



## THE MAD INVENTOR

“What do you want this time of night, then?” demanded the gate-keeper.

A man stood before the Pearly Gates, looking sorry for himself. He was startled at the rude welcome.

“Well, um –”, he stuttered nervously. “It’s just that I’ve just – well, you know...passed on. And I’m not sure what the normal procedure is, so...” His voice tailed off.

The gate-keeper looked him up and down slowly. “You mean, you’ve died and you just thought you’d come up here and wangle your way in, eh?!” The gate-keeper acted as one who was wise to the ways of the afterworld. “Well, my friend, it just isn’t that easy.” He reached for a pile of forms – blue ones, pink ones, an extremely thick pale green one – and licked his pencil in anticipation. “There’s some paperwork to go through and then we’ll see whether we let you in, or – “ The gate-keeper gave a flick of his thumb in the general direction of the Other Premises, and smirked.

“I see, St Peter –“ mumbled the weary traveller.

“And don’t you Saint Peter me!” snapped the gate-keeper. “He’s gone off on his holidays, ain’t he? So I’m from the agency, ain’t I? Standing in for a few days, ain’t I? At short notice, as it so happens. And I have to get the night-shift. Ain’t right, at my age. So don’t you ‘Saint Peter’ me. You just call me ‘Sir’ and we’ll get along fine.” He licked the end of his pencil again. “Right, then: name?”

“Samuel Bentor.”

“B – E – N – T – O – R. Bentor. Profession?”

“Scientist,” said the man apologetically. “I hope that doesn’t...”

“Samuel Bentor the Mad Inventor!” laughed the gate-keeper uproariously. “That’s a good one. Must remember to tell that to the wife tomorrow. Samuel Bentor the Mad Inventor! Ha-ha!”

“Well, not exactly –“

“Never mind! We haven’t got all night. Age?”

“Seventy-seven”

“That’s about right. Won’t have any complaints there, eh? Right, that deals with registration. Just sign there and we’ll move right along to the tricky bits – and there. And there. And there. And the date here, if you will. Now then, let’s see what’s next... right.” The temporary Guardian of Paradise cleared his throat. “First question on this sheet: ‘What do you consider to be your major achievements on Earth? Please list in chronological order.’ Right, let’s have something – if you can think of anything at all!”

The traveller sighed and put down his overnight bag. “Let me think...”

“Come on, come on, I’m getting cold standing out here. And there’s bound to be a few more turning up tonight. I don’t like a queue! Looks bad.”

“Well, the first thing I invented was the Elasto-Plane which was an aeroplane which was launched using a gigantic elastic band, and allowed people to be flown from country to country without any fuel.”

“Hm? Sounds interesting. And was it successful?”

“Well, it was at first.. But then one day there was a disaster when the rubber-band snapped and it bounced all over the countryside, knocking over farmers in the fields and snapping trees until it finally came to rest in the centre of Paris. You must understand it was a very large rubber-band and something like that could easily have killed someone.”

“What a shame. Next?”

“Well the next thing I invented was a small vacuum-cleaner, powered by snores, which automatically cleaned your house as you slept.”

“My wife would approve of that! Can you still buy it?”

“Unfortunately not. It had to be rigorously tested before going on sale and one of the test team managed to Hoover himself up and was never seen again. So the whole project was cancelled.”

“Well, I think that might weigh against you. But honesty is the best policy here, let me tell you. We can have all of this verified. What next?”

“The next thing was called a Motor Car. It was designed to transport up to five people from one place to another at very high speeds.”

“Sounds dubious. What happened to that one?”

“Well, although it was very expensive and made a lot of noise and caused untold pollution, millions were built. It killed thousands of people every year and endless miles of roads had to be built over the countryside. And quite often only one person rode in it.”

“So – complete failure then?”

“Well, not exactly. It’s still being used...”

The gate-keeper stopped writing and slowly ran his eye over the scientist. And shook his head.

“Listen to me, Mr Samuel Bentor. I’m going to do you a favour and not record that last remark. It says here ‘Any untrue statement will exact the most severe penalties.’ So don’t try and tell me this ... Motor-Car thing ... was a success after all the noise and smoke and deaths and destruction. Life ain’t like that. You understand me?”

“But –“

“No ‘buts’. Next?”

“Well, my next project was the Translat-o-Spex, which was a pair of prescription spectacles which would automatically translate any foreign words into your own language.”

“Now, that’s better. Now, I’m off to Barcelona in October with the wife. Do you think I should get a pair of those? What prescription should I ask for – Very Strong Catalan?”

“Well, unfortunately they’re not on sale. Some computer hacker got into the micro-chip which controls the translation and we only just avoided a nasty international incident after they went on sale in Rio de Janeiro ...”

“A pity. So let’s move along – what else have you done?”

“Self-inflating bicycle tyres –“

“Oh, I’ll stop you there, I heard about those. We still get some of your development team floating past from time to time. Look quite lost here above the clouds. But we’re not allowed to put them out of their misery. Uh-huh?”

“And then there was the Mobile Phone, which meant you could make a call anywhere you wanted...”

“I’ve warned you, Mr Bentor!”

“No, but really! It was a great idea. Pity that it frazzled the brains of anyone using them, but a great success.”

“If you persist in this, I’ll have to report you to Security. Get on with it and don’t waste my time!”

“Well, then I invented the Nuclear Power Station, which would create lots of electricity. The only side-effect was that the waste products were totally unmanageable, highly toxic and fatal to anyone exposed to them. But a great success ... oh, no, please don’t, I’ll move on to something else – eh, what about Genetically Modified Foods? That any good?”

“Try me, but don’t push me.”

“Well, great idea at the time; but they wrought havoc on other crops, annihilated entire species of insects and plants, wiped out colonies of birds and animals and drastically reduced the power of the

human immune system. But -”

“No, wait! Don’t tell me: let me guess. Took off in a big way and is even now making millions for companies down below? Tell me I’m right, Mr Bentor, tell me I’m right?”

“Well, that’s exactly right...how did you guess?”

“OK, that’s it! I’m reporting you! How did I guess? How did I guess?! What do you take me for? Some kind of rookie you thought you could sneak past when the Saint was off on his holidays? Here – let me just write this in: ‘Applicant shows no remorse and continues to tell lies even after three warnings. Applicant has now been referred to the Purgatorial Department for corrective therapy.’ And now, Mr Bentor, if you’ll just pick up your bag and report to the big grey building down the road there and let me deal with some real penitents. Go on, off with you!”

*“Next!”*

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