

My son Anthony died in 2005. He was born with Down Syndrome. I began thinking about what this story became when the genetic counselor discussed chromosomal abnormalities with me, saying that a cure for them was a long way off, but other genetic illnesses would soon be cured. Every therapy mentioned in the story is currently being developed. The story is fiction; the feelings are real.

PERFECT STRANGER

by Amy Sterling Casil

The rain falls in sheets across the yard, another pane of glass beyond our windows.

Would you like it warmer, Mr. Gill?

The house pings once. Twice.

“No,” I say. “It’s fine the way it is.”

Thank you very much, the house says.

Just like anybody else, the house likes to talk to somebody. I imagined this as a great feature. I’m an ergonomic architect; I designed it.

Denny is asleep in his room. You’d think at fifteen, he’d be too old to take a nap. But he’s wiped out after soccer.

Carolyn threw Denny’s football out today. The foam rubber football I gave him when he was four years old.

It was old, she said. Falling apart. He didn’t want it any more. I thought, if he really doesn’t want the football, maybe he could say. I tried asking.

But right then, Denny was off to soccer practice, then a study session, then the game. Now, he’s sleeping. This is what happens when they’re in high school.

Carolyn says I should be proud. Proud he’s such an athlete. And a scholar.

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And I guess I'm a gentleman.

The rain comes down like liquid leaded glass.

The gardeners have taken the trash all the way to the curb once again.

It's a very long way to the end of the driveway.

I return with half of Denny's football.

She must have taken shears to it. A lightning strike of rage flashes. If she were home right now . . .

Your body temperature is lower than normal, Mr. Gill, the house chimes in its chimey voice.

"I've been out in the rain," I mutter.

Would you like some soft, fluffy towels? the house asks. I want the other half of the football. I'll glue it back together. But I smile and grunt an assent, to which the house responds.

Outside, the rain sleeted down, a thousand tiny sticks pattering on a thousand tin drums. Nah, not drums. It's just our solar panels.

Denny was born with HLHS. That's an acronym for hypoplastic left heart syndrome. Hypoplastic left heart syndrome is universally fatal, if left untreated. Even now, there are babies that do not survive, even with full-length clone DNA therapy administered in-utero.

When at five months of pregnancy, Carolyn went for a high-level ultrasound that determined Denny had HLHS, it seemed like the most natural thing in the world to try gene therapy. The doctors explained how the heart healed itself as the baby grew.

It was raining that day.

Pouring outside while we listened to the neonatal geneticist explain how the procedure worked. We were so lucky, she said. Before gene therapy, babies like Denny could only survive with full heart transplants. She told us about a doctor that had tried baboon hearts to replace broken baby ones.

Apparently, some parents aborted babies diagnosed with HLHS.

"I'd never accept that," I said.

"What?" Carolyn snapped, her hand over her swollen belly. "You'd rather let my baby suffer?"

I guess I hadn't thought of it that way.

The geneticist explained in the past, babies born with this heart defect were simply left to die. Their hearts barely pumped blood. And they would just fade away.

Maybe that could be less humane than an abortion.

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At least that was what we discussed on the way home.
It was a miracle that we had the gene therapy, and that Denny was
born whole. And totally healthy.
It was the best moment of my life.

The rain rattles the solar panels as I sort pictures on the computer.
Denny in his baby swing. Denny playing with blocks.
I should be working. But I can't focus on the Recreation Center today.
There was one of him holding the fuzzy book he got from his
grandmother. She was so frightened— my mother— when I told her about
Denny's heart problem. She didn't understand gene therapy.
Carolyn got on the phone and explained it to her. When Denny was
born perfectly healthy, I don't think any of us gave it much more thought.
My mother and Denny sat for hours, reading that little book. *Pat the Bunny*.
Her favorite— she insisted on buying it. I have it in my study, in the right
drawer of my desk.

At one past garage sale, it had been another item bound for the
dumpster.

I put the half-football with *Pat the Bunny*.
Denny was about three when he learned to read.
I sorted those pictures, too.
They say a man's not supposed to be interested in pictures.
Mementos.

The man lives his life, and the woman saves it.
Well, what they say is true and what happens are sometimes two
different things.

There was another book Denny liked. *Stan the Hotdog Man*. We read
it over and over.

And one day, Denny started talking about Stan. It dawned on me that
he was reading.

"Carolyn, come here!" I called.
She came running in from the kitchen, alarmed.
"Honey, I think he's reading."
Her face changed. "Horse manure," she said.
"No, really," I said.
Denny then read a whole page of *Stan the Hotdog Man* in his small
voice. He beamed proudly up at me.
"See?" I said.
"You've read it to him so many times, he's memorized it," she said.

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“Oh,” I said.

It was some time later when I learned that by memorizing the book, Denny was, indeed, reading. By that time, he was in kindergarten.

I sorted some more of the pictures from later years, and looked pensively out at the rain. Denny was still sleeping.

I think I always hoped that my son would play football.

Back before I met Carolyn, I played ball. Played all the way through sophomore year in college. Sidelined by a knee injury. I guess I was a pretty good running back, if a little bit underweight. The guys were all into steroids back in those days. There was no such thing as gene augmentation. All we had were good, old-fashioned workouts and protein shakes.

And maybe a shot in the butt for guys that were really dedicated. Or crazy.

You could blow your heart out on steroids. They made you break out all over. Gave you erectile dysfunction. Made you crazy.

Happened to a lot of my friends. It's a good thing I figured out that trap before I fell into it.

I guess I did try it a few times.

Drops of rain dappled the window.

Your heart rate has increased, Mr. Gill, the house chimed. Your core body temperature has dropped.

“So turn up the heat,” I told the house.

I had to say something. Otherwise, it wouldn't leave me alone.

I folded the blue ribbon neatly into my desk drawer. For math excellence. Why they'd give a math prize to a kid in second grade was beyond me.

When Denny hit second grade, his teacher pointed up that he was reading like a pro, but having trouble with his figures.

“I was never too good with math,” I told her. Wasn't that great in reading, either, but I didn't feel compelled to share.

“You might want to look into some tutoring,” she said.

“He's in second grade!” I said.

Carolyn hushed me. “How far is he behind?” she asked.

“Behind?” the teacher asked. “Oh, no— he's not behind.”

“Well, there's no reason to worry,” I said. “He'll pick it up.”

“His times tables,” Carolyn said. “Next year he's got to learn the times tables.”

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“We don’t do it that way any more, Mrs. Gill. Each child is tested individually against his or her own standards.”

I didn’t precisely follow how there could be enough time to set individual standards seeing as the kid had just started second grade.

“How far is he behind?” Carolyn asked again.

“He’s not behind,” the teacher said, a stubborn tone creeping into her voice. “Denny is so bright. I’m sure you’d agree with me that he could do better if he applied himself. That’s all I’m trying to say.”

“Maybe he just wants to play outside,” I said.

“Hush!” Carolyn said. “Gary and I both agree that Denny is bright. And he’s got plenty of motivation.”

“Well,” the teacher said smiling. “Why don’t you try that tutoring service, or a math buddy.”

A math buddy was like an English buddy, or a foreign language buddy. It was a small, silver, pain-in-the-ass robot that could also vacuum the floor. They were notorious for tripping guys foolish enough to buy them for their kids. A guy in Cleveland broke his neck that way.

I was going to be damned if I’d get one. I would have rather gotten Denny another football.

On the way out to the car, Carolyn looked up at me, concern wrinkling her forehead. “He’s falling behind in math,” she whispered.

“You don’t have to whisper,” I told her. “Nobody can hear. Besides, the teacher said he’s not behind. We can encourage him.”

“Encourage him!” Carolyn snapped. “He can do better, and he will.”

“Well, do you think we should try a tutor?” I asked. The thought of locking Denny inside with some greasy-haired high school math geek made me cringe. But even that was a more appealing choice than bringing a gibbering, tortoise-like “math buddy” into the house, so it could trip me on the stairs and turn me into a paraplegic.

“No,” Carolyn said. “Not a tutor.”

I felt relieved.

“Have you heard about the new gene therapy?” she asked. “It’s just like what they did for Denny’s heart defect. Only it can strengthen a child’s brain power. I was reading all about it yesterday.”

“Oh,” I said. I had pretty favorable memories of how they’d fixed Denny’s heart. “How does that work?”

“Maybe it’s like what they did before. Only they inject the new genetic material into someone’s brain. Then it makes a few changes and the person gets smarter.”

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“Oh,” I said. I didn’t like the thought of anybody injecting anything into Denny’s brain. But I’d learned it was best not to interrupt Carolyn when she was thinking like this. Frankly, it was almost always better just to wait things out. Half the time she forgot about this stuff and never mentioned it again.

“If you’re concerned about your son’s logical and mathematical abilities, I don’t think you’ve got much to worry about with Denny,” Dr. Mandel said. “He’s a bright, normal boy.”

“But his teacher says he’s falling behind in math,” Carolyn said. “Can’t we do something?”

“I’d recommend a math buddy,” the doctor said. “My own daughter has one. She’s about Denny’s age. She used to hate math, and now she loves it.”

“Doesn’t that thing get in your way?” I asked— about the math buddy.

“Thing?” the doctor said, looking puzzled. “Oh!” he said, chuckling. “Yeah, it did trip me up once. I fell right off the deck into the pool.”

“There’s something I don’t like about those little robots,” I said. “The teacher also suggested a tutor.”

“A wise choice,” the doctor said. He started to check his personal assistant, a sure sign our time was up. I started to rise, but Carolyn put her hand on my arm.

“Wait,” she said. “Can you explain how the procedure works, doctor?”

He paused. I suddenly understood that he was one of those guys who never missed a chance to wow others with his special, technical knowledge.

“Well,” he said, smiling. “Years ago, we discovered that viruses could be effective transports to load different types of DNA into human— or any other type— of brains. Now we’ve identified a specific enzyme or cocktail of enzymes that enhances almost every type of brain function. We load the enzymes into a virus, which then transcribes the DNA, and delivers the desired changes to what we once thought were ‘unchangeable’ brain cells. I’m sure you’ve heard of people building up their ‘extra-sensory perception.’”

Carolyn and I nodded. We’d seen a show about wild-eyed lunatics bending iron and starting fires at a distance the night before.

“It’s like an infection,” Dr. Mandel said. “But it’s one that most people wouldn’t mind catching.”

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“Like a cold?” Carolyn asked.

“Exactly!” Dr. Mandel said. “You do understand. Only in this case, the subject catches the cold in their cerebral cortex, and as healing occurs, so do changes for the better.”

“Wow,” Carolyn said.

“I’m not sure about this,” I said.

“Shhh!” she hushed.

“How old is your son?” the doctor asked.

“Seven,” Carolyn said.

“Ah, the perfect age. Look—” he said, leaning across his shiny titanium desk— everybody who was anybody had one of those a few years back—“It’s not cheap. But you could make your son into a math genius if you wanted. He wouldn’t feel a thing, and a few days later, his abilities would manifest. They’d grow day by day.”

“I don’t know,” I said. It sounded like mad scientist stuff to me. Weren’t they trying these techniques on psychotic murderers? If this was so safe and healthy, I figured we would have heard about it in other areas beside criminal rehabilitation and iron-bending firestarters.

“People are doing it all the time,” Dr. Mandel said. “You just don’t hear about it on the newlinks because improving kids’ test scores isn’t nearly as big a story as turning a mass-murderer into Mother Teresa.”

Carolyn squeezed my hand under the table. “Doctor, we’d like to try,” she said.

“I suppose we could— ” Dr. Mandel said, voice slightly uncertain.

“Is this necess—”

Carolyn cut me short. “I know he can benefit,” she said. “I don’t think we mentioned it earlier, but Denny received gene therapy before he was born, to cure a congenital heart defect.”

“Oh!” the doctor said. “In that case, he’s pre-qualified. Be sure to fill out all the forms, you two. We’re conducting multi-treatment longitudinal studies and your son is an ideal candidate.”

So, Denny got the blue ribbon in math.

He got so into math that he stayed inside almost all the time. He hardly wanted to play with his friends any more. We were supposed to start Pony League football.

But Denny didn’t want to play. He didn’t want to try for T-Ball, either.

The only thing he’d talk about was math.

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One day, Carolyn pointed out that Denny was getting a little chunky. “He was size eight last month,” she said. “Now I’ve got to buy the next size up.”

“So? My mom told me I grew three sizes and four inches one summer.”

“Your mom said all kinds of things,” Carolyn said.

Mom had passed last spring. We used to joke about her seeing Denny through high school. It wasn’t meant to be.

“Could you give it a rest, Carolyn?” My wife thought that seven months was long enough. For mourning.

She forged ahead. “Denny’s getting fat, Gary. We can’t let him get overweight.”

“So, we’ll put him on a diet,” I said. I’d been a little chunky when I was his age. When my mom found out how much time I could waste playing video games, she ripped the whole console out of the wall. It was the cold-turkey video game withdrawal method. I lost the weight.

We tried a diet, but Denny was too young to understand why he couldn’t eat everything he liked. I wasn’t surprised when a couple of frustrating weeks later, Carolyn told me that she’d called Dr. Mandel.

There was of course a gene therapy—the most popular one of all—to deal with unwanted weight gain. This time, the virus carrying altered DNA helped to increase some of the hormones in the brain that controlled appetite and metabolism.

Voila! A thin kid.

That was Denny’s third treatment.

The rain is imploding on the roof. It’s almost in my head.

“Turn up the heat!” I scream.

The house complies. If I didn’t know better, I’d almost think that the house was sulking.

After the obesity treatment, Denny started getting into soccer. And discovered his talent for art.

By thirteen, Denny was Dr. Mandel’s best patient. He had even been featured on the cover of *Parenting* with two other kids that had been helped by Dr. Mandel’s gene practice. It wasn’t exactly as if gene therapy was cutting-edge any more. Dr. Mandel was known for his “boutique” practice. That meant that he helped parents with money and fine-edged concerns about their children’s growth and well-being.

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No one really took the dire warnings of the early part of the millennium seriously.

Creating a “master race” and so-on. Well, heck. If a person could get a little bit better in some way, and it wasn’t hurting them or anybody else, how did that qualify as a “master race?” People without genetic improvements were never looked down upon.

Sure, it was a generational thing. I mean, there were some skin therapies for people my age and Carolyn’s age. And they had learned how to rejuvenate most of the vital organs. When I was young, it was a big deal for anybody to make it to age 100. These days, you had to hit 120 and look really good to get your picture on the newslinks.

It was the kids that benefited. If somebody would have told me back in the day that a Pugsley kid could turn into a hunk in a matter of weeks, or a kid with no chin could suddenly acquire a nice, square one without surgery, I would have laughed out loud. You were what you were born to be.

Up until he was nine or ten, Denny’s eyes were kind of a hazel color. Now they were piercing, bright blue. The girls went crazy over his eyes. I mean, the kid was a good-looking fifteen, but—

The house chimed. Somebody was calling.

“Gary here,” I answered.

“Is Denny home?” came a petite, snippy little voice.

“Yes, but he’s sleeping. Tired out after his game.” I didn’t share that he’d had yet another treatment— this one to deal with a few pimples, of all things. Kids slept a lot after a treatment. Body change and metabolic readjustment, supposedly. Dr. Mandel likened it to “growing pains.”

“Oh, well, like we were supposed to be . . . studying . . . for chemistry tonight,” the little voice said. After a moment’s pause, she added, “This is Candy.”

“I thought you were Apple,” I said. She sounded like the girl Denny had introduced me to named “Apple.” Apple was a cheerleader, and—

“No, I’m Candy,” she said vehemently. “I don’t see how you could confuse us. Apple is completely shallow and self-centered and she can’t pass math. I’m the captain of the Debate Team.”

“Oh,” I said. *Of course* she was Debate Team Captain. “My mistake. Apple calls a lot.”

“Oh,” Candy said. “I see.”

“Denny hardly ever takes her calls,” I said. This was utterly untrue, but for some reason, I enjoyed the thought of the little white lie that was involved.

“Oh,” she said, voice brightening. “Well, just tell Denny that I called.

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Thank you, Mr. Gill.” And she broke the connection.

So I went upstairs.

“Hey,” I said, waking Denny. “A girl called.”

Denny rose, shaking sleep out of his eyes. “Yeah? Who was it, Dad?”

“Apple,” I said. “Wait— no, Candy.”

“Candy,” Denny said, smiling slyly. “She likes me, I think.”

“She’s the jealous type too,” I said. “What are you doing to attract all these girls, Denny?”

Denny scooted up in bed and swung his legs to the floor. He started rubbing his shoulder. “Hurt it a little bit in the game,” he said.

“How’d it go?”

“Not bad,” he said. “We won by two goals. I got the last goal.”

Of course you did, I thought. I hadn’t gone to the game. Somehow, I just hadn’t wanted to. It was raining. I said it was crazy to play soccer in the rain. Watching soccer in the rain was even crazier.

I couldn’t put my finger on the real reason I hadn’t gone to the game.

Carolyn was at work, of course. She had a fulfilling, demanding job at the local art museum. She put together their brochures and maintained their web presence. Everybody says what artistic talent she has. It’s really amazing how Denny has the same abilities— maybe even moreso. Paintings, drawings, vector art— Denny does it all. He would be taking sculpture, if it didn’t conflict with soccer practice.

Denny got up and started to strip off his clothes. He was only fifteen, but his chest and biceps were more muscular than mine. Not just at that age— now.

He sprinted into his bathroom and called for the house to turn on the shower.

“Did you order more after-shave, Dad?” he called.

“Yeah,” I said. “Yesterday.”

“Oh, right,” Denny said. “It’s all full now— I can see it.”

Of course I ordered after-shave. When you work from home, all those little chores seem to fall on you. Tell the house what to cook for dinner, tell it to keep the different meals ready at different times for everyone’s schedule, see to it the laundry schedule isn’t too full and somebody— namely Denny— isn’t going to have to run to a soccer game and play in a dirty jersey. Make sure all the plants are watered and trimmed and the rug is vacuumed and the floor polished and there are no lights out and there—

“Hey Dad, what should I do about Candy?” Denny asked from the shower.

“Do about what?”

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“She *likes* me, Dad. I like her fine as a friend, but I don’t want to get serious. She’s just not—”

“What’s wrong with her?”

“Nothing,” Denny said.

“Well, if there’s nothing wrong with her, why don’t you like her?” I knew perfectly well what he meant, but I was just playing with his mind.

“I mean *like*, Dad. As in . . . you know . . .”

“You’re supposed to be the genius,” I said. “I don’t know, so explain it to me.”

I don’t know what I expected to hear. “She’s homely, Dad.” Or, “She comes on too strong.” Or, maybe, “She’s pretty nerdy.”

“She’s a mundane, Dad,” Denny said. “I just can’t get interested in a girl who’s never had any type of modifications.”

I said, “Oh.”

I sat on the bed. I think it was the way he said it.

Denny came out of the shower, a towel wrapped around his Adonis-like frame. “Dad, you know how it is,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said.

“I mean, look at Apple. She might not be that smart, but she’s got a great body. She does a five-minute mile, and her nails are perfect. I know her hair’s not real, but what does that matter? It looks great.”

“Apple’s a nice girl,” I said.

A long time ago when Denny was a baby, my mother came over and we spent the whole day playing. Building towers of blocks. Reading books. Setting up paper and finger paints on the kitchen table. She baked cookies.

I watched my son and my mother playing together. His hair was light brown and wispy over his hazel eyes. Maybe he looked like an old, balding fat guy, but he was just a baby. There was a funny little cleft in his chin. He was clumsy. We worked with him to use his right hand, then his left. Just letting him experiment. She grabbed his outstretched hands in hers and lifted him up. He giggled and stood and toddled, then soon sat back down.

He was only nine months.

Even a genetically modified baby can’t walk at nine months.

And it comes to me.

Why I didn’t go to the game.

I looked in Denny’s eyes a long while. Bright blue, they were. There’s been nobody with blue eyes in my family for a long time. Maybe there never were. I can’t say those were Carolyn’s eyes, either. She has muddy brown eyes, and hates them.

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Denny started to laugh, feeling uncomfortable. “Hey, Dad, what are you looking at me like that for?”

I can’t reply.

“I’m just— you know— ” I say, finally. I look over at Denny’s artwork.

At the trophies for soccer. Math ribbons. His poster, running for class president last year.

Yeah, he won.

“Your mom threw your little kid football out this morning,” I said. “What football?” Denny asked.

It was no big deal, I guess. I really didn’t know how to explain.

I heard him on the phone after dinner.

Talking up that Apple.

“Yeah, baby. I know it’s hard. But everyone’s parents are pretty much mundanes. You should see my Dad.”

It wasn’t like I hadn’t had my own rough spots with my Dad. I wanted to run in and grab the vox away from Denny. Yell. Tell her to respect her parents. Tell him.

Denny never knew my father. Carolyn’s Dad was an old fart who painted bowls of fruit and sad-eyed clowns.

He wasn’t a bad guy. He was just kind of . . . distant.

There was no way to make Denny comprehend that my Dad had been a great guy. I mean, I hated Dad when he grounded me. I hated him when he took my car away. I hated him when he flushed my sad little pot stash down the can.

He taught me responsibility. He taught me what it meant to be a man. A mundane.

Hush my feet, I told the house much later that night. The house could do that, you know. Make it quiet to walk, or very noisy. Only the administrator could tell it to do that. I know a lot of parents that use this feature.

I was sleeping in my study again. No. I was lying on the couch in the study, pretending to sleep.

It was easier. Carolyn always has some book she’s reading or some work she’s going over and that light in my eyes drives me crazy.

I was turning the whole thing over in my mind.

All the little treatments. Yeah, it was right to fix Denny’s heart.

We had to fix Denny’s heart.

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Denny was the only son Carolyn and I were ever going to have. I used, back in the day, you know. Stacking. I was juiced up all the time. I thought it made me more of a man.

They said it was a minor miracle that Carolyn had gotten pregnant, since I had a sperm count of about 3. Three million particles per ml. And after that, it went down even more. They call that sterile.

She could have left me. Maybe if I had been in her shoes, I would have.

She could have had a lot more kids with a healthy man.

But this was our son. This was Denny.

One time, my Dad was watching me at football practice. I caught a right screen pass we'd been practicing a long time and raced away. My legs were wings. The scrimmagers hurled themselves at me in slow motion. I was flying, the wind whipping through the bars of my helmet. Nobody could touch me.

My Dad had this look on his face when he ran out on the field after that scrimmage.

We didn't need to say too much. In fact, we didn't say anything. I was his son, and he was my Dad.

Then it started to rain, and we headed for our car.

I wandered into the kitchen, still remembering.

"Hey house, I'm going to make a sandwich," I whispered. "I want to use the last of that good bread."

"Do you want me to slice it?" the house asked.

"No," I said. "You know I cut it myself."

"That's right," the house said. It put the bread and knife out on the counter.

"Mustard?"

"Yes."

"Lettuce?"

"No, just bologna."

"Very good," the house said. "Low-fat, high protein."

"Right, house," I said. "Thanks."

I cut the bread for the sandwich. Put mustard on the bread. Slapped down the meat, slapped the whole thing together and stuffed it in my mouth.

Then I started upstairs on quiet feet.

"Don't forget to put your knife in the dishwasher," the house said. To some questions, house did not require an immediate answer.

In terms of his eyes, they were blue.

A tear rolls down my mundane cheek.

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His chest moves slowly, up and down. His breathing soft, like a cat.
Denny stirs. Moans slightly.

So they dream.

But what dreams come, I can never know.

There was no such face, ever. Not in my house. Not in my line. None
of my father's strength. None of my mother's cleft chin. None of us were
ever so broad-shouldered.

None of us were any good at math.

We were good with people. We were fast runners, me and Dad.
Denny's a fast runner, too, but different.

One time I visited Dad in the care home. Premature Alzheimers, they
said. It was the last time he'd know my face. Be able to say my name.

"Carolyn and I are having a baby," I told him. "It's going to be a little
boy."

He took my hand.

"I'm so glad, Son," he said, his brown eyes warm and lucid. Knowing
me and what I said.

I wonder what it will feel like when I'm an old man. Denny won't
come.

I can't imagine him ever telling me he's going to have a son.

I dream what it will feel like to look into those ice-blue, strange eyes.

Just one stroke. Quick. Hard.

Down into his changed heart. The heart of a perfect stranger.

Denny turns and sighs.

Like a vision, I see my Dad's face. He speaks.

Why did you lose us, Gary? Your Mom— me? For this?

He taught me what it was to be a man.

Outside, the rain falls. It's tapping on the roof like a hundred little cats
running up and down.

I listen.

Then I turn and go on my quiet feet back down the stairs.

Outside, the rain is a cold curtain of ice knifing my face. I look up,
into the clear, black sky. No stars, nothing. Pines shadowed against the
midnight fog.

I know if I just look hard enough, I'll find the other half of the
football.

Let the sky darken like soot. Let the wind gather.

Let it rain.

For Anthony Sterling Rodgers