PLAUSIBLE by Robert Reed

It was a Lullday morning on the brink of winter, a bright and bitterly cold morning, and we were off to watch the Cousins' parade. But our six-wheel needed fuel and my little sister desperately needed diapers, and that's why we stopped at the gasoline shop where Telomere met Jupiter. It's not there now, I know. But there used to be a shop there. My mother stayed in the warm wagon with "her little angel." My father said, "Fill us," to the bull-buddy sitting beside the pump. Then he led me inside the grimy glass building, waving in no particular direction. "Look around," he said with a voice that meant I could pick something small and maybe he would buy it for me. Maybe. So I started running the aisles, giddy-happy because we were going to the parade and because soon I would have some little treasure that I hadn't expected to own.

What I finally decided on was a pack of collector's cards with Lord Dullen on top, wearing his two-brimmed pitching hat, the Blood-bird insignia bright on his black mask. How neat will this be? I thought. But Dad didn't want to buy anything for me. "I only said 'look around,"' he said. "I wanted to buy some time, you know?" But I didn't understand. Buy time why? "Well," he confessed, "the sorry fact is that I don't much like parades, and I'm trying to delay the inevitable." He was laughing as he talked. The woman behind the counter was laughing too. She was wearing a narrow mask that let pieces of her face show, which seemed a little dangerous and unsettling to me. Her breasts looked familiar, resembling my teacher's breasts, small and close together with long pale nipples. Except Mistress Grune was a good deal older, and she always wore her wedding rings through the nipples. The strange, half-masked woman didn't have rings, and she was laughing with Dad and scratching herself on her exposed neck. I asked what these cards cost. She told me, and it didn't seem like that much. "Oh sure, you can pay your own way," Dad told me. "How much you got, fellow?" But even when I emptied my purse, I was short. Then I asked if I could take just the Lord Dullen card, since he was my favorite player in the world. What would that one card cost? The woman bent down to tell me, "No, bug." With a friendly voice, she said, "I can't break up the pack. But maybe you'd like something else. How about some puppies?" She showed me some flat pups sitting under a lamp, but I said, "No thank you, ma'am." I'd just had breakfast, and besides, they looked old, and from hard experience I knew that dog tastes greasy when you let it sit. But what else could be bought? I wanted something, I didn't care what, and like he promised, Dad was in no mood to hurry. But then I noticed Mom sitting in the six-wheel, staring into the shop and probably wondering what was keeping us. So I pointed at the first thing I saw. Lottery tickets were for sale. From listening to the news, I knew that for the last two months nobody had won so much as a zinc ring. It was a record pot, or nearly so. The number on display had so many Xss behind it I wasn't even sure what to call it. But when I touched the number, Dad laughed and gave the front of my mask a little tug, telling me, "You aren't old enough to dream it. You know that, don't you?"

But I could give him my money, I pointed out.

Dad's teeth were showing, and his eyes were smiling inside his winter mask. "I'll waste my own money, not yours," he told me.

And that would have been that. Except the half-masked woman said, "You know, of course," before letting her voice fall away.

"Of course what?" asked Dad.

"There's the Emperor's loophole," she said.

"We don't have an emperor," I told her.

"But we did," she said. "And the old rule still stands: Every citizen who is the same age, day, and year,

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"But we did,” she said. “And the old rule still stands: Every citizen who is the same age, day, and year, that the last emperor was when he inherited the ruler's chair—"

"Good glory, that's right!” Dad

laughed.

The woman bent over the counter. Her mask was loose, and it moved against her smiling face. “How old are you, bug?"

I was eight.

"But how many days?” she wanted to know.

I didn't know. Neither did Dad, exactly. But I had my society-card in my purse, and the woman gave it a quick look and did some double-checking of the math. “It's like this,” she explained, sounding like my teacher. Smart and sure. “The last human emperor was the Child Emperor, and that was nearly three hundred years ago ... and he died the same day he took the throne, which

doesn't matter for our purposes...."

She paused, and then said, “Goodness."

I said, “What?"

"He is, isn't he?” my dad asked.

"I am?” I whispered.

Both of the adults were nodding at me.

According to the Law, for this one day I was an adult, with the same rights and privileges that they had. So I asked, “Is this enough for one ticket?” and pushed my money over the bright copper countertop. The woman counted my coins and gave me a little bit of change, and then Mom stepped inside with my sister on her hip and her breasts under a wool cloak. She stared at the half-masked woman for a moment or two.

Then she started to ask, “What in the blue world of misery is going on—?"

"We're coming,” Dad interrupted.

Then the half-masked woman handed me my own new ticket. It smelled of plastic, and it was filled with unlikely numbers that were picked by the machine. The drawing would be today, I read. At High Sun. Then I looked up at her, and because of the angle and because of her loose-fitting little mask, I could see most of her face. She was letting me stare at her chin, which was pointed and lovely, and at her big smiling lips, and the sharp pretty cheeks. “Good luck, bug,” she said in a certain way, as if we were the best of friends. Which was when I knew, just knew, that

I was going to win the lottery.

* * * *

My ticket was inside my purse, and my purse was riding on my belt, and I walked fast between my parents, thinking that I wasn't cold but I wasn't warm either. It seemed like a long walk from where we had parked to where we needed to be. And we were officially late by then. Judging by the sounds rolling between the tall buildings, I knew the parade had started: Music and singing and chants and screams, then foot stomping and more screams, and a huge voice calling out, “The Winter Solstice welcomes all!”

We were missing the Solstice! “No, no,” my Dad said, smiling in that way

adults do when they're not quite telling the truth. “He'll come around again. I promise. Twice again, maybe." Flags on long poles were what I saw first, and the backs of hundreds of onlookers. The wide walk was jammed with bodies, and the flags whapped against themselves in the cold wind. I wouldn't see anything from back here. I was sure of it. Dad put my sister up on his shoulders—her and her fresh diaper too—and she giggled and put her hands over his eyes and giggled some more, nothing else in the world worth doing. Then I started to jump. Straight up, as high as I could. Not high enough to see over anyone's head, but I grunted every time, as if I was being punched in the

gut. As much as possible, I wanted to bother my mother. And it worked finally. Hearing enough grunting, she turned and said, “Slip up to the curb, go on. But be polite. And stay directly in front of us. Always." That's what I had wanted all along.

The onlookers were mostly human, with bull-buddies and heaven-walkers scattered here and there. Up front was a big family of native-giants, camped out on the curb, sitting with their long legs tucked close and their heads still farther from the ground than my head was. I've always liked the smell of the natives, because of their deep fur and the scents they put in their fur, and I liked how their size always scared me at first, but in a

pleasant way, like when you stand close to a big but trustworthy animal. And I liked their deep musical voices, even when I didn't understand what they were saying. They were singing out at the native-giants who were marching past in the parade. Their friends were carrying a row of dark blue flags—the native-giants' official color. Whap-whap, I heard, the flags cracking as the poles were waved one way, then the other. Following them came a thick row of bull-buddies—short and powerful people, patient and steady and practically immune to the winter. They were holding high their forest-green flags, and, despite the cold, their women left their fat breasts uncovered, and

everyone was wearing the most beautiful masks, each painted to resemble some left-behind god or taiga spirit. Right after them were the heaven-walkers, holding out their long orange flags. Just the other day, Mistress Grune explained to class that some of the cousins were closer related than others. Several thousand years ago, a few heaven-walkers managed to cross the land bridge and the glaciers, making them the first to find this country. Alone here, they became a new species, growing even taller than before, and even heavier. With this in mind, I noticed how the walkers still looked like our natives, except the walkers had shorter fur, of course. And they tended to wear more

clothes. And their voices were completely different than the native voices, harsher and louder, and I didn't like them as much. Or maybe it was because we had a big class of heaven-walkers at my school, and one of its boys was as cruel and wicked as anyone I knew outside my own species.

Next came a row of humans, which meant that more of the crowd was clapping and stomping its feet. I joined in with them, looking up at the gold flags, knowing in my heart that this was the loveliest color of all. Bare brown hands held the flagpoles, and probably a hundred mouths were chanting in unison, saying,

“From the Mother Continent, but for

the World as One!"

"For the World as One," every species called out.

Three more cousin species followed after the humans. The night-skulkers had the gray flags chosen because of their nocturnal habits and their colorblindness. The little forest-folk used a lighter green than the bull-buddies used. Both of their rows were smaller, since they were scarce in our slice of the world. But rarest were the spice-babies, and what I'd wanted to see was walking alone in a row of one: A single spice-baby dressed in a child's coat and a man's mask, yet his grown body barely two-thirds the size of mine.

These were the rarest of my cousins,

dim-witted people but loving. I waved at him, and he seemed to look over at me, black eyes grinning with what might be happiness or might be habit. Either way, I felt wonderfully blessed to see everybody marching together on this bright wonderful cold morning.

A musical band came next. Bull-buddies and humans blew into horns and beat on big drums that rolled before them.

Then came a dozen horses pulling an old-fashioned kerosene wagon.

And after an empty stretch, there was another band of young humans and natives and heaven-walkers. Everybody had a horn, and some carried two. And the girl in the lead had a bright hoop she

threw up high and caught with an astonishing grace—a tall girl dressed from top to toes and who looked human, right up until she was beside me, her reddish fur showing around the fringes of her broad mask. She was a mule, I realized. Which wasn't a polite word, I knew. But that's what I was thinking. She was a mule. And for a little while, I was busy feeling sorry for her, wondering what kind of parents would make a child like that.

The humans' mayor followed after the band. Sitting high on the broad shaggy back of an old mammoth, she looked down at me and waved. You didn't see many mammoths in the city, and they were about my favorite part of any

parade. He was a proud bull with long tusks and sad eyes and a pain in the belly. While I was watching, he pulled to a stop and flicked his little tail, and then with a wet explosion of gas, he did his business in the middle of the street.

The native-giants beside me were laughing with their big happy voices. Out of nowhere, a crew of bull-buddies brought out buckets and shovels and cleaned the street before the other mayors came along on their less leaky mammoths.

After the mayors was another walking band—natives wearing nothing but masks and playing their own instruments, singing songs from times when they were the only people in the only world they

had ever known.

After them came a long snow-snake, the legs of a hundred heaven-walkers carrying the mythical creature in a weaving path.

Following the snake was the traditional dress-over group—employees of the government, each wearing a different species' mask and clothes, for just this one day. By then, my tropical body was cold, and maybe I was growing a little bored. I thought about slipping back to my parents again and asking for some hot milk and biltong. But then a big balloon rounded the corner, its edges dragging against the buildings. The Condemned were coming; that's what the balloon meant. And from

the roaring of the crowd, I knew this was what many of us had come to see.

I felt warm again and not the least bit bored. Between the balloon and me came a couple of floats celebrating winter holidays, and another loud band that made my ears hurt. But I could last through a thousand bands and a million floats, knowing what might happen next. And this was a very lucky day.

* * * *

The balloon was shaped like Death as the bull-buddies saw it, and Death was being towed along by a couple of dozen criminals. If you had enough money and the urge, you could step out of the crowd and buy somebody's freedom. You paid the judge that was walking in front of the

Condemned, and the judge gave a command to the jailers who then cut the lucky soul free. Then the weight holding the balloon down was a little less, and the feet of the remaining criminals felt a little lighter, scraping their way across the cold face of the world.

While I stood there, watching and hoping, one of the native women rose up from the curb and calmly walked out to meet the judge. A bull-buddy woman-judge, as it happened. The two of them started to talk, and the balloon came to a stop. Whenever the wind gusted, the criminals would grab at their ropes and pull. Then a decision was made. Passing money to the judge, the native woman pointed at a native man who was

wrestling with the ropes, her loud lovely voice telling him, “Not you! Anybody but you!" Which wasn't all that unusual. Like they say, who hurts you the most? Some cousin species you rarely see, or the species that you sleep with?

"That one,” said the charitable native. “Save that heaven-walker, there." The judge pocketed the money in the public purse, and then with her harsh, deep voice, she told the jailers to cut the fortunate man free.

For a moment, it seemed as if the great balloon would lift up straight away. But the wind fell off, and the Condemned started to walk again, each wishing that somebody would save him next. Spellbound, I watched them

shuffling their legs along, shoes fighting to stay against the red bricks and red mortar, hands tugging at the ropes pulled taut above them. But they stayed down, and I began running alongside them. It wasn't a proper thing to do, and I was disobeying some strict orders from my parents. But how often in a life do you get to see amazing sights?

If anyone yelled at me, I didn't hear it.

Then as I came to the next crossing, the wind gusted into my face. The bat-shaped Death caught the breeze with its rubbery wings, and that's when every foot lifted free of the ground. One of the jailers tugged hard on the final rope that was dragging after the balloon, pulling loose a sack of iron ballast that fell with

a crash nobody could hear. The crowd was roaring with one voice now, doomed killers and rapists hurling upward into that beautiful blue winter sky.

The balloon had vanished and another band was passing—night-skulkers playing flutes and bellows-organs and jeweled cymbals, accompanied by a troupe of dancers wearing long, nearly weightless capes. Then a hand dropped on my shoulder, and an angry voice said, "Out of my street, little jackal." The skulkers' mask was white as snow, except for the fine black lines around the staring eyes and hard-set mouth. I told him that my parents were back up the street somewhere, probably frantic to

find me by now. But he just shook his head, pushing at me, his pale lips saying, “You're just lucky you're not my son. Now get off my street, little man! Go!"

Human people jammed the walk beyond the curb. I pushed into them, and between them, and in a couple of instances, over them. I said I was sorry and please excuse me, please, and then, just as I was slipping free, a stranger's hand touched me hard and came away with my purse. Who had done that?

I looked at the adults surrounding me. But they were up on their toes, happily watching the dancers. Then I spotted someone dashing away, glancing back at me once before diving into the shadowy mouth of an alleyway.

Funny as it sounds, I was thinking only about my purse. My grandmother had given it to me, and just then that little sack of leather and brass had more value than ten million lottery tickets. I sprinted after the thief, not a drop of fear in me. Only when I was in the shadows did I realize that I was chasing a child no bigger than me. Yet I should have been afraid. A smart thief would have had friends waiting or a knife stashed somewhere close. Anything might have happened in those next moments. But out of all that is possible, very little can occur. What happened inside that moment was this: The thief found herself trapped against a tall concrete wall, and after touching the wall with her free

hand, she turned and said with a sad sweet little voice, “Don't hurt me."

She was a human girl, almost exactly my age.

"I didn't mean it,” she lied. “I was just joking."

Give me my purse, I said.

She wore a second-hand mask badly needing fresh paint. Its faded markings gave her a clan and family, but I couldn't recognize either. Which didn't matter, since it almost certainly wasn't her mask to begin with.

Again, I told her that I wanted the purse.

Except by then she'd realized that I wasn't any bigger or older than her. With a sudden resolve, she told me, “I don't

think so."

It was my grandmother's gift, I told her again. Then with an ease that took me by surprise, I told a lie. Choking back a fake sob, I claimed that my dear Grandma had died last week, and I missed her terribly. The thief gave me a long look, and then she opened the purse, quickly examining its contents. I watched her fish out the few coins and my society-card, and my slick new lottery ticket, and then the obsidian arrowhead that I'd found at camp last summer. My society-card had no value to her, but she pocketed the money, and for some reason, the arrowhead was worth keeping too. Maybe she didn't know what the ticket was. Or more likely, she

had seen streets littered with old tickets, and she was too much of a pragmatist to hold onto a worthless slip of paper. Whatever the reason, she put my card and then my ticket back inside my purse, and with a girl's clumsy arm, she flung them behind a steel trash-coffin. I ran in one direction, she fled in another, and we clipped shoulders as we crossed each other's path. Twenty years later, we would meet again and marry.

Eight years after that, I would discover my glassy black arrowhead buried in a jar of otherwise forgettable trinkets. With an embarrassed voice, my wife would confess to a youthful passion for petty crime, and I would tell her about the Cousins' parade and the

alleyway, and every day after that, we would laugh about the wild, marvelous coincidences that give breath to every life.

* * * *

When I emerged from the alleyway, the Winter Solstice was passing again, riding an enormous float made to resemble an iceberg. He was a bull-buddy dressed in the usual white suit with maroon trim, a huge sack of little gifts at his feet, one strong arm and then the other flinging offerings to the screaming children. Three little packages fell at my feet. I had time to grab up one of them before a pair of young heaven-walkers claimed the others. Inside the colored paper and

foam was a little stack of coins—a quantity of money identical to what I started my day with. By contrast, the heaven-walkers got nothing but cheap candy. Yet I was so accustomed to my good luck, I barely even smiled, refilling my purse and then tucking it deep inside my deepest pocket.

I walked back to where I could see my mother holding my sister on her hip. Then my father climbed out from between the native-giants, telling Mom that he couldn't find me anywhere. He looked furious, and Mom looked scared. So I decided to wait for Dad to vanish again, and then let Mom find me. From long experience, I knew that was the safest route.

I was still keeping my distance, waiting for Dad to wade back into the crowd, when I heard the pounding of wooden clubs hitting the bricks.

"Your Blood-Birds!" said a huge voice. "Champions of the World!" The team was in the parade? I hadn't known! Without the barest hesitation, I dove through a group of Holy Shepherdesses, reaching the curb just as my team started to ride past in a string of open twelve-wheelers. There was their bull-buddy leader, old Master Lank, and the best perimeter players in the game—heaven-walkers, quick and graceful. The dogpit was Kalla, a powerful native-giant who used the biggest club in the game. He and the rest of the clubbers were

reaching out of the vehicles to bang at the street. And then in the final car were the throwers, including my Lord Dullen —a human man, tall and lanky, wearing his two-brimmed hat and his famous game mask, black as coal with the Blood-Bird insignia filling up the forehead.

Security men were walking beside the twelve-wheelers. And occasionally one of them would stroll over to one curb or the other and pick out a few children, inviting them to come and beg for autographs. One uniformed man approached me and then told the boy beside me, “Come on." I walked out with the lucky kid.

"No, not you,” the man told me. He

was a bull-buddy with a menacing voice and not much else. He looked fat and old and too tired to let himself get into a public brawl with an eight-year-old human. I ignored him, walking straight for my hero.

Lord Dullen noticed me coming. He had a pen ready, but I didn't have anything to write on. I realized that, and thinking for any excuse, I said he was amazing and great and I had something real special to give him.

"Like what?" he asked.

All I could think of was my lottery ticket. So I yanked my purse out of my pocket and handed him the slip of laminated paper, telling him that I'd bought it today, just for him. Right away,

he told me the exact day I was born on.

But how could he know that?

"Because I always keep track of my emperor's day. Which is today. Plus thirty years, of course." One dark eye winked at me, and he laughed in a pleasant way. "Since you bought that ticket, you claim, that means you're the very same age our emperor was when he took the throne. Which means, my boy, that you and me share a birth date."

I was astonished, but I shouldn't have been. Not really.

"So you bought this gift for me," he said, examining the ticket. "Is that so?" I nodded and showed him my smile.

"Why don't you ride with me?" Lord Dullen said, reaching out with his empty

hand. “Just for a little bit. Okay, my boy?"

My father had finally seen me, and he was chasing after the twelve-wheeler now. But the fat bull-buddy stopped him short and told him to go back. Dad pointed at me and said a few hard words, and suddenly the bull-buddy was angry enough to forget that he was fat and old. The two of them were shouting at each other, and I didn't want any part of that.

I climbed in beside my hero.

Lord Dullen held the lottery ticket in both hands. It was almost High Sun, and he was looking at the numbers. When he spoke, I smelled something familiar. Beer. That was it; I smelled beer. There

was so much noise from the applause and the fight behind me that I had to shout to be heard. But I managed to tell him that he had a great year, and I hoped next year would be even better.

"It won't be," he told me.

I was startled. I couldn't believe he said that.

"I'm serious," he continued. "You know, my boy ... there were ten or twelve throws I made this year that I shouldn't have made. In key moments, I got very lucky or the clubber got very unlucky, and that's the only reason we won the tournament. A set of circumstances just happened to fall my way, just that once

... and it won't ever happen again, at

least not to me...."

I didn't know what to say.

Then he handed back my ticket, saying, “Thanks, but this is yours." Up ahead, up where the street turned to the right and where I would eventually climb out, I could see a neon sign. It was exactly High Sun now, and, all of a sudden, numbers began to flash against a black background.

The drawing had been made.

With a wet, beery voice, Lord Dullen said, “Huh. Those numbers. Don't they look kind of familiar, my boy?"

But I wasn't thinking about numbers. I was considering luck and this very exceptional day that was still barely half-finished, and when I looked at

everything that had happened already, what was luckiest and most memorable —

"Read your numbers, kid. Come on!"

What meant most to me was when I was standing at that counter and got to look up that woman's half-mask, seeing her practically bare face. It lasted only for a moment, but it was still the best moment ... and nothing in my life since has ever felt quite so unexpected or even half as wondrous ... !