

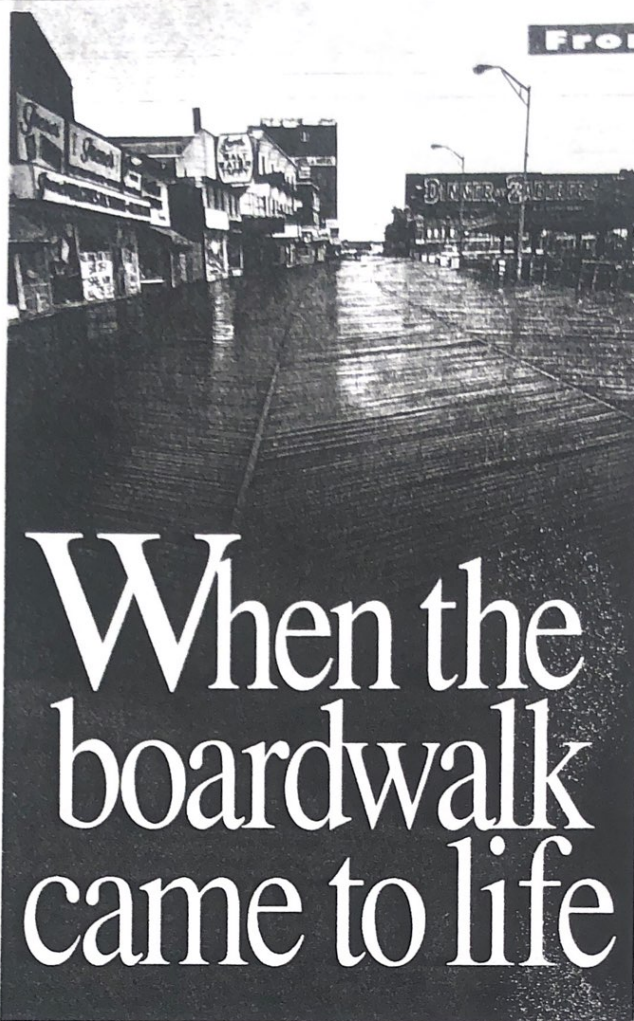
by Carla Merolla

The metal gates on storefronts from Chelsea to Virginia Avenues rattled up with a crash. Concession workers slowly pushed couples in high-backed wicker rolling chairs. And for the kids in town, the amusement piers reopened: Painted horses bobbed on the carousel. Hawkers at the arcades dared people to *Teeery yer luck*, only a quarter while the Lucky Wheel clickety-clacked around and around. The air was filled with the toasty aroma of popcorn and peanuts. On Easter Sunday, after its winter nap, the Atlantic City boardwalk turned magical for another tourist season.

Too early for "summer people," the Easter Sunday celebration was like a cocktail party for locals before the start of the big banquet. Every year, through junior high and high school, my best friends—Lisa, Sara and Donna—and I saved our baby-sitting money so we could buy a new blouse or jacket from Lit Brothers to wear to the boardwalk that special day. We set our alarms to get to an early mass and be out in time to put on enough makeup to brighten our faces (but not enough for our mothers to notice). Then we met at the corner of Ventnor and Jackson where we caught the jitney that took us uptown to the boardwalk.

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Now, if a boy liked you, he'd never ask to spend the entire day with you because he was there with his friends, too. Instead, he'd arrange to meet you at the Oriental Express ride on Million Dollar Pier. The two of you would



When the boardwalk came to life

climb into one of the red torn chairs that jerked along tracks through a dark labyrinth. A mechanical mummy rose out of its sarcophagus. You'd scream. He'd laugh—or maybe he'd take your hand and still be holding it when the car rolled out into sunlight again.

Anything was possible the day the boardwalk opened.

I am a child of newlyweds who honeymooned in

shoreline, beckoning beachgoers to visit the "World Famous Steel Pier" then to dine at Captain Starn's. Visitors came from all over to our city by the sea from Memorial Day to Labor Day, when the Miss America Pageant provided a stunning epilogue to summertime.

But by the late '60s, when my friends and I were starting to meet those boys at the Oriental Express, the crowds had stopped coming to town. Air travel was becoming less expensive and families were choosing to visit more "exotic" destinations than the Jersey Shore. Over the course of the next decade, dozens of businesses failed. Sara's father sold his souvenir shop and took a job delivering liquor and groceries. Lisa's dad, a contractor, moonlighted as a cab driver. Still, every Easter Sunday, our families hoped that the new season

would be better and pull us out of the downward spiral. Wasn't it possible?

Then in November 1976, the year that we graduated from high school, the referendum was passed that would bring casino gambling—and a livelihood—back to Atlantic City. Most of us were thrilled with the prospect of a business boom, of construction jobs for our fathers and our brothers, perhaps not fully realizing that before something new can go up, something old must come down.

The Steel Pier and Captain Starn's are gone now. Bally's Park Place, a casino hotel, stands where the Marlboro and the Blenheim once surveyed their domain. A few Ma-and-Pa stores still operate, but they are a tiny battalion that fights the larger enemy for territory.

The boys we knew, mostly from Ireland, who returned to work the piers summer after summer, no longer had any place to come back to. Many of the rides and games closed down. The piers were destroyed or converted to serve new functions: a shopping mall, a helicopter landing pad for high rollers who come to town. And though the echoes of laughing and shrieking children—of us—are dim, I can hear them in between the thud of the crashing waves.

Today Atlantic City is a year-round resort. Even in winter, hordes of people pull their coats tight around them as they stalk the boardwalk from casino to casino, those tabernacles bathed in gaudy neon. I remember winters when the only hue was the gray of the sky and the ocean and the pigeons that scavenged for food. But just until Easter Sunday, when the boardwalk would come to life, full of sights and sounds and smells . . . and everything was possible again. ♦