

CORNERING THE CAFES

by Sasha Sanders

I like the 7 Elevens. I really do. I like that I can walk up the road and buy milk or chocolates in the middle of the night. I like that I can buy a drinking yoghurt on my way to work early in the morning. And I like that they bake really good bread.

But there's something missing from them: the Coca-Cola sign. 7 Eleven's green and yellow logo has a certain charm of its own, but it doesn't have the same associations as the reassuringly familiar white script on red; the sign that told you, even from a distance, that this shop was a corner café.

I loved those little convenience shops. And they were all over Sea Point, where I grew up. The roughly 1km stretch from one end of Sea Point to the other is famous for its high density of restaurants, but when I was a schoolboy there were also plenty of cafés. Certainly more than anywhere else I ever went. And at the time I probably could have named them all. When I was pre-pubescent, corner cafés were where I hung out.

But over the last few years, Sea Point's cafés have seen an increasingly rapid demise. I can now count them all on one hand. And I get sad, somehow, each time I pass a property, closed or empty, that used to house one of those cafés.

The reason for their closure, I suppose, is that they simply can't compete with the 7 Elevens. The chain has seen and, with great financial muscle, filled a gap in the market. The stores are, like corner cafés, mini-supermarkets. But they're bigger than the cafés, so they stock a little more. And they bake their own fresh breads. And they open earlier. And they close later, if at all.

How can café owners compete? They've got families to spend time with. And their incomes have stopped being a livelihood. So they've closed their cafés and looked for something else to pay the rent. As the going has got tough, the previously tough have gone shopping.

But my lament is a selfish one. It's more for my own sentimentality than for the café owners and their families. Because soon there will be fewer cafés than 7 Elevens in Sea Point. And as they disappear, so does a part of my past.

In junior school, when the end of day bell went, hordes of us used to run 50 metres down the road to what was then the Crystal Supply Store. The man behind the counter was old and unfriendly. He used to throw our change onto one of those nipped rubber mats, probably Lexington-branded. Even then you could buy loose cigarettes. But I used to buy bubble gum. Small Chappies for half a cent or Wacky Wicks King Size for 2 cents.

On Saturday mornings, on our way to shul, we'd stop at various cafés on the way. I was born after the pinball generation, but if you were into arcade games, Theo's Café was the place to go. They had the biggest and best selection of machines, and they always kept up to date. At one time or another they had all the classics: Space Invaders, Pacman, Asteroids, Donkey Kong.

We used to have fistfulls of twenty cent pieces. I went through them quicker than someone playing a 1-arm bandit. But sometimes there'd be a real pro playing a game, one who'd clocked up more free lives than he'd started with, and there'd always be a big crowd watching him, awe-struck, mesmerised, and then you didn't spend money. You just watched.

And there was a whole culture in those cafés, amongst the beeps and zaps and explosions that came from the machines. There were the cool kids, usually a bit older and slightly bullyish, who were respected and accorded the proper privileges. In other words, if they wanted to play the game you were playing, you either died and finished very fast or you just stopped in mid-game and pretended, nonchalantly, that you'd had enough.

Girls and sexual politics also featured. There were the tomboys, who were treated like honorary guys. They spoke and acted as rough as the guys. And there were whiny girls, who came to watch but not to play, and who were tolerated but generally regarded with disdain.

There was also an unspoken understanding between us kids then, about which café owners were nice and which weren't. Most weren't. Some never smiled. They grunted. They made you feel guilty. They made you feel like they were doing you a favour. But I like to think that, somewhere, underneath those mean and scary faces, was a kind of endearment. And maybe a mutual appreciation, on some level, of what we meant to them, and what their cafés meant to us.

It's hard to say how much longer they'll survive, but the cafés that are left in Sea Point are die-hards. They're the ones that have been there ever since I can remember. Plomarion Café at the far end of Main Road; Harry's Fruit Bazaar with its big wide doors; Belgravia Café with its beautiful blue mosaic pillars; Crystal's, which now has a different name; and at the other end, Central Market, which still sells the best fruit in the area. They all still have Coke signs outside.