

The Hand You're Dealt

by Robert J. Sawyer

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Current HUGO AWARD Finalist

For Best Short Story of the Year

Current ARTHUR ELLIS AWARD Finalist

For Best Short Story of the Year

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And ye shall know the truth, and the
truth shall make you free. -- John 8:32

"Got a new case for you," said my boss, Raymond Chen. "Homicide."

My heart started pounding. Mendelia habitat is supposed to be a
utopia. Murder is almost unheard of here.

Chen was fat -- never exercised, loved rich foods. He knew his
lifestyle would take decades off his life, but, hey, that was his choice.

"Somebody offed a soothsayer, over in Wheel Four," he said, wheezing slightly.

"Baranski's on the scene now."

My eyebrows went up. A dead soothsayer? This could be very
interesting indeed.

I took my pocket forensic scanner and exited The Cop Shop. That was its real name -- no taxes in Mendelia, after all. You needed a cop, you hired one. In this case, Chen had said, we were being paid by the Soothsayers' Guild. That meant we could run up as big a bill as necessary -- the SG was stinking rich. One of the few laws in Mendelia was that everyone had to use soothsayers.

Mendelia consisted of five modules, each looking like a wagon wheel with spokes leading in to a central hub. The hubs were all joined together by a long axle, and separate travel tubes connected the outer edges of the wheels. The whole thing spun to simulate gravity out at the rims, and the travel tubes saved you having to go down to the zero-g of the axle to move from one wheel to the next.

The Cop Shop was in Wheel Two. All the wheel rims were hollow, with buildings growing up toward the axle from the outer interior wall. Plenty of open spaces in Mendelia -- it wouldn't be much of a utopia without those. But our sky was a hologram, projected on the convex inner wall of the rim, above our heads. The Cop Shop's entrance was right by Wheel Two's transit loop, a series of maglev tracks along which robocabs ran. I hailed one, flashed my debit card at an unblinking eye, and the cab headed out. The Carling family, who owned the taxi concession, was one of the oldest and richest families in Mendelia.

The ride took fifteen minutes. Suzanne Baranski was waiting outside for me. She was a good cop, but too green to handle a homicide alone. Still, she'd get a big cut of the fee for being the original responding officer --

after all, the cop who responds to a call never knows who, if anyone, is going to pick up the tab. When there is money to be had, first-responders get a disproportionate share.

I'd worked with Suze a couple of times before, and had even gone to see her play cello with the symphony once. Perfect example of what Mendelia's all about, that. Suze Baranski had blue-collar parents. They'd worked as welders on the building of Wheel Five; not the kind who'd normally send a daughter for music lessons. But just after she'd been born, their soothsayer had said that Suze had musical talent. Not enough to make a living at it -- that's why she's a cop by day -- but still sufficient that it would be a shame not to let her develop it.

"Hi, Toby," Suze said to me. She had short red hair and big green eyes, and, of course, was in plain clothes -- you wanted a uniformed cop, you called our competitors, Spitpolish, Inc.

"Howdy, Suze," I said, walking toward her. She led me over to the door, which had been locked off in the open position. A holographic sign next to it proclaimed: Skye Hissock Soothsayer Let Me Reveal Your Future! Fully Qualified for Infant and Adult Readings

We stepped into a well-appointed lobby. The art was unusual for such an office -- it was all original pen-and-ink political cartoons. There was Republic CEO Da Silva, her big nose exaggerated out of all proportion, and next to it, Axel Durmont, Earth's current president, half buried in legislation printouts and tape that doubtless would have been red had this been a color rendering. The artist's signature caught my eye, the name Skye with curving lines behind it that I realized were meant to represent clouds. Just like Suze, our decedent had had varied talents.

"The body is in the inner private office," said Suze, leading the way. That door, too, was already open. She stepped in first, and I followed.

Skye Hissock's body sat in a chair behind his desk. His head had been blown clean off. A great carnation bloom of blood covered most of the wall behind him, and chunks of brain were plastered to the wall and the credenza behind the desk.

"Christ," I said. Some utopia.

Suze nodded. "Blaster, obviously," she said, sounding much more experienced in such matters than she really was. "Probably a gigawatt charge."

I began looking around the room. It was opulent; old Skye had obviously done well for himself. Suze was poking around, too. "Hey," she said, after a moment. I turned to look at her. She was climbing up on the credenza. The blast had knocked a small piece of sculpture off the wall -- it lay in two pieces on the floor -- and she was examining where it had been affixed. "Thought that's what it was," she said, nodding. "There's a hidden camera here."

My heart skipped a beat. "You don't suppose he got the whole thing on disk, do you?" I said, moving over to where she was. I gave her a hand getting down off the credenza, and we opened it up -- a slightly difficult task; crusted blood had sealed its sliding doors. Inside was a dusty recorder unit. I turned to Skye's desk, and pushed the release switch to pop up his monitor plate. Suze pushed the recorder's playback button. As we'd suspected, the unit was designed to feed into the desk monitor.

The picture showed the reverse angle from behind Skye's desk. The door to the private office opened and in came a young man. He looked to be eighteen, meaning he was just the right age for the mandatory adult soothsaying.

He had shoulder length dirty-blond hair, and was wearing a t-shirt imprinted with the logo of a popular meed. I shook my head. There hadn't been a good multimedia band since The Cassies, if you ask me.

"Hello, Dale," said what must have been Skye's voice. He spoke with deep, slightly nasal tones. "Thank you for coming in."

Okay, we had the guy's picture, and his first name, and the name of his favorite meed. Even if Dale's last name didn't turn up in Skye's appointment computer, we should have no trouble tracking him down.

"As you know," said Skye's recorded voice, "the law requires two soothsayings in each person's life. The first is done just after you're born, with one or both of your parents in attendance. At that time, the soothsayer only tells them things they'll need to know to get you through childhood. But when you turn eighteen, you, not your parents, become legally responsible for all your actions, and so it's time you heard everything. Now, do you want the good news or the bad news first?"

Here it comes, I thought. He told Dale something he didn't want to hear, the guy flipped, pulled out a blaster, and blew him away.

Dale swallowed. "The -- the good, I guess."

"All right," said Skye. "First, you're a bright young man -- not a genius, you understand, but brighter than average. Your IQ should run between 126 and 132. You are gifted musically -- did your parents tell you that? Good. I hope they encouraged you."

"They did," said Dale, nodding. "I've had piano lessons since I was four."

"Good, good. A crime to waste such raw talent. You also have a particular aptitude for mathematics. That's often paired with musical ability,

of course, so no surprises there. Your visual memory is slightly better than average, although your ability to do rote memorization is slightly worse. You would make a good long-distance runner, but ..."

I motioned for Suze to hit the fast-forward button; it seemed like a typical soothsaying, although I'd review it in depth later, if need be. Poor Dale fidgeted up and down in quadruple speed for a time, then Suze released the button.

"Now," said Skye's voice, "the bad news." I made an impressed face at Suze; she'd stopped speeding along at precisely the right moment. "I'm afraid there's a lot of it. Nothing devastating, but still lots of little things. You will begin to lose your hair around your twenty-seventh birthday, and it will begin to gray by the time you're thirty-two. By the age of forty, you will be almost completely bald, and what's left at that point will be half brown and half gray.

"On a less frivolous note, you'll also be prone to gaining weight, starting at about age thirty-three -- and you'll put on half a kilo a year for each of the following thirty years if you're not careful; by the time you're in your mid-fifties, that will pose a significant health hazard. You're also highly likely to develop adult-onset diabetes. Now, yes, that can be cured, but the cure is expensive, and you'll have to pay for it -- so either keep your weight down, which will help stave off its onset, or start saving now for the operation ..."

I shrugged. Nothing worth killing a man over. Suze fast-forwarded the tape some more.

"-- and that's it," concluded Skye. "You know now everything

significant that's coded into your DNA. Use this information wisely, and you should have a long, happy, healthy life."

Dale thanked Skye, took a printout of the information he'd just heard, and left. The recording stopped. It had been too much to hope for. Whoever killed Skye Hissock had come in after young Dale had departed. He was still our obvious first suspect, but unless there was something awful in the parts of the genetic reading we'd fast-forwarded over, there didn't seem to be any motive for him to kill his soothsayer. And besides, this Dale had a high IQ, Skye had said. Only an idiot would think there was any sense in shooting the messenger.

After we'd finished watching the recording, I did an analysis of the actual blaster burn. No fun, that: standing over the open top of Skye's torso. Most of the blood vessels had been cauterized by the charge. Still, blasters were only manufactured in two places I knew of --Tokyo , on Earth, and New Monty. If the one used here had been made on New Monty, we'd be out of luck, but one of Earth's countless laws required all blasters to leave a characteristic EM signature, so they could be traced to their registered owners, and --

Good: it was an Earth-made blaster. I recorded the signature, then used my compad to relay it to The Cop Shop. If Raymond Chen could find some time between stuffing his face, he'd send an FTL message to Earth and check the pattern -- assuming, of course, that the Jeffies don't scramble the message just for kicks. Meanwhile, I told Suze to go over Hissock's client list, while I started checking out his family -- fact is, even though it doesn't make much

genetic sense, most people are killed by their own relatives.

Skye Hissock had been fifty-one. He'd been a soothsayer for twenty-three years, ever since finishing his Ph.D. in genetics. He was unmarried, and both his parents were long dead. But he did have a brother named Rodger. Rodger was married to Rebecca Connolly, and they had two children, Glen, who, like Dale in Skye's recording, had just turned eighteen, and Billy, who was eight.

There are no inheritance taxes in Mendelia, of course, so barring a will to the contrary, Hissock's estate would pass immediately to his brother. Normally, that'd be a good motive for murder, but Rodger Hissock and Rebecca Connolly were already quite rich: they owned a controlling interest in the company that operated Mendelia's atmosphere-recycling plant.

I decided to start my interviews with Rodger. Not only had brothers been killing each other since Cain wasted Abel, but the fingerprint lock (a standard ten-points-of-comparison model) on Skye's private inner office was programmed to recognize only four people -- Skye himself; his office cleaner, who Suze was going to talk to; another soothsayer named Jennifer Halasz, who sometimes took Skye's patients for him when he was on vacation (and who had called in the murder, having stopped by apparently to meet Skye for coffee); and dear brother Rodger. Rodger lived in Wheel Four, and worked in One.

I took a cab over to his office. Unlike Skye, Rodger had a real flesh-and-blood receptionist. Most companies that did have human receptionists used middle-aged, businesslike people of either sex. Some guys got so rich that they didn't care what people thought; they hired beautiful blonde women whose busts had been surgically altered far beyond what any phenotype might provide.

But Rodger's choice was different. His receptionist was a delicate young man with refined, almost feminine features. He was probably older than he looked; he looked fourteen.

"Detective Toby Korsakov," I said, flashing my ID. I didn't offer to shake hands -- the boy looked like his would shatter if any pressure were applied. "I'd like to see Rodger Hissock."

"Do you have an appointment?" His voice was high, and there was just a trace of a lisp.

"No. But I'm sure Mr. Hissock will want to see me. It's important."

The boy looked very dubious, but he spoke into an intercom. "There's a cop here, Rodger. Says it's important."

There was a pause. "Send him in," said a loud voice. The boy nodded at me, and I walked through the heavy wooden door -- mahogany, no doubt imported all the way from Earth.

I had thought Skye Hissock's office was well-appointed, but his brother's put it to shame. Objects d'art from a dozen worlds were tastefully displayed on crystal stands. The carpet was so thick I was sure my shoes would sink out of sight. I walked toward the desk. Rodger rose to greet me. He was a muscular man, thick-necked, with lots of black hair and pale gray eyes. We shook hands; his grip was a show of macho strength. "Hello," he said. He boomed out the word, clearly a man used to commanding everyone's attention. "What can I do for you?"

"Please sit down," I said. "My name is Toby Korsakov. I'm from The Cop Shop, working under a contract to the Soothsayer's Guild."

"My God," said Rodger. "Has something happened to Skye?"

Although it was an unpleasant duty, there was nothing more useful in

a murder investigation than being there to tell a suspect about the death and seeing his reaction. Most guilty parties played dumb far too long, so the fact that Rodger had quickly made the obvious connection between the SG and his brother made me suspect him less, not more. Still ... "I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news," I said, "but I'm afraid your brother is dead."

Rodger's eyes went wide. "What happened?"

"He was murdered."

"Murdered," repeated Rodger, as if he'd never heard the word before.

"That's right. I was wondering if you knew of anyone who'd want him dead?"

"How was he killed?" asked Rodger. I was irritated that this wasn't an answer to my question, and even more irritated that I'd have to explain it so soon. More than a few homicides had been solved by a suspect mentioning the nature of the crime in advance of him or her supposedly having learned the details. "He was shot at close range by a blaster."

"Oh," said Rodger. He slumped in his chair. "Skye dead." His head shook back and forth a little. When he looked up, his gray eyes were moist. Whether he was faking or not, I couldn't tell.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Do you know who did it?"

"Not yet. We're tracing the blaster's EM signature. But there were no signs of forcible entry, and, well ..."

"Yes?"

"Well, there are only four people whose fingerprints opened the door

to Skye's inner office."

Rodger nodded. "Me and Skye. Who else?"

"His cleaner, and another soothsayer."

"You're checking them out?"

"My associate is. She's also checking all the people Skye had appointments with recently -- people he might have let in of his own volition."

A pause. "Can I ask where you were this morning between ten and eleven?"

"Here."

"In your office?"

"That's right."

"Your receptionist can vouch for that?"

"Well ... no. No, he can't. He was out all morning. His sooth says he's got a facility for languages. I give him a half-day off every Wednesday to take French lessons."

"Did anyone call you while he was gone?"

Rodger spread his thick arms. "Oh, probably. But I never answer my own compad. Truth to tell, I like that half-day where I can't be reached. It lets me get an enormous amount of work done without being interrupted."

"So no one can verify your presence here?"

"Well, no ... no, I guess they can't. But, Crissakes, Detective, Skye was my brother ..."

"I'm not accusing you, Mr. Hissock --"

"Besides, if I'd taken a robocab over, there'd be a debit charge against my account."

"Unless you paid cash. Or unless you walked." You can walk down the travel tubes, although most people don't bother.

"You don't seriously believe --"

"I don't believe anything yet, Mr. Hissock." It was time to change the subject; he would be no use to me if he got too defensive. "Was your brother a good soothsayer?"

"Best there is. Hell, he read my own sooth when I turned eighteen." He saw my eyebrows go up. "Skye is nine years older than me; I figured, why not use him? He needed the business; he was just starting his practice at that point."

"Did Skye do the readings for your children, too?"

An odd hesitation. "Well, yeah, yeah, Skye did their infant readings, but Glen -- that's my oldest; just turned 18 -- he decided to go somewhere else for his adult reading. Waste of money, if you ask me. Skye would've given him a discount."

My compad beeped while I was in a cab. I turned it on.

"Yo, Toby." Raymond Chen's fat face appeared on the screen. "We got the registration information on that blaster signature."

"Yeah?"

Ray smiled. "Do the words 'open-and-shut case' mean anything to you? The blaster belongs to one Rodger Hissock. He bought it about eleven years ago."

I nodded and signed off. Since the lock accepted his fingerprint, rich little brother would have no trouble waltzing right into big brother's

inner office, and exploding his head. Rodger had method and he had opportunity. Now all I needed was to find his motive -- and for that, continuing to interview the family members might prove useful.

Eighteen-year-old Glen Hissock was studying engineering at Francis Crick University in Wheel Three. He was a dead ringer for his old man: built like a wrestler, with black hair and quicksilver eyes. But whereas father Rodger had a coarse, outgoing way about him -- the crusher handshake, the loud voice -- young Glen was withdrawn, soft-spoken, and nervous.

"I'm sorry about your uncle," I said, knowing that Rodger had already broken the news to his son.

Glen looked at the floor. "Me too."

"Did you like him?"

"He was okay."

"Just okay."

"Yeah."

"Where were you between ten and eleven this morning?"

"At home."

"Was anyone else there?"

"Nah. Mom and Dad were at work, and Billy -- that's my little brother -- was in school." He met my eyes for the first time. "Am I a suspect?"

He wasn't really. All the evidence seemed to point to his father. I shook my head in response to his question, then said, "I hear you had your sooth read recently."

"Yeah."

"But you didn't use your uncle."

"Nah."

"How come?"

A shrug. "Just felt funny, that's all. I picked a guy at random from the online directory."

"Any surprises in your sooth?"

The boy looked at me. "Sooth's private, man. I don't have to tell you that."

I nodded. "Sorry."

Two hundred years ago, in 2029, the Palo Alto Nanosystems Laboratory developed a molecular computer. You doubtless read about it in history class: during the Snow War, the U.S. used it to disassemble Bogatá atom by atom.

Sometimes, though, you can put the genie back in the bottle.

Remember Hamasaki and DeJong, the two researchers at PANL who were shocked to see their work corrupted that way? They created and released the nano-Gorts -- self-replicating microscopic machines that seek out and destroy molecular computers, so that nothing like Bogatá could ever happen again.

We've got PANL nano-Gorts here, of course. They're everywhere in Free Space. But we've got another kind of molecular guardian, too -- inevitably, they were dubbed helix-Gorts. It's rumored the SG was responsible for them, but after a huge investigation, no indictments were ever brought. Helix-Gorts

circumvent any attempt at artificial gene therapy. We can tell you everything that's written in your DNA, but we can't do a damned thing about it. Here, in Mendelia, you play the hand you're dealt.

My compad beeped again. I switched it on. "Korsakov here."

Suze's face appeared on the screen. "Hi, Toby. I took a sample of Skye's DNA off to Rundstedt" -- a soothsayer who did forensic work for us. "She's finished the reading."

"And?" I said.

Suze's green eyes blinked. "Nothing stood out. Skye wouldn't have been a compulsive gambler, or an addict, or inclined to steal another person's spouse -- which eliminates several possible motives for his murder. In fact, Rundstedt says Skye would have had a severe aversion to confrontation." She sighed. "Just doesn't seem to be the kind of guy who'd end up in a situation where someone would want him dead."

I nodded. "Thanks, Suze. Any luck with Skye's clients?"

"I've gone through almost all the ones who'd had appointments in the last three days. So far, they all have solid alibis."

"Keep checking. I'm off to see Skye's sister-in-law, Rebecca Connolly. Talk to you later."

"Bye."

Sometimes I wonder if I'm in the right line of work. I know, I know -- what a crazy thing to be thinking. I mean, my parents knew from my infant reading that I'd grow up to have an aptitude for puzzle-solving, plus superior powers of observation. They made sure I had every opportunity to fulfill my potentials, and when I had my sooth read for myself at eighteen, it was obvious that this would be a perfect job for me to pursue. And yet, still, I have my doubts. I just don't feel like a cop sometimes.

But a soothsaying can't be wrong: almost every human trait has a genetic basis -- gullibility, mean-spiritedness, a goofy sense of humor, the urge to collect things, talents for various sports, every specific sexual predilection (according to my own sooth, my tastes ran to group sex with Asian women -- so far, I'd yet to find an opportunity to test that empirically).

Of course, when Mendelia started up, we didn't yet know what each gene and gene combo did. Even today, the SG is still adding new interpretations to the list. Still, I sometimes wonder how people in other parts of Free Space get along without soothsayers -- stumbling through life, looking for the right job; sometimes completely unaware of talents they possess; failing to know what specific things they should do to take care of their health. Oh, sure, you can get a genetic reading anywhere -- even down on Earth. But they're only mandatory here.

And my mandatory readings said I'd make a good cop. But, I have to admit, sometimes I'm not so sure ...

Rebecca Connolly was at home when I got there. On Earth, a family with the kind of money the Hissock-Connolly union had would own a mansion. Space is at a premium aboard a habitat, but their living room was big enough that its floor showed a hint of curvature. The art on the walls included originals by both Grant Wood and Bob Eggleton. There was no doubt they were loaded -- making it all the harder to believe they'd done in Uncle Skye for his money.

Rebecca Connolly was a gorgeous woman. According to the press reports I'd read, she was forty-four, but she looked twenty years younger. Gene therapy might be impossible here, but anyone who could afford it could have plastic surgery. Her hair was copper-colored, and her eyes an unnatural violet. "Hello, Detective Korsakov," she said. "My husband told me you were likely to stop by." She shook her head. "Poor Skye. Such a darling man."

I tilted my head. She was the first of Skye's relations to actually say something nice about him as a person -- which, after all, could just be a clumsy attempt to deflect suspicion from her. "You knew Skye well?"

"No -- to be honest, no. He and Rodger weren't that close. Funny thing, that. Skye used to come by the house frequently when we first got married -- he was Rodger's best man, did he tell you that? But when Glen was born, well, he stopped coming around as much. I dunno -- maybe he didn't like kids; he never had any of his own. Anyway, he really hasn't been a big part of our lives for, oh, eighteen years now."

"But Rodger's fingerprints were accepted by Skye's lock."

"Oh, yes. Rodger owns the unit Skye has his current offices in."

"I hate to ask you this, but --"

"I'm on the Board of Directors of TenthGen Computing, Detective. We were having a shareholders' meeting this morning. Something like eight hundred

people saw me there."

I asked more questions, but didn't get any closer to identifying Rodger Hissock's motive. And so I decided to cheat -- as I said, sometimes I do wonder if I'm in the right kind of job. "Thanks for your help, Ms. Connolly. I don't want to take up any more of your time, but can I use your bathroom before I go?"

She smiled. "Of course. There's one down the hall, and one upstairs."

The upstairs one sounded more promising for my purposes. I went up to it, and the door closed behind me. I really did need to go, but first I pulled out my forensic scanner and started looking for specimens. Razors and combs were excellent places to find DNA samples; so were towels, if the user rubbed vigorously enough. Best of all, though, were toothbrushes. I scanned everything, but something was amiss. According to the scanner, there was DNA present from one woman -- the XX chromosome pair made the gender clear. And there was DNA from one man. But three males lived in this house: father Rodger, elder son Glen, and younger son Billy.

Perhaps this bathroom was used only by the parents, in which case I'd blown it -- I'd hardly get a chance to check out the other bathroom. But no -- there were four sets of towels, four toothbrushes, and there, on the edge of the tub, a toy aquashuttle ... precisely the kind an eight-year-old boy would play with.

Curious. Four people obviously used this john, but only two had left any genetic traces. And that made no sense -- I mean, sure, I hardly ever washed when I was eight like Billy, but no one can use a washroom day in and day out

without leaving some DNA behind.

I relieved myself, the toilet autoflushed, and I went downstairs, thanked Ms. Connolly again, and left.

Like I said, I was cheating -- making me wonder again whether I really was cut out for a career in law enforcement. Even though it was a violation of civil rights, I took the male DNA sample I'd found in the Hissock-Connolly bathroom to Dana Rundstedt, who read its sooth for me.

I was amazed by the results. If I hadn't cheated, I might never have figured it out -- it was a damn-near perfect crime.

But it all fit, after seeing what was in the male DNA.

The fact that of the surviving Hissocks, only Rodger apparently had free access to Skye's inner office.

The fact that Rodger's blaster was the murder weapon.

The fact that there were apparently only two people using the bathroom.

The fact that Skye hated confrontation.

The fact that the Hissock-Connolly family had a lot of money they wanted to pass on to the next generation.

The fact that young Glen looked just like his dad, but was subdued and reserved.

The fact that Glen had gone to a different soothsayer.

The fact that Rodger's taste in receptionists was ... unusual.

The pieces all fit -- that part of my sooth, at least, must have

been read correctly; I was good at puzzling things out. But I was still amazed by how elegant it was.

Ray Chen would sort out the legalities; he was an expert at that kind of thing. He'd find a way to smooth over my unauthorized soothsaying before we brought this to trial.

I got in a cab and headed off to Wheel Three to confront the killer.

"Hold it right there," I said, coming down the long, gently curving corridor at Francis Crick. "You're under arrest."

Glen Hissock stopped dead in his tracks. "What for?"

I looked around, then drew Glen into an empty classroom. "For the murder of your uncle, Skye Hissock. Or should I say, for the murder of your brother? The semantics are a bit tricky."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Glen, in that subdued, nervous voice of his.

I shook my head. Soothsayer Skye had deserved punishment, and his brother Rodger was guilty of a heinous crime -- in fact, a crime Mendelian society considered every bit as bad as murder. But I couldn't let Glen get away with it. "I'm sorry for what happened to you," I said. The mental scars no doubt explained his sullen, withdrawn manner.

He glared at me. "Like that makes it better."

"When did it start?"

He was quiet for a time, then gave a little shrug, as if realizing there was no point in pretending any longer. "When I was twelve -- as soon as I entered puberty. Not every night, you understand. But often enough." He paused, then: "How'd you figure it out?"

I decided to tell him the truth. "There are only two different sets of DNA in your house -- one female, as you'd expect, and just one male."

Glen said nothing.

"I had the male DNA read. I was looking for a trait that might have provided a motive for your father. You know what I found."

Glen was still silent.

"When your dad's sooth was read just after birth, maybe his parents were told that he was sterile. Certainly the proof is there, in his DNA: an inability to produce viable sperm." I paused, remembering the details Rundstedt had explained to me. "But the soothsayer back then couldn't have known the effect of having the variant form of gene ABL-419d, with over a hundred T-A-T repeats. That variation's function hadn't been identified that long ago. But it was known by the time Rodger turned eighteen, by the time he went to see his big brother Skye, by the time Skye gave him his adult soothsaying." I paused. "But Uncle Skye hated confrontation, didn't he?"

Glen was motionless, a statue.

"And so Skye lied to your dad. Oh, he told him about his sterility, all right, but he figured there was no point in getting into an argument about what that variant gene meant."

Glen looked at the ground. When at last he did speak, his voice was bitter. "I had thought Dad knew. I confronted him -- Christ sakes, Dad, if you knew you had a gene for incestuous pedophilia, why the hell didn't you seek

counseling? Why the hell did you have kids?"

"But your father didn't know, did he?"

Glen shook his head. "That bastard Uncle Skye hadn't told him."

"In fairness," I said, "Skye probably figured that since your father couldn't have kids, the problem would never come up. But your dad made a lot of money, and wanted it to pass to an heir. And since he couldn't have an heir the normal way ..."

Glen's voice was full of disgust. "Since he couldn't have an heir the normal way, he had one made."

I looked the boy up and down. I'd never met a clone before. Glen really was the spitting image of the old man -- a chip off the old block. But like any dynasty, the Hissock-Connolly clan wanted not just an heir, but an heir and a spare. Little Billy, ten years younger than Glen, was likewise an exact genetic duplicate of Rodger Hissock, produced from Rodger's DNA placed into one of Rebecca's eggs. All three Hissock males had indeed left DNA in that bathroom -- exactly identical DNA.

"Have you always known you were a clone?" I asked.

Glen shook his head. "I only just found out. Before I went for my adult soothsaying, I wanted to see the report my parents had gotten when I was born. But none existed -- my dad had decided to save some money. He didn't need a new report done, he figured; my sooth would be identical to his, after all. When I went to get my sooth read and found that I was sterile, well, it all fell into place in my mind."

"And so you took your father's blaster, and, since your fingerprints are essentially the same as his ..."

Glen nodded slowly. His voice was low and bitter. "Dad never knew in advance what was wrong with him -- never had a chance to get help. Uncle Skye never told him. Even after Dad had himself cloned, Skye never spoke up." He looked at me, fury in his cold gray eyes. "It doesn't work, dammit -- our whole way of life doesn't work if a soothsayer doesn't tell the truth. You can't play the hand you're dealt if you don't know what cards you've got. Skye deserved to die."

"And you framed your dad for it. You wanted to punish him, too."

Glen shook his head. "You don't understand, man. You can't understand."

"Try me."

"I didn't want to punish Dad -- I wanted to protect Billy. Dad can afford the best damn lawyer in Mendelia. Oh, he'll be found guilty, sure, but he won't get life. His lawyer will cut it down to the minimum mandatory sentence for murder, which is --"

"Ten years," I said, realization dawning. "In ten years, Billy will be an adult -- and out of danger from Rodger."

Glen nodded once.

"But Rodger could have told the truth at any time -- revealed that you were a clone of him. If he'd done that, he would have gotten off, and suspicion would have fallen on you. How did you know he wasn't going to speak up?"

Glen sounded a lot older than his eighteen years. "If Dad exposed me, I'd expose him -- and the penalty for child molestation is also a minimum ten years, so he'd be doing the time anyway." He looked directly at me. "Except being a murderer gets you left alone in jail, and being a pedophile gets you

wrecked up."

I nodded, led him outside, and hailed a robocab.

Mendelia is a great place to live, honest.

And, hell, I did solve the crime, didn't I? Meaning I am a good detective. So I guess my soothsayer didn't lie to me.

At least -- at least I hope not ...

I had a sudden cold feeling that the SG would stop footing the bill long before this case could come to public trial.

THE END

Further Reading:

A few notes about the science in this story, for those who might be interested

Information about this story's nomination for the Hugo Award

Information about this story's nomination for the Crime Writers of Canada's

Arthur Ellis Award

Other short stories by Robert J. Sawyer

Information about Rob's novel Frameshift, a current nominee for the Hugo

Award for Best Novel of the Year

A profile of Rob from Tangent concentrating on his short-fiction career

Back to the Robert J. Sawyer main page (www.sfwriter.com)