

Spring Break 2011

By Mike Bailey

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I've been struggling how to begin telling the story about Deanna and me taking our 16 year old grandson on a Caribbean cruise – during the height of “Spring Break.” Some might ask (actually, a lot did), “What in the world were you thinking?”

Actually, this story started four year ago when we took all our kids and grandkids, except for Justice, on Royal Caribbean's “Freedom of The Seas” cruise ship for a 7-night Caribbean cruise. At the time, Justice could not go with us and Deanna & I promised him that we would take him on a cruise one day to make up for his missing out on that cruise.

Last year, Justice told us he though it would be a good idea if we took him on a cruise for his 16th birthday. We agreed and soon, our great cruise was all planned out and booked (almost a year in advance). Since his birthday falls just before Christmas, we thought we'd wait until spring time and if his school let out for spring break, we'd go then.

Justice was primed and ready to go the minute he turned 16. He finally gave into the notion (fact) that he would have to wait until April to go cruising. As spring time approached, he talked constantly about “going on a cruise for Spring Break” and how cool that would be. Deanna and I were still out in la la land and had yet to focus on the words or implications of what traveling during that time would really mean.

April 2 finally arrived and we were packed and ready to head to Florida. Prior to travel day, we had enjoyed shopping with Justice and getting him a few things to take with him ... like a new black suit, black shirt, and bright lavender tie that matched my black suit, shirt, and matching tie. We decided to go formal with our own style.

With the Suburban packed to the limit, I left a seat up in the back for Justice to ride on and soon he had carved out quite a comfortable position to travel in – stretched out and asleep. As we left the Atlanta area and headed south on I-75 for Florida, we knew we were going to have a busy time with traffic as we were driving straight through to Cape Canaveral Florida in one trip – 515 miles and 9 long hours away.

The Interstate was jammed packed with cars full of people headed south. I think every kid that had a car that lived north of Atlanta was on the road with us and going on Spring Break. There were times when traffic was so heavy that we were only moving along at about 40 miles per hour.

About the time we crossed over the Florida line and stopped at the Welcome Center, Justice finally woke up – all rested up and ready to go. As we went into the Center, I noticed that he was still wearing his favorite shoes – a pair of soft, floppy, worn out moccasins. D and I just looked at him scooting along in them and laughed and prayed that he didn't trip and fall because he constantly was walking on the sides of them, letting them just flop on his feet, whatever.

Hours later after we had finally escaped the clutches of the Toll Monsters that surround Orlando, we were headed over to the coast and our destination at the Radisson Inn there about one mile from the cruises ship terminal.

If you ever go to the Cape by way of the Florida Turnpike, Orlando, and then the road over to the Cape, you will feel like you have been caught up in some sort of "Toll Booth Nightmare." It seems like there is a toll booth every 45 feet as you go from one roadway to another before finally escaping the money grabbers. After we paid our last toll, we noticed that just one mile down the road was another huge toll plaza under construction.

When it was first built, the "Bee Line Expressway" was just that – a fast trip between the Cape and Orlando. Now with at least 7 toll plazas and more on the way it seems, they ought to call it the "Snail Trail."

After 10 hours on the road, we finally crossed over the bridges connecting the Cape to the mainland and were immediately thrust into cruise mode as we started seeing signs for the cruise terminals and finally, we could see the ships themselves tied up at the docks.

Our hotel was a welcomed site after a long drive. Even though we had stopped a bunch of times to let D get out of the car and walk a bit, she was worn out and I was not too far behind. Having slept most of the way down, Justice was all rested up and roaring to go. After we finally found our rooms -- building layouts are like a giant puzzle – we relaxed a bit before heading over to the restaurant in the hotel for dinner.

The hotel had a great pool area and it was packed with people. We found out that our reservation for a shuttle bus over to the cruise terminal in the morning had been lost and that the earliest they could take us over would be 3 PM. There was no way we were going to wait that long. Heck, by 3 PM, D and I would already be on our 2nd or 3rd "Welcome aboard Coco Loco."

I called the local AAA Cab Company and they said they would pick us up at 10 AM. The main reason I chose this hotel was for the shuttle service and you could leave your car parked at the hotel for free (cost over \$100 if you park at the cruise terminal).

Anyway, we had a great dinner and then went back to the room to watch some TV before calling it quits and getting a good night's rest. The ride down from Marietta had been long and tiring. I can drive all day long on quiet back roads and never get tired but 9 hours on the Interstate – especially when it is bumper to bumper with high-speed crazy drivers – can (and will) wear you out.

Sunday morning found us in the middle of a full blown Chinese fire drill as the hotel was emptying out with hundreds of guests like us that had stayed there before catching one of the cruise ships docked over at Port Canaveral.

People were jammed all over the lobby area and out front as they were checking out and then trying to catch a shuttle bus or a cab, whatever, over to the cruise terminals. The shuttle buses had huge trailers attached to them so they could get all the passengers and their cruise luggage over to the terminal in one trip.

Right at 10 AM, the cab we had ordered up (lots of people had also done this versus trying to deal with the crazy shuttle bus thing) and we were soon loaded up and headed for the cruise ship.

To say that Justice was awed by the sight of the Freedom of The Seas as we approached it in the cab would be an understatement. Heck, it even awed us and we have already sailed on it. This class of cruise ship is so large and no matter what you read about them, or see pictures of them, you do not truly get the “picture” until you are literally standing along side one and are immediately dwarfed and humbled by the sheer gigantic size of them.

D and I are Royal Caribbean Diamond level cruise members and as such, get extra perks like moving to the head of lines, etc. That and with D in a wheelchair, we were about the 3rd group of people onboard ship when they gave the all clear to load passengers.

It was wonderful seeing the awe and excitement on the face of Justice as we boarded the ship and made our way up to the Pool Deck. It was just 11:30 and the ship did not even sail until 5 that afternoon so we got to enjoy being on the ship for almost half a day in port. After exploring around a bit so Justice could start to see just what all a cruise ship this large provides, we headed for the Windjammer Café on the aft end of the Pool Deck.

I think Justice was looking forwards to this more than anything. Justice loves to eat (thank God I do not have to feed him all the time) and stories about the “Windjammer Café” had always been special to him and was high on his list of things to do or visit if he ever got to sail on a cruise ship.

When he actually saw the place and all the food that was there just for the asking, and found out he could come back through the line as many times as he desired, he was in heaven. I figured by the time the cruise was over, Royal Caribbean would lose money on this “Eating for 10 people passenger.”

Justice was rearing to try out the FlowRider ride on the stern of the ship as it was already up and running and kids surfing away on the fast moving waters. Of course the basketball court caught his eye right away and amazed at how big it was – full size in width and about 80% in court length.

Speaking of the FlowRider, we had a rude awakening waiting on us later on when Justice went about getting his “wrist band” that signified that he was registered to use FlowRider. Registered meant that the parent and/or guardian had filled out lots of paper work and signing their lives away promising to not sue anyone if the rider got hurt.

The first stumbling block we encountered in this little side show started with the attendant at the FlowRider control station asking us to see the letter we had authorizing us, the grandparents, permission to take Justice out of the United States! Say what?

We explained we had no-such letter, only a letter signed/notarized by his mother that we had permission to act on her behalf in the event of medical emergencies involving Justice. “Sorry, that won’t do” was the attendant’s response.

To make a long story short, we had to get a ship’s officer involved to get the whole mess settled and Justice was finally issued his coveted FlowRider Wrist Band.

He was in – one of the elite. We noticed throughout the rest of the cruise that all the teenagers onboard proudly displayed all the wrist bands that they had accumulated for all the various things that required one.

Around 1 PM, we made our way down to Deck 6, starboard side forwards (right hand side) to where our room was located. Justice knew that the rooms were small but I think seeing one in person amazed him. When he saw that his bed folds up into the ceiling, he was amazed and thought that was the coolest thing ever. Then, when he pulled the curtains back and saw our huge balcony with table and chairs, he was blown away.

After cleaning up a bit, we left the room and continued exploring the ship. When Justice saw how huge the Royal Promenade Area is in the middle of the ship, he was really blown away. It even messes with my mind every time I see it. Being almost 500 feet in length and about 80 feet wide, the Promenade overwhelms your senses in that it fools you into believe you are strolling down some fancy street in a bustling city somewhere.

Restaurants, fancy bars, ice-cream parlors, high-end clothing stores – it has them all. On some nights, the ship’s crew staged elaborate parades with people in all sorts of fantastic costumes. Bands and musicians play there at various times of the day and all in all, it is always a “happening place” to be and to just stroll along and enjoy the sights and sounds.

Before heading back up topside, we checked out the Royal Casino. D and I saw lots of slot machines that we recognized and were already looking forwards to playing them. Just outside the Casino is the Bolero Bar that also had a small dance floor. A small band was already playing some great Latin music and out on the dance floor was an elderly couple gliding around the dance floor in perfect time with the music.

This couple, who we found out later when talking to them, was in their mid 80s and had been married 65 years. They danced every afternoon and early evening to the Latin rhythms that constantly filled the air with a sense of Dancing Away the Night somewhere

in South America. Every time D and I saw them, we smiled and applauded their loving efforts to dance and enjoy to the fullest their time together.

Back up on the Pool Deck, we marveled at the scenery around us. The Cape Canaveral area is a beautiful place. Over on one of the tiny islands near the bridge over to the mainland, there is a long sandbar attached to the island that must be the place to be if you have a boat. I have never seen so many boats jammed into one place in my life. However, even from where we were, we could tell that everyone over there was having a good time and enjoying the sun and warm water.

Looking over at the Disney cruise ship Dream tied up close to us, we could see the fantastic water slide they had installed up on their pool deck. This thing looked like a 4-foot diameter clear plastic tube that wound its way up and down, around and around with riders inside of it zipping along on rafts being carried by rushing water.

Down below on the docks, we could see all sorts of activities going on as the ship's crew worked with various vendors to load supplies on to our ship. I watched one lady arrive at the security gate that led onto the loading area on the dock in a pickup truck that was carrying cold drinks and peanuts.

She had to get out, was checked all over with a hand-held metal detector and then patted down. While she then stood there and watched, the security guard examined her truck, the load in the back and including looking underneath the truck with one of those mirror devices they use to see up under cars, trucks etc.

They (cruise line) take security very seriously and as a passenger with family onboard, "Thank you, thank you very much."

Later on in the day, we all had to gather on the Boat Deck for the mandatory life boat drill. I am not sure why, but you no longer have to show up wearing your life jackets. Even without them, it is still a crowded event and after hearing how to put one on in case of a real emergency, the All Clear signal was given and everyone was rushing off to begin enjoying their cruise -- it was officially now in progress.

Back up on the Pool Deck, the official "Sail Away" party was in full swing. Justice was really starting to get in the swing of things – hard not to do with great live music and laughter all around you – and asked if he could go back to the FlowRider area on the Sports Deck. With a reminder to be back at the room by 5:30 so we could get ready for our first dinner at 6 PM, we told him to go explore and have fun.

By 5:30 back at the room, he had already made about six new friends, plus run into some of his classmates at Walton High School back at home. He felt at home now and there would be no turning back now.

We had first seating for our evening dinner arrangement and soon we were at our assigned table in the main dining room and meeting our new "table friends." We fell in

love with Bob and Betty and Steve and Vicky. There was a setting for another couple but they never showed up the entire cruise.

Justice was impressed with the dinning room – the opulent surroundings, formally set table, smartly dressed waiters and assistant waiters – the works. He especially liked the idea that you could order not only what was on the menu, but select more than one entrée if desired. He reminded me of our grandson Garrett who on this same cruise ship four years earlier, thought he had died and gone to heaven when he could order anything he wanted off the menu.

After dinner, we wandered back up to the Pool Deck and while we settled in watching the movie “Grease” on the huge outdoor screen, Justice took off to go join his new found friends some where. They all hung out at either the full fledge fitness center, the FlowRider, the basketball court, or one of the other places onboard primarily for teenagers only.

Bed time came quick tonight – it had been a long day. About an hour after we had hit the sack, Justice came in and called it a night also. I think he was sound asleep one second after he climbed up into his Pullman Bed and hugged his pillow.

Yes, it had been a good day.

Monday morning found us steaming through the beautiful clear, blue waters of the Caribbean. Today was a sea-day and our first port-of-call, Labadee, Haiti, was not until bright and early Tuesday morning.

After finally getting Justice up out of the bed, we made our way up to the Windjammer Café for breakfast. This would be the only breakfast we all three shared together as after this morning, Justice was on his own schedule to come and go. However, that schedule did have two major exceptions.

One, he was to be back at the room every evening by 5:30 so as to get ready for our 6 PM dinner (which he had to attend) and two, he had to be back in the room by 1 AM to be in compliance with the ships’ rule that no one under the age of 17 could be out and about on the ship unless in the direct accompaniment of an adult.

Sea days are just down right lazy, easy going, and carefree days. I love them. While Deanna usually sits around a pool somewhere and reads one of her favorite books, I wander around the ship taking pictures and checking out all the bars. I feel obligated to make sure that all bottles of beer sold are of the highest standards and as evening time approaches, to also start verifying that all glasses of Merlot sold are of the same high standard of excellence.

A friend of mine once told me that after I finished my tour of the bars onboard, I probably could not tell the difference between a good beer and a bad home-made one if my life depended on it. That well may be true, but what is important is that I am duty

bound to appear to be honestly carrying out such important responsibilities with class, calmness, and a steady pace.

Tonight was our first formal dress night onboard ship. Justice and I could not wait to get all dressed up in our matching outfits – all black with bright lavender ties. I must say, that after we got all decked out in our formal gear, we were two cool looking dudes. It was a hoot and I enjoyed seeing Justice having a good time and enjoying the evening at dinner all dressed up and afterwards when we had our formal pictures taken.

While Deanna I went to a great live show in the main theater and afterwards started contributing to the ship's personnel 401K pension plan in the Royal Casino, Justice took off with all his friends and disappeared into the night. Since we were in a closed, safe environment, we felt good about just turning him loose and letting him be free with his friends. He knew all the rules and I am proud to say, we trusted him enough for him to be on his own. Besides, he knew that I would kill him and throw him overboard if he broke any of the rules. : -)

Tuesday morning found us gently entering the lagoon area that surrounds Labadee, Haiti. The peninsular of land that we were headed for on the north coast of Haiti is owned and managed by Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines. It is about a half mile in length and maybe 200 yards wide at its widest point. However, for its size, it is a virtual paradise -- white sand beaches, palm trees, great picnic shelters, paved paths to walk on, sports areas, water parks, a roller coaster, zip lines -- the works.

Before leaving the ship, Deanna and I headed for the Windjammer Café for breakfast. Mr. "I be partying till 1 AM" decided to pass on this and sleep in until we were ready to go ashore. I think breakfast on the cruise ship is D's & mine favorite meal time. After parking her at a table with a view of the ocean or land if in port, I take off and make her breakfast plate for her.

She never knows what I will select and it is a treat for both of us actually, to find something different each day. I generally stick to same basics – eggs, potatoes, sausage and I usually nip some of her fruit that I bring back for her. It is all just relaxing somehow -- no rush, no schedule – just pick and choose your food from a huge selection, eat slowly and enjoy the views and quiet conversations and a good cup or two of coffee and a huge glass of cold tomato juice.

After a great breakfast in the Windjammer, we headed ashore. They have built a brand new pier here and instead of having to tender over in small boats like we did when last here, you now are tied up to the dock and can just walk ashore. Soon we were moseying along one of the new paved pathways and looking for a place where Deanna could sit in a lounge chair and be in the shade.

After finding a good location and getting her set up. Justice and I headed for the gathering place for our ride on the zip line. When I say zip line, I am not talking about some single, maybe 300 foot long zip line. What I am talking about is five zip lines

parallel to each other that stretch from a tower on a mountain side that is 700 feet above the ocean to a landing pad over 3,500 feet away – the longest zip line in the world over water.

When we had first reached the ocean beach side of the peninsular (the other side is a calm lagoon) and Justice had seen with his own eyes just how long and high up the zip line was he was both excited and a bit apprehensive at the same time. However, after watching a few people go zipping by with their arms outstretched and yelling happily at those around us, he soon lost his fear and was ready to go.

We joined our group of 20 people and after being fitted with harnesses that match our weight and height, we headed over to the practice zip line. I've always said that if you could survive this ordeal – the walk over and climb (stairs) up to the jump off platforms and then the sudden, bone jarring braking maneuver to stop you after a FAST, steep, 250 foot zip line ride – then you would find the 3,500 foot ride an enjoyable wild ride over the ocean.

Soon, we were all harnessed up, attached to the practice zip line and just dangling there as we received our last instructions. Justice listened intently to our guide and all the instructions he was giving. I am quite sure Justice paid more attention to this “lecture” than any he had ever listened to before, especially since he knew that his safety was depending heavily on how he conducted himself during the zip line ride.

With a quick release of the locking pins, we were soon zooming downwards to the landing area just a short distance away. With a loud slamming, banging noise, we both came to an abrupt halt as the braking devices above our heads crashed together and stopped our descent.

Laughing like crazy, we both headed for the beat up 4-wheel drive trucks that would take us up to the top of the mountain where the real zip line started. After all of our groups finished their practice runs and was loaded up into the trucks, we made like a safari convoy and headed for the mountain top. Soon, we left the back gate area of the property and started following an old washed out dirt and gravel road up the side of the mountain that over shadowed the entire peninsular.

Justice was in heaven as he loves 4-wheeling in the mountains and was totally enjoying our rocking, bouncing ride up the mountain. When we reached the top where the huge steel jump off tower is located, he began to get a real sense of just how high up we were. After we got out of the trucks and then walked up the long ramp to the tower itself and then out to the edge where you start the zip line, he really got the shock treatment.

The view from the tower is absolutely awesome. Not only is the tower very high above the ground and trees beneath it, it is perched some 700 feet up the side of a mountain. We could see all of the long, skinny peninsular that stretched out far below us. We could see our cruise ship tied up on the other side of the peninsular and then the entire beach on the ocean side with hundreds of people and umbrellas dotting the landscape.

And then far away -- 3,500 feet away -- we could see the very tiny wooden platform built out on the rocky end of the peninsular itself. Justice was in awe of all that was around us (so was I) and soon it was our turn to harness up and begin the ride of a lifetime. I asked him if he was OK and his exuberant smile back to me said it all.

With that and a boastful yell of “Beat you to the bottom Granddaddy,” he was off the platform and zipping proudly to our destination far away.

Within seconds, I was off the platform and zipping along also – loving the fantastic views, the speed, the sensation of flying as I held my arms out to help control my decent and felt the warm, salt air blowing across my face and arms. For just a brief moment in time we were both flying high and loving every second of it.

As I zipped along on the long steel cable, I was immediately reminded of the last time I did this. Four years ago, my daughter Ashley slipped off the same launch tower – her about 3 seconds before they released me. We had been told that if we laid back and held our feet together, we could faster but because the wind was picking up, for us not to zip that way.

I could see Ashley ahead of me -- arms outstretched in what they call the star fish position to help steady you in the wind and slow you down a bit – and I could hear her laughing with excitement. I laid back, pulled my feet together and within a second or so, I had caught up with her and went zipping past her all the while yelling at her for being a slow poke.

I can still hear her laughing and screaming back at me, “Daddy, they told you not to do that!”

Anyway, with a gentle braking of the zip line brake devices, Justice and I both came to a halt on the landing platform and our wild zip line ride across the ocean was over. If we could have turned around and gotten right back on, we both would have done it in a heart beat.

We made our way back to where Deanna was located and saw that she was not a happy camper with her lounge chair arrangement. We packed up all our gear and headed for the sports area of the beach near where the roller coaster ride was that Justice and I had tickets for later on that morning.

Sitting under the shade of the beach side pavilion near the roller coaster ride was a chair made for Deanna. I call them Charleston chairs and some folks call them Adirondacks chairs. All I know is that they are comfortable as all get out and with a small table sat in front of it to prop her legs up on, Deanna was a happy camper. She had the chair, the shade, her book, and a fresh Coco Loco from the bar inside the pavilion.

Justice and I left her and made our way over to the roller coaster ride. This ride -- German designed, made, and operated by the manufacturer's German representatives -- is unlike any roller coaster I have ever been on.

Each car is individually free to roll on its own and the braking of the ride once it starts its wild down hill ride, is 100% dependant on the primary rider who holds on to two braking levers for the entire ride. Each tiny car -- looks like an overgrown snow sled with a seat back -- can carry two people jammed tightly together with the front person sitting between the rear person's legs.

Soon, our car was headed up -- straight up -- the very steep side of the same mountain where we had just been to start our zip line ride. In fact, when our roller coaster car reached the very top of its climb, I noticed that it was actually right by the parking lot where we had departed our truck ride from the zip line.

That momentary glance of recognition was soon replaced with fear as our little car started its very quick and wild ride down the mountain. All I could think of was "God, I must have been crazy to have signed up for this!"

Twisting and turning, the downwards track weaved back and forth across the face of the mountain for a fast and exhilarating ride down the side of the mountain, Justice could see the "Brake Now" warning signs before I did and would scream out "BRAKE GRANDDADDY!"

With brakes squealing and wild laughter thrown in for good measure, we zoomed downwards and soon we shot past the STOP NOW sign and came to a grinding halt. The ride is fun, it is wild, it is scary, and is not for the faint of heart. If you don't brake, your day might get a bit depressing as they haul you off on a stretcher.

Laughing like crazy, we climbed out of our tiny car and ambled down the off ramp like we were veteran roller coaster riders. While we might have been smiling and giving boisterous high fives, I think we were both saying quietly to ourselves, "There ain't no way in hell I am ever getting back on that crazy thing!"

Returning to the pavilion where D was camped out, I immediately ordered myself up several adult beverages while Justice took off and headed for the volley ball nets on around the beach from us. Within minutes, he made friends with several guys and gals and then they all starting playing volleyball. Ten minutes -- from knowing no one to making 10 friends for the rest of the cruise and getting up two teams to play volleyball.

The food courts in all the picnic shelters were now open and within minutes D and I were chomping down on grill cooked hamburgers, hot dogs, and French fries. We watched Justice playing volleyball as we ate and just enjoyed the whole scene around us. It really is a beautiful place here, no doubt about it.

Soon Justice and some of his new friends showed up and after they all had gotten something to eat, we decided to head back to the ship and enjoy the rest of the day there. Besides, it was past noon already and Deanna likes to take a nap around 1 for an hour or two so we said our good byes to Labadee beach and went back onboard ship.

Back onboard, we all did our own things. While D rested up in the cabin, I wandered around the ship taking a few pictures and making sure that all the beer at the various pool-side bars was still up to standards. Justice took off to be with his friends either up on the basketball court or around the FlowRider watching people getting dumped.

Most mid-days followed this same basic routine, whether we were in port or it was a sea day. As D's nap time ended, I would always be back at the room with a plate of cookies, cheeses, and fruit from the Windjammer Café plus a bottle or two (small individual glass full size) of wine and we would sit out on the balcony and kick back for an hour or so just taking it all in and enjoying our quiet time together.

On this day as we started getting close to sailing away, I was high up on the sports deck looking back down towards Labadee and seeing how deserted everything was becoming. Whereas just a few hours earlier the beach and paths were crowded with hundreds of happy visitors, the scene now was almost depressing, lonely, and sad.

I watched (with my telephoto lens on my camera) a group of ten or so people playing on the beach and in the water while a few stayed in their lounge chairs. They were determined to get every last second of beach time in they could before the signal was given for all passengers to return to the ship.

I do not know why it bothered me so to watch this. The beach area was now almost totally deserted – covered in a lonely sea of empty chairs. Everyone was gone except for them -- like they had been left behind and they did not know it. I wanted to call out to them, to warn them that we were leaving. Finally, sensing that they were all alone, they gathered up their belongings and started running for the dock and the safety of our ship.

Now all the chairs were empty of happy beach goers. All the wave runners were parked at the docks and the small tour boats were returning their passengers safely back to the mother ship. Within minutes it seemed, all was totally quiet and motionless -- like a painting – with all the laughter and smiling faces gone forever.

Now only the sounds of the wind and surf pounding hard against the rocky coast reached my ears. Even though it looked lonely and lifeless now, Labadee still looked beautiful there in the late afternoon sun -- resting up I guess, for the next ship that would arrive for a fantastic day in a tropical paradise.

Our evening meal with our dinner companions was great as always and Justice was bubbling over with excitement as he talked about what all we did that day. Hearing him, seeing him proudly telling others what a great time he had had that day made me feel good inside.

Another round of watching a great live show and playing the slots in the Royal Casino completed D's and my night. Justice was off with his friends and having a ball. Each night, I told myself that "I am going to lie here on the bed and watch TV until he comes back to the room."

Yeah sure -- I was snoring (per D) in 2 minutes and she turned the TV off and would speak with Justice when he quietly slipped into the room each night just before curfew set in.

Wednesday morning found us slipping into a new port – Falmouth, Jamaica. On our last cruise, we had docked at Ocho Rios. Falmouth is a small town further west on the north coast of Jamaica and is busting at the seams as it expands to support the brand new cruise terminal that is being built there.

As we slowly came into port and finally docked along side a brand new pier and terminal area still heavily under construction, we could see the faces of this old Jamaican town.

Close by, we could see the new face – the face of the future as the terminal area was a beehive of activity to support the growing economy based on being a key cruise ship port in Jamaica. Looking further away, we could see some of today's problems like the abandoned condo complex, just an empty concrete shell of failed dreams sitting out on a peninsular of land and then the tent city and shacks of the poor on the outskirts of town.

Then we could see Falmouth's past as we saw her beautiful old stone churches and brightly colored government buildings, etc., all showing that she was a proud city, even though she was small and poor.

Justice was rearing to go ashore – almost like a pilgrimage -- to see the birthplace of one of his favorite singers, the late Bob Marley, the "King of reggae music." After a quick breakfast in the Windjammer Café, we all headed for town.

Within the new cruise ship terminal area were hundreds of local vendors set up selling everything you could think of that related to Jamaica. Justice was almost overwhelmed by the vendors and all of them hawking their wares. He and his buddies had seen a taste of these while at Labadee and had walked through the craft area set up by locals there but that was a controlled environment.

Here at the cruise terminal area and then especially when we left the fenced in area and started wandering around in Falmouth itself, he saw just how aggressive some of the vendors could really be. To be honest, this sort of thing bothers the heck out of Deanna and me also. Some times, it can become unnerving, almost scary.

However, with his grandmother leading the charge, so to speak, he got into the buying spirit while we were still there in the terminal area by first watching how she started haggling with a local vendor over the price of a wooden face carving that he had picked

out for his brother Garrett. He just stood there and watched with a look of amazement on his face as he watched a professional haggler almost make a local vendor cry and give away the item for sale just to make her go away and not influence any other potential buyers who might be watching all this.

Then he spied a cool t-shirt – large, multi-colored one with a picture of Bob Marley on it – for himself and bantered a bit with the seller to get the price he was willing to pay for it. Feeling good now about buying things from these vendors, he started looking for a souvenir for his mom and soon found a neat looking beach bag for her.

As we wandered around in town, I could see that Justice was not too keen on this part of our tour around town. While some things were quaint and beautiful around us and even the weird marching parade of people dressed up in animal costumes were interesting and great to look at, there were clearly visible areas that were not so good.

You know things are bad in an area when you see a policeman standing with a loaded shotgun cradled in his arms outside the door of a local bank. This sight did not sit too well with Justice (me neither for that matter).

Anyway, one of the things that we had been looking for was a sun visor hat for Deanna and by now we had wandered about eight blocks away from the terminal area. Just as we were getting ready to turn around and head back, Deanna spotted an outdoor stand down a hill from us that sold all sorts of stuff, including what looked like hats.

As we started down the hill, I immediately realized that we had run out of tourist around us and told D that I didn't really like that. About that time, a young man looking drugged out and wearing shabby looking clothes approached us walking in the opposite direction uphill. Let's just say he looked frightening. However, to our surprise he very quickly pointed at D in her wheelchair and made signs with his hands to her and then to me to stop, turn around, and to not continue into the area where we were headed.

That did it for us – as we immediately turned around and made a beeline for the cruise terminal area.

A few minutes later found us back safely inside the terminal area and watching two crazy guys in clown costumes doing magic acts. The military band that we had seen and heard earlier when our ship was being tied up at the pier came marching back right through the crowds and it was fun listening to them and seeing them marching around in formation moves to entertain the crowds.

We continued to wander around a bit, checking out more souvenir stands, and finally bought some Blue Mountain Coffee for a dear friend of D's back home. We then found some special Tortuga Rum Cakes & Spices a couple bottles of Wray & Nephew's Rum Cream for friends and family back home.

What amazed us was the price for the coffee. It was unbelievable how much it varied all over town – from as high as \$65 U.S. to as low as \$15 U.S. – all for the same 1 pound bag from the same company. Like the old saying goes, “It pays to shop around and know what things cost!”

We finally ended our shopping spree by settling in at a table with an umbrella and enjoyed a margarita at a tiny booth called Margaritaville. Jimmy Buffett would be proud :-) Not only did they serve up some great Margaritas but low and behold, D spotted hanging on a nail at the bar window an honest-to-goodness sun visor hat – embroidered with “Margaritaville,” no less, across the bill.

With that she exclaimed, “My problems are solved – got my gifts, my coffee, my hat – I’m a happy tourist!”

We noticed that the waitress and the bartender in the stand itself could care less about how old a potential drinker might be. The waitress kept after Justice to “buy a drink.” We saw the bartender sell Margaritas to kid after kid – money on the counter, drinks poured, no questions asked.

Their actions did, however, answer a question we had – “What is the drinking age in Jamaica?” “Five Dollars.”

Soon, we said our goodbyes to the terminal area and went back onboard ship. While D settled into the cabin to take her afternoon nap, Justice headed off to be with his friends and I carried out my usual afternoon tour of various pool bars to make sure the beers were still OK.

Later on, I returned to the room with a plate of cheeses, fruit, and cookies and as we munched on that while enjoying a glass of wine, D and I sat out on the balcony and watched all the goings on down below us.

As I mentioned earlier, the cruise terminal is still undergoing a major build and we enjoyed seeing how some of the workers were carrying out their work orders for the day.

Oh, we saw lots of workers actually working and making meaningful progress but at the same time, we noticed that there were an equal number of workers pretending to work and some who didn’t even bother to do that – they just leaned up against a wall and slept.

One guy even covered his face up with a rag to hide his identity while he curled up in a box to shade him while he slept up on the roof.

Our evening meal was great as always and we enjoyed listening to Justice tell the others at the table about what all we had done that day in town and especially the part about the guy who told us to turn around and go the other way.

We all had tickets for the ice show that night but D and I knew that Justice was probably going to “not make it” because he and his buds had already been by the room and all were excitedly talking about all what they were going to be doing that night. Sure enough, they got to the ice rink to late to get in but were sorry they missed it. “Yeah, sure ... :-)”

However, D and I thoroughly enjoyed the show. It still amazed me to no end that here we were, out in the middle of the Caribbean Sea on a cruise ship and were sitting at a huge ice skating rink watching a spectacular show as all the skaters in beautiful costumes royally entertained us.

A quick pass through the Royal Casino closed out another great day for D and me and soon the quietness and comfort of our beds back in our stateroom greeted our two tired bodies. Right at 1 AM, our adventurous grandson returned from another night of fun with all his new found friends. It turned out that one of his friends (his parents) had rented out (reserved) the FlowRider for an hour of private time and lessons just for them.

Early Thursday morning, we approached the harbor at Georgetown, Grand Cayman Islands. Since we knew that you have to tender in here to reach town, we were in no real hurry to join the mad rush of people trying to get ashore on the first few boats. While Justice got in a few more winks, D and I headed for the Windjammer Café for our usual morning ritual of totally enjoying a quiet, stress free breakfast as we worked on our plan for enjoying the rest of the day.

Justice finally joined us and we went topside to watch our final approach into the harbor. The cruise ship Horizon that was tied up next to us in Falmouth was also coming in with us and soon we were at anchor with three more ships – Holland America’s Ryndam, Carnival’s Conquest, and Royal Caribbean’s Grandeur of The Seas.

With five cruise ships in port, we knew it was going to be crowded in town so we made our way down to Deck one and soon we were aboard our tender for the short ride to the docks in Georgetown, This was Justice’s first tender ride and he thought this was the coolest way ever to get ashore.

Georgetown is a beautiful place – one of our favorite ports to visit. I think this is because it is noticeably clean, safe, and everyone speaks English. After walking around a bit in the terminal area, we headed out into the town itself and just started wandering around. Of course we soon found ourselves in a jewelry store – who would have thought – and D was thoroughly enjoying the air conditioned cool air while she shopped for new pieces to add to her Charmed Memory bracelet.

After a thorough search, she settled on two green colored charms to add to her bracelet. The colors were beautiful – representative of the lushness of the tropics that we were enjoying. Heading back out into the hot sun, we continued our walking tour of Georgetown.

Justice said he liked this place a whole lot better than Jamaica. He was noticeably more at ease as we walked and laughed and joked a lot as we toured the old town. He really loved this old pickup truck that was parked on a side street that was all painted up as a Tortuga Rum Company delivery truck, complete with a load of wooden rum casks in the back.

As we approached the waterfront area again – looking for a place to eat lunch – we ran across a beautiful rooster strutting around an alley way who was sort of watching over his family. Chirping loudly were about seven or eight tiny chicks looking for something to eat while being watched over and lead by their mama – an absolute beautiful hen in her own right. Sitting on a wall ledge close by was a huge lizard watching all this.

What struck me the most by all this was how life goes on, beautifully some times, in the strangest ways and places. Here we were in the middle of a bustling town crawling with people, boats, cars, honking horns, and strutting around like they owned the place was a proud papa rooster and his entire family.

We found a great restaurant on the street facing the harbor and after walking up to the second floor where you could eat outside on a covered deck, we settled in for a long, leisurely lunch. After ordering up some adult beverages for me and D, a huge coke for Justice, we settled in on ordering cheeseburgers for me and Justice and a Conch Fritter platter for D.

We had a great view of the waterfront area of Georgetown and enjoyed watching all the goings on while we enjoyed lunch. I noticed, as did Justice, that all the ships in port used local vendor tender boats to get their passengers ashore, that is, all except the Ryndam. Holland America cruise ships always use their own motorized life boats when they arrive at a port that require tender operations. Their color schemes – international orange top over snow white bottoms -- are easily recognized in any port that they might visit.

Our great visit was brought back to a sudden dose of reality when the waiter brought me the check -- \$95 dollars for two hamburgers and a seafood platter and a couple drinks!

It was approaching noon time so we headed back to the docks to catch our tender back to our ship. Safely back onboard, Justice took off to be with his friends and while D headed for her afternoon nap, I once again toured the ship with camera in hand. I was pleasantly pleased to once again find that the quality of beers sold at the various pool-side bars were still up to their usual high quality.

I went out to the literal bow of the ship, accessed via Deck 5 (the Promenade Deck which allows you to walk around the outside edge of the entire ship in the shade) and took several pictures of the harbor scene from that vantage point. Close by was one of the fun “Pirate Party” ships where everyone on board was having a good time drinking, singing, walking the gangplank, jumping off the sides and then trying to get back on board.

I then carried on with my walking loop around the ship and then back up topside for more pictures. After D woke up from her nap and we had our usual wine and goodies out on

our balcony, I took her back to where I had stood on the bow of the ship. Sure enough, in true “Titanic Movie” mode, she stood there with her arms raised and spread out like she was “flying across the waters” just like the central character in the movie had done.

We continued our afternoon walk up on the pool deck watching a few brave kids demonstrating their surfing abilities on the FlowRider and then settled in near the main pool area and listened to some music and enjoyed a couple of Coco Locos.

After another great meal in the dining room with our table partners, D and I spent an hour or so in the Photo Gallery on Deck 4 looking for pictures taken of us since coming aboard. Justice had long since departed and was somewhere with all his friends. He had become quite attached to one young lady and tried to spend as much time as possible with her.

After finally selecting the pictures we wanted, I wheeled D into the Royal Casino next door and set her up at the slots she liked to play while I went back to the room to get rid of all the pictures we had just bought. Returning to the casino, I picked D up and off to the theater to watch another great live show. Afterwards, we came back to the casino for a few more spins of the slot machines before we called it a night and headed for our cabin.

As with all the nights before, we left the TV on for Justice to turn off when he quietly sneaked back into the room at 1 PM sharp. I am not sure about other cruise ships but this one rigorously enforces the 1 AM curfew for those 17 and under. I guess it is for the best and in reality, I think it is a wise move.

A friendly shout of “Buenos días mis amigos” greeted us as we entered the Windjammer Café Friday morning.

We had pulled into the port of Cozumel, Mexico earlier and the Café greeter was just trying to get us into the mood for the port we were visiting. Each day, he dressed according to the port we were visiting and it was always a surprise to see what getups he could come up with – from light blinking sunglasses, long, fake dreadlocks – the list was endless to totally describe his complete outfits. All in all, he made for a great start on each day as his cheerful personality made you just want to smile and go have fun that day.

Justice was anxious to go ashore here because he had said of all the places he really wanted to see on this cruise was Señor Frogs in Cozumel. He of course had seen all the great cruise pictures from our last cruise on the Freedom of The Seas and this place had really caught his attention.

We were tied up at the pier along side another of Royal Caribbean’s great cruise ships, the Voyager of The Seas. When we departed our ship and went out onto the pier and headed for shore, it felt like we were walking in a narrow but very deep canyon. The

enormous size of these two great ships towered over us like gigantic metal monsters as we made our way off the pier.

After reaching the bright sunshine after passing both ships, we were greeted by the great music we could hear being played somewhere and all the bright colors of the wares for sale in the local terminal area. It was like a village – shops all over the place, brightly colored objects for sale and hundreds of cheerful, happy people wandering around and searching for great bargains.

Soon, we left the terminal area and made our way next door to the Señor Frogs café situated right there on the seawall by the harbor. The view from here of the ships docked right behind us, the shops next door at the terminal, swimmers in the pool right beside us and down in the water below us was quite a rewarding site.

We secured a table out on the patio by the narrow swimming pool at the edge of the seawall and after making sure our umbrella was not going to blow away, we settled in for a long leisurely visit.

Right off the bat, we ordered up a round of their signature “Yard Long Margaritas.” Of course the one for Justice was non-alcoholic but it’s cool all the same because the drinks come in almost 3-foot tall plastic glasses.

The saying around here is that Señor Frogs Café is close enough to the cruise ships so that you can drink by the yard and crawl back to your bed onboard ship.

As we found out last time we were here, that is an absolute true statement! : -)

Anyway, this time around we measured our yard intake and stayed on our feet. The wind was quite brisk and I spent a lot of time holding onto the umbrella post as we had already seen the set-up next to us come crashing down on the people and the table next to theirs.

We ordered up burgers and other good stuff to munch on and thoroughly enjoyed our time there at the café. What always amazes me is what all you can see at this particular Señor Frogs – especially when it comes to people and or the tattoos that some people have. Maybe it is the yard tall drinks that bring them out but you can always see something totally weird while here.

One guy -- might have been a gal, we were not really sure – that sat next to us had this wild, crazy face-like drawing on his arm. Not trying to be mean but let’s just say it was ugly enough to freak you out if you looked at it.

After lunch and a few rounds of “yards,” we started saying our goodbyes to Cozumel and headed back to the ship. I say started because you can not go to Señor Frogs and then not go through their T-shirt/gift store. After visiting it and getting a few more T-shirts, we finally made our way back to where our ship was docked as Justice was anxious to catch

up with his friends where ever they might be, it was D's nap time, and I was late for my daily pool bar beer verification routine.

Safely back onboard, and no, we did not have to crawl back, all afternoon plans – Justice with friends, D napping, and my beer quality reviews -- were put into motion and carried out.

It seems like every time we are in Cozumel, there is a lot going on all around us. As I walked around topside, I was amazed at what all I could see like the high-speed cigarette boats – those high powered, ocean going race type boats – zooming all around the harbor area. Also, there were the usual parasail gliders high up in the air being pulled by speed boats and a host of other types of water crafts that were ferrying people all over the place. I could even see the coast of Mexico itself and some huge structure near the beach by Playa del Carmen over 11 miles away.

After D's nap, I arrived with a great plate of cheeses, fruits, and cookies from the Windjammer Café, plus a few mini bottles of wine and we settled in out on our balcony to enjoy the quiet time together and to watch what all was going on around us.

Across from us on the Voyager of The Seas was a couple out on their balcony taking pictures. What was interesting about this was that the woman had a small, white doll-like figure that she held out in front of her and in the field of view of her camera so that with every picture she took, the white doll would be in the snapshot. I guess that was so he could tell (prove?) to all his buddies back home that yes, “he did go on a cruise with mommy and daddy.”

As the afternoon wore on and it came close to the time we were set to sail, I observed an event – a phenomenon – that I see just about every time we are close to sailing away from a port. I watched a couple leave our ship about 15 minutes before the dock workers started singling up all lines and our ship started backing away from the pier.

What amazes me is that the ship lets people leave that late. The rule is, “We leave on time, wait for no one, and if you miss the sailing, you will have to find (and pay for) your own way back to meet us in the next port!”

I would be scared to death to leave this ship this late – totally afraid something, anything might prevent me from being back on board in a just a few minutes. These people had all day long to go ashore but waited instead until 15 minutes before sailing away to do it. One word – idiots!

Tonight was another formal night so Justice and I again suited up in our all black outfits and D matched us with her beautiful black formal outfit. She had a huge ring on her finger in the shape of a cone flower that had colored petals on it to match the bright lavender ties that Justice and I sported. Together we were a class act! :-)

Knowing that tomorrow was a sea day, and nothing urgent happening to make us get up early, we visited several of the shops on the Royal Promenade after our dinner and also enjoyed a glass of wine at the Vintage Wine Bar before catching the show in the Arcadia Theater.

D and I always sat up on the second level (balcony level) because it had the best and easiest place to park a wheelchair and have a great view of the stage. We both love the live entertainment onboard cruise ships and all in all, the week's presentations so far had been OK. Oh, some are not for all tastes but collectively, they provide for a variety of first class attempts at entertaining a captive audience so to speak.

With the show over, we made a beeline for our favorite penny slots in the Royal Casino. For some reason, we did not find ourselves fighting (waiting a long time) for our favorite machines to be free. Maybe it was the economy or something but in general, we moved about the casino with ease trying to out wit the various penny slots we like to play.

By week's end, I think we came out about even on our gambling adventures. Besides, we both love it and with a drink or two close at hand, it is a pleasurable hour or two of noisy and visually exciting entertainment. Plus, every now and then you luck out and win big and that is just more icing on the cake.

We finally called it quits and ambled back to our stateroom. It was not all that big – OK size for typical ocean view with balcony cruise ship room – but most importantly, it was our home away from home. It was our room, our sanctuary, our quiet, clean, cool place to hide, rest, get cleaned up and get ready to start another adventure the next day.

Right at the stroke of 1 AM, I heard Justice slip into the room, get undressed and climb up in his bed. All was well – all were home safe.

Saturday found us steaming along on the beautiful blue waters of the Caribbean Sea and headed back to home port – Port Canaveral, Florida.

It was also my birthday – 69 years old and having a ball!

Breakfast was great as always again this morning in the Windjammer Café and while Justice slept in (so what else is new?), D and I enjoyed our usual morning ritual of her waiting to see what I had picked out for her for breakfast.

D loves fresh made omelets so I went to the “Egg Station” and gave the cook behind the counter my order. While the omelet was being prepared, I got her the bacon she likes, some croissants, butter, jelly, and some great looking potatoes fried up with peppers, onions, etc., and finished off her plate with a pile of fresh fruit pieces.

After getting her all situated, I got my favorites (scrambled eggs with cheese, sausage links, some of those potatoes) and with the coffee and tomatoes juice already brought to our table by one of the servers, we were all set.

After breakfast, we headed for the pool deck to just hang out and relax. This was our last day onboard and with it being a sea day, we knew we had all day to just bum around and not worry about getting off and on the ship as we would do if this were a port call day.

D staked out one of her favorite places on the pool deck where she was in the shade but could enjoy the music and other things going on around her. It amazes me how she can sit there in the middle of all this and read her book as if she were sitting in a quiet library somewhere. She told me one time on a cruise that it was easy – especially after raising two kids and then having grandchildren to enjoy.

Some time mid-morning, Justice stumbled by – just to check in and say that he was hungry – and then he was off to eat and then join up with his friends for one final day together onboard ship. He had become quite attached to his new friends and we knew that he was already dreading the fact that after tomorrow morning, they would all be gone their separate ways.

While D continued to enjoy her pool-side reading, I took off and wandered around the ship with camera in hand on one last inspection tour. It has always amazed me that no matter how many times you cruise or sail on the same ship, you can see or find things that you have never encountered before.

For example, as many times as I have passed by or stood in line at the Purser's Desk (Guest Relations), I had never noticed that the entire wall behind the counter was covered in all these fantastic medieval looking line-art drawings (10 in all) that were absolutely fascinating to look at.

We met Justice later up on the sports deck where he was scheduled to ride the FlowRider with some of his friends. Most of the time, the FlowRider is wide – set up for just one rider at the time. Every now and then, they divide it in half with an air-filled barrier device so that two riders could try their skills at the same time but not interfere with the other person next to them.

This is neat and all that but for some like Justice and his friends, it cuts way down on their maneuvering room to do lots of tricks, etc. Any way, he finally made his way to the top of the line and then boom – he jumped out into the upwards rushing waters with his boogie board beneath him and in seconds was zipping all around the tops of the water like a seasoned professional.

Sadly, the narrow area to ride/perform in hindered his abilities to really put on a show but he did great in the time and space that he had. Finally, after a few minutes, he made a quick turn and rode the rushing water up to the top and got dumped against the end wall – signaling to the next rider in line that it was his turn to churn and burn (and possibly crash).

We left him top side with his friends and went down to the Royal Promenade Deck to check out the fruit carving and ice carving exhibitions that were set up (and some still was going on). I am always amazed at the artistry and skill it takes for these people to do these things.

I do good to cut up a watermelon to serve to five people let alone carve out the face of a woman that looked like it was a cast statue. And then the ice carvers – holy cow – talk about skill and working under pressure. I imagine it would be difficult enough to start with a block of stone or wood and carve out a statue of a Dolphin leaping out of the water but to do that with ice is mind blowing.

With the stone or wood, you can take your time – even stop for a lunch break, take a nap, or call it a night, whatever – because your source material is stable and will be in the same shape or state just as you left it when you return. However, with ice, your modeling medium is constantly trying its best to melt and to disappear right before your eyes – even while you chisel away, let alone the damage done if you take a break.

After hamburgers, hot dogs, pizza slices, and French fries lunch, I dropped off D at the stateroom so she could take her nap while I wandered around the ship taking pictures and once again, verifying for the final time that all the bars onboard ship were all serving the same high quality of beers that I had become accustomed to testing. I am pleased to report that my final round of testing was a joyful success.

“Happy Birthday, Mike.” “Thank you, ah, thank you very much” : -)

The Men’s International Belly Flop Competition was being held at the main pool up on the Pool Deck so with a Corona in one hand and my camera in the other, I got up on a higher deck and positioned myself for a great view of all the festivities down below.

This event always draws a huge crowd on every cruise we have ever taken and today’s contest was the largest I have ever witnessed. Every possible place where one could sit or stand on two decks that could see the pool area was packed to the gills. If you came later, all you could see was the backs of people and hear the roars of laughter and exclamations as one crazy contestant after another did their version of a world class belly flop.

It was funny watching the contestants parading around and showing off in front of the judges before they finally climbed up on a 3-foot high stand and did their best to splash all the water out of the pool in a single, death defying, spread eagle flying jump. When they slapped the water, my body cringed in sympathy. I can’t image what it must have felt like to them.

Anyway, as usual, one of the skinnier guys won the event. Most newcomers to this event (contestants and viewers alike) think the 300 plus pound guys will win. What they do not realize is that the seasoned crowd (and judges) are most impressed by a very high jump off the stand, flying thorough the air, and hitting the water totally flat with a very loud slapping noise (and perceived as very painful so that it makes you shudder all over in

sympathy for the jumper) type jumps. These types always win and 97% of the time, it's the smaller guys that carry it off to perfection.

After the contest and wandering around a bit more, I arrived back at the stateroom with a plate of cheeses and fruit and a couple bottles of wine so that D and I could enjoy one last afternoon out on our balcony. After a few minutes, Justice popped by to tell us he was going somewhere. D told him to not forget that he had to come back later before dinner to pack his stuff (except for what he was wearing that night and home the next day) and not to be late.

With a "Yeah, OK, no worries," he closed the balcony door and was gone.

We wanted to get as much packing done before dinner as we could so we could go ahead and get our suitcases out in the hallway right after dinner for pick up later that evening. You know your cruise is coming to an end when you start seeing everyone's luggage starting to appear outside their stateroom doors. As the evening and night progresses, it all disappears and you will not see it again until after you have cleared U.S. Customs at the dock the next morning.

Anyway, D and I sat out on the balcony and enjoyed our last time there together as we talked about all the things that had happened over the past week onboard ship. Then disaster struck like a lightning bolt.

When I got up to open the door, it was locked! Justice in his haste to be with his friends, had closed the door firmly and then locked it as he had been told to do time and time again if he went out on the balcony and came back in.

Panic set in – what in the hell were we going to do? Believe me, without a crowbar or something like one, you are not going to force open one of these doors. I started banging on the balcony partition walls on either side of us hoping to catch the attention of the people they served. There was no response to our banging or shouting -- we were not getting help from either of the staterooms beside us.

About this time, D leaned out over our railing and looked both ways. While she was looking, a man appeared at his railing about five staterooms away and she hollered at him to help us. She told him we were locked out on the balcony and asked him if he could please find our stateroom steward for us.

Almost 15 agonizing minutes later, we saw our stateroom door open and our savior passenger come over to the balcony door and unlocked it for us. His first words were, "How in the world did you manage to do that?"

D's reply was, "16 year old grandson!"

"Say no more," he laughingly said as we walked through our room so he could leave. Before he left, he turned to us and said, "You open that fridge under the desk there and

take one candy bar, the steward will be here in 5 seconds to bill you for it but call 911 for an emergency, it takes them 15 minutes to find him!”

We all laughed at it but at the same time, it struck home because in fact it was the truth -- he called 911 on the ship's phone and it took 15 minutes to find our steward!

What was really strange was that just days before, I had been out on our balcony taking pictures and when I looked to my right, I saw this same man at the railing just staring out at the ocean, What caught my eye as I took his picture was the fact he was wearing very large gold ear rings in the shape of crosses. Maybe it was a sign -- who knows.

Oh well, live and learn. Of course by now, we both could have skinned our grandson alive but as the minutes ticked by, we started laughing about it. We went ahead and packed our suitcases (leaving out only what we needed that night and the trip home tomorrow) and placed them outside the door.

We left early for dinner so we could first visit the Diamond Lounge on Deck 14 one final time. Hey, free booze (any hard liquor drink, beer, or wine) is nothing to sneeze at on a cruise as these enjoyable libations are not included in the price of your cruise ticket.

Arriving at our dining room table about 5 minutes late (the Diamond Lounge visit was very pleasant), Justice was already seated there and was giving his grandmother the “You're late look” as he pointed to his watch and made hand gestures.

Her reply to him was, “You're DEAD!”

“What, what, what did I do?” was his worried response.

“You locked us out on the balcony, you turkey!” she sternly exclaimed to him but with a big grin on her face.

“No way!” he exclaimed. “Yes way!” she replied.

After all the laughter died down, D recounted the whole event to our table companions and it was funny as heck listening to her draw out the drama to an attentive audience.

Soon we were enjoying our final meal in the dinning room and jabbering away about all the fun we had the past several days together. The last meal on a cruise is always awkward because everyone knows it is the last one, that new found friendships will soon be strained to keep up, etc. But at the same time, all are also thinking about getting back home and returning to normal so it sort of balances things out.

After dinner and then enjoying the dinning room staff entertain us with a few traditional cruise ship songs, we said our goodbyes to our wonderful dinner companions and headed off to catch one final show in the theater and then a few rounds on the slots.

As we left the dining room, D gave Justice his marching orders for the night (time to be back in the room, we have to get up early in the morning, etc.) he took off to be with his friends. We knew this would be hard on him as he had really gotten to be really good friends with a lot of kids he had met onboard. We knew that with texting and Facebook, he would be able to keep up with all of them after we left the ship.

When we had finally called it quits in the casino, I went over to the cashier's cage to cash in all the "player points" I had earned since we came aboard. If you insert your Sea Pass card into the slot machine when playing them, you earn points as you play. Of course, the amount you have earned is directly proportional to how much you won and lost. Anyway, I cashed out with a genuine plastic, 3-D Slot Machine key chain holder!

By the time we returned to our stateroom, all of the luggage we had sat out by our door was long gone. We knew then that it would just be a short matter of time and we would be gone from our beautiful room on the stately Freedom of The Seas.

Five AM the next morning came fast. Since Justice didn't return back to the room until exactly 1 AM, we knew he would be dragging.

Being Diamond cruisers, we were able to get luggage tickets (color and number) that allowed us to depart the ship in the first wave going ashore (after the express people leave). If you elect to carry off all your own luggage, you can choose the express option and leave the ship first after docking. For some people, this is a great option but it certainly was not for us.

Anyway, we all got up and dressed for going home. With one final quick look about the stateroom, we gathered up our carry-on luggage and headed to the Windjammer Café for one final breakfast onboard ship. We were scheduled to actually leave the ship between 7:15 and 7:30 so we wanted to eat and then relax before they called our color and number to depart the ship.

After breakfast, D elected to stay in her wheelchair at our designated departure point while Justice and I went up on the Pool Deck for one final look around. We had actually arrived about 3 AM and had quietly eased into our berth there at the cruise terminal at Port Canaveral. It was just beginning to be light outside and the terminal area, the ship, and the harbor scenes all around us were magically beautiful in the early dawn light.

Soon, we were back down with D and then we heard our color and number called for departure. With a quick rush through U.S. Customs, we were past the first of two major hurdles that you have to endure to leave the ship completely. Customs always scares me – afraid they won't let me come back home – but the next hurdle scares me even more.

Baggage claim! Most of the time, you are let into a room the size of the largest airplane hanger you have ever seen and you have to search through 10,000 pieces of luggage all stacked up on its end -- row after row after row! We lucked out this time. They had

recently installed a luggage carousel type device (like the ones at the airport) so you can basically stand in one place and watch for your luggage to come by.

Low and behold, ours came out not 2 minutes after we had entered the claim area. I was impressed – it was only 7:40 in the morning and we were basically heading out the door and home. We quickly gathered up our luggage, found a porter, and were out the door to find the shuttle bus that would take us back to the Radisson Hotel so we could claim our car and head home.

As we rode the bus back to the hotel, we noticed how sad and quiet Justice had become. It broke our hearts to see him this way, but knew that with just a bit of time and a few calls, and/or Facebook messages, etc., he would get back into the swing of things and move on. We knew that would happen and that he would be OK, but we also knew from first hand experiences of our own, how lonely and sad he felt inside as the bus pulled away from the terminal area.

Seeing my beautiful black Suburban parked there at the Radisson Inn Hotel made me feel good and anxious to hit the road and return home. We were off the shuttle bus in a flash and after packing all our worldly goods into the Suburban, we said our goodbyes to the Radisson, the Freedom of The Seas as we drove back past the terminal area and Port Canaveral as we zoomed over the bridge and headed for I-95.

We had decided to take a different route back to one, avoid all the crazy toll plazas over near Orlando, and two, we love to travel by car and wanted to see more of Florida by going a different way home (at least so for the first 200 miles).

We reached I-95 and headed north to Flagler Beach where we picked up State Route 100 and followed it up and across Florida to Lake City where we picked up I-75 and headed for Atlanta.

The trip on FL 100 was great and we were so glad we had decided to come this way. The beautiful countryside and small towns just made for a great diversion to the monotony of the long Interstate travel that we knew was ahead of us.

At Lake City, we joined the parking lot headed for Atlanta. We thought I-75 was busy last week when we had driven down on Saturday to Port Canaveral. If there were four million cars headed south last week for “Spring Break” in Florida, then there were at least 16 million cars heading to all points north AFTER Spring Break!

I swear, you could run out of gas or have a flat tire at the GA/FL line and not have to worry about it until you reached your turn off, wherever that was – you would have been pushed at no expense to you the entire way! I have never, ever seen so much traffic on the road at one time.

While it was interesting that so many people were going home, it was also scary. Driving at 70 miles an hour in heavy traffic does not bother me but when it gets to be 70 mph, 3

lanes wide, bumper to bumper hour after long hour, it starts to get to you. People get tired, do stupid things, and get angry, scream, holler, and drive crazy, whatever.

All that came to a dramatic and traumatic event right before our eyes about half way back to Atlanta. For whatever reason, all three lanes of I-75 North were coming to a sudden stop. Some bozo in the left lane driving with their head up you know where “doesn’t notice this” and slams into the car ahead of him so hard that it made it go airborne and land on its side in the southbound lanes of I-75 on the other side of the concrete barrier.

All hell broke loose as other cars were hit by these two and traffic started swerving to the right to avoid colliding cars. Right in the middle of this melee was a Harmon Brothers charter bus carrying school kids from Gwinnett County (right by Atlanta) in the right hand north-bound lane.

To avoid crashing into the cars ahead of him, the bus driver swerved to his right and ran off the Interstate, down a slopping hill and then back up the side of an embankment that supported a bridge overpass at that point on the Interstate. The bus slammed into the concrete structure and then bounced back about 2 feet.

This is when it really got bad because the bus was now leaning dangerously to its left on the uphill slope. By the time we got up beside the bus, the driver was already out on the ground and being attended to by people out of their cars and helping. People were up on the bridge screaming at the passengers on the bus to NOT move for fear the bus would tip over on its side.

Over in the southbound lane, people were now up on the side of the car frantically trying to get the driver’s door opened to extract the people inside the car that had been sent airborne over the barrier wall. I could see their possessions scattered all over the roadway -- clothes, shoes, a camera, a laptop, sand buckets – it made me sick to my stomach. Someone’s fantastic vacation in Florida was now shredded apart and scattered all over the highway. I prayed all the way home that those in that car survived.

As we slowly drove by the bus, we could see all the frightened passengers onboard. Near the rear of the bus, a young boy was crying and was scared to death with his face smashed up tight against the window. The vision of that boys face still haunts Deanna. Just past the bridge and off to the side was one of the first cars hit when the original collision started.

After seeing the young boy on the bus, I was devastated inside. My mind was racing with all sorts of things like just 3 minutes earlier – three small, innocent, inconsequential minutes -- and that could have be us lying there on the other side of the barrier wall with all our hopes and dreams possibly shattered for life and scattered without cause or respect all over a busy Interstate.

After a few miles of driving slowly past all this and having time to calm down, I called Fox News (*5 on my cell phone) in Atlanta and reported the accident. I told them there

were no police or ambulances on the scene nor had we seen any on the way since we had left but with that bus about ready to tip over, could they use their resources to get in touch with the proper authorities.

About ten minutes later, we finally saw first responders and police heading south on the Interstate. Traffic had just gotten back up to speed when we could see miles ahead of us something burning (looked like it was on the Interstate) and traffic was coming to a complete halt. I was approaching an exit and at the last minute, took it and decided to find a way around this latest road block. Using the GPS unit built into my car, we found a route around all this and about 20 miles later, rejoined the cars on I-75 headed towards Atlanta, then on to Marietta and home.

To make a long, slow drive home story short, our drive home from Port Canaveral took about 13 hours versus the normal 8.5 hours. We were bone tired, we were safe, and we were home.

As soon as we got in the house, I sent an e-mail to Fox News in Atlanta to ask about the bus full of people since we had heard nothing about it on the radio. The news desk responded back that all had been safely removed with one having to be air-lifted away for treatment and about 12 taken to local hospitals but were all soon released.

I told them that I had photos of the accident if they were interested. They immediately responded back for me to please send them and for about two days, the four pictures that I took were used on their TV broadcast every time they ran the story.

Anyway, back to our cruise.

Deanna and I especially enjoyed the week that we got to share with our grandson and see him flourish in a new environment, grow stronger as a young man, make new friends, and grow to have an even stronger desire to succeed in life and to do the things that he wants to do.

As the week wore on, I began to realize how our time with Justice was being spent. As things worked out, we basically had him during the dinner hours at night and when we went ashore in the various ports we visited and then for the rest of the time, he belonged to the ship and all his new-found friends.

The cruise also allowed Deanna and I to relive in a very magical way, a lot of the memories that we created when just four years ago, we sailed on this same ship with our entire family, except for Justice, and visited the same countries as we did this time. We found ourselves constantly remembering something that one of us did or said on that cruise.

As I ambled around the ship on my daily sojourns while D took her naps, I felt like I was constantly running into ghosts from times past. I smiled inside and felt at ease for I could

see the smiles and hear the laughter of my kids, grandkids, son and daughter-in-laws, and Deanna as we all enjoyed a Fantastic Voyage of the Caribbean.

Spring Break 2011 on the Freedom of The Seas cruise ship with our 16 year old grandson was now a done deal. It was fun, exciting, and we all made memories to last us a lifetime.

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