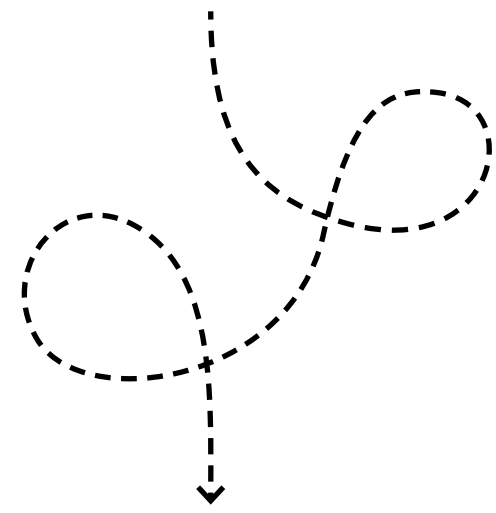


DOWN the rabbit hole



Back in the 1980s, the hottest ticket in town for the elementary school set was an invite to the Mad Hatter, a birthday party centre owned by soon-to-be real estate tycoon Harry Stinson. Inside the weirdest place this city ever spawned.

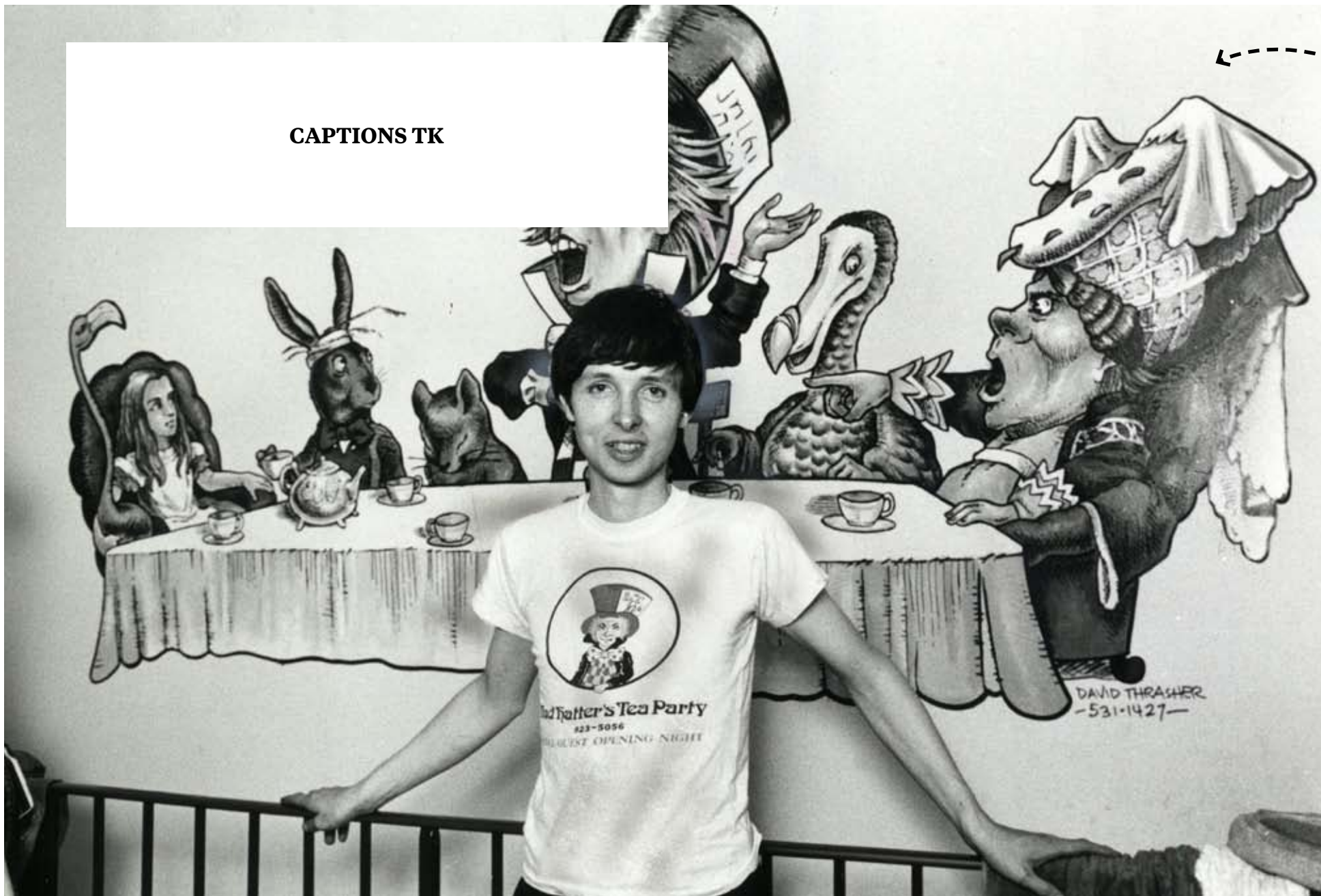
By Sheila Heti

PHOTOGRAPHS VICKY LAM



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hen people who grew up in Toronto in the '80s talk about their childhoods, one thing always eventually comes up: The Mad Hatter. "Did you go there? Was it real?" And when people who were *not* children in 1980s Toronto overhear us talking about the place, they always think we're making it up. Yet even those of us who went to parties at The Mad Hatter wonder if it wasn't actually some collective hallucination.

The Mad Hatter's Tea Party was a popular children's birthday party venue that was run out of several locations in North Toronto, including strip malls at Eglinton and Avenue Road, Bathurst and Eglinton and Woodbine and Highway 7. Every weekend, a new group of unsuspecting middle-class Toronto parents

would drop off their seven to 12-year-olds for an hour or two of birthday revelry, replete with bodily endangerment, ritual humiliation and untold health-code violations, and presided over by a bunch of vaguely sociopathic teenagers. They were the most incredible, most envied, most traumatizing birthday parties a generation of kids ever attended.

With the exception of the patchwork of collected memories of children from that era, there is little remaining evidence that The Mad Hatter ever existed. Recently, I set out to prove that it did. I spoke to former party attendees. I found articles mentioning it in the *Toronto Star*, and talked with people who worked there at the time. Here's what I learned: The Mad Hatter was created by a 18-year-old entrepreneur named Harry Stinson in the early '70s. He ran the business until 1990, and then entered the condo market, in time earning the designation "Toronto's Donald Trump."

The Mad Hatter folded in the early '90s. Stinson, following some very public financial troubles, now develops condominiums in Hamilton and New York. I spoke with him, as well as former employees and patrons of The Mad Hatter about their memories of the place. Let it be known once and for all: That magical place was for real.

THE SCHOOLYARD

"A friend invited me to his birthday party at The Mad Hatter when I was seven. And this was a pretty coveted thing. People in Grade Two were very excited about the prospect. It enjoyed some fame in the schoolyard as a very wild place to go."—*Amy Langstaff, 33*

"It was so prestigious an invitation to get, that it was just like you were completely insane with excitement. Also, The Mad Hatter was this opportunity to socialize on a boy level that I never really got anywhere else. I never had a tree-house fort. I never started a war with anybody. I was just a kid who read a lot of books. So The Mad Hatter was my Neverland."—*Matt Brown, 35*

"I was desperate to get to a Mad Hatter party. They were legendary: Studio 54 for 12-year-olds."—*Hilary Doyle*

THE HEARSE

"We were picked up in the hearse. It was supposed to be a limo; it was definitely a hearse. It smelled really bad, and being Grade Six girls, we were like, 'It

smells like death. They've just converted this hearse from carting around dead people!'"—*Erin Oke, 35*

"[The red hearses] were great promotion, and they actually made the parties run efficiently, because the kids would all arrive in one block and they'd all leave in one block. When you've got 30 parties running in an afternoon, starting every 20 minutes, and the adults aren't taking the arrival and departure times seriously, it can make for a very clogged system."—*Harry Stinson*

THE AESTHETIC

"It was sort of fairy-tale like. It was this magical underground kingdom where parents didn't exist. So there was sort of a joy-fear split about that."—*Josh Knelman*

"It was dank. It was a grim place. And it smelled so bad."—*Jesse Brown, 34*

"It was not decorated. It was just like someone's creepy basement. And it was kind of dreamlike in a way, 'cause it just didn't feel right. There was something very off about the whole thing."—*Jeremy Freed, 29*

"It was totally squalid. I remember graffiti on the walls, but not pretty graffiti, like they'd hired someone to do a mural. It was like you could take a marker and write on the walls."—*Erin Oke*

"It was raw brick, it was unfinished foam. And parents were never allowed down there, right? Which is crazy. Like, please drop off your children and *no*, you can't actually come into the premises to even look around."—*Matt Brown*

"There was no natural light. It was like a bunker."—*Lisa Mesbur, 39*

THE NAMING RITUAL

"To start, the kids were arrayed around the table, and the party leader seemed very old—he was probably 16 or 17. We were all given names that involved swear words. The teenager was like, 'What's your name? Amy?' So I, at age seven, became Amy Asswipe, and my friend whose party it was, he was Adam Asshole. And we were supposed to be referred to by those names the rest of the time."—*Amy Langstaff, 33*

"The name I ended up with was a fat joke: Jugular Jesse. And it stung. I remember this burning feeling, and as much righteous indignation as an eight-year-old can feel just looking at these counsellors, like, 'You're grown-ups, how can you let this happen?'"—*Jesse Brown*

THE PILLOW FIGHTS

"There was a pillow fight with these smelly, urine-stained, raw foam pillows, in a completely black room with a strobe light. That's burned into my memory, 'cause you would just see, like, in slo-mo, somebody coming at you, and you'd think you still had a few seconds, and suddenly, Pow! You'd just get this dense pillow across the head."—*Jesse Brown*

THE CAKE

"They made an offer to the birthday girl. They said, 'Do you want to cut the cake or just eat it with your hands?' And she was like, 'I want it cut,' but then everyone just dove in and threw it around, and she started crying 'cause she didn't get any of her own birthday cake.'"—*Erin Oke*

"When the birthday cake came, they smashed it in my face and I didn't know that was going to happen. It sucked. It really sucked. It just made me feel stupid."—*Efrim Manuck, 41*

LUNCH

"We were in cages. It was probably a big room subdivided with plywood walls, but the walls didn't go all the way to the ceiling and I remember this chicken-wire mesh or something over top. There were these wooden benches that we sat on, and popcorn was strewn all over the ground, which was really sticky. And there was just a tray of hot dogs, like, boiled, with white buns and condiments. We were throwing them around. There was a party of boys next door and they somehow climbed up and they were looking down at our party and yelling obscenities, and, you know, showing us their penises."—*Erin Oke*

"The hot-dog room was my nightmare. There was just a table and they'd throw the food down like we were animals, and then you'd get to throw it at each other. All of the condiments, too. There was no method."—*Miriam Verberg, 34*

THE TEENAGERS

"The teenagers who were supervising this thing did not seem like the wholesome teenagers who were our camp counsellors."—*Amy Langstaff*

"The teenage guy who led us around—I guess each party was assigned a teenager—his name was Boner. Or he called himself Boner. I think even in Grade Six, we thought that was kind of not super-appropriate."—*Erin Oke*

"I know many people who are notable citizens in the Toronto community who either had their parties there or worked there as a party supervisor, and some of them will not admit it."—*Harry Stinson*

THE WHIPPED CREAM FIGHT

"It was probably just a gallon of whipped cream, but it seemed like it was the size of an oil drum, and the room literally had four inches of dry, clotted whipped cream on all the walls. They just opened this bucket up and they'd be like, 'Go for it.' So you'd just reach in and wallop each other, which is crazy! Afterwards, I think they just hosed you down, prison-style."—*Matt Brown*

"I don't think the water they hosed you down with was warm; it was cold. It does sound like I'm describing this weird torture chamber. And I'm sure for some kids it was."—*Erin Oke*

"First you had to change into your swimsuit in this weird, creepy change room. But it just seemed like an anti-climax. Everybody had been building up this [part of the] experience and when you got there it was like, 'This is just a bunch of whipped cream. And we're supposed to throw it at each other?'"—*Jeremy Freed, 29*

THE SHOPPING CARTS

"In retrospect, I can't believe how totally dangerous they were—the shopping-cart bumper cars. One person would push a shopping cart while another kid sat in it...very treacherous. At my party we just went through a random door—I don't think we were being supervised by anyone—and we ended up in the mall's underground parking lot, so we were smashing into each other and smashing into cars."—*Erin Oke*

"I liked the shopping carts. They were scary. They were in a big plywood maze that basically looked like a

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—*Harry Stinson*

slaughterhouse. The walls went up to the height of the shopping cart. So you'd see the person you wanted to hit with your shopping cart, but you still had to get through the maze, so chances are, you weren't going to get to them."—*Miriam Verberg*

"I got lost in the maze, really lost, to the point that I didn't see anybody anymore. By the time I got back everybody had moved on. They were, like, two activities later. Nobody came to find me. I remember I just gave up the shopping cart at a certain point and was running, trying to find my way back."—*Jayme Stone*

THE BODY

"We had head bumps periodically, but I don't think we had any major accidents. Usually things happened during the whipped cream fights, because it was really slippery. People would slip. I don't know. Kids today aren't allowed to play, they're not allowed to do anything...It's like, just give me a break. The only acceptable things for them to do is sit like marshmallows in front of their videogame...and that's safe."—*Harry Stinson*

"By the end of the party, there would be bloody knuckles and bruised feelings and people would be crying. It almost got out of hand constantly. I remember they made sure there was a cushion of 20, 30 minutes where we were let loose in the ice cream parlour, and you'd get these double cones—one handle with two scoops side-by-side—and you could have as much ice cream as you wanted. So when the parents showed up you were sort of, like, coming down from this emotional adrenaline rush, from a sugar high, and you were kind of like [panting], and if you had been crying an hour earlier, now you were, like, Best party ever!"—*Jesse Brown*

"I used to work in Yorkville in the late '70s, and we'd see these really fried-looking children coming out of The Mad Hatter and I remember we used to sit across the street, just waiting for a shift to start or something, and you'd see these really, really messed-up looking kids staggering out of there—it looked like they came out of a horror movie, cause they'd have ketchup all over their clothing and they'd look really really pooped. So it kind of was great."—*Erella Ganon, 52*

LINGERING FEELINGS

"You wonder, Could that really have been what it was like? I think when you reach the age of 16, you begin to realize that it was just petrifyingly dangerous. It should not have legally existed for as long as it did. Like, how long did it exist? Two decades? That makes literally no sense to me. I'm stunned nobody was killed. I'm stunned no one was sued."—*Matt Brown*

"I just wanted to be left alone at the Mad Hatter. I had a dream of just getting into it myself and having, like, three people who would be my complement, and staying there for a really long time. Like an opium den."—*Miriam Verberg*

"I would always hear, 'Oh, The Mad Hatter is the best.' But I didn't love it. It reminded me of those—I'm going to sound ridiculous—but those proto-sexual dreams you had when you were a kid where you're alone, and it's this very weird feeling. That's the only way I can describe it. Sort of sinister, with this weird sexual overtone."—*Jeremy Freed*

"I felt love, total love. I was not afraid. I was not afraid at all."—*Lisa Mesbur*

DID YOU TELL YOUR PARENTS WHAT HAPPENED?

"I wouldn't have talked to my parents about it. What do you say?"—*Will O'Neill, 30*

BACK AT SCHOOL

"After the party was over, I remember just being pitched out into the street. My mom wasn't there, and I just remember being pitched out, sopping wet, in the winter, walking around in this industrial park and wait for my mom to pick me up, completely shell-shocked from the whole thing. This was on a Sunday. On Monday, some kid who hadn't been invited to the party heard it was amazing and great, and he came up and asked me what my nickname had been, and I told him: Amy Asswipe. And then my teacher heard that I swore, and I was sent to the principal's office, and I think I really freaked out at that point. I think I started crying. I felt so hard-done by. The world had gotten so strange all of a sudden."—*Amy Langstaff*