

ACM Awards – 2011 Edition

Was it really 11 years ago already that we got to attend the 2000 Academy of Country Music Awards in Los Angeles? Newcomer Brad Paisley won that year for Best New Male Vocalist, and he's now a country music veteran who took the Top Male Vocalist prize in 2011. Someday, I'd like to attend the recording of another live awards show. Nothing beats the excitement in the air and participating in a live tv show taping where anything goes. And never in one place will you see so many super performances by a variety of outstanding performers – both from country music and also outside the genre. But my 4.5 kids keep me grounded, and I don't travel as much as I would or as much as I used to. So until the day when I can get back to a live country music awards show taping (and I will be in no hurry to go to the ACMs until they move it out of Vegas!), I will enjoy watching and voting along at home.

This year was a super show; I had a nice time watching it last night. And a surprise awaited me at the end...

Some highlights:

– Brad Paisley opens with a performance, and then he's joined by none other than – ALABAMA!! They were so awesome; this number really got my country blood pumping!

– Some unlikely duos performing this year:

Unlikely duet #1 – Jennifer Nettles from Sugarland and pop star Rihanna. Their duet made for an interesting performance. Not my favorite kind of music, but they sounded good.

Unlikely duet #2 – Country music sweetheart Carrie Underwood screaming alongside Aerosmith frontman turned American Idol judge Steven Tyler. The first song wasn't great; it was more for Tyler than Underwood, in fact, I thought it a waste of her

lovely voice. But their "Walk This Way" duet was toe-tappin' fun!

Unlikely duet #3 – Zac Brown Band and James Taylor. I'm really starting to enjoy the harmonies of the Zac Brown Band, and their performance with James Taylor tonight was thoroughly enjoyable!

– Probably the first time I've cried while watching the ACM awards – Darius Rucker's song backed by a chorus from the Lifting Lives music camp was incredibly uplifting and awe-inspiring! I loved every minute of it!

Overall, a wonderful show! Except one thing – where the heck was Rascall Flatts?!?

And oh yeah, that surprise at the end – Taylor Swift won Entertainer of the Year. No surprise there; if I had paid attention when I filled out my fan ballot and realized that the Entertainer award was fan-chosen, I would have picked Swift in a heartbeat. But I spaced and chose Miranda Lambert (still beat Hubby on the ballot 7-3, just sayin') for some reason. The real surprise came when they announced the nominees for Entertainer of the Year, and I actually found myself rooting for Taylor Swift – what was going on? I've never been a fan of Swift's music, and I hadn't voted for her, so what gives? My 6-year-old daughter was enjoying the show with me, and every time Taylor Swift came on or her name was mentioned, Sammie got SO excited. So I told her I would let her know when "the big award" was coming on, and you should have seen her face when Taylor Swift won – she cheered! It was adorable, and I cried. I cried at the ACM awards twice last night, what is wrong with me? Oh yeah – pregnancy will do that to you. Probably a good thing that I was watching from the safety of my own home.

At Least I Have No Regrets

Spring break is over, and for me it flew by- and it was wonderful. I had my concerns about being so tired and keeping 4 kids from getting bored and restless, and those fears mounted last week when I saw the weather forecast – 40s all week, scarce sunshine, and maybe even a little snow. I was especially concerned that spring break would be my own personal forecast to what summer break will be like because hard as I try not to, I have times where I dread the summer a little bit.

For one thing, there is a wonderful Christian camp that we've been hearing about from a friend, and we've been trying to let our kids go for years now, but it hasn't worked out for one reason or another. This year, it seems that the dates will work, but the fees are a little steep, and the 45-minute trip to the camp x4 (there-back-there-back for two kids) might hurt the wallet a little bit with the price of gas the way it is. Add to that a trip to Nashville Indiana with extended family – SO fun, but 8 more hours of driving, plus groceries and supplies to buy, plus 4 round-trips to South Bend Indiana, and I calculated my mileage from July 4-23 at 1388 – That's one thousand eighty-eight miles in 20 days. Factor in our van's crummy gas mileage and all the pregnant lady bathroom stops, and OUCH. But then I got to thinking about it, and I think I'd rather spend my July driving around the tri-state area than locked away in my air-conditioning with 4 rambunctious kiddos. As I said, the trip to Nashville will be lots of fun, and most expenses have been paid thanks to a generous Christmas gift. So what if I have to miss the 4th of July fireworks for one year (next year we do have to pick a different date though guys if you are reading this ☐ 4th of

July is one of my favorite holidays!). And the trips to South Bend mean that Grandma is taking the kids – so that means fun for them, and a break for us. So what if it's not all 4 kids gone at the same time anymore – that's just one of the small trade-offs for having such a large (wonderful) family. And I'm STOKED that the kids finally get to go to this camp – they are so excited too! So what if we have to leave Nashville at 5am just to drive the 4 hours to get Sammie there on time? But the main reason for optimism for summer vacation was spring break – it was awesome, and it flew by.

For me, the month of March dragged on and on, and I think much of it had to do with my prenatal dr. appointment on the 31st. I just could not wait. Part of it was excitement – this stage of pregnancy is tough in a different way than the rest of it because many of the changes are internal, and you have nothing to show for it. I spend my time looking up sketches of what my baby might look like these days, but unless you count fatigue, nausea, moodiness, or tears, there aren't any outward signs to get excited about – and no, leftover baggage from previous kids does not count as a “baby bump”. Also, I've been extra worried about this pregnancy – I can't put my finger on it, maybe it's that stupid stat I heard somewhere that keeps sticking in my brain – “1 out of 4 pregnancies end in miscarriage”. This is my 5th pregnancy, so that panics me. I wish I didn't read the news so much. Maybe the worry is because of how incredibly difficult this pregnancy has been on me (and my family) compared to the others. Whatever it is, I've been especially panicked, but I've been building a great relationship with my new doctor – she is very understanding and so much more of a problem solver than my previous doctor. But either way, spring break saw me at my prenatal, and everything looks great! Baby is measuring at exactly 12 weeks, right where s(he) should be. AND... I got to see her (him) dance!! The baby keeps sneaking us ultrasounds – I wasn't scheduled for one, but the heartbeat couldn't be detected (my understanding doctor warned me of this ahead of

time, or I would have panicked. Again.), so she took me into the ultrasound room. There, we saw baby on the screen, and my little 2-inch miracle was *dancing* – I saw her legs moving and everything! I keep thinking and saying “she” and “her”, but don’t place any bets – I’ve been known to be wrong about my children’s genders in the past – *before* they’re born, of course, sheesh.

So I took the kids to the zoo on Monday of this spring break, and last night I’m still on cloud nine from seeing my baby dance, and the more I thought about it, the more I realized that I could not resist going back to the zoo on the last day of our season’s pass. We aren’t going to renew because as much as I love the zoo, it feels like a waste to renew right before summer, especially when I’m pregnant and (probably?) won’t feel like going as much. And I know I won’t be able to go after my surgery for a month or so... So I took the kids to the zoo not once, but twice this spring break, and I didn’t even feel like I was going to keel over by the end of today, which means that my first trimester fatigue *might* be fading (afraid to get too excited). I even took an extra kid with me to the zoo both days, a gamble that paid off both times since we all had a blast – even if I was late getting Ellyn home today (that’s why I didn’t stop to chat Justj – I’ve been kicking myself ever since. I really wanted to see your daughters! But I was late, and you just don’t expect to run into a friend 60 miles from home so I was caught off-guard).

So yes, I missed the Chicago Cubs opening day game taking my kids to the zoo, and I’m proud of it! Nevermind that I was looking forward to that game for months. Hubby recorded it for me, and I watched it as soon as I got home anyway. And I’m telling you what, the Cubs did not play badly (except for Dempster – if I still cussed he would be on my you-know-what-list), but they lost. But as I said, they did not play badly, so there is MUCH hope for the season – you can’t tell anything decisive on opening day. Well, except for last year but we’ll

leave that out of it. But the best part is, I have no regrets. I can't imagine how I would have felt had I missed my last chance to take my kids to the zoo in order to watch a game where the Cubs lost.

Super decision on my part, and if this spring break was any kind of predictor for summer vacation, BRING IT ON!

A Language All Their Own

WOW – two posts in a row from me, what's that about? My kids are on spring break, and the older ones are playing with the younger ones, giving me some unexpected spare time. I wouldn't dare schedule a household project; everyone knows the magic would end and I would suddenly find myself in the middle of an undone project. Don't worry, I already know it's a fluke, and I don't expect it to last long. In the meantime, I enjoyed this video and wanted to share it. Almost makes me want twins someday. Almost.

I think the one twin got an idea about climbing on the kitchen appliances, and the other twin is telling him how he'd fall, get hurt, and how much mommy would yell at both of them. Whatever they're saying, they are adorable!

I Want To Be A Glass Is Half-Full Kind Of Person

...so I'll start with the Cubs. Because goodness knows in my own life, being an optimist is too exhausting. I wake up feeling crummy, determined to make the best of my day, only to have had to step in to referee not less than 10 fights before I even make it to lunch. And I'm not talking about MY lunch – that comes much later (if I'm lucky) after I've served up umpteen helpings, cleaned up infinite messes, and responded to various other distress calls. But the point is that at a time where I could really use my time and energy to focus on me and growing a healthy baby, much of said time and energy is wasted on what feels like mundane, pointless referring and the like.

But with the Chicago Cubs opening day mere HOURS away (ok, dozens of hours, but still countable by hours!), I came across the following article which did indeed fill me with cautious optimism – not for my own summer, no, for there is no doubt I'm going to feel like a huge pregnant balloon, warm beyond reason, lazy beyond doubt. I know that I will have 4 little kids to chase around, and I will have to pry myself out of my chair a little earlier in the chase if I'm going to have any hope of catching them to stop the trouble or keep them out of danger. The optimism isn't for me – it's for the Chicago Cubs. If you're a Cubs fan, read the following, and tell me

if you agree. I especially like the line that says, "...allow me to put on the ol' rose-colored glasses and search out reasons to be hopeful that 2011 will be a better year than 2010 for us Cubs fans. For one, it can't be much worse."

Excellent point, that. After all, I had to write off my Cubbies after watching what was the debacle they called opening day last year. Not that I ever tend to give up on the team, I am a Cubs fan after all, but well, if you saw them play, er um, "play" baseball on opening day of 2010, then you would agree. Check out the rest of the reasons for optimism here as written by Bob Warja for the Bleacher Report @ bleacherreport.com:

[10 Reasons for Cautious Optimism for the Chicago Cubs in 2011](#)

And GO CUBS!!!



Looking Forward To The Next One

Well, here we are only 2 months out from our last trip to Disney World, and I'm already wanting to go back. That's nothing new, it's an awesome place, but I'm also reading about

many changes taking place. Ok, so I'm not exactly planning the next trip (step one would be how to fit our family of soon-to-be 7 into the minivan along with a week's worth of luggage for a 20 hour drive), but articles like the following tempt me. Especially interesting: Disney's \$1 billion Next Generation project, which includes interactive line queues – they're adding things like an interactive mystery experience to the line of the Haunted Mansion attraction. And apparently they've already added interactive video games to Soarin' and Space Mountain, none of which I had noticed on our last visit! Maybe because we did the Fast Pass? That reminds me, Disney is going to try a new concept as part of the Next Gen project: guests will be able to book their ride times for various attractions from their hotels or from home ahead of time, drastically reducing or even eliminating the need to wait in line (and to see all these brand spanking new queue attractions?). Also something I missed this last time around: the new playground and interactive video games in the line for the Winnie the Pooh ride. Now where would they have room for that, I wonder? But no wonder that we didn't notice these enhancements; that ride normally has an over 40 minute wait even in the down season, so we don't usually indulge in it.

Lots of interesting changes and enhancements on the horizon, [check them out for yourself](#).

I Would SO Try This!!

In past summers, Hubby and I have been lucky enough to have all 4 kids watched by Grandma for an entire week. This gave us time for some kid-free fun together with just us, as well as time to catch up on necessities like work and sleep. For the past two summers, we've made a trek down to Cincinnati

for some FUN. We've been going to [King's Island](#), an amusement park in the suburb of Mason. Their VIP tours are quite reasonable, considering all the benefits you get (your own personal park guide for the day, all you can eat for lunch, and front of the line ride access, to name just a few!). We've been making a weekend of it, going to the world-class Cincy Zoo one day, followed by a VIP tour at King's Island the next.

I was on their site today, and I saw this cute little teaser video starring Don Helbig, the public relations manager at King's Island: the same guy who meets us by the awesome 5-minute long wooden coaster The Beast for our backstage tour, which is also included in the VIP ticket. Having ridden King's Island's wooden coaster The Racer over a whopping 12,000 times and holding the Guinness record for coaster riding, Don is fascinating to talk to. He made this video to unveil King's Island's new 2011 attraction – or so I thought.

So after seeing the video, I did a bit of internet searching, and it didn't take me long to find the attraction being unveiled on March 18; here is [your sneak peak](#):



The Windseeker is a swing ride, but it's going to suspend riders 301 feet above the ground, swinging at speeds over 30 mph!! Even though I have not been enjoying the height of the coasters in the past few years, I would try this!! Thing is, we won't be making it to King's Island this summer because buying a ticket to enter the park would be a waste of money for me this year – I am due with my 5th child in the fall! I'm not too broken up about missing the new ride or any of my old favorites; after all, I'd rather have a baby than a trip to King's Island a million times over, but for the record, I would try this ride!!

We're going to have to find something equally fun and pregnant-lady-in-the-summer-friendly to do this summer, but it might be a challenge – everything I can think of involves being outdoors and also lots of walking. Not only that, but since there are now 4 kids, Grandma wants to split their vacations with her into shifts during the Grandma week, meaning Hubby and I are down to zero kidless days. Oh well, there is plenty of time for that in about 20 years, right?!?

Jack Hanna, David Cassidy, Goats, Camels, And Live TV

I saw a link to this on Facebook, and it's hilarious – gave me my smile for the day! Watch chaos erupt on live TV in the 70s when Jack Hanna brings a gaggle of goats into the tv studio, and they run amok. The host, Bob Braun, has a great sense of humor about all of it, although the same can't be said for all of the audience members, especially those who end up with rogue goats in their laps! David Cassidy even has a hand rounding up the herd, and by the time the camel puts in his two cents, the host is practically rolling on the floor with laughter!

Why I Dislike Time Change

Just a few of the reasons why I dislike the time change, especially the “Spring Ahead” version:

1. LOSING AN HOUR OF SLEEP

2. Mechanical clocks can be reset, kids’ internal clocks cannot. I will lose an hour of sleep, and my kids will still wake up at the same time, which doesn’t bode well for the “fall back” version of the clock change. In the spring, the kids will still want to go to bed at the same time, no matter what the clock says – see #2.

3. Normally I would like having the sun out later into the evening, but with 4 kids who don’t want to go to bed until it’s dark, the old go-to-bed reply, “but it’s not dark out yet” can actually make sense until 10pm where we live. I both like having daylight until 10pm in the summer and dislike it at the same time – a conundrum for now, maybe something I’ll like better when my kids get older.

4. LOSING AN HOUR OF SLEEP (that hour is so precious, it’s on here twice)

5. There is a HUGE difference between 9:45pm and 10:45pm that I wouldn’t have noticed if not for the time change tonight. At 9:45, the night was young, I had time for my shower, some laundry, and maybe a quick tv show or two to watch with Hubby before bed. But before getting into the shower, I changed the clocks, and suddenly it was 10:45. Suddenly there is only time for the shower and maybe a quick load of laundry before getting to bed too late to really feel good tomorrow anyway. And no kid-free time with Hubby because (see #2). □

6. LOSING THAT HOUR OF SLEEP (so important, it needs to end the list)

Don't forget to set your clocks ahead one hour everyone, and forgive me if I chuckle at those of you who show up late to church tomorrow – maybe it will help me feel better about my tiredness!! ☐

Florida 2011 – Trip Diary – Part 2

Sunday January 16 – We drove over to Congo River mini golf to try to feed the gators they have there, which never works out because it's usually too cold in January for the cold-blooded gators to care much about eating, and this time was no exception. But we spent a long time just watching the gators and their habitat-mate turtles climbing around and over each other, getting in and out of the water – kind of like a free little zoo exhibit. My kids are too little to enjoy or let us enjoy playing mini-golf, so we went to Sizzler for an all-you-can eat lunch buffet. We spent the afternoon relaxing at the house so Hubby could watch the Chicago Bears game and the kids could swim, and we even took a dip ourselves at half-time. For dinner, we went to Medieval Times, which is a dinner show – it is SO fun!!! Everyone is seated around an arena, and the audience eats a Medieval-style feast while watching a show complete with horse, knights, and jousting. You are assigned a seat in a certain color section (we were green – note the crown in the picture below), and you cheer on your color knight in the jousting and games – it's a blast!!



After watching the knights duke it out, Grandma took the kids back to the house and we took Jamy on the extreme go-karts at Fun Spot. The track called The Vortex is wicked; you wind up and around 3 or 4 times until you reach the top, and it's strange to be up so high in a go-kart. But you don't really have time to think about that, because there is a steep drop down, followed by a couple of hairpin / bowl-like turns that you have to navigate as driver of the kart! Super fun, though not for everyone. We thought this is what caused Jamy's back injury that ended up plaguing his trip, but turns out it was something else. And we took our daughters on these go-karts later in the week – with helmets of course – and our oldest hated them and wouldn't let me use the accelerator; it was SO frustrating!! Our daredevil 6-year-old Sammie loved it though, and I found her to be a passenger more willing to go my speed – pedal to the metal!!

Monday January 17 – We ate breakfast at Sizzler at their breakfast buffet, and then headed out to Universal Studios as planned despite the dire forecast of rain all day, and the weathermen were not mistaken. It was like a monsoon when we arrived, and scarcely let up all day. Many of the rides at Universal are indoor, but Hubby and I did take a bit of a gamble (and lost) when we got in line for the new Rip Ride Rockit coaster. They had to shut the ride down when they saw lightning, and wouldn't you know it, we were first in line! After investing that much time waiting, we really didn't want to get out of line, but the kids were waiting with Grandma and

Jamy, so we called them to see if they were ok and able to stay dry. We waited probably about 20 minutes, and it was fun to try to read the different hand signals and procedures the staff was doing to see if we would get to ride soon or not. Finally, they opened the coaster, and we were first – test rats. This coaster looks more intimidating than it is, mostly because the first lift is straight up, face pointed at the sky, your back is parallel to the ground. Other than that, it's a pretty lame coaster; the best thing about it is that you get to choose a song to listen to while you're on it, and your song choice plays in the speakers behind your head. I chose "Devil Went Down to Georgia" which made a very good coaster theme song, but the coaster was so tame that I was able to do some air-fiddling along to the song. I heard Hubby beside me rocking out to Gloria Gaynor's I Will Survive, and that seemed like fun too, but I wasn't about to wait in line again for this ride. The other thing that stank about the Rip Rokit is the rain – riding a coaster in the rain is not a lot of fun. The rain pelts your face; it hurts and you can't see anything, so it takes a lot of the fun out of it. And oh yeah, this is how soggy we looked when we were done riding:



Most of us made the best of the rain; after all, where we were from in Ohio the weather was sub-zero, so rainy 50's still felt good to us. Our oldest was not a happy camper, however, and she soon grew tired of walking around in the rain, even though Grandma splurged and bought the kids ponchos – I didn't think to bring any, but maybe I will next time. It never does the all-day-rain thing

in Florida! It usually rains or storms for less than an hour and then the sun comes back out so we were unprepared for the all day down-pour. But seriously, how could Universal be anything but fun? Even though the rain slowed us down a bit, we were still able to catch our first glimpse of the Wizarding World of Harry Potter – it was very cool!!

Hogwarts castle was amazing, and I guess I must have misplaced the picture I made Hubby take of me in Hogsmeade, which was beautiful at night. We got some Butterbeer, and it was yummiier than the version we attempted at one of our game nights here in Ohio. The Wizarding World has 3 rides, and we only had time to get on The Forbidden Journey on this day – that's the one inside the castle. While you wait in line, there is plenty to see – it looks like you are on the movie set except better because it doesn't look like a set – it looks real! The portraits move and talk, and there are 3D projections of Harry, Ron, and Hermione that look like real people. As you wind around the corridors of the castle, you get to explore many scenes straight from the books and movies: Dumbledore's office, Gryffindor common room – even the Sorting Hat makes an appearance! And the ride itself is *amazing*!! If you are a Harry Potter fan, this area is a **must-see**!! Though we did have a slight oopsie – while trying to rush over to the Harry Potter World before the park closed, we skipped lunch, so now we were cold, wet, and hungry. It would have been ok, except that once we snaked throughout the corridors of the Hogwarts castle, we learned that the Forbidden Journey ride was down. After waiting in the dark hallway listening to the Sorting Hat give his spiel over and over and on empty stomachs, we had had it – especially grumpy oldest who, if you remember, was not happy with the day at Universal in the rain to begin with. Our torturous wait in the hallway of Hogwarts became so irritating that I wished my husband had bought the flaming wallet we had seen at the magic show – so we could throw it at the Sorting Hat, flames and all! ☐

We did finally get on the ride, and it was awesome, but my oldest neglected to try it – she doesn't like anything faster or more thrilling than the Scrambler. As I said, the ride was amazing, so now we were all famished after a day at Universal. But being budget-conscious we wanted to leave the parks before finding dinner, though I must confess: I was so hungry that the idea of the 'whopper bar' on Universal's City Walk that had turned my stomach that very morning was actually sounding quite good after a day walking around in the rain! We ended up at Denny's, which is a place I hadn't been to in probably over a decade, and while the food wasn't great, it sufficed.

(to be continued in part 3)

Florida 2011 – Trip Diary – Part 1

Friday January 14 – We left our hometown about 4:40pm after loading the car, getting kids' school stuff stashed for the week off, the gas tank filled up, and some snacks from the drive-thru for the kids. I noted the dashboard temp at 20°F. Around 8pm, we found a Goldstar Chili to stop at in Westchester, a suburb of Cincinnati – we love to stop for Cincy chili and coney's! We took about an hour there, giving the little ones some time to run off some steam since there weren't many people there that time of night. Luckily we asked first and that's how we learned that the McDonald's Playland across the street had been removed – otherwise we would have taken 4 kids into the Playplace-shaped McDonald's

and had much disappointment to contend with. Dinner went well, despite the waitress' well-meaning attempt to reward our cute kids with balloons – *helium balloons*. Really, lady? 4 helium balloons to add to the 6 people and the 6 people's week's worth of luggage in the mini-van about to trek 1000 miles? So we managed to sneak out of the restaurant with only 2 balloons, and one popped right after we got on the expressway – thankfully it wasn't too distracting to driver Hubby or we would have all been in trouble. That last balloon made it all the way down to Florida with us, and it bopped around our rental house for the rest of the week until I "forgot" to pack it for the trip home. After the Goldstar stop, the kids bedded down for the night, and they were all out by 10:30 – not bad, not bad at all!! I had such a great time talking with Hubby and keeping him company as we drove down the country together that I didn't want to go to bed, but I made myself try for some shut-eye around 2:30am. I do really like the schedule we've made for these long drives to Florida, but there is just one downside – the most beautiful part of our trip, the winding drives through the breathtaking Tennessee mountains, is always done during the night when we cannot see anything outside but the lights of the towns in the valleys far below. Hubby (and me) arrive in Florida tired, but the kids are well rested, and this is a way to break up the monotony of a 20+ hour car ride for those kids.

Saturday January 15 – We all woke up around 6:30am when we stopped for gas; I can't remember where we were. But the kids were in good moods, and the sunrise was beautiful. Since the south was just coming out of a cold snap at this time, the air had an odd smell to it – a hard-to-describe tropical-climate-frozen-over kind of smell. The kids awoke in wonderful moods, and we ate up all the miles we could until we began to get hungry for breakfast. We decided to stop first for breakfast and then head to the beach since we had made the extra 90 minute jaunt over to the coast to visit while we were in the area. We chose St. Augustine Florida since it's coastal, and

I had been there as a kid and kind of wanted to see it again. But when we got off the expressway, there was no place for a family breakfast. The Shoney's that was on the roadside attraction sign had turned into a Chinese buffet, and even if we decided to stomach Chinese food for breakfast, they were not open at 8 in the morning. So we headed east to the coast, and we found St. Augustine to be somewhat of a ghost town. There were shuttered buildings and for lease signs everywhere; it was sad. There seemed to be 2 sections to the city, however, and while the one section was full of shuttered attractions, empty storefronts and loiterers, the 'original' part of St. Augustine was bustling and beautiful. Hoards of people were walking around the streets near the quaint shops, and we found our first glimpse of the ocean beyond the [Castillo de San Marcos](#). We weren't able to stay long since everyone was starving and St. Augustine does not seem to have any family-type restaurants (mostly seafood and steak here), but we did get to glimpse some of the oldest city in the United States and marvel at the narrow streets as we tried to find our way out. We got back on I-95 and exited miles south; near Palm Bay, I think – everyone was SO hungry at this point I wasn't paying much attention to where we were, just that there was food nearby. The Golden Corral here was excellent and satisfied our hunger pangs quite well. And I have to note how incredibly amazing those hungry, tired kid behaved!!! All they wanted was to get to the beach, and they were SO hungry, but they were SO patient while we looked for food – unbelievable!! Next it was time to find a beach, so we drove east and found a nice place where we had been before. It's a minimal \$2 toll to get over a bridge and to the coast, but well worth it since there is ample parking and shelters with bathrooms and showerheads to get the sand off.



We had a great time at the beach, even if it was cold (I think in the 50s – I’m writing this so long after it’s hard to remember!) and the locals were walking along the coastline wearing hats and gloves while we were wading. The kids LOVED the beach, but we got cold and very tired since we were on minimal sleep, so we threw everyone into the car; most of the kids were half-dressed. At this point, all we wanted to do was get to our rental house in Orlando, and we were so excited when we spotted Orlando’s familiar landmarks along the I-4 corridor. But we had one stop to make – Downtown Disney to check how many Disney World tickets we had left – you can’t do this over the phone anymore. Downtown Disney was MOBBED and we were a bit discouraged, but then again, we go through this every time we take a trip to Florida- we think it’s crowded down there, but everything ends up ok. This year was quite crowded comparatively, so we asked a Disney cast member, and they summed it up in one word, “Brazilians.” After she said that, looking around, there were a lot of Brazilians, I guess because in January it’s their summer vacation since they are in the southern hemisphere. But anyway, my husband was walking around Downtown Disney, trying to find our ticket info, and things had been so crazy when we dropped him off, that he got out of the car without his shoes (remember he was on 0 hours of sleep!). So he’s walking around Downtown Disney, confused, shoeless, and smelling like the ocean – people are staring, some are laughing. Then he realizes – his toenails are painted!! He had promised our 6 year old a week

before that if she was good about getting up and going to school in the morning for a whole week, she could paint Daddy's toenails. We and some random strangers had a good laugh about that.

We left Downtown Disney, and we were SO anxious to get to the house we made a beeline straight for it except for one problem – we were an hour early for check-in. So we headed back to the tourist area (Irlo Bronson Highway), and we looked for some timeshare presentations to sign up for. Don't get me wrong, it's not that we like to do timeshare presentations, but we've gotten great at saying no, and Hubby and I used to make little games we'd play (insert funny random word in the conversation, things like that) that would make the 2-3 hours fly by. Plus they would feed you and pay you for your time, so we recovered some of our vacation expenses that way. Little did we know that the Orlando vacation scene is changing – timeshare presentations are no longer a dime a dozen; in fact, we never found one that paid enough to be worth our time.

So we're trying to kill an hour before we could get to the house, and we make a stop at the gift shop when we realize that most of the kids are not even dressed. So I open the back of the van, and everything that we had just haphazardly thrown in the back when we left the beach tumbles out – including our bag of collected seashells. So I'm picking up the seashells from the parking lot, one by one, and since I was half asleep, I didn't really notice what I was doing until I heard, "Uh, Mom..." I look in my hand, and I had picked up a couple of someone's old discarded cigarette butts!! Having had barely any sleep, I lost it then, and I laughed with the kids until I cried.

We pulled ourselves together and made it back to the house, which was finally ready – YAY!!! Hubby took the kids in the pool while I unloaded and unpacked – I was happy to do this chore without little ones underfoot, and their behavior on the

long drive was so incredibly stellar that they deserved a swim. In a couple of hours, some of our fellow vacationers arrived (my mom and our friend Jamiahsh), and we headed out for some stuffed Chicago style pizza at Giordano's. We have had the question, why go all the way to Florida to get Chicago-style pizza, but it was YUMMY and we had gotten a Groupon for it which saved us money.

After that, Hubby and I went out together while the kids stayed with Grandma and Jamy, but we didn't do much – we were still looking (in vain) for timeshare presentations to attend. We went to Old Town, which is an area in Orlando set up like an old-fashioned midway. There are blocks of little shops – and bars, which were overflowing this Saturday night with intoxicated people- and carnival and thrill rides at either end of the strip of shops. We normally have fun at Old Town, but I don't think we will be going back on a Saturday night- definitely wasn't for kids.

(continued in part 2, a more abbreviated version!)