

# The Inventor

## by Casey Barasch

He was an inventor and he lived on a dark, lonely side of town which had recently been bulldozed save for his own rickety three-story house. Few visitors dared show up. He had not been checking his mail because, six months ago, a band of teenagers on bicycles stole his mailbox. Why would they want his mailbox? He never figured it out. Regardless, it was gone. These days, mail arrived on his doorstep if it even came at all.

The inventor awoke with a bump. Bumps were frequent. Bumping his head on the doorframe, banging his knee on the table, dropping a book on his little toe. Usually when this happened he un-bumped himself by jerking his body in the opposite direction. Un-bumping was cutting edge. In fact, when he told people about it, they doubted him. But it worked; he swore by it.

He un-bumped. He un-bumped again. Something was wrong. The noise downstairs wasn't letting up. Frustrated, the inventor yanked a robe off the lampshade and jaunted downstairs. The noise was outside. He wondered if the alley cats were brawling again. As his hand scraped the railing on the stairs, he heard the skittering of rats. The inventor opened the front door. His eyes followed the sound, and they landed on his front stoop.

A wooden box of blankets lay on the top step. As he watched, the blankets squirmed and piped up in a rasping wail. He shivered and he picked up the box, which was heavier than he thought it would be. He took one last glance at the empty street, and he called out to see if anyone had left their box here by accident. With no response, he turned and went inside.

In the specimen room, the inventor peeled back the layer of blanket. A wailing red face greeted him. The face stopped and gasped for air. It wailed again. The features of the face were sharp, but the skin on its cheek was soft. *Baby-soft* was an expression he'd read somewhere. By process of elimination, the inventor deduced it was a baby, a human baby. He had not seen one in decades. He prodded its cheek. The baby stopped crying and studied him with its disproportionate alien eyes.

The inventor first thought that he should call the police. Last time he called the police, it was when those teenagers stole his mailbox. They laughed at him on the phone, enormous gales that they didn't even try to hide. The inventor had hung up, taken a small box knife, and cut the telephone cord. He knew how to fix it, but he didn't want to. *No*. He would call the police tomorrow, at a reasonable hour.

The inventor looked at the baby. The baby looked at him.

"Who would leave you here?" he asked.

The baby said nothing.

"Must have been a *very* forgetful person. I consider myself a forgetful person, but there are some things that one simply cannot forget. Who are your parents?"

The baby said nothing, just drooled. Babies were frustratingly uncooperative, it seemed. The inventor sighed. He glanced at the specimen shelves, the glass jars and the taxidermied rodents. The live rodents he kept on what might have once been a dining room table. Lately he was working on miniature life buoys, which floated in a dish of water next to the rodent enclosures. The mouse-sized ones fit the mice, but he'd have to alter the sizes for the gerbils and rats. Progress was good, though. Soon he would solve the issue of mouse-drownings forever.

But it wasn't the rodents he was trying to find. It was the ceiling tiles above them. There had once been a ceiling tile with a dark spot that used to bother him, so he had pasted some newspaper over it. One newspaper had on it an advertisement for baby formula. There was a picture of a mother holding a baby, one hand on its rear and the other on its shoulder. The inventor picked up the baby this way, one hand on the rear and the other on its shoulder.

He picked through the rest of the box, searching for clues as the baby began to cry again, right in his ear. He turned over the box. A soiled yellow blanket fell out, along with a small scrap of paper. The paper appeared to be a list of financial transactions, with separate boxes for sales tax. At the bottom it read, "Aaron Mattresses and Furniture."

"Ah," said the inventor. "That must be your name. Aaron Mattresses. How odd. They didn't bother to leave the furniture with you, though."

Aaron Mattresses had soiled himself quite severely by this point and so the inventor took him upstairs to attempt to clean him. He unwrapped the cloth diaper and his hypothesis was confirmed as the boy urinated straight into the air. The inventor sighed again, placed the baby in the sink, and wondered how he was supposed to wash a baby. They didn't take showers, right? The inventor decided on scrubbing the baby down with a washcloth.

After the bath, the inventor wrapped Aaron in a dish towel. The second the baby touched his shoulder, it fell asleep. The inventor wandered the house for a while with it slumped over his shoulder. He collected many things, scraps of metal, telephone wires, taxidermied spiders, but never a crib or a bassinet. Eventually he found somewhere suitable for a baby to sleep, and he placed a few blankets down, and set the baby there for the night.

The inventor woke early the next morning. Usually he had a particular order of things, The System, as he called it. He picked up his wire glasses and tapped the frame on his bedside table three times so the dust fell off. Then he tested his slippers twice for scorpions, and stretched one arm over the other. He used to pour cereal and then take a shower, so the cereal would be properly soggy when he got out, which was just the way he liked it. But lately he hadn't been showering every morning, and the milk was curdled and the cereal boxes had taken in ants like a landlord taking in unruly tenants.

Regardless, The System broke down the moment the inventor woke up. A cry pierced the air and he ran to where the baby slept, scooping it into his arms. Then he marveled at what he had just done. He was like the woman in the newspaper advertisement! And like her, he realized that babies also need to eat.

The inventor sucked his teeth as he opened the refrigerator. He poked through four expired milk containers. They always seemed to expire on him right away. Why was it like this, that milk would expire mere seconds after purchase? And yet, at the same time, there was a sore on the back of his hand from an injury ages ago, and it had not gone away, no matter how much he picked at it. He rubbed the sore against the refrigerator door as he found a bottle of milk at the back that would expire tomorrow. Relieved, he pulled it out.

The inventor fashioned a baby's milk bottle from a glass beaker and a rubber diaphragm, both from the chemistry room. He warmed the bottle under his shirt. Aaron Mattresses knew what to do, and drank voraciously until all the milk was gone. The inventor tossed the bottle into the sink and swung the baby over his shoulder. Aaron Mattresses burped in agreement.

With little else to do, the inventor took to sitting on his front porch and scribbling notes while the baby sat on his lap. He was hoping that someone would come by to pick up Aaron Mattresses. He figured if he were to lose a baby, there's nowhere he wouldn't go to find it again.

The inventor once read a story in the newspaper about a teenage mother who left her baby at a fire station so that someone else could come and take care of it. But his house was far from the nearest fire station. And anyway, why on earth would anyone leave a baby with him? Was it a sick joke, he wondered, from his former coworkers at the electrical engineering company? Was it a test?

Regardless, he knew his own limitations. He did not have what it took to be raising a baby. If it weren't for the incident with those cops, he would have turned over the baby by now. Really. He would have. But he didn't.

The inventor was not so great with time. As a result, he did not know how much time had passed since the night someone left the baby on his doorstep. He rose, he slept, he rose, he slept. He bought milk, it expired, he bought milk, it expired. He changed the baby, he fed the baby, he washed the baby, he put it to sleep. Sometimes the baby would grab on with vice-like strength to his pointer finger. Sometimes it would steal his glasses or pull his hair. The inventor didn't mind. The baby was only doing what it thought it should be doing and thus, it was really no different from himself.

Aaron Mattresses liked to take a nap at midday. The inventor put him down to where he slept. He sighed. Then, rattling against the back of his skull, was the sound of a knock on the door. The inventor paled. He left the baby to rest, and he slid down the metal rail of the stairs and ran for the door. Once there, he caught his breath, straightened himself, and opened it.

On the other side of the door was a woman, an infrequent visitor. She wore a government suit and hospital-plastic badge. One hand was holding a clipboard while the other pushed up heavy glasses. The inventor gulped. He didn't make one of those fake smiles that people make in doorways. He didn't know whether or not he was supposed to pretend to be happy.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Raczak," said the woman. Her name was Ellen Hincke, the inventor recalled. At his lack of response she said again, as if to a child, "*Good afternoon.*"

"Ah... yes," said the inventor. She always expected him to be looking at her face, and had put in the notes last time when he didn't. So he was looking at her face now, staring hard at it. Faces were distracting, though. He struggled to focus. "Good afternoon, Ellen."

Ellen pushed her way past him. "I hope it's okay if I come in."

"You already have," grumbled the inventor.

"How are you feeling today?" Ellen asked, tap-tapping her pen on the clipboard.

*What a strange question,* the inventor thought. Today he was feeling the same as he did every other day, which was all sorts of things, it was the squeeze in the upper part of his chest, it was the churning in his stomach, it was the itching on his skin from the cotton stitching in his clothes, it was the dull ache just behind his eyes, it was the electricity pulsing through his muscles all at once, it was giddy euphoria, it was bitter despair, it was spiders crawling up the back of his throat and dripping out of his mouth. But the inventor said what he was supposed to say, which was, "I am well."

By the time he answered, Ellen was already in the kitchen, picking through the inventor's cupboards. Each item was stored in a clear plastic container. The labels were Ellen's idea, insistent as she was that the inventor did not know enough about chemical compounds to avoid pouring citric acid into his coffee. Each cupboard was diligently organized, and when Ellen took them out it caused the inventor physical pain.

"I don't understand," she said, "how you can spend so much time organizing these near-identical chemicals, but can't be bothered to put away your dishes."

"The dishes will not catch fire when exposed to air for too long," the inventor replied.

"Hm," said Ellen, neither convinced nor remotely interested.

"It's as if you were to mix ammonia and bleach," the inventor explained. He had to explain these things in detail because most people did not understand. "That one you put on the counter is ethanol, which I use to dissect mice. Highly flammable. It'll burn your lungs if you're not careful. Also, it's a carcinogen, which means it causes cancer. And that jar of crystals you tossed in the sink, those are potassium. If they were to make contact with the water, it would blow up this end of the house. And that one you're holding right now is organic mercury. You don't even want to know what will happen to you if you touch that."

Ellen set down the mercury. "Mr. Raszak, there are *cobwebs* on the dish rack!"

"So?" said the inventor.

"There are *cobwebs* on the *dish rack!*" Ellen cried. "That's how long it's been since you bothered to put the dishes away."

"No."

"No?"

The inventor struggled for a lie. "I'm using that rack for breeding spiders."

Ellen didn't even bother with a response. She took a step back, pushed her glasses up, raised the clipboard, and wrote something down. The inventor winced.

"I was joking," he said, but it wasn't enough to make her cross out the note.

Ellen went farther into the house, and she found a broken down futon. The inventor warned her not to sit on it, but she did so anyway. She sank right into the ground, and the color of her face sank to a reddish plum. She leapt up with a cry and demanded answers.

"I removed the metal frame. I'm using it to build something," the inventor said.

"Building what, Mr. Raszak?"

"The matter doesn't concern you," he snapped.

The matter, it seemed, did concern her. "Is this about the incident six months ago?"

"The matter doesn't concern you," he repeated.

Ellen reached a hand into the futon and removed a glass beaker with a diaphragm wrapped over it. She sniffed the surface. "*Milk?*"

"That's a prototype. I made a better one recently," the inventor explained. He tapped his fingers together. "Oh! I haven't introduced you to Aaron yet. Aaron Mattresses, I mean."

"Aaron?" She raised an eyebrow, opting for once to humor him. "Okay. Show me Aaron. Is it a new project you've been working on?"

"No, actually." The inventor beckoned her upstairs with a grin. "I'll introduce you."

The inventor beat her upstairs. He took a groggy Aaron Mattresses out of his nap and carried the baby into the hall. Aaron yawned. The inventor stuck his finger into the baby's mouth, and when Aaron closed his lips his huge brown eyes bulged in surprise. The inventor giggled. He removed his finger and tickled the baby on the neck. Aaron giggled, too.

Ellen Hincke was not laughing. On her face she wore the look of a tsunami survivor watching the waves pull away from the beach. She stared, her mouth hanging open. Then she wrote something in all capital letters on her clipboard. Underlined it. Then, she opened her mouth and stared some more.

"Mr. Raszak, why do you have a baby?" she demanded.

The inventor watched Aaron yawn again and stretch his little arms. "Someone left it at my doorstep, I don't know how long ago. I've been taking care of it. I built a bassinet."

"Is it your baby?"

"You're asking me if I made it?"

"Yes. Did you make this baby?"

"God no. That's well outside my area of expertise. A colleague once told me how the process works, but I can't recall."

"Mr. Raszak."

"I was joking."

Ellen shook her head. "You're not supposed to have a baby that doesn't belong to you."

"Why not? He might seem like a lot up front, but he's quite charming, once you get to know him." It occurred to him that it wasn't Aaron that she had an issue with. "The parents left him at my doorstep. They never came back. I think perhaps they thought I ought to raise him. I've been feeding and clothing him alright. He's not much trouble."

"Mr. Raszak." Ellen sighed. She dropped her pen and pinched the bridge of her nose. "You're not taking your medications, are you?"

The inventor clutched the baby tighter to his chest. "Lots of people have babies."

"Not everyone is supposed to," Ellen said. "Wouldn't you agree?"

"Sure. But there's always a reason. If you think I should give up this baby, tell me why. You haven't told me anything yet, except that I have cobwebs on my dish rack, which I knew."

"I could name a reason."

"Name it."

"Mr. Raszak," Ellen said, "six months ago, your former coworkers reported that, when you were fired from your electrical engineering company, you told them you were building a weaponized robot suit with the intention of... causing destruction."

"Oh," the inventor said faintly. "That's why you're here?"

There was so much that happened before the robot. What Ellen Hincke didn't know was that the inventor had been dumped from his PhD program at the university due to a "lack of social adeptness"—which wasn't even a requirement for the program. After that, he decided to leave snobbish academia and get a job where it mattered, redesigning the city's electrical power grid. It was decent work, for the first two weeks. But after the inventor had successfully redesigned the power grid, his coworkers didn't seem to buy it.

The inventor outperformed everyone at the company. There wasn't a task he couldn't complete in record time, no knot he couldn't untangle. This generated jealousy from his peers, each of them concerned about their own job security. So they plotted to remove him. They spread rumors. They harassed him. They came into his office late at night and swapped the pens with the pencils. By week four, they knew just what to do in order to provoke an outburst from the inventor right in front of his supervisor.

Week six was the quarterly presentation to the city council. The inventor arrived at his office to find that it was locked, and he couldn't get his diagrams out to show the council. Frustrated, he elected to show up at the council anyway and explain the situation. But when he arrived, his coworkers were finishing up the council presentation. They were holding up *his* diagram, *his* work, and telling the council they made it without him.

"They stole my work, did they tell you that?"

Ellen shook her head again. "That's no excuse."

"No," the inventor admitted. "It wasn't."

The letter arrived on the inventor's desk soon after, and he knew what it was before he opened it. He swung open his office door and his coworkers were right there. Snickering. Gossiping. Watching him, like he was their only source of entertainment. Rage swelled in him, red dots dancing at the corners of his eyes. He opened his mouth and told them exactly what he thought of their little games. They laughed. He told them exactly what he thought of their future job prospects once he reported what had actually happened to the council. They kept laughing. Then, he told them about the robot.

The inventor never forgot the looks on each of the faces when he told them about the robot suit he had been welding together from scraps of metal. He started building it when they started mocking him. It was a simple armored suit, operated by someone inside with the inventor's exact proportions. It was powered by a generator in the back of the suit, which caused the outside of the suit to reach a temperature hot enough to melt most building materials.

He hadn't planned to use it. He didn't actually intend to take the suit anywhere other than the patent office. But as soon as he mentioned the suit to his coworkers, he realized that normal people didn't spend every night welding spikes on the back of a robot. He realized he sounded like what they always thought he was, a lunatic.

"Mr. Raszak."

"Please stop calling me that," said the inventor. "My real name is—"

"Are you building a superheated armored suit?" Ellen interrupted. "It's normal to feel angry about being fired. But it's not okay to retaliate, no matter how angry you feel. I'm not here to pester you about arbitrary details. I want you to be well, and that means taking your medications and cleaning and feeding yourself. I don't think a baby is going to be any help in assisting your recovery. Now, I'll ask again, are you building a robot?"

"Yes," the inventor muttered. "I'll show you."

He led her down a dark, peeling hallway. On the right side was a small room not much bigger than a closet. A muscled figure stooped in the dark. As she approached, Ellen Hincke got a better view of the thing. It appeared to be a suit of armor bent down on one knee. Its hands cupped together in front of itself. Upon further inspection, the suit's helmet was open. A blanket filled where the head would go. The disconnected arms lay on the floor.

"It's no longer operational," the inventor said. "I converted it to a baby bassinet."

"You put the baby to sleep in there?" Ellen asked scornfully.

"You say," he told her, "that I lack the ability to care for a baby. What have I done other than get flagged as a problem in your system? If I were any other person, you would easily give me the chance. You don't need a license or a degree to make a baby. What innate features do parents have that I don't? You told me earlier I wasn't ready to care for a baby. What needs to happen before I am? When is someone ready for a baby?"

"I guess," Ellen began. She pinched her chin. "I guess no one is ever ready for a baby."

Aaron Mattresses started to cry. It was a harsh cry, sharp enough to pierce the inventor's chest cavity and rocket straight into the churning generator between his ribs. He squeezed the baby one last time, then spoke to Ellen. "You woke him from his nap," he said. "If you're going to take him, now isn't a good time."

Ellen stared at the inventor. She reached out a finger towards the baby, but Aaron was too busy wailing and flapping his arms to notice. She pulled back. The inventor offered her a sad smile. Ellen returned the expression. Then, she raised her clipboard and tore out three pages. They crumbled and fell like ashes in her fist.

"I'm not here to take your baby. Frankly," she let out a dry laugh, "I don't get paid enough. But he's not going to be a baby forever. He's going to get bigger, and hungrier, and shit more and cry louder. You know that, right?"

"I'll build another bassinet. I'll grow food in the specimen room."



*"The Inventor" by Casey Barasch*

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“And I’m not going to try to take him from you, but the next version of me might. You know that too, right?”

The inventor sighed. “Of course.”

“Then I’ll, uh, I’ll leave you to it.” Ellen raised her bare clipboard and headed for the stairs. The inventor heard the first creak as she sank down, then another as her head popped back up over the bannister. “Wait.”

“Yes?”

“Put your other hand on his neck, not his back. Better support for the head.”

The inventor slid his hand up the baby’s back until he reached its frail neck. That felt much better. More natural, in a way. He opened his mouth to thank her for the grain of wisdom, but she was gone. He opened his mouth again to say something to Aaron, but the boy had fallen asleep.