

Spending A Day At The Lottery Fair

by Frederik Pohl

All writers have favorite themes and return to them over and over-even when they don't intend to and perhaps, as in my own case, don't realize quite how often they've done so until it comes time to put a collection of stories together. Their excuse (which I do dearly hope you will find justified in the present examples) is that a new treatment, a new setting, a new angle of attack can refresh an argument-especially an argument that seems worth making in the first place. At any rate, this story came about in the summer of 1982, when curiosity led me to Knoxville to see how they were doing with their first-ever world's fair. I am no great connoisseur of world's fairs; I'd only been to three before-Knoxville -the pair in New York City a generation apart and the 1970 event in Osaka, Japan .Knoxville was a much smaller spectacle. Still, it had a lot of interesting exhibits and a holiday-carnival atmosphere; I had a good time. The locals I talked to seemed to be enjoying it a lot less, and when I asked them why so glum, they reported that it was losing money by the fistful and pot. What then (I wondered) was the reason for having it? Echo gave me an answer, and so I went back to my hotel room and began writing this story.

They were the Baxter family, Randolph and Millicent the parents, with their three children, Emma and Simon and Louisa, who was the littlest; and they didn't come to the fair in any old bus. No, they drove up in a taxi, all the way from their home clear on the other side of town, laughing and poking each other, and when they got out, Randolph Baxter gave the driver a really big tip. It wasn't that he could really afford it. It was just because he felt it was the right thing to do. When you took your whole family to the Lottery Fair, Baxter believed, you might as well do it in style. Besides, the fare was only money. Though Millicent Baxter pursed her lips when she saw the size of the tip, she certainly was not angry; her eyes sparkled as brightly as the children's, and together they stared at the facade of the Lottery Fair.

Even before you got through the gates there was a carnival smell, buttered popcorn and cotton candy and tacos all together, and a carnival sound of merry-go-round organs and people screaming in the rollercoaster, and bands and bagpipes from far away. A clown stalked on tall stilts through the fairgoers lining up at the ticket windows, bending down to chuck children under the chin and making believe to nibble the ears of teenage girls in bright summer shorts. Rainbow fountains splashed perfume spray. People in cartoon-character costumes, Gus the Ghost and Mickey Mouse and Pac-Man, handed out free surprise packages to the kids; when Simon opened his it was a propeller beanie, a fan for Emma, for little Louisa cardboard glasses with a Groucho Marx mustache . And crowded! You could hardly believe such crowds! Off to one side of the parking lot the tour buses were rolling in with their loads of foreign visitors, Chinese and Argentinians and Swedes; they had special entrances and were waved through by special guards who greeted them, some of the time anyway, in their own native languages- " Willkommen !and "Bon jour!and " Eythere, mate!-as long as they didn't speak anything like Urdu or SerboCroatian , anyway. For the foreign tourists didn't have to pay in the usual way; they bought their tickets in their country of origin, with valuable foreign exchange, and then everything was free for them.

Of course it wasn't like that for the regular American fairgoers. They had to pay. You could see each family group moving up toward the ticket windows. They would slow down as they got closer and finally stop, huddling together while they decided how to pay, and then one or two of them, or all of them, would move on to the window and reach into the admissions cuff for their tickets. Randolph Baxter had long before made up his mind that there would be no such wrangles on this day for his family. He said simply, "Wait here a minute, and strode up to the window by himself. He put his arm into the cuff, smiled at the ticket attendant, and said grandly, "I'll take five, please.

The ticket seller looked at him admiringly. "You know, she offered, "there aren't that many daddies who'll take all the little fellows in like that. Sometimes they make even tiny babies get their own tickets. Baxter gave her a modest I-do-what-I-can shrug, though he could not help that his smile was a little strained until all five tickets had clicked out of the roll. He bore them proudly back to his family and led them through the turnstiles.

"My, what a crowd, sighed Millicent Baxter happily as she gazed around." Now, what shall we do first?

The response was immediate. "See the old automobiles, yelled Simon, and, "No, the animals!and , "No, the stiff!cried his sisters.

Randolph Baxter spoke sharply to them-not angrily but firmly. "There will be no fighting over what we do, he commanded." We'll *vote* on what we do, the demo- craticway. No arguments and no exceptions. Now, he added, "the first thing we're going to do is that you kids will stay right here while your mother and I get tickets for the job lottery. The parents left the children arguing viciously among themselves and headed for the nearest lottery booth. Randolph Baxter could not help a tingle of excitement, and his wife's eyes were gleaming, as they studied the prize list. The first prize was the management of a whole apartment building-twenty-five thousand dollars a year salary and a free three-room condo thrown in!

Millicent read his thoughts as they stood in line. "Don't you justwish!she whispered. "But personally I'd settle for any of the others. Look, there's even a job for an English teacher!Randolph shook his head wordlessly. It was just marvelous -five full-time jobs offered in this one raffle , and that not the biggest of the day. The last one, after the fireworks, always had the grandest of prizes. "Aren't you glad we came? Millicent asked, and her husband nodded.

But in fact he wasn't, altogether, at least until they safely got their tickets and were on their way back to the children, and then he was quickly disconcerted to see that the kids weren't where they had been left. "Oh, hell, groanedRandolph . It was early in the day for them to get lost.

But they weren't very far. His wife said sharply, "There they are. And look what they're doing! They were at a refreshment stand. And each one of them had a huge cone of frozen custard. "L *told* them not to make any purchases when we weren't with them! Millicent cried, but in fact it was worse than that. The children were talking to a pair of strange grownups, a lean, fair, elderly woman with a sharp, stern face and a round, dark-skinned man with a bald head and immense tortoise-shell glasses.

As the Baxters approached, the woman turned to them apologetically. "Oh, hullo, she said, "you must be the parents. I do hope you'll forgive us. Mr. Katsubishi and I seem to have lost our tour, and your children kindly helped us look for it.

"it's all right, Dad, Simon put in swiftly." They're on this foreign tour, see, and everything's free for them anyway.Dad? Why can't we get on a tour and have everything free?

"We're Americans, his father explained, smiling tentatively at the tall English-looking woman and the tubby, cheerful Japanese-he decided that they didn't *look* like depraved child molesters." You have to be an international tourist to get these unlimited tickets. And I bet they cost quite a lot of money, don't they? he appealed to the man, who smiled and shrugged and looked at the woman.

"Mr. Katsubishi doesn't speak English very well, she apologized." I'm Rachel Millay . Mrs. Millay , that is, although my dear husband left us some years ago. She glanced about in humorous distress. "I don't suppose you've seen a tour leader carrying a green and violet flag with a cross of St. Andrew on it?

Since Randolph Baxter had no idea what a cross of St. Andrew looked like, it was hard to say. In any case, there were at least twenty four parties in sight, each with its own individual pennant or standard, trudging in determined merriment toward the pavilions, the rides, or the refreshment stands. "I'm afraid not, he began, and then paused as his wife clutched his arm. The P.A. system crackled, and the winners of the first drawing were announced.

Neither of the Baxters was among them. "Well, there are six more drawings, said Millicent bravely, not adding that there were also six more sets of raffle tickets to buy if they wanted any hope of winning one of them. Her husband smiled cheerfully at the children.

"What's it to be?he asked generously."The life exhibit? The concert-

"We already voted, Dad, cried Emma, his elder daughter." It's the animals!

"No, the stiffs!" yelled her baby sister.

"The old autos, cried Simon." Anyway, there won't be any stiffs there until later, not to speak of!

Baxter smiled indulgently at the foreigners. "Children, he explained." Well, I do hope you find your group. And he led the way to the first democratically selected adventure of the day, the space exhibit.

Baxter had always had a nostalgic fondness for space, and this was a pretty fine exhibit, harking back to the olden, golden days when human beings could spare enough energy and resources to send their people and probes out toward the distant worlds. Even the kids liked it. It was lavish with animated 3-D displays showing a human being walking around on the surface of the Moon, and a spacecraft slipping through the rings of Saturn, and even a probe, though not an American one, hustling after Halley's Comet to take its picture.

But Randolph Baxter had some difficulty in concentrating on the pleasure of the display at first because, as they were getting their tickets, the tall, smiling black man just ahead of him in line put his arm into the admissions cuff, looked startled, withdrew his arm, started to speak, and fell over on the ground, his eyes open and staring, it seemed, right into Randolph Baxter's.

When you have a wife and three kids and no job, living on welfare, never thinking about tomorrow because you know there isn't going to be anything in tomorrow worth thinking about, a day's outing for the whole family is an event to be treasured.No matter what the price-especially if the price isn't in money. So the Baxter family did it all. They visited six national pavilions, even the Paraguayan. They lunched grandly in the dining room at the summit of the Fair's great central theme structure, the Cenotaph. And they did the rides, all the rides, from the Slosh-a-Slide water chutes through the immense Ferris wheel with the wind howling through the open car and Simon threatening to spit down on the crowds below to the screaming, shattering rollercoaster that made little Louisa wet her pants. Fortunately her mother had brought clean underwear for the child. When she sent the little girl off with her sister to change in the ladies' room, she followed them anxiously with her eyes until they were safely past the ticket collector and then said. "Rand, honey. You paid for all those rides yourself.

He shrugged defensively. "I want everybody to have a good time.

"Now, don't talk that way. We agreed. The children and I are going to pay our own way all the rest of the day, and the subject is closed. She proved the point by changing it. "Look, she said, "there are those two foreigners who lost their tour group again. She waved, and Mrs. Millay and Mr. Katsubishi came up

diffidently.

"If we're not intruding?" said Mrs. Millay. "We never did find our tour guide, you see, but actually we're getting on quite well without. But isn't it hot! It's never like this in Scotland."

Millicent fanned herself in agreement. "Do sit down, Mrs. Millay. Is that where you're from, Scotland? And you, Mr. Kat- Kats-

"Katsubishi. He smiled, with an abrupt deep bow. Then he wrinkled his face in concentration for a moment and managed to say: "I, too- Sukottaland."

Millicent tried not to look astonished but evidently did not succeed. Mrs. Millay explained, "He's from around Kyle of Lochalsh, you know. Since Millicent obviously didn't know, she added, "That's the Japanese colony in northern Scotland, near my own home. In fact, I teach English to Japanese school children there, since I know the language-my parents were missionaries in Honshu, you see. Didn't you know about the colony?"

Actually, Millicent and Randolph did know about the colony. Or, at least, they almost did, in the way that human beings exposed to forty channels of television and with nothing much to do with their time have heard of, without really knowing much about, almost every concept, phenomenon, event, and trend in human history. In just that way they had heard of the United Kingdom's pact with Japan, allowing large Japanese immigration into an enclave in the north of Scotland. The Japanese made the area bloom both agriculturally and economically. The United Kingdom got a useful injection of Japanese capital and energy, and the Japanese got rid of some of their surplus population without pain. "I wish we'd thought of that," Millicent observed in some envy, but her husband shook his head.

"Different countries, different ways, he said patriotically, "and actually we're doing rather well. I mean, just look at the Lottery Fair! That's American ingenuity for you. Observing that Mrs. Millay was whispering a rapid-fire translation into Mr. Katsubishi's ear, he was encouraged to go on. "Other countries, you see, have their own way of handling their problems. Compulsory sterilization of all babies born in even-numbered years in India, as I'm sure you're aware. The contraceptive drugs they put in the water supply in Mexico -and we won't even talk of what they're doing in, say, Bangladesh. Mrs. Millay shuddered sympathetically as she translated, and the Japanese beamed and bowed then spoke rapidly.

"He says one can learn much, Mrs. Millay translated, "from what foreign countries can do. Even America."

Millicent, glancing at the expression on her husband's face, said brightly: "Well! Let's not let this day go to waste. What shall we do next? At once she got the same answers from the children: "Old cars!" "Animals!" "No, whined Baby Louisa, "I wanna see the stiffs!"

Mr. Katsubishi whispered something in staccato Japanese to Mrs. Millay, who turned hesitantly to Millicent Baxter. "One doesn't wish to intrude, she said, "but if you are in fact going to see the Hall of Life and Death as your daughter suggests. . . well, we don't seem to be able to find the rest of our tour group, you see, and we would like to go there. After all, it is the theme center for the entire fair, as you might say-

"Why, of course, said Millicent warmly." We'd be real delighted to have the company of you and Mr. Kats- Kats--

"Katsubishi, he supplied, bowing deeply and showing all his teeth in a smile, and they all seven set off for the Hall of Life and Death, with little Louisa delightedly leading the way.

The hall was a low, white marble structure across the greensward from the Cenotaph, happy picnicking families on the green, gay pavilions all around, ice cream vendors chanting along the roadways, and a circus parade, horses and a giraffe and even an elephant, winding along the main avenue with a band leading them, diddley -boom, diddley -boom, diddley -bang!bang !bang !-all noise, and color , and excitement. But as soon as they were within the Hall they were in another world. The Hall of Life and Death was the only free exhibit at the fair-even the rest rooms were not free. The crowds that moved through the Hall were huge. But they were also reverential. As you came in you found yourself in a great, domed entrance pavilion, almost bare except for seventy-five raised platforms, each spotlighted from a concealed source, each surrounded by an air curtain of gentle drafts. At the time the Baxters came in more than sixty of them were already occupied with the silent, lifeless forms of those who had passed on at the Fair that day. A sweet-faced child here, an elderly woman there, there, side by side, a young pair of newlyweds. Randolph Baxter looked for and found the tall, smiling black man who had died in the line before him. He was smiling no longer, but his face was in repose and almost joyous, it seemed. "He's at peace now, Millicent whispered, touching her husband's arm, and he nodded. He didn't want to speak out loud in this solemn hall, where the whisper of organ music was barely audible above the gentle hiss of chilled air curtains that wafted past every deceased. Hardly anyone in the great crowd spoke. The visitors lingered at each of the occupied biers; but then, as they moved toward the back of the chamber, they didn't linger. Some didn't even look, for every tourist at the Fair could not help thinking, as he passed an empty platform, that before the Fair closed that night it would be occupied...by someone.

But the Rotunda of Those Who Have Gone Before was only the anteroom to the many inspiring displays the Hall had to offer. Even the children were fascinated. Young Simon stood entranced before the great Timepiece of Living and Dying, watching the hands revolve swiftly to show how many were born and how many died in each minute, with the bottom line always showing a few more persons alive in every minute despite everything the government and the efforts of patriotic citizens could do-but he was more interested, really, in the mechanism of the thing than in the facts it displayed. Millicent Baxter and Mrs. Millay were really thrilled by the display of opulent caskets and ceremonies, and Randolph Baxter was proud to point out to Mr. Katsubishi the working model of a crematorium, with all of its escaping gases trapped and converted into valuable organic feedstocks . And the girls, Emma and Louisa, stood hand in hand for a long time, shuddering happily as they gazed at the refrigerated display cases that showed a hideous four-month embryo next to the corpse of a fat, pretty two-year-old. Emma moved to put her arm around her mother and whispered, "Mommy, I'm *so* grateful you didn't abort me. And Millicent Baxter fought back a quick and tender tear.

"I'd never let you die looking like *that*, she assured her daughter, and they clung together for a long moment. But Randolph Baxter was becoming noticeably ill at ease. When they finally left the Hall of Life and Death his wife took him aside and asked in concern, "Is something the matter, hon ?

He shrugged irritably at the foreigners, who were talking together in fast, low-toned Japanese. "Just look at their faces, he complained. And indeed both Mr. Katsubishi and Mrs. Millay's expressions seemed to show more revulsion than respect.

Millicent followed her husband's eyes and sighed- there was a little annoyance in the sigh, too. "They're not Americans, she reminded her husband." I guess they just don't understand. She smiled distantly at the foreign pair, and then looked around at her offspring. "Well, children, who wants to come with me to the washrooms, so we can get ready for the big fireworks?

They all did, even Randolph , but he felt a need stronger than the urging of his bladder. He remained behind with the foreigners. "Excuse me, he said somewhat formally, "but may I ask what you thought of the exhibit?

She glanced at the Japanese. "Well, it was most interesting, she said vaguely." One doesn't wish to criticize, of course- And she stopped there.

"No, no, please go on, Randolph encouraged.

She said, "I must say it did seem odd to, well, *glory* death in that way.

Randolph Baxter smiled, and tried to make it a forgiving smile, though he could feel that he was upset. He said, "Perhaps you miss the point of the Hall of Life and Death- in fact, of the whole Lottery Fair. You see, some of the greatest minds in America have worked on this problem of surplus population-think tanks and government agencies-why, three universities helped design this *Fair*. Every bit of it is scientifically planned. To begin with, it's absolutely free.

Mrs. Millay left off her rapid-fire sotto voce Japanese translation to ask, "You mean, free as far as money is concerned?"

"Yes, exactly. Of course, one takes a small chance at every ticket window, and in that sense there is a price for everything. A very carefully computed price, Mrs. Millay, for every hotdog, every show, every ride. To get into the Fair in the first place, for instance, costs one decimill -that's one percent of a point zero zero zero one probability of receiving a lethal injection from the ticket cuff. Now, that's not much of a risk, is it? He smiled. "And of course it's absolutely painless, too. As you can see by just looking at the ones who have given their lives inside.

Mr. Katsubishi, listening intently to Mrs. Millay's translation in his ear, pursed his lips and nodded thoughtfully. Mrs. Millay said brightly, "Well, we all have our own little national traits, don't we?"

"Now, really, Mrs. Millay, said Randolph Baxter, smiling with an effort, "please try to understand. Everything is quite fair. Some things are practically free, like the park benches and the rest rooms and so on; why, you could use some of them as much as a million times before, you know, your number would come up. Or you can get a first-class meal in the Cenotaph for just about a whole millipoint. But even that means you can do it a thousand times, on the average.

Mr. Katsubishi listened to the end of Mrs. Millay's translation and then struggled to get out a couple of English words. "Not-us, he managed, pointing to himself and Mrs. Millay.

"Certainly not, Baxter agreed." You're foreign tourists. So you buy your tickets in your own countries for cash, and of course you don't have to risk your lives. It wouldn't help the American population problem much if you did, would it? He smiled. "And your tour money helps pay the cost of the Fair. But the important thing to remember is that the Lottery Fair is entirely voluntary. No one has to come. Of course, he admitted with a self-deprecatory grin, "I have to admit that I really like the job lotteries. I guess I'm just a gambler at heart, and when you've spent as much time on welfare as Mrs. Baxter and I have, those big jobs are just hard to resist! And they're better here than at the regular city raffles.

Mrs. Millay cleared her throat. Good manners competed with obstinacy in her expression. "Really, Mr. Baxter, she said, "Mr. Katsubishi and I understand that- heavens, we've had to do things in our own countries! We certainly don't mean to criticize yours. What's hard to understand, I suppose, is, actually, that fetus. She searched his face with her eyes, looking for understanding. "It just seems strange. I mean, that you'd prefer to see a child born and then perhaps die in a lottery than to abort him ahead of time.

Mr. Baxter did his very best to maintain a pleasant expression, but he knew he was failing. "It's a

difference in our national philosophies, I guess, he said." See, we don't go in for your so-called birth control' here. No abortion. No contraception. We accept the gift of life when it is given. We believe that every human being, from the moment of conception on, has a right to a life-although, he added, "not necessarily a *long* one. He eyed the abashed foreigners sternly for a moment, then relented. "Well, he said, glancing at his watch, "I wonder where my family can be? They'll miss the fireworks if they don't get back. I bet Mrs. Baxter's gone and let the children pick out souvenirs-the little dickenses have been after us about them all day. Anyway, Mrs. Millay, Mr. Katsubishi, it's been a real pleasure meeting the two of you and having this chance to exchange views-

But he broke off, suddenly alarmed by the expression on Mr. Katsubishi's face as the man looked past him. "What's the matter?he demanded roughly.

And then he turned, and did not need an answer. The answer was written on the strained, haggard, tear-streaked face of his wife as she ran despairingly toward him, carrying in her hands a plastic cap, a paperweight, and a helium-filled balloon in the shape of a pig's head, but without Emma and without Simon and even without little Louisa.