AFTERWORLD

 James T. Kirk was tired.

 As Captain of the United Star Ship “Enterprise” these past three years -- under the direction of the United Federation of Planets -- he and his crew of 430 were on a five-year mission ‘…to explore strange, new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations...’ Every six months, the Enterprise headed for a one-month shore leave (and any necessary repairs or system overhauls) at the nearest UFP Star Base.

 The year was 2277. The starship had been systematically mapping a specific galaxy section while checking various planets for any life forms. Surprises, dangers, and the unexpected generally occurred only about 10% of the time, but the remaining bulk of the duty was simply routine.

 When he retired to his personal quarters after his duties, Kirk looked in his bathroom mirror and noticed the start of a few gray hairs at his temples and the beginning of some puffy circles under his eyes. The stress and strains of command were not the problem, however. He was trained for that and was totally used to it as Captain. It was, instead, a subtle but real longing for Earth, a nostalgia for his boyhood days back in Riverside, Iowa – a place he hadn’t seen for over thirty-five years, ever since he left for advanced junior placement at Starfleet Academy in San Francisco. From a desk drawer, Kirk took out a three-dimensional color holograph of his childhood home. There was the red and white farmhouse, along with his parents, George and Winona, his older brother, George, Jr. (who went by his middle name, Samuel – “Sam"), as well as the faithful family dog – a tawny Saluki named “Sonic”, because ‘he could run faster than the speed of sound’, or so thought young Jim when he was allowed to name him as a puppy.

 Kirk’s reverie was interrupted by his chamber door summons.

 “Come,” he loudly called out.

 It was the Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Leonard “Bones” McCoy, ship’s physician and by now, Kirk’s personal friend.

 “Oh…Hi, Bones. Is there a problem?” Kirk asked.

 “No, Jim. Just dropped by for a visit. Am I interrupting anything?” McCoy replied. “I brought a bottle of Aurellian brandy and two glasses. Lately, you seem like you could use a snort.” Bones grinned, grandly presenting his offering. “Doctor’s orders!”

 The two men sat together beside Kirk’s desk. “Now, Jim, tell this old country doctor what’s the matter,” Bones inquired, pouring the pungent and fiery amber liquid. “You seem more and more distracted these last few days.”

 The shipmates clinked their glasses in a silent toast, then drank. Then Kirk explained his preoccupied feelings to McCoy.

 “It’s like being homesick, I suppose…I miss the colors and smells and sounds of nature back on Earth, as well as my home and my long-dead family. Having a regular shore leave doesn’t really help this kind of longing. Relaxing in virtual reality pods or deep dreaming using psychotropic chemical supplements back in port are poor substitutes for the real need we humans have...you know, to simply lie in a green field on a summer’s day and watch the birds and clouds drift by,” Kirk elaborated. Bones listened intently and nodded. “Space itself can be so dark and cold and lonely sometimes too…” the Captain added, looking away.

 Kirk savored another sip of brandy. “You know, Bones, I just turned 49 years old,” he continued. “I’ve been on the job for twenty-four years. Mentally and physically, I still enjoy all the challenges of command. I’m not ‘burned out’ or bored. I can easily envision myself working until the mandatory Starfleet retirement age of ninety. And you keep reminding me that our average life expectancy is now around 120 or so. But it’s my emotions that concern me. The sharp, longing pang for ...something. But what? Maybe I need to get married and raise my own family. Of course, that would mean giving up command and taking an administrative desk job with the usual promotion on some Star Base. So I’m torn…”

 Bones took a deep breath, then spoke up. “Jim, the way I see it, you are already married…except it’s to this ship. And the crew are both your family and your responsibility. Maybe a quick vacation back on Earth before our five-year mission is complete is the ticket. I can put in a special request to Starfleet on our next shore leave, asking for an extra month extension for you. We all get unexplained and unexpected bouts of depression throughout our lives. I’m only a year older than you, and I get the blues regularly too. It’s just the human condition. Your record is so exemplary that I doubt the request would be refused, let alone be seen as any kind of negative on your permanent service record. All I ask as your doctor and as your friend is that you think about it.”

 Suddenly, Kirk’s intercom whistled. He hit the reply button.

 “Kirk here.”

 “Captain, scanners have reported an unidentified Class M planet ahead, with a compatible nitrogen/oxygen atmosphere and a suitable climate. I am also picking up some evidence of life forms.” It was Chief Science Officer and Lieutenant Commander Mr. Spock reporting. Spock was second in command on the Enterprise – Kirk’s trusted 'right-hand man.' He was also from the planet Vulcan, with dark, slanted eyebrows and pointed ears. He had joined Starfleet eighteen years ago, and was well-regarded for his brilliant, logical mind. His father, Sarek, was a Vulcan, but his mother, Amanda, was human. Hence, Mr. Spock waged a life-long struggle between his unflappable, analytical Vulcan half, and his emotional, imperfect human half.

 “Thank you, Mr. Spock. Mr. Sulu, reduce speed to Warp Factor Two. Mr. Chekov, plot a new course and engage an orbit around our new discovery. Lieutenant Uhura, inform Starfleet of our upcoming actions and current position. Scotty, meet Dr. McCoy and me on the bridge immediately. Kirk out.”

 The Captain smiled at the Doctor. “Bones, thanks for the drink. Now let’s see what we’ve stumbled upon…come.”

 Lieutenant Commander and Chief Engineer Montgomery “Scotty” Scott was already on the bridge when Kirk and McCoy arrived. Sulu, Chekov, and Uhura were at their respective action stations.

 “Well, Mr. Spock, what else have you found out about our newest mystery planet?” Kirk asked.

 “Captain, the planet appears deserted and covered with a thick cloud layer, with the exception of one section of unobscured land-mass approximately thirty square kilometers in size. All life forms register only in that area, exact number unknown, but sensors report them as being humanoid in appearance,” Spock explained.

 “Lieutenant Uhura, open a hailing frequency on all channels and announce our peaceful intentions. Request permission to beam down,” Kirk commanded. Curious that this planet was never detected before, he thought.

 Suddenly, there was a reply from the unknown world. “Jimmy, we've been waiting for you…Come on down!”

 James T. Kirk was stunned. “That voice sounds exactly like my father’s,” he murmured. The rest of the bridge assembly turned and stared at their Captain. “But he died on Tarsus IV twenty-five years ago, along with my mother,” Kirk said aloud, looking at no one in particular. “Bones, Spock, Scotty, come with me to the Transporter Room. Bring your phasers. Spock, bring your tricorder. Bones, bring your medical scanner. Mr. Sulu, you have the Com. Mr. Chekov, maintain standard orbit around the planet. Lt. Uhura, inform Starfleet Command of our actions. I’ll update you later from the planet’s surface as conditions warrant. Let’s go,” Kirk directed.

 In the Transporter Room with their equipment and communicators, the four took their positions on the circular transport pads. “Energize,” Kirk commanded to the console crewman. The four were rapidly converted to shimmering and sparkling atomic particles, then vanished.

 When they reassembled on the mysterious but livable Class M planet thousands of kilometers below the orbiting Enterprise, Spock immediately began scanning with his tricorder. Kirk, Bones, and Scotty, meanwhile, were each in a state of surprised shock.

 “Iowa?” asked Kirk.

 “No, Jim, it’s clearly more like Mississippi,” Bones replied.

 “No, gentlemen…canna ya see? 'Tis bonny Aberdeen, Scotland,” Scotty declared, satisfied, in his thick Scottish brogue.

 “Fascinating…” said Mr. Spock. “Each of you is seeing the present reality differently, yet apparently accurately. My tricorder scan registers all three scenes simultaneously, yet overlapping, in defiance of established scientific principles.”

 What Kirk saw was Riverside, Iowa, five years before he left home for the Academy at age fourteen. In the distance was the family farm that he remembered from his boyhood. The crop acreage was covered by an enormous, clear geodesic dome. Large, green agribots were working the fields automatically – some plowing, some seeding, some harvesting. The dome precisely controlled the climate and the moisture in a closed ecosystem, along with organic fertilizers and beneficial insects. The crops of yellow corn were flourishing and were productive year-round. Wind turbines and solar panels outside of the dome provided the energy. Meanwhile, a red and white farmhouse was adjacent to the dome. It was sturdily built, incongruously yet classically, in the Midwest style of around the year 1900, complete with a wrap-around wooden porch, several rocking chairs, and an outdoor hand water pump. A similarly painted barn stood next to the house. Kirk then beheld a silver hover-car approaching in the distance, with his father, mother, and brother aboard, all smiling and waving. And Sonic was there too, barking excitedly. The weather was comfortable but warming, for it was a sunny mid-morning with a few drifting white clouds -- a typical early June day in the year 2237.

 James T. Kirk was temporarily flummoxed, but he quickly recovered just enough to issue some simple orders. “Bones, permission to explore as you see fit. Scotty, the same. Keep your communicators open and share any unusual findings with me and the ship. Be careful. Spock, you stay with me.”

 The men split up as directed. The hover-car soon pulled up, and remained floating forty centimeters off the ground. “Jimmy! It’s so good to see you! How have you been, son?” George Kirk asked, exiting the vehicle and warmly extending his hand. Winona Kirk's eyes welled up with happy tears as she moved to eagerly embrace her youngest boy. Jim’s older brother, Sam, next rushed forward and tousled his kid brother’s hair, saying “Jimmy-boy, have I ever missed you!” The Captain found his own eyes welling up in a surprise tsunami of emotions. Lastly, Sonic leaped out of the hover-car and jumped playfully into Kirk’s arms, licking his master’s face with pure, abandoned joy.

 Kirk, with some effort, composed himself sufficiently to formally introduce Mr. Spock to his family. Spock then continued his exacting tricorder scans, before finally announcing, “Captain, these life forms are not hallucinations or projections. They appear to be genuine, living humans – other than the dog, of course, who is also quite real. As to what their purpose in being here is, I can offer no meaningful explanation at this time. It is if we are on Earth, only back in the past. Your own past, to be more specific.”

 “If you’ll both hop in, we can drive back to the house for some lemonade on the porch. And of course, you’ll stay for lunch later,” Winona offered. “There is so much to talk about! How long can you stay, Jimmy?”

 “I’m not sure, Mom. I command a Federation Star Ship now, with a crew of 430 depending on me. But I think a few hours of visiting can easily be arranged,” he smiled warmly.

 The hover-car quickly took them to the familiar farmhouse. Kirk heard birds chirping, felt the faint breeze of summer, and smelled the trimmed green lawn and the flower beds near the front porch. A vegetable garden and several fruit trees were visible nearby. Everything was peaceful. And perfect.

 Kirk’s father and brother relaxed in rocking chairs on the porch, with Sonic at their feet, while his mother made fresh lemonade using just-picked fruit and cold water from the outside pump. Kirk, meanwhile, gave Spock a brief tour of his boyhood home. In his upstairs bedroom, Jim marveled at the 'frozen-in-time' look of his old room. There were his models of rockets and spaceships, mobiles of planetary systems suspended by thin wires from the ceiling, and exciting posters on the walls advertising Starfleet Academy (‘Come, Join the Inter-Galactic Adventure!’), as well as Kirk’s lacrosse stick, his first fencing foil, and his archery set. In the corner near a window was Kirk’s first computer. And of course there were bookshelves packed with various fiction and non-fiction titles.

 “Alright, Jimmy, you and Mr. Spock come downstairs right now and come out on the porch. Lemonade’s ready!” Winona announced.

 Everyone sat in wooden rocking chairs – a first for Mr. Spock, who proclaimed the sensation of slowly rocking back and forth while not actually going anywhere as ‘very curious’ – and enjoyed the refreshing, sweet yet tart lemonade, their glasses quickly coating with condensation as their ice cubes tinkled when they sipped. Before they talked in serious depth, Kirk called the Enterprise to explain what was happening, then he hailed Bones and Scotty separately. They were likewise having a fine time back in their respective childhood home areas. Nothing appeared dangerous or suspicious at this point during their time on this unusual and extraordinary planet.

 Captain Kirk began the conversation with the urgent, basic questions of: What are you doing here, and how did you get here? “This planet looks exactly like Earth, but we are, in fact, thousands of light years from home,” Kirk explained to his family. “Plus, and maybe most importantly, umm…Mom, Dad, Sam…each of you …died…years ago. Yet here you are.”

 Mr. Spock broke in. “History tells us that George and Winona Kirk died during a plague outbreak out on Tarsus IV twenty-five years ago. George, Jr. -- or ‘Sam’, if you prefer -- died on Deneva twelve years ago from toxic, macroscopic, one-celled organisms which attempted to take over that planet. Fortunately, that threat was ultimately defeated and eliminated. Your brother left behind a wife and three children, Captain. As for your childhood dog, even with the best of care…” Spock trailed off, referring to the obvious.

 “All that your friend has said is true,” George Kirk admitted. “Each of us remember the exact moment of our deaths. Yet afterwards, we immediately reappeared here, just as you see us -- and it -- now. Everything was just as it was before. We have not aged, nor do we ever get sick. As far as we can determine, we are alone in this ‘afterworld.’ When we first explored and ventured beyond our four horizons, we found a barren world devoid of life and shrouded in a kind of dense fog. We continue to farm, but the stored crops simply go away somewhere by themselves after several days. Food we cannot grow ourselves re-appears automatically after we consume it, as if by magic, in our cabinets and in our refrigerator. Yet we are happy and fulfilled here, and have no cares or worries.”

 “I know…I’ve got an idea…how about a swim down at the pond before Mom makes lunch? It will cool us down,” Sam interjected. “How about it, Jimmy? Just like old times!”

 The whole family agreed, so they drained their glasses of lemonade and went upstairs to change into swimsuits. That is, all except Mr. Spock. Although he would accompany them to the swimming pond, he would not be going into the water. When asked to explain, he replied, “On Vulcan, because of the rarity of fresh water, we have evolved to cleanse our skins monthly using a fine, naturally adhesive powder made from certain minerals, which is then removed using ionization. The human habit of using water for swimming, showering or bathing is quite foreign to us.”

 Kirk went to Sam's room and borrowed one of his swimsuits. After grabbing some towels, the family and Mr. Spock walked the half-hour to the pond. Naturally, Sonic tagged along. On the way, Kirk checked in again with Lt. Uhura back on the Enterprise, and also communicated again briefly with Bones and Scotty. Dr. McCoy was pleasantly visiting with his daughter from his first marriage, Johanna, and his father, David, on the family plantation in Mississippi. Meanwhile, Mr. Scott was gladly occupied with a former Aberdeen lady friend. Like Kirk, however, they were still mystified regarding exactly how and why they were able to reunite in this place with those who were known to have died.

 The pond water was cool and invigorating. The entire Kirk family was laughing and splashing, free of cares and concerns. Sitting on a convenient log near the shoreline, Spock had rarely seen his commander so happy in all their eighteen years together. It was like seeing him as a fun-loving boy, only in the body of a grown man. But it was at that moment that the Vulcan noticed something rather peculiar.

 When the family got out and dried off after an enjoyable hour in the water – Sonic shaking the water off himself too -- everyone laid down on the ground on their towels and relaxed, closing their eyes occasionally after gazing at the blue sky and drifting clouds overhead. When they were later walking back to the farmhouse, however, Spock asked to speak privately with the Captain, so the two hung back briefly from the group.

 “Captain, no one in your family has a navel, or as you humans often refer to it -- a ‘bellybutton’,” Spock declared.

 “Are you sure, Mr. Spock? Kirk asked, incredulously.

 “Positive, Captain. Look for yourself before we return to the house. I believe that in your human religious mythology, only two beings were ever born without a navel. You recall they were named Adam and Eve. Created whole by your god, but not naturally developed in a womb with an umbilicus and delivered,” Spock remarked. “Of course, belief in a supreme being or divine entity is completely illogical.”

 “Yet didn’t your tricorder scans indicate that these life forms were indeed human?” Kirk asked.

 “Yes, Captain. Scientifically, these life forms should have all necessary human characteristics,” Spock announced. “I can offer no definitive explanation.”

 Upon rejoining the group, Kirk noticed that Spock’s observation was indeed accurate. But he made no mention of it to his family.

 Winona made a traditional, hearty farm lunch, with thick, juicy hamburgers (though Spock politely declined eating any meat) topped with cheese and sliced tomatoes, steaming ears of sweet corn drenched in butter, mashed potatoes and gravy, coleslaw, tangy pickles, and apple cobbler for dessert, all washed down with glasses of cold milk. After the meal -- which brought back so many fond memories of the Captain’s childhood -- all the males retired to the couches and easy chairs in the living room while Kirk’s mother tackled the dishes. (“Never you mind…I’ve got this all taken care of…you just relax, Jimmy…you’re our special guest!”) Sonic sat loyally at Jim’s feet while Kirk rubbed his tawny coat affectionately. Soon, Winona joined everyone and they comfortably digested their fine meal and reminisced about their mutual yesterdays for more than an hour.

 But by then it was time to go. Using his communicator, the Captain hailed Bones and Scotty, and ordered them to return to the beam-down coordinates where they first arrived. Kirk then slowly got up and went to tenderly hug each member of his family. Sonic seemed to sense the farewell and looked morose, but Kirk gave him a last playful rub. The family got back into the hover-car with Jim and Spock while the dog stayed behind. Kirk contacted his ship while his father drove, informing the Transporter Room to stand by. He also got a ship status report from Sulu and Chekov.

 At the rendezvous point, Dr. McCoy and Mr. Scott were already waiting.

 “I don’t know why this day happened,” Kirk somberly said to his family. “Maybe it was some kind of miracle, or maybe even a little glimpse of heaven. All I know is that for the first time in a long time, I was happy…Saying goodbye now is one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do,” James T. Kirk admitted, choking back tears. “But I must go now. I love you all so very much…” Kirk wiped his eyes with the backs of his hands, took one last look around, cleared his throat, and spoke into his communicator, “Transporter Room. Four to beam up. Energize.”

 Back on the bridge of the Enterprise a dozen minutes later, Bones and Scotty were excitedly sharing their own experiences on the planet’s surface. Kirk was about to give Lt. Uhura a quick summary report to relay to Starfleet Command when Mr. Chekov suddenly exclaimed, “Captain, the planet we've been orbiting…it’s…it's...gone!”

 Sulu and Spock immediately checked their station instruments. “Ensign Chekov is correct,” Spock replied. Staring again at the ship’s forward viewing screen, Sulu agreed. “One moment it was there, Captain, then it simply…vanished.”

 “Captain, for a planet to disappear without a tremendous explosion or without it being in close proximity to a black hole and getting sucked in is scientifically impossible. The laws of physics and of science in general are immutable and permanent. The universe is simply not given to playing any kind of ‘magic tricks’,” Mr. Spock definitively declared, raising a diagonal eyebrow.

 “True, all that you say, Mr. Spock.” Captain James T. Kirk admitted. “But maybe what you just witnessed was what we all just witnessed – an unexplained or unexplainable miracle. Perhaps by hand of God Himself. Who can say? A true need was met. A real desire was fulfilled. An unspoken prayer, answered..."

 "Helmsman, set a course for Star Base Twelve. Warp Factor Five. This crew is ready and eager for some well-deserved shore leave,” Kirk declared, with a large grin.

 Dr. McCoy waited a moment, then slowly approached the Captain as he sat confidently in his large command chair in the center of the bridge. Bones leaned forward, then whispered in his friend's ear:

 "Good to have you back, Jim..."

 THE END

 By Jack Karolewski

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