



# We're All As Mad As Hatters Here

The young man in question had problems. (This was how we referred to mental illness growing up in the New England of the nineteen seventies: *having problems*.) He wasn't right. (This was how the Oklahomans I met getting my Master's would describe a young person with mental illness: *the boy ain't right*.) I don't know where it entered my brain from, television most likely, or maybe the Internet, but the phrase that comes to my mind is he had trouble *being a person*. That's not exactly right. In my mind, the words exist only in the sense of saying it to him directly, not in describing him to a third party — "Do it like a person! Be like a person!" — maybe adding "You ain't quite right, are you?" and "You got problems." for good measure.

If there is a colorful local phrase for describing a person with mental illness, I haven't heard it spoken aloud.

He was naughty, to be sure, but he was acting like a person, specifically a teenaged person, when he did the thing that he did. And I can sympathize. My first job offer, the better offer in many ways, was from a firm in Thailand. One of the reasons I ended up here instead of there was a nagging fear that I would someday get an uncontrollable urge to call the [REDACTED] an [REDACTED], just because I knew it was against the law. I'm not weird about it or anything, I mean, I know I wouldn't actually do it. I would have taken the job if nothing else had come through. It's just an urge, like the way you want to grab a policeman's gun when you see it, or jump from a height when you stand close to the edge. You think about it, but you don't do it. Poe called this feeling the Imp of the Perverse. Also, if I'm being one hundred percent honest, I think I was afraid I would go with prostitutes if I moved to Bangkok. I didn't want to turn into that guy.

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I'm American. We get weird about free speech; we get indoctrinated pretty early. The fact that it's illegal to give a *sieg heil* or deny the Holocaust in Germany always struck me as kind of messed up, like, morally wrong. I believe that patently bad ideas should fail based on their own merits. I know that in the US there's always the example of it being illegal to yell "Fire!" in a crowded theatre, or being strictly forbidden to say "I'm going to assassinate the [REDACTED]", and now it's gotten broader whenever terrorism might be concerned. Some British party boy got his visa revoked because he tweeted "I'ma destroy NYC" or something and there have been cases of jackass TSA agents detaining people at the airport for having Arabic study guides, or even Arabic writing on a T-shirt. American speech was never one hundred percent free and now it's considerably less so. But still, I have no hesitation referring to two or more ultimately identifiable US government security agents as "jackass(es)" in this public forum, for instance, whereas I'm not entirely sure what footing I'd be on if I referred to a member of the Ministry of [REDACTED] as a "fascist [REDACTED]", even if I thought I was making a thought-provoking social critique or a meaningful artistic statement in doing so.

The point at which I started to see that the kid had problems was when he got out on bail. He just doubled down on crazy, kept coming up with stranger things to do, and say, those weird accusations against his bailor and the retractions and the transparent excuses. I wanted to slap him,

not because of any of the specific things that he said or did, but because I have to tell people that *I live here*. I have to defend my choice of residence to below-the-line trolls and relatives. This kid wasn't right. He kept putting us in the news, making everyone who lives here look like a joke. I'm not going to tell you who to vote for (I'm not even sure that I'm legally allowed to), but I wish that the people in charge of running this place could see that the more that we, as a society, invest in caring about what this little jackass does, the sillier we all look.

A nation's authority as a place of cutting edge technology is undermined when that nation steps into one of the Internet's most long-standing and stereotypical pissing contests in order to settle it by judicial fiat. Prior to the advent of modern information technology, was the High Court adjudicating teenagers' disputes viz. "Yo' mama be so fat..." via defamation law? There is literally no one who doesn't live here who thinks about our status as a container port or exporter of silicone wafers before thinking of us as the punchline for jokes about smacking people in the butt with canes. And that includes people who import containers full of our wafers. I should know. I talk to these people. You should hear the things my brother comes up with — what was the last Facebook post? — something like, "Hey faggot, do they cane your [REDACTED] when you get caught [REDACTED] some Chinese guy's [REDACTED], or are they worried that you'd like it?" I wish I never got Facebook. Who is it I thought I'd be keeping in touch with anyway?

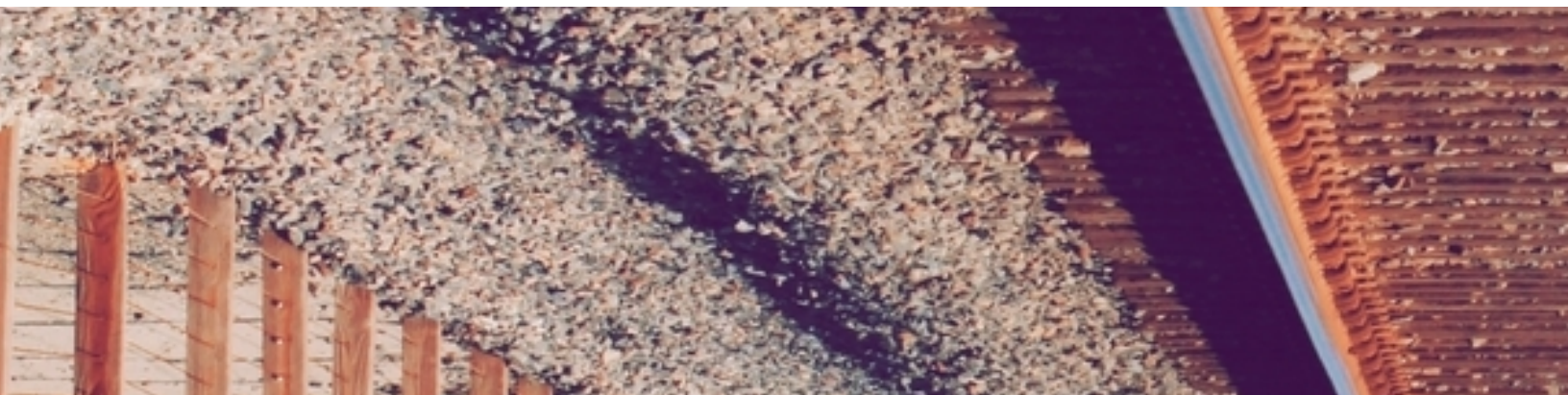


I use the phrase “mental illness” as an American. I understand that in many Asian households, mental illness is only spoken of when it has reached a certain level of urgency such that the authorities have to be involved. We set the bar lower than that. If an individual meets certain criteria, they get a diagnosis. Some diagnoses are less damning than others — a little head cold doesn't require an intravenous drip; a twisted ankle doesn't get surgically splinted with an external fixator. There was nothing in the kid's behavior to justify involuntary committal to a psychiatric facility, even late in the business when you wanted to slap him and shout at him to just stop it and act like a person. The court's decision only made sense in the self-referential way that you'd have to be crazy to say that sort of thing around here.

I wonder if they forced him to take the medicine they won't give me. I used to just get it from my regular doctor when I started with the palpitations, then from the psychiatrist that Judy made me see before she left me. I can't find anyone who will prescribe it to me since that first doctor reported me to the Ministry of Health and the Central Narcotics Bureau as a benzodiazepine addict. It was my own stupid fault for being honest and telling him that I had smoked weed as a kid, was in recovery for alcoholism, and had been managing my symptoms with sixty to one hundred pills a year

for over ten years; and that I wanted some more, please. I only brought twenty pills here with me because that was all they'd allow me when I asked for preauthorization before I moved. People tell me I should have just brought in a bunch anyway. If I was the sort of person who could have successfully done that, I wouldn't be the sort of person who needed them, though, would I?

I have been given the choice of two pills in Singapore. I am familiar with both. The dark red pill makes me feel as if the world is an endless source of danger, against which I must remain constantly on guard. It makes life seem both less and more real at the same time. Under its influence, I take in a steady stream of data about the events surrounding me and I assess the potential level of threat against my person that each new piece of information may represent. It's exhausting. It also makes me want to stab myself with a kitchen knife in an oddly specific way. The light blue pill makes it impossible for my [REDACTED] to get hard. I know my social life hasn't been all it could be since I moved here, but I still like to use it, if only to [REDACTED] [REDACTED] a couple of times a day. That one also made me gain about fifteen kilos the last time I was on it — a repeat of which would do nothing to help my prospects with the ladies. The third doctor I saw clucked his tongue at my willful non-compliance and offered me a beta blocker as an afterthought.



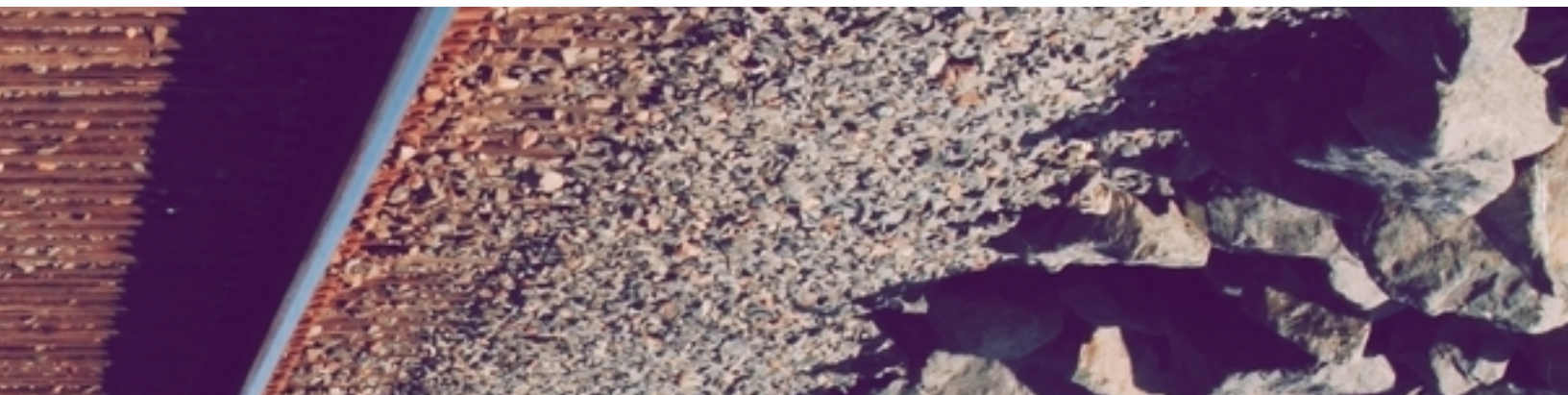
Did I put that kid in jail? Did I, in some way, consent to his incarceration when I accepted my salary and benefits package? Am I to blame at all for the way things are? I have only lived here a short while and I don't know how long I will be staying. Can that be an excuse? We are many. If we stopped showing up, would the place depopulate in two or three generations? A society is constructed from a mass of individual participants. We choose to come here. I chose this job over the offers from Kuala Lumpur and Dubai because of safety concerns. (Not because of how things are right now, but because, frankly, █████ scare me, and the way the world's going, who knows what those places could be like in ten years?) Do I consent, when another day passes in which I have given absolutely no thought to the possibility of violence against my person; when I sit carefree in the park despite the presence of young men in groups; when I walk home safely? I would say, *walk home safely at all hours*, but that would be false and hyperbolic. I never stay out late anymore.

We are the same, Singapore. I know what it is to grow too quickly. I've built myself up from a difficult separation. I need control, too. I know the effort necessary to maintain it. I know what it feels like when you wonder if the cracks have begun to show. I understand the fear of what might happen, that lives unhappily with the ignorance of what exactly that might be. I know

what it feels like to hold on to something so tightly that the blood drains from the thing held and the hands holding it. I'd be afraid of the consequences of the introduction of hard drugs into my system, too.

When the palpitations come, I believe I can feel something; behind the thoughtlessness of impeccable manners, just below the skin of polished glass and swept concrete. In the moment between heartbeats, it becomes clear to me that our high-rise apartments and office spaces might break free at any moment, sending us all plummeting several dozen rankings in any number of official international listings of economic indicators and standardized measures of quality of life, garnering us even more scarlet letters of shame from various non-governmental organizations.

I understand why people are sensitive to the strength of words spoken by a moody sixteen-year-old with Internet access; words I dare not repeat here. If a █████ woman had been █████ by a gang of █████ during the last major episode of interethnic rioting, her child would be only forty-five years old today: a bloody history is half an industrialized lifespan removed. This sensitivity, this terror, is understandable in a multicultural society, especially since the place is basically run by a cabal of █████, which is argu-







ably the most racist culture on Earth. Of course, historically, indigenous populations resent the local diasporic [REDACTED] population, and that's no different here. The [REDACTED], in particular, have never missed an opportunity to take revenge for perceived injustices at the slightest provocation. I've heard people say it's because they're less hard-working and prone to jealousy. (I should say: not here. I've never heard that said here.) Uniquely in the region, though, in mid-century Singapore the [REDACTED] proved that they can give as good as they get. It's a numbers game really. I understand that properly managed demographics are key to managing Democracy. And, forget race and ethnicity, you want a recipe for disaster? You let people start openly criticizing [REDACTED]. Those people are [REDACTED] nuts. **END QUOTE**

'Your Honor, in closing, I draw your attention to Exhibit B, the web-log posting, published by the offender on 13 August 2015.

'Therein, the offender admits to a diagnosis of an undisclosed mental illness, for which he refuses to comply with the pharmaceutical treatment recommended by his doctors. Further, he indicates that he had been, at the time of publishing, in full control of his alcohol addiction, and that he was functioning without the benzodiazepines to which he has a documented history of addiction, despite his claims to the contrary in his official statement to investigators. The prosecution will stipulate to the offender's claim that he was intoxicated at the time by a combination of an unknown

quantity of alcohol and the benzodiazepine drug, lorazepam, and that he therefore has no memory of committing the crime. However, we believe that the fact that the offender has demonstrated the ability to abstain from these substances, as well as his failure to follow medical advice to manage his mental illness, should greatly limit the degree to which his *non compos mentis* state should be considered as a mitigating factor in his sentencing.

'Further, the electronic document in question raises serious concerns regarding the character of the offender. Although he does not refer to the Thai people specifically, his statements regarding a number of Southeast Asian cultures and peoples border on the xenophobic. According to multiple witness testimonies — including the separate accounts of the two prostitutes who had been in the continuous company of the offender for at least 27 hours — he had over the course of that time made, with increasing frequency, public and private statements offensive to various classes of people, including but not limited to: Germans, Australians, British, Singaporeans, Mainland Chinese, all bearded men under the age of twenty five, and, strangely enough, Americans.

'Lastly, and most damning, the offender states therein that he himself in fact suspected that, due to his untreated mental illness, he was capable of — perhaps even predisposed towards — an act of Lèse-majesté directed at His Majesty's late father.



‘The offender knew of his predilection to commit the crime, failed to take action to prevent his commission of the crime, and indeed took actions which increased the likelihood of his committing the crime. Far from being cause for mitigation, the facts of the offender’s illness and intoxication indicate a sort of premeditation of his hateful and bafflingly obscene utterances against the dignity of His Majesty, and of the late

Queen mother. Accordingly, the prosecution asks your Honor to impose a custodial sentence of no less than ten years.’

**End**

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## Writer’s Exegesis

The abstract figure known, among other names, as the *hamsa* in Judaism and the *Hand of Fatima* in the world of Islam, is not a representation of a human hand: that would be forbidden by Pentateuchal and Koranic prohibitions. In each of the many variations on the form, lines describe five narrow protrusions emerging in parallel from a wider central body, analogous in relative length to fingers from a palm. It is, arguably, as *hand-like* as an image could be while still failing to represent a hand. If, looking at an example of the figure, you see a human hand, it would be because your mind has imposed that meaning upon it. The artist who made it would remain blameless.

It is forbidden by Singaporean Law to publish material that exhibits partisan politics,

or is likely to cause offence on grounds of race, religion or gross indecency. What would take shape from following a path just alongside the edge of the law, but never crossing over? If, like the Hand of Fatima, you see that which is forbidden when you look upon it, the workings of your own mind are at fault, the author and publishers accept no responsibility. I, myself, see something reminiscent of an increasingly common American method of presenting information to the public.

### **Biography**

*Nathan Lauer is an American writer living in Hong Kong. His works have appeared in Asia Literary Review, Buffalo Almanack and Meat for Tea: The Valley Review.*