*The times that make the trials bearable*

File this column under the category “Things that make vacations memorable.”

**Chapter one, “Discovering new places”** – After a long and difficult winter Stephanie and I looked forward to a week in sunny Florida, starting with a visit to catch up with her brother Kyle in Valrico. A quick stop-over for lunch found Kyle guiding us to Smokin’ Joe’s Barbeque in unincorporated Lithia, Florida. I’m a bbq addict and this is the real Florida, not the glitzy tourist traps. Smokin’ Joe’s occupies a trailer with an order window, surrounded by picnic tables adjacent to a nearby convenience and meat store.

The “Slaw Hog” is just what it sounds like, pulled pork smothered in creamy southern cole slaw with your choice of sauces. The most descriptive phrase would be, “More, please.” Kyle had ribs and tips. He let us have a taste. I thought about mugging him to steal the rest. Well worth the drive off I-4 about 45 minutes east of Tampa.

**Chapter two, “The Banana Phone”** – Grandson Jack is a never-ending source of amusement. We met son John and daughter-in-law Amanda in Clearwater Beach, kicking off several days with the babies, toddler Jack and little sister Khloe, 10 months.

Imagine this picture. Steph sees a banana. Picks it up and holds it to her ear. “Hello, Jackson,” she says. The 3-year-old picks up the room phone and answers, “Hi, Grandma Steph.” They chat, then he signs off, “Bye, Grandma Steph.” Next he sidles up and says, “You can hold my hand Grandma and walk to dinner.”

No kidding, I’m pretty sure I could see Steph’s heart flipping and fluttering in her chest.

**Chapter three, “Unforeseen bargain”** – Baby Khloe is not yet mobile. She sits up. Rolls over. Army scoots from one point to another. But not quite crawling. So what harm could come from placing Khloe in the middle of the big hotel bed with some toys while her Dad straightened up the room a little?

John left his phone on the bed. Khloe likes to slap things. Anything. So she was happily flailing away as Dad busied himself while keeping one eye on her. When John picked up his phone there was a message from an e-commerce app he uses. Congratulations, it said. You have purchased a $1,200 travel package for one to Italy.

Khloe just smiled.

There is a happy ending (although Amanda, who was jazzed about going to Italy, might disagree). After much explaining and pleading, the e-commerce company agreed to cancel the charges to John’s account. This episode, though, surely will go down in family lore to be told and retold for generations.

**Chapter Four, “Never too tired”** – Jack and I have developed a pattern of behavior which usually leads to the first phrase out of his mouth when I’m around him: “Ice Cream Papa.” That kind of explains itself.

So we ended every evening in Clearwater with a visit to the ice cream shop. On the last night the little guy was so tired he couldn’t keep his eyes open. Still, he refused to call it a night without ice cream. Usually one to walk, he climbed into the wagon by himself and demanded to be pulled to the store – whereupon he ate a few bites, climbed back in the wagon, and zonked out.

So I ate his share.

**Chapter Five, “Passing the test”** – Then it was on to the Orlando suburbs and the real purpose of our trip, to attend the wedding of daughter Traci and her beau Alex. The evening before the nuptials we attended granddaughter Cate’s varsity softball game. She’s a phenom on a top two or three team ranked statewide. Fingers crossed for a full-ride scholarship. Her on-base percentage that night – 100%.

Last summer, when Cate and her sister Caroline visited us in Wisconsin, I figured out she was texting with a boy. Her first boyfriend. Yikes. So, of course, I had her send a couple of messages to him. Like, What’s your interest? Like, Better treat her right. Like, At my age a life sentence is not a deterrent.

I got to meet him. He brought her a bouquet of flowers. He sat with the family at the game. He responded to queries with “Yes, sir” and “Yes, ma’am.”

All right, Cate. He passed the Grandpa Test.

**Chapter Six, “Love”** – I walked my daughter down the aisle. She was beaming. Alex was tearing up. So was I. And Steph was a veritable fountain. Beautiful sunny outdoor ceremony beneath a spreading century-plus old Live Oak.

Memories.

Go make your own.

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