

Mathers House

by

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In Hobart's CBD there is a place where retired women and men meet their friends. They play scrabble, take art and writing classes, computer and ukulele lessons, hold book clubs, discuss family history and grey nomad road trips. For the last few weeks I have been invited into this secret society. They tell me stories, let me eat lunch with them, and beat me at scrabble. In the quiet afternoons, I escape the chatter to sit typing by the windows. From an old laminex table I have a view of office workers buying bouquets, cakes and jams from the Flower Room. Over the fence I can see youngsters in puffer jackets race their tricycles through the childcare playground. Within this microcosm, I have time to reflect on what it means to grow old in a city like Hobart. With my thirtieth birthday approaching, this is also a story about snow.

This August for the first time in thirty years it snowed down to sea level. It's been ten years since it snowed in the suburbs. In 2005 I woke up and looked out the windows to find my backyard in Mt Nelson painted white. It happened again in 2015. It didn't settle in the city centre like it did in 1986 but gardens were full of frost and higher up toward the mountain there were inches of soft, powdery, snow. By lunchtime the sun had come out and even though it was still sleeting and snowing from time to time, the whiteness slipped away from all but the darkest corners. Buses stopped running on Strickland Avenue and further up the mountain they closed the roads and the Southern Outlet in from Kingston. Snow statues sat in the corner of yards and kids in mittens threw balls at passing cars. I let my dogs out into it and they sniffed and skittered through the softness but wouldn't walk past the letterbox once the wind picked up and there was rain falling on their thin fur.

On the second day of snow I pull on my coat and scarf and wait at the bus stop eating a ham sandwich. The bus pulls around the corner to take me to town.

Only the young and the elderly catch the bus. There is an old man in the seat next to me. He has two canes and he struggles with them as the bus stops in the city, rising unsteadily to his feet. His movements are sharp and I expect him to make an exit before me but he casts his hands out as if he is tossing a fly across the surface of a lake and following his direction I move out of the bus leaving him behind.

At Liverpool Street I cross the road where Myer is being redeveloped almost ten years in the making. The businesses are rundown behind the scaffolding and the one lane street is narrow and easy to cross.

Down Mathers Lane I pass the jeweler, the vegetarian restaurant, the juice bar where I ate lunch the day before. There was no newspaper so I watched the manager charge his waitress \$5.60 for two coconut balls he would probably have thrown out at the end of the week.

In the courtyard between the Lane and Mathers House I slide my hood down, take headphones out, tilt forward to climb the short hill to the sliding doors at the front of the building. Sparrows flutter away from where they are eating potato gems dropped in the grass. Two teenagers in school uniform wait outside Criterion House near the childcare centre. One has her head curled like a swan over her phone and the other is eating raspberry licorice out of a white packet. It is cold and the skin on their faces is pale. They don't speak to each other. This is their routine.

My routine has been to drop into Mathers House. I take pen and paper and laptop. I sit in the dining room, which is like a small community hall. There is frosted glass on one side and open windows on the other. Laminex tables and green plastic chairs are set out ready for lunchtime. Maroon folding doors and a dinner service alcove with wine glasses hanging from a rack make a window into the kitchen. There is a thin lady at one of the benches snacking on a piece of chicken she has just diced, the clatter of pots, lunch getting ready. Volunteers find us says Angela, the coordinator. The woman eating chicken recently moved to Hobart to be with her daughter. But here she is keeping busy. I want to be like this when I'm older.

A woman on a motorised wheelchair quietly approaches the dinner service area. She has purple hair and a fur coat. Her scooter is adorned with lilac scarves that hang over the back of the headrest. A red and blue umbrella is sheathed in the back like a sword. She runs the craft classes. She tells me that two of her students have been working on a quilt for quite a while. It seems she is ready to start a new project.

Another woman comes in with a handful of homemade cards that she makes for Mathers House to give to its volunteers. They are enclosed in white paper envelopes and include bows and ribbons, collaged wrapping paper, and words like "Thank you" and "Happy Birthday."

A deliveryman drops a box off to the kitchen.

You bought 10 kg of chicken? asks Angela. That's a lot of chicken.

Out the window a small fairy follows her mother down the path to the childcare centre. She is pulling a pink tulle wedgie out of her tights as she goes. She has a lime green backpack over one arm. A few minutes later her mother reappears solo, smiling at a text message she checks on her phone.

In the afternoons there is a volunteer called Chaowanee singing in the kitchen. Today there is also ginger and peppermint tea and homemade biscuits. I try not to brush crumbs on the floor.

The visitors to Mathers House tell me they like it here because it's warm, and no one moves them on until they're ready. They can sit and sip their drinks and chat. For a gold coin, they can make their own tea from the urn on the side table. The visitors have grey hair, purple hair, red hair, black hair, and white hair. Their eyes are bright or streaked behind glasses. Their skin is soft and flecked. Some are beautiful and their clothes sing from a different era.

This is not a nursing home or an "aged-care facility" and like the others I get to go home at night. Mathers House is a community centre run by the Council. It opens for lunch and is staffed by volunteers. It offers hot meals and a raft of programs in the various rooms. When I write, the coordinators bring me coffee and biscuits made by the kitchen volunteers. And when I leave I rinse my cup for Chaowanee to put through the industrial dishwasher.

Every season there is a big lunch that everyone is invited to. The coordinators and volunteers plan it for months. When I arrive long tables have been laid out diagonally across the hall. The volunteers, who are not young themselves, have wreathes of ivy in their hair and serve beef goulash, mashed potato, and giant bowls of apple crumble with ice cream for dessert. There is even a complimentary glass of red wine or champagne. I take a seat across the table from the Lord Mayor and a couple who usually spend winter somewhere in their campervan on the mainland. Her hair is vivid red. She tells me this is the first winter they've stayed home in years, but that the snow has made her fall in love with Hobart all over again.

They tell me about crossing the Nullarbour, which they have done almost ten times. They take the van and head out somewhere remote staying in campgrounds or housesitting when the opportunity comes up. In a campground out of Perth there was an advertisement for a housesit 500km from Kalgoorlie. They took it and were there for three months without ever meeting the owners. She says that was her favourite. The stars. You can't imagine the stars. They taught the kids on the next station who were doing distance school for a month and then they packed up and left again making the long trip home.

On my right is woman with a purple fringe, Ada. Her hair is striking and matches her mauve jumper and the long chain of beads that hang around her neck. I compliment her hair fishing for the reason why she and other women her age choose to dye it that particular shade. Ada tells me that when your hair turns all grey and white it drains the colour from your face. Purple puts a bit of warmth back in. It's also a good conversation starter at airports.

Five years ago Ada completed a doctorate in Fine Arts. We've only just met but as I'm finishing my apple crumble, she says:

Make sure you look after your health while you're young.

I think about how I should wear earplugs when I go out to see bands, get my teeth checked, and take out health insurance. I wonder what she got up to

when she was younger. In the weeks that follow Ada sends me samples of her artwork via email. Abstract pictures, like an unfocused eye, about landscape, perception and the visual cortex. In her email she apologises for the delay in sending the images:

Old chooks burn up their energy so fast, time slips by.

This makes me think about getting older as a form of time travel, or perhaps as the mastering of it. Time slips by, but we can call the past back anytime we like. Or put it on hold. Already there are people I prefer not to remember. There are holidays that are better on reflection, and old friends whose teenage faces blur with the ones they carry now.

On my rapid approach to thirty, I've thought about this. It does feel rapid as though time sped up, which it has, relatively speaking, given that now a year is only a small fraction of the time I've spent on earth compared to when I was four and it was a quarter. Summer to summer used to stretch out as if Christmas would never come. Now, the years flow. This summer I sat on a stool next to my Gran's armchair and said:

I'm turning thirty this year.

Well dear, she said, I'm turning eighty.

Her clear green eyes turned my self-obsession inside out. No matter how old I am Gran will always have fifty years on me.

It makes me think about the preference we give to particular ages and why? Despite the markers of eighteen, twenty-one, thirty, forty, fifty – at what point does time start to circle? It ties us up in details, knots of memories so that we become the stories we tell and the people we remember. What do birthday's serve? A count to keep us on track for school years, social norms and life achievements? To mark growing, health, biological clocks, wrinkles, dress codes, then turning grey, shrinking, developing new ailments, requiring new health checks? We mark age in linear time, but life folds in – a calendar file fanning in the wind and we are stick figures drawn on the corner of each page. Flip it backwards and the cartoon is over in a few seconds. Age itself is like an endless apple peel, carefully spiraled away from the fruit without causing a break. It's only straight when the two ends are pulled taut. We can say this is the part that came off smoothly. This is the part that I nicked with the edge of the paring knife. In reflection we are all time travellers.

If I'm completely honest I expected the people at Mathers House to treat me like I'm their grandchild. I realise this is what I have come to expect from the old. And I realise the unspoken influence of older people can't be underestimated. But I'm not theirs, and they are kind and caring anyway. They tell me stories about their grandchildren in the circus or working in China and I feel like a dead weight left behind on the island, both older and younger than I look.

On Tuesday afternoon I meet Frank and his writing group. There are four women including me. Two are sisters. They are writing their family history but trying to do so in a way that is fluent and interesting to read. The other woman

has a knitted, rainbow vest on. She is writing a fantasy novel. Frank writes all sorts of things. As a teenager he was trained as a typesetter and has worked as a writer and editor ever since, as well as many other jobs – knife hand in the meat works to fish and chip shop owner to farm labourer, musician and folklorist. He is still a copy-editor for Australian Geographic, but he complains that the writers these days don't have the backstory. They don't know the codes and conventions that used to be in place about Australia and what it meant. The conversation runs differently now even though we talk over and over the same things.

On Wednesdays I play scrabble. The women chat to me through lunch – Shepherds Pie – and make me score.

Haven't you played scrabble before?

Only when I go camping.

I think you need to go camping more often.

I try and add up and can't under the pressure. But I get there in the end, even if I manage to lose by thirty-four points. But that's when they start to talk and I hear about the Russian photographer Fran worked for as a teenager, and how he crossed the mountains through to Asia to get to Australia, to get as far away from Russia as he could. She tells me how she loved teaching at Bridgewater High School, and how the teaching didn't stop for all the years she served as a Member in State Parliament.

Fran offers to bring a round of tea over. The man at our table hesitates and says he's had a good lunch and should be alright. His eyesight is good and he has seen the \$1 sign above the urn. Fran tells him this is her shout and I see a woman who will never lose her benevolent charm.

Another woman at the table has her own radio show that she programs music for. She says she tries to include as many female singers as she can. The group agrees that they like John Denver, but they don't like the 1950s café music being played over the stereo. Two of the women tell me they have the same grandchildren. This confuses me but they explain that one of their sons married the other's daughter. There should be a word for that, they say, for when mothers-in-law become friends. It's an important relationship.

Another woman has a neat twenties haircut clipped close around her ears and wears jumbo cord trousers and a stylish coat with a silver broache. The rings on her fingers hold large black stones and her wedding band is silver. Her back and shoulders are curved and clearly she is a smaller woman than she used to be, but by all accounts an avid gardener. She says she met her husband in 1982 on a holiday after they were both widowed and it was the happiest day of her life. Her name is Catherine and she wins both games of scrabble.

On Friday I go to book club. It's only once a month so I've been planning this. Sue who runs the group has a sharp white haircut and arched black eyebrows. She wears black boots zipped up over her jeans. She takes me

downstairs into the meeting room underneath the dining hall.

The book club is not the kind that I am familiar with where everyone buys a book and reads it. This is an official book club supported by the State Library. It costs \$5 a session and everyone is provided a book. Only the library doesn't buy new material very often anymore so this month they read, *March* by Geraldine Brooks from 2005 and next month, *Death of a Riverguide* by Richard Flanagan from 1994. Most have read both before. None of them have much good to say about *March*, although they all made sure to read it so they could discuss it with the group. But the book rarely comes up directly apart from when Sue brings the group back to focus.

Everyone is friendly and Catherine is there. Today I find out that she is eighty-nine years old and has a seventy-year-old daughter. This makes sense but for some reason I still find it confronting that they are both so old. I ask if she's planning a birthday party. And she says her children want to but she told them to wait and see if she makes it first. She laughs when she says it, a joke she's told before.

There are nine members of the book club. They don't talk about jobs or money. They talk about their grandchildren sometimes, but mostly ideas. Ken has written a novel and has it there in a spiral binder. They look out for each other even though it seems none of them are in good health themselves. They don't censure what they say. They aren't trying to impress. Self-indulgently they talk to me like I'm young. They want to tell me what they know. I sit and listen, two days off thirty, as thin as I'll ever be, and with as well a hearing and few wrinkles as I can hope for.

You must be almost twenty, says a man in blue jeans and a rugby top. I lap it up.

They talk about a recent Four Corners program about the lives of four transgender women in Australian prisons. One of the women says it's terrible, all of it, referring to how we treat our fellow humans. They talk about how one of the women was so beautiful and her voice so soft you never would have known she had a penis. It's the hormones now. They can change everything. They say I bet you didn't think this is what we talk about. The conversation moves on. A woman in stylish black with silver hair on my right says:

One thing I can't figure out, and I can think of at least two examples – is women in their late thirties who are much smarter, capable and switched on than their husbands, but they "let" their husbands be in charge. The women earn more, and have a clearer idea of what's going on, but they let him take charge. I don't know why that is.

Despite everything that has changed, I think about how frustrating it must be to watch the things that don't.

After book club I gather my thoughts by the window. On her way out one of the volunteers passes my table.

Do we get to read it when it's done?

Yes, probably.

Well I hope so.

I'll have to make sure I write nice things.

I don't care about that. I've only been here 13 years.

She is pragmatic and wry.

In the playground next-door behind the Flower Room there is a child wearing a red jumper standing away from the others. He slaps his hands together and pulls his sleeves back down as his friends reappear in a tricycle pack like a kiddie formation of *Mad Max*. The boy throws invisible stones at them as they pedal by. A carer begins to pack the toys into a square bucket. Through the glass I hear a bang on the fence. The children approach the carer, their trikes discarded. She kneels down to check one child is okay before rising over them. They crane their tiny necks to watch her speak. The boy in the background swirls his arms as if he is hurling magic at the group, there and apart at the same time.

I meet Frank again the week I'm due to finish. White beard, blue eyes, navy cable knit fisherman's jumper. A friend from uni comes along who is writing her thesis on Ernestine Hill, Mary Durack and Patsy Adam-Smith, and their contribution to Australian literature. The writing class is cancelled until the end of the winter, but Frank says he was glad to get out of the house. We fall quickly into conversation.

Frank got back from the United States eighteen months ago where he spent five years playing music, mostly in Kentucky. But he is originally from rural Western Australia. The family ended up on Cockatoo Island in the Buccaneer Archipelago when Frank was a kid. He had his ninth birthday there. Mad for books, a truck driver gave him a copy of *Tarzan and the Apes*. He says he loved it and that we forget how crucial reading was back then. They'd just read anything. His grandfather was a drover and he said his mate used to recite Shakespeare to the cattle to keep them quiet at night. No one knew if it actually was the Bard, but it sounded like it. Frank grew up with Aboriginal and Chinese people as well as refugees from Europe (officially Displaced Persons, or DPs as they were called) who began arriving in the 1950s. At the start of that decade Frank's family left Cockatoo Island. The mining company completed the landing jetty for the iron ore mine in the late 1950s and then they left too. The company went back in the 1970s and cut the top off. Frank says:

It was just a huge coral garden. It affected my mind for the rest of my life spending my young years on it.

Needless to say the reefs were later ruined from the mining and dynamite.

Frank tells us about the time he spent on Cape Barren Island off the Tasmanian coast. How his friends bought a TV and when they switched it on it was all white noise. Frank could read so they asked him to look at the instructions. He got it going. They all sat in the lounge room to watch the news. When it was over the Father said:

That was the news from Melbourne.
And they all went outside to play music in yard. Right through the 1960s,
Frank says he made seventy per cent of his living from music.

Oh we ate, he says. The world was a lot more generous then.

Generous or not, in the shadow of a snow-covered mountain, Hobart waits like a postcard. A glamour shot of a waterfront city. Population: 200 000. Average age: late thirties. Twice a year a museum themed on sex and death deals young Melbournians into the city (thick rimmed glasses), while the Hobartians get high off richly printed programs designed in pink and black slipped into the local newspaper. The rare New Yorker flies over, but no one notices. Meanwhile Myer rebuilds.

If you walk down the alleyway across the road from the construction site you will pass a jeweler, a café, a trophy shop, a juice bar and a vegetarian takeaway. This is Mathers Lane. At the end of it is Mathers House, a red brick building tucked between the art deco State Library and a childcare centre. If it is the afternoon, Chaowanee will be in the kitchen. She is there when I leave. She is singing, this time along to the ukulele band playing in the corner of the hall. All the chairs and tables have been packed away and as I peer out the service window over the silver aluminum bench tops that gleam like mirrors, I can see a group of almost fifteen people. Some have guitars and others ukuleles, smaller or larger. They strum with picks and fingers in front of music stands where black notes dance across white pages. Their voices soft carry over it all:

Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer, do,
I'm half crazy all for the love of you.
It won't be a stylish marriage,
I can't afford a carriage,
But you'd look sweet upon the seat
Of a bicycle made for two.

It is the same song that we sang in primary school. There is a certain confluence about youth and old age. But then as I write it, it snaps out again and I know they are nothing alike. They are the opposite ends of the apple peel, sweet and rotten, both, close and far apart.

Chaowanee has done her hair. It curls and kicks under. When I compliment her she says she just put rollers in when it was wet. Nothing special.

What are you doing this weekend? I ask as if she were a friend from uni. Maybe I've transgressed. But she pauses, smiles big, and says she has some new fruit trees that she bought during the week. This weekend she will ask her son to dig holes so she can plant them. I walk past the music players to say goodbye to one of the coordinators Bob wearing green cardigan with purple stripe.

How did you go with the book club? he asks.

Fine. They were all lovely.

Chaowanee comes over and hands me a sprig of daphne and two mauve pansies that she has wound together with a rubber band. I thank her and walk

back into the day with my posy.

It is a cold afternoon with a turquoise sky. There is a white sugar mountain and a birthday waiting for me on the horizon. I wonder if we'll have to wait another ten years until it snows.

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Thank you:

To coordinators Angela, Bob, and Danielle, and all the volunteers. Also Fran Bladel, Frank Povah and Ada Henskens, and everyone who let me sit in on their activities and made me welcome, also Caitlin Richardson from Twitch and Chris Gallagher from the Tasmanian Writers' Centre.