It’s an escape you need—a selfie for the soul.

BY OLIVIA GUNN KOTSISHEVSKAYA

What is this place?” A nuclear family of blondes presses its faces to the window of the Downeaster. “Old Orchard Beach. Passengers for Old Orchard Beach,” the attendant sings out in the doorway, beckoning the four of us to the exit as the train glides to the platform. After a fifteen-minute ride from Portland on the 6:15 p.m. departure to points south (not even enough time to make it to the bar car), we’ve arrived.

Stephan, Meaghan, my husband Fil, and I step off the train fully prepared to take on the night ahead. We all went to bed early, ate filling lunches, and mentally readied ourselves for six hours of OOB—six hours to check off each and every essential mo-
ocean breeze rushes past, an edge-of-the-world feeling settles over us. It’s a snapshot for the soul—the four of us, Stephan and Meghan newly engaged, Fil and I newlyweds. I consider the many friends who’ve existed in this very moment since The Pier’s opening in 1898. Can you imagine the Pier Casino Ballroom in its heyday? Snazzy cocktail dresses and creased slacks galore! With featured acts like Duke Ellington and Sinatra, the mid-century presented an Old Orchard Beach that’s hard to fathom—especially as two barely legal girls donning barely there bikinis pose for their cache of Instagram strangers on the beach below.

Wild Child
“We have to ride the Sea Viper,” Meaghan says as we make our way to the amusement park. “It sounds dangerous.” I look up at the looming roller coaster. “Stop. It’s brand new.” She bee-lines it for the ticket booth.

Fil, ever-reassuring, pipes up, “You know, I’ve never put something together without missing at least one screw.”

The Sea Viper is a new Old Orchard Beach attraction. Standing 70 feet tall, the roller coaster is in no way the wildest ride I’ve taken, but I’m just not a thrills kind of girl. A spin on a wobbly bar stool after a shot or two is about as much as I need.

Instaperfect
Our first stop is the Pier Patio Pub for an Old Orchard-style happy hour: steamers, Coronas, and a multi-vodka concoction dubbed “The Fish Bowl.” Bad decision number one? We’ll find out.

“All right, everyone in on this,” Stephan says as each of us snags a straw, bumping foreheads while trying for a decent selfie. “I can’t do this. You’re too close.” “You’ve touched every straw.” “Smile.”

After two baskets of clams, we walk to the very end of The Pier, which, come sundown, transitions into the nightclub Top of The Pier with a DJ. For a moment, as the sun drops over the Electra Wheel and an
You may be looking for a nostalgic ride, but watch for the Bumper Car hooligans. Remember, you're not one of the sandlot kids anymore.

On the way over, we pass a sobbing child, light-up sneakers flashing as she bolts for it. "But I want to ride THAT one! It's not fair!" Her mother chases after her, assuring her the day will soon come. Back straightened, I step up the metal ramp. For you, little one.

The four of us line up, taking over the gate of the lead car as the riders before us pull in. "Hope you didn't eat your pier fries yet," a barrel-chested man laughs as he steps out. His wife rolls her eyes.

Before I know it, I'm stuck. The safety bar is down; the ride attendant double-checks. Is he sure? Can he check again? "He seems distracted."
"He's not."
Too late, anyway. The cars are slowly pulled up the incline, inching us to our

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Side to side, I’m flopping like Raggedy Ann, white-knuckling the entire way. My company shrieks with laughter, squealing with every twist and turn. Oh, boy, what fun. Look at that, we nearly died. The cars come to a slow, dramatic halt, and my hair looks like I’ve just left a Quiet Riot concert.

“One more time?”

“How about a shot?”

THE NIGHT IS YOUNG

The street energy has picked up, and crowds begin to form in front of the bars along E. Grand Avenue. Music from the deck of Weekend at Bernie’s lures us in, and, although no one among the patrons is actually dancing, there’s a general consensus on the floor that “No Diggity” is a great dance song.

We take to the deck for a bit of fresh air, our giant, aluminum Budweiser bottles in tow. No sooner do we score the perfect table does a group of middle-aged women saddle up next to us—one clearly tipsier than the others.

“The kids call me Mama Kath.” She scans our foursome. “I can’t find my husband.”

Her friends mouth apologies over her shoulders while coaxing her back to the corner, but Mama Kath is content right where she is. Looks like we’ve made a new friend.

The bartender approaches with a tray of Jell-O shots.

“We’re going to do Jell-O shots,” I tell Kath. “Would you all like one as well?”

“I’ve no idea what that is.”
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“We’ll take seven.”

Our motley crew encircles Mama Kath, and one of her friends leans in, making an Irish toast, accent and all. She ends with a snappy line about the fellas getting her home before down the hatch they go.

At some point, Kath’s husband, Papa Dan, as the kids call him, arrives, and before we even think to ask for it, we’re gifted with the 30-minute version of their story. After another round, I’m past wondering why they’re exposing these intimate details of their lives. Instead, I’ve accepted that tonight they’ve escaped. They’ve escaped their home in New Hampshire, their three grown kids, their jobs, and here in Old Orchard Beach, away from it all, they can do Jell-O shots with a group of twenty-somethings and not be Mama Kath and Papa Dan.

**PURPLE HAZE**

We all agree on one last round before heading back toward The Pier, and, according to our guide, Meaghan, we can’t not visit The Brunswick. Boasting the “largest oceanfront patio bar” in town, it’s a must.

We order our beers inside before pushing our way through the large crowd. Outside, the patio drinkers mill about in purple light and the cool ocean air gives everyone a new burst of energy. The plan was to grab a quick dinner here, but our rendezvous at Bernie’s went even longer than realized. It’s already after 10 p.m. The Brunswick has stopped serving dinner.

“I told you we should have eaten at The Pier.”

“I didn’t know it was this late.”

“I’m not missing out on a chili dog.”

We down the rest of our beers and set out across the beach in search of the greasiest food we can find. Ahead, I see two fig-
ures standing in the dark. A familiar smell wafts through the air. If anyone knows where to find a chili dog, these two do.

“Hi, guys. How much further for food?” They laugh, not realizing the severity of my hunger. I’ve lost the others but push on.

ONE FOR THE ROAD...

The sign glows heavenly. “Mile Long Franks” is written across the silhouette of a wiener dog. Beauty. I bask in its glow as the others emerge from the beach. Fil and I order two large chili dogs and a cup brimming with fries doused in cheese sauce. Meaghan and Stephan cross the street for a slice at Bill’s Pizza.

While I love a fine dining experience as much as anyone, this chili dog satisfies something deep in the pit of my gut that can’t be put into words. Forget farm-to-table, fresh catch of the day. This mile-long-dog is where it’s at, heartburn be damned. I want another.

No longer hangry and tired, Meaghan and I consider one more round. The guys go along for a minute or two before vetoing the idea. Apparently, one more round isn’t always necessary, a belief I’m still not quite convinced of. I’m still a trashy twenty-something, guys. We’re at Old Orchard Beach. Life is short. The train isn’t here for another 40 minutes. The night is young.

“And the Uber is here.”

The ride home is smooth enough that Meaghan and I fall asleep, leaving Fil and Stephan to regale our driver with stories of our night in OOB.

Back home, sand sprinkles across the floor and I take off my shoes to crawl into bed as Ferris wheels, Skee-balls, and chili dogs dance in my head.