidekick, Kathleen Solomon, that involved a conveyor belt in the Adams building. To my great chagrin, I could not find this super-cool conveyor belt and allow my inner five-year-old to play (whee!), but perhaps you can! The tunnels are barren, except for the signs marking directions to buildings and where you can get a reader card -- and a "road sign" segregating pedestrians and equipment. I suppose if you have a scooter, you could use either "lane", although it's probably more prudent to stick with the pedestrian side. Again, the lighting is rather poor in some areas, so I would recommend bringing a small flashlight if this is an issue for you; no area of the tunnels is completely dark to my knowledge, though.

I took this opportunity to look up my favourite book, *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell, which I find the time to reread every year and have favourite chapters (3, 22, 62, and 40, if you were wondering). In addition to adoring the careful architecture of the story and generally loving epics anyway, I really love this book on an emotional level. I read it shortly after the close deaths of my mom and uncle. As my family was unravelling in a mortifying and stressful way, I took solace in the characters of the epic: Ellen O'Hara's quiet yet firm management of Tara; the weakness of Wade, Scarlett's first son; and the altruism and purity of Melanie, just to name a few. It doesn't hurt that my sister was named after Scarlett (my dad's idea; Sarah was to be her name originally), and that everyone in the family is expected to read it at some point. On a scholastic level, *Gone with*

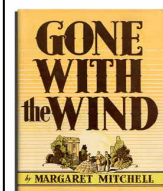
Figure 2.1



the Wind taught me that to truly appreciate literature -- or, indeed, any art -- the reader, viewer, or listener must pay keen attention to details. Because of reading (and rereading) this magnum opus, I learned that every artist creates a stroke with careful deliberation. This book (in addition to my *siddurim*, of course!) has gotten me through quite a lot, and I'm forever indebted to the late Mrs. Mitchell. See Figure 3.1 for the book cover. If you've not yet read it, I encourage you to do so! It is well worth the time.

I had the great misfortune of going to the National Cathedral as deluges started to pour into the streets of Washington. I could not really make out the gargoyles that well, and actually paid \$40 for an umbrella, which I'm slightly embarrassed to admit. I did see the high altar and stained glass, but that was all I could maneuver around to see. I can't really comment on the similarities of my views on the Cathedral and Brown's, although I am disappointed that I could not get to the Sanctuary (or, as Mr. Brown would style it, the *Sanctuary*). Be kind, and look quickly at the photographic evidence of me being totally, totally soaked (see Figure 4.1). All in all, this is fun, but it takes much more time to get around, and a lot of the prettier places in the building aren't wheelchair accessible. For future reference to any Gallaudet student stuck in the rain at the Cathedral, a Yellow Cab ride back to campus costs exactly \$16.00.

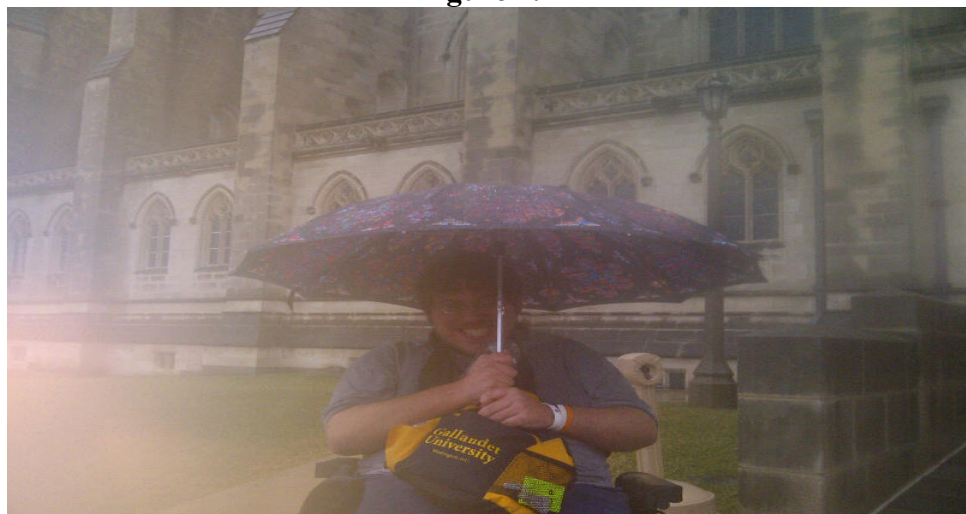
Figure 3.1



Then there is Freedom Plaza. If you aren't involved in some sort of protest, it's really quite dull, and not the treasure hunt paradise Mr. Brown says it is. The actual map part isn't accessible by wheelchair (if it is, *I* couldn't find it). To be frank, I spent quite a bit of time - maybe too much - analysing Langdon and Solomon's Metro route. On page 377, Brown says they disappear down the stairs into the Metro Center station. However, the nearest Metro station is Federal Triangle, which is a lot more efficient to use, especially if you're busy running from the law.

There are other issues with their route, too, but I don't want to bore you. The trek

Figure 4.1



to the Freedom Plaza is rather arduous if you're a wheelchair user; most of the curb cuts are more like steep hills - one of them on 16th Street was too high for me to get on. I can't remember the exact route I took to get onto the plaza, but it is quite stressful, and I'd avoid it if possible. For what it's worth, I do have photos - not only of the Freedom Plaza, but by an even cooler (and more accessible) DC voting rights display -- pictures at the end.

It is my sincere hope that my kvetching about "accessibility" issues and Dan Brown's repetitive writing has not turned you off from visiting the District. As someone with a disability, you just have to plan more, take alternate plans, and suck up to people more. It's a cruel reality, but it's still reality.

