

THE QUARRY

Victoria Marin

The Golden Mile in Sticky Shoes

It was a mild September night as I walked from Kings Cross station toward Victoria Street. There were people who really ought to be wearing a jacket, lining Darlinghurst Road handing us coupons for their venues. Free drink! Free entry! Each one seemed just as enticing as the next to a young crowd starting out the night. I was with a group of friends – it was my first time in Kings Cross – and I felt reassured by safety in numbers. Young people flooded the area as we headed down Bayswater Road, congregating in packs as though marking their territory. With arms slung over each other, groups of mates stumbled around to their next party stop. Perhaps it is my own lack of interest in getting intoxicated beyond recognition, but the volatility of nightlife in Kings Cross made me feel uneasy. Growing up watching news segments that showed the worst of the Cross' nightlife put me on edge. I knew it could change from pushes and shoves to punches being thrown in the blink of an eye.

Still onwards I went, following the leaders to World Bar. A popular venue where they sell shots of vodka that taste like Skittles. It was the overwhelming smell of tobacco that hit me first. Shuffling through the narrow gaps in the crowd to get inside, the soles of my shoes stuck to the floor with each step. With two drinks for the price of one in each hand, we wandered around looking for a table. What a prize to find a table. They are few and far between in any venue. Spare stools were lying around which we slowly accumulated until all four of us were comfortably seated...more or less. By the time I went back for a second round of drinks the atmosphere had shifted towards the sloppy end of intoxication. This was only the beginning.

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In 2001, when Kings Cross was in its golden age where bars, pubs, and brothels kept their candles burning well into the early hours of the morning. Helen and Arthur - my aunt and uncle - started up an Italian pizzeria on Victoria Street. It was previously owned by family friends who had decided to move back to Argentina. My aunt says at the time there were 'half as many restaurants on Victoria Street.'¹ At first the restaurant was nothing but a shell. The sour smell of fresh insect poison stung my eyes. The kitchen was tucked away behind the front counter, concealing huge steel ovens and benches that still had their plastic labels on them. The dining room had been cleared out to polish the tiles. Delivered tables and chairs sat stacked outside. My cousins sat in the upstairs dining room polishing cutlery. The sun had just begun bowing its head for the day, leaving polluted rays to light the street which was preparing itself for another big night. Above the restaurant was a small apartment that my aunt and uncle began renting in 2003. After their nightly dinner service they would retire upstairs to their apartment. Being so close to the main road, they watched nights disappear into mornings where people eventually stumbled their way home. My aunt says she remembers that from around 2010 onwards, more and more young girls were getting themselves into strife. She and my uncle have witnessed some horror stories, she says; watching young girls struggling to stay upright, and even restraining a young woman whom they presumed was high on something, from

attacking their dinner guests. Christie, their daughter, was 21 at the time and just beginning to venture into the Kings Cross nightlife scene. She recalls the queues for nightclubs – Hugo’s in particular – wound all the way down the street and around the corner. Despite being completely ‘packed,’ⁱⁱ and ‘messy,’ⁱⁱⁱ there was a distinct ‘community feel,’^{iv} she says, but that deteriorated quite quickly in the following years.

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By round three, I was a little cloudy. My fingers were numb, my tongue wasn’t working properly and it had gotten very warm. Perched on my stool, I recall thinking that people were really enjoying themselves, maybe even a bit too much.

The scene began in the 1920s when the residential landscape began to shift. New apartment buildings were being constructed across the Kings Cross precinct in Darlinghurst, Woolloomooloo, Potts Point, and Elizabeth Bay. They replaced the existing boarding houses and residential chambers that had largely occupied the area. With the rising number of residents in the area, the commercial sector began shifting too. Kings Cross was becoming a Bohemian place, not just in its new living style but also in its food and entertainment. Bars, restaurants and cafes were the platform for the emerging atmosphere; where artists, writers and musicians began crafting the scene. Murals sprung up on the sides of buildings, both local and international bands and musicians made regular appearances. The Australian poet Kenneth Slessor based much of his poetry on life in Kings Cross during the 1920s, when its seedier, more dangerous side began to emerge. In the journal article *Home* in 1923, Slessor wrote that Kings Cross ‘is a chasm, echoing with romance and adventure – and hidden drunks.’^v There has always been something about these streets that make Kings Cross so alluring. Anne Summers, a long-time resident and author wrote that ‘the romance of the place is that it embodies the tougher, edgier side of life.’^{vi}

The 1920s brewed an illicit trade of razor-gangs and thuggery in a violent territorial war. Assaults and shootings were all the more frequent. An Australian drama series, *Underbelly: Razor* that aired in 2011 documented the crimes in the underworld of Kings Cross; from notorious brothel owners, to assassins and corrupt police officers. The show had massive success and was ranked ‘the highest ever

drama to have screened,^{'vii} in Australia since 2001. While the troubles of the 1920s soon dissipated after countless Royal Commissions, there remained an undercurrent of criminal intent well into the new millennium. Between the late 1980s and the early 2000s, another bout of organised crime surfaced where corrupt police officers and prominent night-club owners were caught drug dealing and organising prostitution. The 'King of the Cross', John Ibrahim, was a leading figure in this new era. The *Underbelly* franchise capitalised on his reputation in another series, *Underbelly: the Golden Mile*, which traced the 1995 Woods Royal Commission into drug and prostitution crimes. He would frequent the Cross, enough for my aunt and uncle to see him 'hanging around with his mob'^{'viii} on their way to Coles. Christie comments that she once saw him pull up in front of Show Girls to pick up his money shortly before leaving. 'It was like a movie.'^{'ix}

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From this cultural landscape came a series of events that forever changed nightlife in Kings Cross and most of wider Sydney. On my way home from my first night out in Kings Cross, even in my haze, I watched security guards throw young men out of the venue and quite literally shut the doors in their face. It seems I turned 18 during one of the most violent times in Sydney's nightlife history. Kings Cross was a place that got wild even on a school night. Anne Summers describes it as a 'place of risk, full of gamblers who seldom win much and who often lose everything, including their lives.'^{'x}

In July of 2012, a young couple were heading out for a birthday on Victoria Street. It would later be revealed that the young woman was apprehensive about heading into the Cross that night. One random and unprovoked punch from a violent man was enough to fatally injure her partner. It was early in the night, just after 10pm when the incident happened. At the time I was 17. It's hard to forget the shock of such vicious attacks at that age. The name, Thomas Kelly, still strikes a very sensitive chord.

Similar fatalities were occurring around Sydney. In an interview with Gordian Fulde, the head of the emergency ward at St Vincent's Hospital in Kings Cross, he

described the scene in the emergency ward during this period as ‘really busy,’^{’xi} and the longer people were out the busier it got. Generally speaking, 10pm onwards saw young girls, typically in their 20s, come in who had ‘drunk too much on an empty stomach.’^{’xii} Midnight onwards brought in testosterone fuelled young men, whose bodies were toxic with alcohol.

In March of 2014, the NSW government introduced alcohol laws to Sydney’s CBD, in an attempt to ‘crackdown on drug and alcohol-fuelled violence.’^{’xiii} These laws had been used in other parts of NSW. In 2008, Newcastle experienced ‘something of an element of the Wild West.’^{’xiv} Young people would pre-load on alcohol before heading into the city and nightclubs, where they would be topping up until all hours of the morning. When they were eventually asked to leave, violence broke out on the streets. It was called the ‘Newcastle experiment.’^{’xv} The Newcastle coalition ‘scaled trading hours back to 3am in the CBD and instituted a lockout that prevented patrons entering licensed venues after 1am.’^{’xvi} Much like Sydney, assault rates dropped and violence in the CBD had considerably reduced.

In the eight years since, these laws have become known as the ‘Newcastle solution.’^{’xvii} In Sydney the effects seem to have succeeded in keeping patrons safe and reducing violence in venues and on the street. The NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research ‘found that the reforms were associated with an immediate and substantial reduction in assault in Kings Cross (down 32%) and a less immediate but substantial and perhaps ongoing reduction in the Sydney CBD (down 26%).’^{’xviii} Fulde says the scene on the footpaths of Kings Cross was the first positive change following the lockout laws. ‘They are safe now,’^{’xix} he says. Reports gathered by the emergency department at St Vincent’s hospital showed a ‘25% decrease in the most critically injured patients coming in over the weekend,’^{’xx} which Fulde calls ‘high alcohol time.’^{’xxi} There are few worthy arguments against a policy that ensures fewer lives are lost, however like every political decision, it has its opposition...

By February of 2016 it stood at 16 licensed venues had shut down in Kings Cross since the 2014 lockout laws. The loss of local businesses has had ramifications on trade, employment, and culture. NSW Premier, Mike Baird, describes opposition to the laws as ‘growing hysteria.’^{’xxii} When the popular nightclub Hugo’s closed its

doors, in August of 2015 something of a panic swelled among protestors, with signs reading ‘locked out of venues = locked out from jobs,’^{xxiii} Kings Cross businesses are going as far as seeking compensation for the impact the new laws have had. ‘The streets became bare,’^{xxiv} my aunt says. Victoria Street had developed into a bar and restaurant metropolis on its own. It was only in May of 2015 when they arranged their liquor license. Prior to that they had been operating as a BYO business. People would just ‘walk out,’^{xxv} because venues that sold alcohol were what patrons were looking for. Already tough times were made tougher.

On the 31st of May 2016 my aunt and uncle closed their restaurant. While my aunt says it wasn’t a ‘direct decision’^{xxvi} to close after the lockout laws, the downturn was obvious. ‘It wasn’t going to get better.’^{xxvii}

Businesses all over the Kings Cross precinct have felt the slow burn of a culture being locked out. The decrease in patronage, particularly of the male variety, has hit the brothel industry hard. Kellet Street, once full of brothels, has seen several adult establishments shut their doors. There are simply not enough young men to make a profit anymore. The new owner of number 16 Kellet Street, formerly known as Cleopatra in the City, ‘plans to turn the space into a licensed boarding house,’^{xxviii} transforming it back to what Kings Cross was once known for. Plans for redevelopment of sold-off brothels include high-rise apartment buildings, more boarding houses, and bars and restaurants. Kings Cross was always a modern place. It makes sense, but the thought of knocking these historical buildings down to build more high-rises is depressing. Victoria Street has always been home to bars and restaurants as opposed to nightclubs and brothels, some lasting longer than others. My aunt says ‘the true picture comes from seeing every second shop on Darlinghurst Road with a for lease sign.’^{xxix}

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Newcastle is now a thriving coastal destination with a nightlife to match. Commissioner of the Newcastle lockouts, Tony Brown, revealed that ‘there has been a 100% increase in the number of licensed premises, which has led to more jobs.’^{xxx} In Los Angeles nightclubs close for good at 2am. While my cousin is cradling her first

baby boy she says ‘where *don’t* you see the odd fight? In a mass of nightclubs in the space of a few meters you’re bound to encounter violence.’ She kisses her son and smiles ‘But he isn’t allowed out.’^{xxxii} The Coca-Cola sign that dominates the Cross is the last remaining survivor of Sydney’s most iconic suburb. Its flashing red light is about the only red light left in the district. ‘We never thought this is how it would end,’^{xxxiii} my aunt says.

Lockout laws have now been part of my nightlife experience longer than they haven’t. The trend for young people now is to head to the lockout-free areas of Sydney; Newtown and Surry Hills precincts. Gordian Fulde reveals the local hospital in these areas, Royal Prince Alfred hospital, have seen a decrease in alcohol-related injuries. This may signal part of a cultural change.

Perhaps these laws are doing more than we think? Despite their unpopularity, the laws did their job in reducing alcohol-related injuries and deaths. It’s difficult to think of a good enough rebuttal to that result. It is a great shame it had to play out as fatally, and as abruptly as it did; that we couldn’t see this problem coming sooner, or chose to turn a blind eye and have another drink instead. Not just in the loss of life, but in the loss of a family business, and others alike; that held birthdays, graduations, and baby showers over the years. Perhaps the question we should be asking ourselves now is why people need to be heavily drinking past 3am and why they are violent when they do...

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