

Walking Backward Through Death's Door

by

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Take up brush and palette. Paint the outlines of a bedroom. It is a young boy's room filled with brightly colored clothes and mass-produced artwork. Add a few personal touches, such as trophies and tropical fish. Toss a pair of cleats in the corner. Hide a few dishes under the bed.

Now place two people in the room. One, a sprightly old man, sits near the bed. He holds a box wrapped in brown paper. The other, a pale young boy with black hair, lies immobile on the bed. A plethora of sensors, tubes and wires secure him to the wall. Fiber optic cable connects his skull to a diagnostic computer. Behind the bed, a host of medical equipment monitors him, adding drugs, stimulating muscles, inducing sleep.

Both of these people are dying.

Now put down your brush and consider the scene before you.

Virgil Hayward had lived more than a century, survived a war, married two women, fathered three children, and won two Republic lotteries. His body, despite expensive rejuv treatments, faced inevitable system failure.

His grandson Charlie suffered from Weinhart's Cancer, a new and terminal oncogen. Charlie had earned three school awards, played left forward on two soccer teams, kissed a girl (once), hated eggplant, read books his parents didn't understand, and loved his grandfather.

He also loved the Entertainment Net and ice cream, but those were ordinary pleasures. Even Christmas, which only happened once a year, was pretty predictable. But he *never* knew what his grandfather would do.

“Hi, Virgil. What did you bring me?”

“Something real special.” Virgil set the box down at the side of the bed and extended his hand. Charlie took it in both of his and squeezed it as hard as he could.

“That’s the way, kid,” said Virgil, wincing in mock pain. “You’re as strong as ever.”

He didn’t have to read the monitors next to the bed to know Charlie was weaker today. His grandson’s grip was a gentle touch.

“So what’s in the box? Are you going to make me guess?”

Virgil realized he still held Charlie’s hand. Drifting again, you old fool, he thought. “You don’t have to guess, Charlie. I’ll tell you.” He peeled back the wrapping paper. “It’s a fishing trip.”

Charlie raised himself from his pillows. “You mean a fishing pole, don’t you?”

“Now, what did I just say? I said a fishing trip and fishing trip it is.” Virgil shook his head. “I may be old—”

“—but I haven’t lost my good sense,” Charlie finished.

“That’s right,” Virgil continued. “It’s a fishing trip. For two.” He snapped open the box with a flourish. Inside lay two plastic cases, one larger than the other.

Charlie’s eyes opened wide. “You found the Sony! I knew you would.”

“Of course I did. Said I would, didn’t I? It’s not like I had to fight Shiva or anything.”

“Who’s Shiva?” asked Charlie.

“Hindu god. Associated with destruction and dance. Barrel of laughs.”

“What’s a Hindu?”

“Jesus Jones! What are they teaching you in school these days? Look it up on the Cultural Net. Cross reference to Myth and Religion. Got that?”

“Got it, Virgil.”

The night they had brought Charlie home from the hospital, Virgil had given him an antique fountain pen and taught him to sign his name like an adult, something he claimed the schools no longer taught with any skill. Then he insisted on being addressed by his first name.

Charlie's parents thought it rather silly, but Virgil was deadly serious. "He'll never grow up," he told his son and daughter-in-law. "You know it and I know it and *he* knows it. You can bet his doctors and nurses treat him like a brave little boy, but I won't have any of that. He deserves a chance to be an adult, if only for a little while."

"Tilt your head a bit, Charlie."

He did. Virgil fiddled with the implants at the back of the boy's skull. "What are you plugging in?" asked Charlie.

"Audio/visual and tactile output from the Sony." He secured the cable, then brushed the boy's short hair back. It was very soft and fine, like kitten's fur.

A look of guilt and worry crossed Charlie's face. "What about the monitor?"

"Don't worry. I'll keep an eye on you." He opened the Sony's case and inserted the Winchester optical chip. Then he attached the Sony's other output cable to a set of induction disks. He pasted these to his own forehead. Virgil hated interface sockets and had refused to have one installed, even though it would have improved the illusion.

"You ready, Charlie?"

"You bet!"

"Let's go, then." He placed a wrinkled hand on the Sony and touched a switch.

The steady breeze surprised Virgil. When he had previewed the virtual reality scenario in the store, the weather had been calm.

He stood on a wooden pier that jutted out into a mirror-bright lake. A few cirrus clouds spiced up an otherwise dull blue sky. The smells of dandelions, watercress, and fennel tickled his nose.

An old fashioned rowboat, filled with gear, bumped against the dock. "Charlie, where are you?" he called.

"Right here, Virgil."

Virgil turned, saw his grandson lying on the dock.

The boy shaded his eyes against the bright morning sun. He grinned, emphasizing his dimples. "Can I get up?"

"Of course you can, kid."

Charlie raised himself on one elbow, then the other. Refusing Virgil's outstretched hand, he stood on thin legs and stepped into the boat. Virgil followed him and untied the mooring rope. It felt like jute.

Virgil locked down the oars and rowed to the center of the lake, where they opened pails of salmon eggs, night crawlers, and fat earthworms.

They had their first strike within minutes.

As Charlie hauled in the struggling bluegill, Virgil turned his back and roughly wiped the tears out of his eyes. He has so little time, he thought.

"Look at him, Grandpa!"

Virgil didn't correct him.

When they unjacked from the scenario, Virgil quickly reconnected Charlie to his monitors. The systems came on-line immediately, checked themselves and their charge, then settled into vigilant silence. According to the monitor's clock, they'd spent only a few minutes in the scenario. From Virgil's subjective point of view, he'd passed a lazy afternoon with his grandson. He disconnected the rest of the Sony's leads and put the VR unit away. Charlie's parents would soon return from the theater. As usual, they would find their child sleeping peacefully under the watchful eye of his grandfather.

As soon as he had learned of his only grandson's illness, Virgil Hayward had packed his meager belongings and moved back to Los Angeles to be closer to the boy. Though Lake Tahoe was only a few hours away by monorail, he begrudged even that time.

When his wife, Annette, had been diagnosed with a second-generation retro virus, Virgil retired from part-time computer consulting. He watched her suffer through two painful years of chemotherapy. But it didn't make a difference. When Annette asked him the last favor, he packed her in the car and drove her to San Francisco. They shared the sunset from a patch of grass near the Golden Gate Bridge, sipping an ancient Bordeaux, before checking into the hospice.

The newly independent Republic of California offered many civil rights denied by the United States, including assisted suicide.

A year later, Virgil had contracted Alzheimer's. Drugs kept the disease in check, but the dosages exacted a terrible price on his body. His pride kept him going, though. He refused to saddle his children with another patient. Let them worry about Charlie.

Wall-to-wall electronic junk connected by geometric strands of fiber-optic cable filled the small shop. In the exact center of the organized chaos perched a young Japanese man wearing tortoise shell glasses. Virgil thought of an *anime* spider.

The spider raised his head after a moment. "May I help you with something?" His accent placed him six thousand kilometers east of Tokyo.

"I need an open-ended VR simulation programmed. It's a rush job."

"I'm real busy right now. Perhaps you can come back in a month. Or, if you like, I can recommend someone else—"

Virgil cut him off by dropping a large, heavy sack on the counter between them. The sack smelled of dust and leather. "I don't wish to be rude, Mr. Isosaki, but this is an emergency."

Michael Isosaki pushed his glasses from his nose, letting them hang by their straps. He studied his visitor carefully. He'd heard rumors on the VR Net that an old man had been making the rounds looking for a custom scenario. According to Isosaki's local contacts, this same person had acquired some very expensive and non approved drugs grown in Samsung's orbital bioengineering lab. He suspected his visitor was about to commit a crime.

"May I ask your name?"

"You can ask," Virgil replied.

Isosaki smiled at the old joke. "Tell me something, if you would. How many times have you won the Republic's lottery?"

Virgil crossed his arms. A smile crept to his lips. "Twice."

"Ah." Isosaki stood up and bowed a full 45 degrees. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Hayward."

Returning the bow in the same fashion, Virgil said, "Please forgive my earlier behavior. It was unspeakably rude."

"No, no, the fault is mine," Isosaki replied. "One should always respect the wishes of a customer." He stuck out his hand. "There! Honor is satisfied!"

Virgil shook the proffered hand. "Thank you," he said. "Is there somewhere we can talk?"

"My office is safe, but I always discuss business over food." He pulled a datachip from a reader and stuck it in his pocket. "Come on. I know a great little Mexican place across from the mall with a very circumspect owner."

Fifteen minutes later, Virgil and Isosaki tore into spicy burritos and salsa. They cooled their tongues with large bottles of cerveza.

"My compliments," Virgil said, tears streaming down his cheeks. "No one knows how to burn an esophagus anymore."

Isosaki nodded and wiped his mouth with the back of his delicate hand. "What do you want in the scenario?"

“Nineteenth Century America. Midwest.” He finished his beer and opened another. “Specifically, I want to create an interactive scenario based on the milieu of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.”

“That’s a tall order. When do you need it?”

“Two months.” He thought for a moment. “Six weeks would be better.”

Isosaki pushed away his empty plate. “Is this scenario for you?”

“It’s for my grandson, Charlie. He has Weinhart’s Cancer. I want to give him a proper memorial.”

Isosaki said nothing. He found a clean napkin and polished his glasses. While Hayward hadn’t lied to him, he had omitted certain truths. He knew that Hayward had been very active on the Medical Net recently, making dozens of inquiries about brain functions and life support systems. The possibilities intrigued him.

“If you want the best time compression algorithm, I will have to bring in some trusted friends. It will be expensive.”

“Money isn’t an issue. Charge me for every minute on this project. If you dream about it, bill me for that time.” Reaching under the table, Virgil opened the sack that he’d brought from the shop. He placed a heavy book on the table. The title, spelled out in gold-leaf, read *The Complete Works of Mark Twain*.

“This is your blueprint,” he said, opening the cover. He ran his fingers across the page, savoring the feel of the stiff paper. “I want you to give me everything, right down to the paper and ink.” He closed the cover and slid the volume across the table.

You walk a dangerous path, Isosaki thought. Buddha grant you peace. He picked up the book and stood. “It is said that ‘Two-Time Virgil’ is an honorable man. I will do this for you.” He bowed and left.

Virgil pushed his credit card into the table’s slot and paid for lunch. The food was outrageously expensive, but he didn’t care. One way or the other, he wouldn’t be rich for much longer.

He went home and called Charlie’s father at the office. “Howdy, Gerald.”

His oldest son peered back at him from the phone's tiny screen. Except for the petite mustache, he might have been looking at a 40-year-old tape of himself.

"Hi, Dad." He grinned. "What's up?"

"I'm calling about dinner," Virgil said.

"We're still on, right?" Gerald said.

"Well, not precisely." He shifted in his chair, fidgeting his hands below the range of the video pickup. "I'd like to take a rain check if I could."

"That's too bad. Delores was looking forward to it."

"Flatterer," Virgil said. "You could learn something from her besides contract bridge." He favored Gerald with his best sly-old-fox look. "I want you and Delores to go out anyway. My treat."

"What's the occasion?"

"No occasion. You just need a break, that's all. Look, if I had called you at home, Delores would have raised a fuss about rescheduling rather than go without me. Sometimes, she's just too damn polite."

"I can think of worse faults," Gerald observed.

"So can I." Virgil pulled a battered black plastic QWERTY keyboard onto his lap. "Like not taking care of yourself." He typed a few lines. "Here's the address of a good place. You'll like it—they have a dress code."

"This is all very generous, Dad, but—"

"Sorry, no argument. Until I fail the Turing Test I'm still your father. And that means you listen to me when it comes to parenting." He pressed a key, transferring the data to his son's office terminal. "It doesn't do any good worrying yourself sick, and you know it." He made eye contact, as much as the camera would allow. "Charlie's your only child, but you're *my* boy. Now go out and have fun with the missus."

Gerald closed his eyes. "Thanks, Dad."

"You're welcome. Say hi to the sommelier for me. He's such a snotty bastard."

Virgil cut the connection, breathing heavily. He didn't like sneaking around behind his son's back. With a sigh, he reached across the desk for his injector kit. Every day, he needed more pain killers and cloned neurotransmitters to keep going. If Gerald knew, he'd be shocked. It's not easy having a junkie for a father.

His other children might give him hell, but he had stopped listening to them years ago. Virgil lived by strict rules for friends and family. Two years without a Christmas card, and he banished the offender to the address book archives. Gerald sent him birthday and Christmas cards every year without fail. Not programmed greetings or e-mail, but honest-to-goodness paper mail. Virgil chuckled at the memory of the confused messenger who had tracked him down one time in the Guatemalan desert to deliver an "important parcel."

The drugs entered his system, pulling him into sleep as they usually did. Damn, Virgil thought, I won't get anything at Christmas this year.

He woke an hour later than he had planned. Without pausing to consider the ramifications of *that*, he hurriedly dressed and shaved. By the time he arrived at his son's house, Charlie was fast asleep.

He sent the night nurse out of the room and commandeered her chair. The dark circles beneath Charlie's eyes worried Virgil. Images of refugee camps. Stop it, he told himself. He's not starving. They wouldn't let him. Probably the radiation therapy series. Nausea and puking all day had stripped his grandson of vitality. All that remained was a sleeping shadow.

Virgil plugged his datapad into the house network and called up a magazine index. A keyword search turned up 31 references on virtual reality. He chose an author he recognized and starting reading. Two hours later, Gerald walked in.

"Dad, what are you doing here?" he whispered.

"Reading about research into AI-enhanced VR simulations. Fascinating stuff."

"Christ, they're just games. Somebody must be hard up for a thesis topic." He glanced at Charlie, then examined each monitor briefly. "Looks okay."

"How was dinner?" Virgil said in a louder voice. He didn't want Charlie to hear whispers in his sleep. Children usually read the worst into them.

Gerald leaned against the wall. "Fine. Good prime rib."

"What did you have with it? Nice cabernet, maybe?"

"Twenty-nine."

Virgil nodded. "Almost sorry I missed it."

"Yeah, it would have been nice." Gerald looked down the hall, where he heard Delores chatting with the nurse. "In a way, though, I'm glad you stayed home. We—"

"I know." Virgil raised his hand. "Don't mention it."

In the silent moment that followed, Charlie stirred. He rolled to one side as his breathing shifted into a deeper rhythm. Virgil recognized the telltale signs of REM sleep. He stood up and walked quietly into the hall. Gerald followed. Virgil put on his coat, folding the datapad into the large inside pocket. The two men stood facing each other. Finally, Gerald said, "He sleeps an awful lot these days, Dad. Do you think he's getting worse?"

Virgil looked at his son, wondered what to say. *He's dying*. How much worse could it get? "His body is conserving its resources, I suspect. Hoarding them for the next attack," he said. "But there's something else, too. I think Charlie is hiding in his dreams." Then he hugged Gerald briefly and walked into the cold evening air.

A tall, powerfully built Negro made his way down the crowded dock carrying a fancy valise balanced on one shoulder. The young man's shirt was sewn from cheap cloth, with straight and neat stitching. The same was true for his pants. Most folks looking at him would say right off that he was married, or had some girl do his sewing. No bachelor handled a needle that well.

From the easy way he carried himself, the man told everyone he was a free laborer. Not a freed slave, mind you, but a man who had worked his entire adult life for a fair wage, coming and going as he chose.

When he reached an empty pier, the Negro stepped out of the crowd. He set down the valise, removed a handkerchief from his back pocket and mopped his brow. Then, when no one looked his way, he plunged both hands into the valise—straight through the fabric—touching the Sony optical synthesizer at the bottom of the bag. It felt cool to his big, thick hands. Perfect.

With a chuckle, Michael Isosaki paused the scenario. Birds stopped abruptly in mid-flight. Water drops, flung up by a passing paddle wheel steamer, sparkled like chunks of zircon. One pedestrian, lighting a cigar, held the flame from his wooden match impossibly still.

When the simulation reached stasis point, Isosaki erased his own disguise. Now he stood in the middle of Nineteenth Century America, wearing bright red Levis, a mirror fabric T-shirt, and scuffed cowboy boots. His eyeglasses dangled against his neck.

Most VR programmers disdained such theatrics, opting for speed and efficiency while writing the interface. They moved in and out of their scenario like some *Deus ex Machina*, shaping parameters and characters on the fly. Isosaki rejected that approach out of hand. The artifice and the art were inextricably, *inexplicably* linked. If you didn't respect your own work, why should anyone else?

So Isosaki moved among his creations cloaked in borrowed faces, voices and bodies. He sat down to breakfast at boarding houses, swam in the Mississippi, trapped frogs for supper, hauled lumber for a few pennies, and danced at the County Fair.

He had approached this commission with some trepidation. Every time he composed a new VR scenario, he gambled his extensive reputation. Even though his father had died years ago in an IRA bombing in Dublin, Isosaki still felt the old man's presence. *To write another's dreams is an honor—treat it as such.*

Always, father, he thought. I would never bring dishonor upon our house.

Donning his disguise once more, Isosaki kick-started the world. The sun stroked his face. He bent down and rapped his knuckles against the solid wooden pier. Everything felt right.

A few days later, he called Virgil to set up a demonstration, only to find him out of town. He made an appointment for a week hence.

When Virgil walked into the noodle bar, he thought at first that he had the wrong address. Businessmen, their ties loosened the regulation three centimeters, crowded every available seat at the counter.

A round, smiling chef waved at him from the sushi table. "Howdy!"

"Howdy, yourself," Virgil said. "How's the ramen today?"

"Best in Sunnyvale. Lunch special to go, neh?"

He looked around. "Well, I was supposed to meet someone, but I don't see him."

"Maybe he's in a booth." He gestured with his knife to an adjoining room. "You want beer with lunch?"

"No. Mineral water. Calistoga if you have it."

The chef banged on the counter. "*Hai!* Lunch special and Calistoga. *Isogi!*" Someone in the kitchen called back an acknowledgment.

Virgil meandered to the next room. He spied Michael Isosaki immediately. The programmer sat in the open, ignoring several privacy booths. He slurped soup from an oversize plastic bowl.

"Tampopo is good today," he said. "Not too salty." He wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his sweatshirt, plucked chopsticks with his left hand, attacked the outrageously long noodles.

"I got your message," Virgil said as he took a seat. Two Korean women, sitting to his left, traded gossip over calamari rolls. "How's it going?"

“Finished,” Isosaki replied, then continued speaking in German. “I actually completed the basic scenario several days ago. Been debugging and polishing it since then.”

“Sounds good,” Virgil said. “God, don’t you speak French or something? I can barely remember my college German.”

“At least you learned it the old fashioned way. I took a temporary implant so I could work in concert with a *really* talented fellow in Stuttgart. Strange stuff, when you’re used to thinking in English.” He slurped some soup. “Besides, I doubt anyone here cares about an old gringo who doesn’t have the decency to speak Japanese like everyone else here.”

“I suppose you have a point.” The hostess appeared at his elbow. He took the tray and thanked her. Poking around with his chopsticks, he snagged a slice of pork and chewed noisily. Isosaki was wrong. Damn stuff was too salty by half. “Is it ready to test?”

“Absolutely. Ready to run, if you ask me.” He drained the last of his broth and set the empty bowl loudly on the table. “*Hai!* Good!” The hostess, standing in one corner of the room, bowed to him.

Isosaki reached behind him and produced an old nylon backpack. “I used this all through school. Sort of a good luck charm.”

Virgil glanced at the contents. “Bigger than I thought it would be.”

“You wanted it open-ended, didn’t you? Besides, the controller has more raw computing power than the average office block.”

“How did you manage that?”

“You don’t want to know, Mein Herr,” Isosaki said. “Now, my invoice.” He picked up a napkin and wrote the following:

Time: 30,000 CA Francs

Materials: Hardcopy of *The Complete Works of Mark Twain*.

“I would like to keep the book if you don’t mind.”

Virgil smiled. “You place a great deal of value on Mr. Clemens’ work. I was prepared to pay you twice as much.”

Isosaki shrugged. “Send a donation to the Irish Red Cross. They always need help.”

Virgil picked up the backpack and stood. “Thank you for everything, Michael-san.”

Isosaki held out his hand. “It has been an honor working for you, Virgil-san. May the wind be at your back.”

Clad only in his silk robe, Virgil considered his wardrobe. He didn’t want to arouse suspicion by overdressing, but on the other hand, a man likes to look good for his funeral. He finally settled on a broken-in blue Oxford shirt and khaki pants, loafers, and the tie his wife had given him a quarter century before. He then shaved and brushed his hair back carefully over the new interface socket. It still itched, despite what the surgeon in Tahoe had told him. Maybe it was just nerves. That and fasting all day.

He had allowed himself only some fruit juice and an extra dose of neurotransmitters. Virgil felt more alive than he had in years. He knew it was just an illusion—he’d tried the macrobiotic route before—but he savored the feeling of well-being nonetheless.

He toured his apartment again, straightening up a few things, washing a missed glass. Then he left an envelope tucked into his computer keyboard and considered the vacuum flask of hot chocolate from the counter. He had made the mixture extra sweet to cover the taste of the drugs. Charlie probably wouldn’t notice—he loved sugar. He zipped the flask into Isosaki’s backpack and left.

The night air was mild for November, so he continued past the bus stop and headed for his son's home. He used the time to breathe deeply, calming the slight palsy of his hands and the pounding in his chest.

This was what he wanted. Not like Annette, who had to be wheeled into the hospice. Virgil would walk through Death's door on his own power. What was that old Irish blessing? May you be in Heaven a half hour before the Devil knows you're dead?

That would be just enough time.

He rang the doorbell twice before anyone answered. Gerald opened the door, then stepped back. "Dad! I wasn't expecting you."

Virgil walked in and took off his coat. "It's nice to know I can still surprise you occasionally."

"Yeah, well, I can't talk right now. Delores and I are going to a couples workshop at the college—"

"And we're going to be late," called Delores from the bedroom. "Hi, Virgil."

"Hi, yourself." He picked up the backpack. "Well, don't worry about me. I can amuse myself for a bit."

"Um, sure." Gerald shrugged. "We'll talk when we get back, right?"

"Have fun," Virgil said. He hugged his son briefly. "Goodbye."

Virgil waited a full fifteen minutes before locking the front door and activating the house security systems. Then he took his injector kit, inserting one of the cartridges he had acquired using a different name and a credit line routed through an Uruguyan bank famous for its confidentiality.

He walked quietly in the Charlie's bedroom. The night nurse was lost in a book. Charlie played chess on a datapad. "Can you come out here for a second?" Virgil said.

When the nurse stepped into the hall, he asked, "Are you pregnant?"

She looked at him oddly. "No, Mr. Hayward. Why do you ask?"

“Don’t want to take any chances.” He grabbed her arm and pressed the injector against it. She pulled back, but the drugs quickly paralyzed her. He caught her before her knees collapsed, then laid her on the couch. He checked her pulse, then administered a mild tranquilizer with an obvious signature. Virgil wanted her to have a solid alibi.

Charlie looked up from his game when he walked in. “Where’s Ms. Ogden?”

“Taking a nap,” said Virgil. He set the backpack on the bed.

“What did you bring me?” Charlie sat up in bed, his chess game quickly forgotten.

“A fishing trip. Or a rafting trip. I don’t know, yet.”

“What do you mean you don’t know? What is it?” Charlie said.

“It’s a surprise.” He opened the flask and poured a cup of hot chocolate. “Here, special treat.” He handed the cup to Charlie. “Now I want to tell you something important. Pay attention.” God, he hated using that tone.

“Yes, sir—Virgil.”

“Good boy. Do you know I have Alzheimer’s Disease?”

“Yes. Dad told me.” He sipped the hot chocolate.

“That’s right. And the drugs I take make me very weak. In fact, they’re killing me slowly. Just like your cancer.”

“I’m sorry, Virgil.”

“So am I, kid. So am I. But there’s a chance I can beat it.”

“How?” Charlie’s eyes lost a bit of focus. Virgil had to make a decision quickly.

“By running away.” He lifted Isosaki’s platinum-colored plastic box out of the backpack. “The whole Mississippi river is inside here, did you know that? The longest waterway in the whole country. It’ll take me a long, long time to see all of it.”

Charlie struggled with comprehension. “I’ve never heard of a VR like that.”

“It’s special. I had it custom-made. But if I go, I won’t come back. Ever.”

“I’ll miss you, Virgil.” He yawned.

"I'll miss you, too, Charlie. That's why I want you to come with me."

"But what about Mom and Dad?"

"They'll be sad. They'll be sad, no matter what, though. That's what happens when people die."

"I'm not sure, Virgil. I'm scared."

"So am I. But that's okay. It's an adventure. You're allowed to be scared." He cupped Charlie's cheek in his leathery hand. "Will you trust me?"

"Sure...." Charlie drifted off.

Virgil lowered his head to the pillow and hooked him into Isosaki's box. He slipped the second connection into his own socket, then loaded his last cartridge into the injector. He dosed himself a final time.

Draw back the curtain and let the sun illuminate the painting. Two people stand on the railing of a ship, looking out on dark blue water. The boy on the left, dressed in overalls and a straw hat, laughs and points at a dragonfly as it buzzes past. His hair is cut in straight bangs and freckles fight for space on his red cheeks.

The man on the right, who bears a face of middle years, rests his left hand on the boy's shoulder. His right thumb is hooked under his belt. He is dressed in good cotton trousers and shirt. His boots are well-made, but not polished. His eyes are bright with joy.

The man and the boy do not know where they are sailing. Somehow, it does not seem important.

Now step back from the canvas and wish them well.

THE END