

# MY WORST IDEAS

Michael Jeffrey Lee



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## MY WORST IDEAS

I have ideas for stories all the time: I might be standing on a bridge, looking down at the freezing water; I might be walking home late at night, trying not to be murdered; or I might be getting intimate with a significant other; but no matter where I am or who I'm with, my mind is working overtime, helping me generate fresh ideas and inspirations for my fiction – that's why I always keep a pen at the ready. There are days when I can barely jot my ideas down fast enough, and I can fill whole Moleskines without coming up for air – it's on those days that I feel my most healthy and human.

But some of my ideas over the years have been very bad – a few of them have made me downright ashamed of my own brain. Even worse are the bad ideas I insist on laboring over for long periods, bringing them all the way to draft form. A few years ago, I spent several months writing a story about an incarcerated man. He had done something awful, his execution day was quickly approaching, and the stress was causing him to lose his grip on reality: alone in his dark cell, he would hallucinate and see people who weren't really there, talking and dancing and carrying on with them until the wee hours. Then, the night before the state was set to murder him, something unexpected happened: he died in his sleep, an apparent heart attack. The story took a turn for the humorous, and the bumbling guards, fearful of legal action, tried to carry out the execution as planned, and spent the rest of the day attempting to fool the sheriff and the chaplain and the victims' family into thinking that the condemned man was still alive, right up to the point that the switch was flipped. I am particularly proud of the last supper scene, messy as it is, though I don't think much else about the story

works – I realize now that the idea was just not original enough. Many authors have written that story better, and I had no business thinking I had anything new to bring to the table.

And just a few months ago, I found myself working on another dud – it was a story about a woman who dreamed every night about owning a hybrid car. She wanted to use less gas and help the environment, and even though such a car was well beyond her means it didn't stop her from thinking about it night and day. She was obsessed, and who could blame her? Also, she was very old, which I was hoping would make her more sympathetic. But then an interesting opportunity came her way: a famous game show began filming in her town, and something told her to try and get on it, so she did, and, just her luck, the grand prize of the day was a hybrid car, and through a combination of chance and skill she managed to win it. She drove it home that day – the happiest day of her life. But that's where her luck ended. She crashed the car the very next day, and before long, everything in her life was going wrong, and soon she found herself on the street. The last scene was quite ironic: a jeweled hand passing a single dollar bill out the window of a hybrid car to the protagonist, who stood shivering on a median beneath a freeway overpass. I didn't really like the story when I began it, and I *really* didn't like it when I finished it, especially because it seemed to imply that the old woman deserved a severe punishment for desiring something well beyond her means. I'm glad I lost the story when my computer got wet.

Just the other day I had another bad idea; from sunup to sundown I worked on this story that will probably never see the light of day. It was a tale of two roommates. They were friends, living in an apartment together. They were both working odd jobs and, interestingly, they were both involved in romantic relationships that were eating their souls. Anyway, one night, one of the roommates finally snapped, and he packed up his car and drove to the

river and then drove his car into the river, but he decided at the last minute that he wanted to live, so he rolled down the window and escaped. The next day he cut ties with his sweetheart, purchased a bike, and turned his life around. The other roommate was happy for him but still mired in his own toxic relationship, which he persisted in for a few more weeks. Actually, I'm not really sure if this is a bad story or not. I know these people, and I feel too close to the material to be able to judge it accurately. But I suspect that it's bad, very bad and nasty and quite possibly my worst, and I don't think I'll return to it anytime soon.

Anyway, those are some bad story ideas, and if I wasn't so excited about the one I'm working on today – it's about a church group building toilets for some grateful villagers – I'd feel much more depressed about how much of my life I've spent working on them.

## THE YOUNG MAN WHO WANTED TO MAKE FRIENDS

There was a young man who moved to a new town and couldn't make any friends. All the friends were taken, it seemed, and he found himself alone every day and night. One day, he was in the square, sitting on a crooked bench and eating his lunch. Potential friends were passing to and fro with each other, not even giving him a glance.

"If only I could make a friend," said the young man. "Then life would be bearable."

Just then a pigeon flew down and alighted next to him. "I heard what you said," said the pigeon. "I have a lot of pity for you."

"Thank you," said the young man, who had been looking for pity. "But will you be my friend?"

"No," said the pigeon, "but I will help you."

"You're very kind," said the young man. "I've had no luck here in this town."

"First," said the pigeon, "hold me in your fist nice and tight, and with a firm grip. Then with your other hand twist my little head off, quick."

"Fine," said the young man. "What then?"

"Toss my head in your mouth and swallow it whole, no chewing."

"Fine," said the young man. "And then?"

"Lift my body to your lips," said the pigeon, "and drink my blood in a single draft."

"And then?" said the young man.

"After every last drop is gone," said the pigeon, "put my headless corpse in your pants pocket."

“Easy,” said the young man. “But how will it help me?”

“You will keep me in your pocket when you go around town. When you come close to a friend, I will heat my body up. Your pocket will get hot, and it will be a signal to you that you should engage them.”

“Have you come from God?” said the young man.

“I’ve come on behalf of the mayor,” said the pigeon.

“The mayor,” wondered the young man.

“He has eyes in the sky,” said the pigeon.

“And he would sacrifice one of his pigeons for me?” said the young man.

“It means that much to him,” said the pigeon.

“Thanks to you both,” said the young man. “Are you ready?”

“I am,” said the bird.

So the young man seized the bird, twisted off the little head, popped it in his mouth, drained the body to the last drop and then put it in his pocket for safekeeping. As soon as he left the crooked bench and began walking around town, he could feel his pocket getting hotter. Hotter and hotter did it grow, until he came upon his first friend. He introduced himself, and they spoke for a little while, and then they made some plans. It thrilled his heart to have made a friend, and he set out to find more. Day after day the young man walked around town, making friends and making plans, with that bird nearly burning a hole in his pocket!

Time went by, and soon the young man was quite well-known in town, and there wasn’t a single day or night that he did not speak with a friend. Policemen, office girls, homeless people, people from all walks of life – soon he was friends with so many. And the pigeon’s body never decayed, nor did it fail him. Always it was in his pocket, heating up when he neared a potential friend, or cooling off around someone he needn’t bother with.

One day, when he had made all the friends he needed to make,

the young man set out to find the mayor, who lived on the outskirts of town, in a big house several stories tall, to thank him. But when he arrived at the mayor's house, weird things immediately started happening. On the first floor he saw a row of young men's skulls, grinning at him. They directed him one flight up. On the second floor he saw a bunch of young men's hands, waving at him. They too directed him one flight up. And on the third floor he saw a pile of smoldering private parts, and they too directed him one flight up. When he got to the fourth floor, he peered through the keyhole and saw the mayor sitting in his chair.

"He looks like a bird," thought the young man, but when the young man opened the door the mayor leapt out of the chair and into his bed, and pulled the covers all the way over his head.

"Mr. Mayor," said the young man. "What is all of this?"

"What are you talking about?" said the mayor.

"Weird things in your house," said the young man. "On the first floor, I saw a row of young men's skulls grinning at me."

"You poor child," said the mayor, "those were juicy melons ready to be eaten."

"And on the second floor," said the young man, "I saw a bunch of young men's hands, waving at me."

"You poor child," said the mayor, "those were spicy red peppers, flopping in the wind."

"And on the third floor," said the young man, "I saw a pile of smoldering private parts, and they too directed me one flight up."

"You poor child," said the mayor, "those were moldy carrot skins, waiting for the garbage can."

"And on the fourth floor I peered through the keyhole," said the young man, "and I saw you, Mr. Mayor, and you looked just like a bird."

At that moment the skulls, the hands, and the private parts came into the room and began to dance, and beneath the covers



the mayor seemed to dance as well. The young man did what any other young man would have done in that situation: he took that hot headless pigeon out of his pocket, dropped it on the floor, and started to dance!



## MY WORST IDEAS Michael Jeffrey Lee

In the final story of Michael Jeffrey Lee's *My Worst Ideas*, a disembodied voice asks the narrator to write him a story. The voice asks the narrator to include "my jingle-jangle voice, my queer way with words. My general philosophy." Strange jingle-jangle voices fill Lee's new collection, mumbling to each other as the text, full of uncanny and unsettling repetitions, builds into a fugue. Lee's characters are unable to get comfortable; they don't feel at home in their city, their relationship, or even their body. With dissonant black humor, Lee explores their sense of dislocation and mounting desperation. In one story, a lonely young man carries a pigeon's headless body in his pocket that warms when he hears a potential friend; in another, a pretentious lover is carried down a filthy river after diving in to save his sweetheart, who couldn't care less. There is an innocence and directness to the writing that makes it harder and harder to ignore the work as it circles the drain of its obsession.

Born in the Bay Area of California, **Michael Jeffrey Lee** spent time in New Orleans and now lives in Berlin, Germany. Sarabande Books published his first short story collection, *Something in My Eye*, in 2012. Lee's stories have appeared in *N+1*, *The Rupture*, and *BOMB*, among many others. He received the Mary McCarthy Prize in Short Fiction and a literary grant from the Berlin Senate. In addition, he is the vocalist for Budokan Boys and teaches writing at The Reader Berlin.

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