

## go long, go long (right over the edge of the earth)

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by [violet\\_pencil](#)

### Summary

"You're what, like thirty-five? It's your quarter-life crisis, aren't you due for some exploration?"

"Kid," Len says wearily, "if you wanted to be my quarter-life crisis, you're three days and a couple thousand miles late." He swings out an arm, gesturing widely to encompass San Francisco, the Academy, space. Everything. Everything out there that's cold and dark and dangerous and still a better option than the life he left behind. "I'm about to get all the exploration I can handle."

### Notes

Written for ao3 user southernmedicine for the 2022 Star Trek Holidays fic exchange.

Title from Joanna Newsom's "Go Long."

In contrast to all the fresh-faced recruits and spit-shined cadets loaded in neat rows onto the Starfleet transport shuttle, Jim Kirk looks— well, he looks like how Len feels. There are dark smudges under his eyes, the shoulder-seam of his jacket is ripped, and he reeks of beer sweat, dust and exhaustion. There's dried blood spotting the collar of his t-shirt and God only knows what under his nails.

Kirk hasn't had three-quarters of a nervous breakdown while locked in the shuttle bathroom, though, and it's just possible that somewhere in the galaxy there's someone who loves him— so in comparison to Len, maybe he isn't doing so badly.

They hit turbulence. Len panics, unstraps himself and gets up, stumbling down the aisle, back towards the bathroom. The little officer in gray with the sharp eyes and the Napoleon complex reaches for the straps of her safety harness, mouth already thinning. He fixes her with a deathly stare. "Let him puke," Kirk calls from down the aisle, "unless you want to clean it up... you make the call, it's your jackboots!"

She frowns but lets him pass.

The bathroom is cramped, an upright metal coffin. The deck plating vibrates unevenly under Len's feet. He braces himself with one arm to the side of the smeared mirror screwed into the bulkhead. His reflection stares back, wild-eyed, colorless as a corpse.

Eventually he manages to convince himself that he's not going to die. Not this instant, anyway. When he comes out, one of the shiny kids leans into his path. "Is that James Kirk you're sitting next to?"

"Beg pardon?" Len blinks at her.

"James Kirk! He's George Kirk's son, isn't he?" The recruit's eyes are wide with awe. The other potential cadets are pretending not to listen. Hungrily.

"Where's your goddamn respect for privacy?" Len says in his sharpest tone. "Ask him yourself or hold your water."

"Sorry, sir!" she stammers. Len grimaces and heads back to his seat.

Len was eight when the Kelvin was lost. He remembers the news reports, the mystery, the tragedy, the Romulan killer ship no one ever tracked down. The pretty widow who never said a single word about her heroic husband's last minutes; not in front of a camera, anyway. Before Jim Kirk could walk there were kids chasing each other around the schoolyard playing Captain Robau and First Officer Kirk.

He straps and buckles himself back into his seat, glancing briefly over at the kid. He's staring straight ahead, something like amusement in the quirk of his mouth. Now that Len knows, he can see the family resemblance. Old-fashioned Midwest cute, all shoulders and jaw. The kind of good-looking they used to call "all-American" without even being ironic.

"Time?" Kirk says, staring straight ahead.

Len raises his wrist so Kirk can read the time off his watch. He honestly doesn't want to know how long they've been in the air. It has to have been at least forty-five minutes, right? They'll be landing any damn second now, right?

The kid is merciless. "Twelve minutes. Twelve whole minutes till *Isn't that George Kirk's baby boy*. Fucking A."

Len leans back, closing his eyes. "Oh, is that your malfunction? Daddy issues?" he asks, because honestly, right now he doesn't have the spare energy to suppress his natural instinct to say the shittiest possible thing. "Here I thought it was gonna be something interesting."

Kirk chokes— actually misses a beat, then comes back with "Fuck you!" in a raspy, delighted shout. It's loud enough that it probably gets a couple dirty looks, because he leans in, breathing hot and sour against Len's ear. "Like *cranky just-divorced son of a bitch* is so original."

"I was a cranky son of a bitch before I got married, let alone divorced," Len says without opening his eyes. "I was a cranky son of a bitch before your voice changed, kid. It works for me." Except for the part where he's divorced, damaged and aimless with nowhere to go but the cold vacuum of space, but who's counting? "Move on up to the front if y'want. I think there's an open seat near your fan club."

"Fuck 'em. You know how hard it is to clean jizz out of Tellarite leather?" Kirk says, losing track of his inside voice again. Len bites his cheek hard to keep from smiling.

No way this kid is gonna get past the aptitude tests and psych evals, Len thinks. He's probably smart, and he looks like he wouldn't have any problems with the physical. And if it's been more than a couple of months since his last lungful of Andorian hash he may even pass the substance test. (Plus he's a legacy, both sides. Dead hero dad won't hurt his chances.) But the psych eval is gonna hit him like a windshield smacks a bug.

The kid's got no chance.

It's late, and Len is aching everywhere. He prescribed himself a late night in the quietest, darkest, least trendy dive of a bar he could find within walking distance of the Academy, and he's... to be totally honest, he's been wallowing. He got to skip some parts of the induction evaluations based on the fact that he's a grown goddamn adult with a medical degree, but going through the full application process to the Academy still had a lot more poking and prodding than Len really would've preferred. Physical *and* psychological. A quote from one of his favorite pre-Eugenics era memoirs keeps rolling through his head, over and over: *There were only two questions at three in the morning, and they were Am I dying? and Does anybody really love me?*

Len can't shake the thought— maybe that's just what space is? No day or night, no place to plant your feet. Just one big three in the morning, forever. Lord, what the hell has he done with his life?

"I'm in!" announces Kirk, swinging a leg over the stool next to Len's at the bar, and Len startles hard.

"How the hell—" he begins, because he didn't tell anyone where he was going; who was there to tell? Wait, what? "You *are*?"

Kirk narrows his eyes, smiling like he knows exactly what Len was thinking on the shuttle, and waves the bartender over. "Bud Classic and a shot of Jack, and another for my friend here, whatever he's having..." He squints as the bartender nods and moves away. "Tell me that's not a mint julep."

"It is," Len growls, "and what's wrong with that?"

"Seriously?"

"Yes!"

Jim considers. "Is it good?"

"No," Len mutters, tilting his head back for a deep swallow.

"Old-school," Jim says admiringly. "So you think I'm not smart enough to fake out a six-stage personality assessment, or what?"

"You can't *fake out* a personality profile," Len says. Put an actual psychologist in front of him and he'll argue till doomsday that computer-based personality analysis is basically bunk— but you can't bullshit the kinds of examinations that Len just spent the day suffering through, no matter how smart you are. Either the kid is secretly deeply functional or he's even more cracked than Len first assumed.

"Can't I?" Kirk mutters.

"No!"

The bartender comes back with their drinks. Kirk toasts Len ironically with his shot, then downs it easily. "Have it your way."

Len considers. Either he's underestimating Jim Kirk's reserves of bullshit or his intelligence. Because the only other possibility is that the kid is

just *super well-adjusted*, despite the way his eyes glitter like broken glass and he still hasn't got that split in his lip fixed. Despite that careless, too-deliberate swagger in his walk that barely disguises how his shoulders are constantly braced against some invisible weight— and yeah, despite the fact that it's a Friday night in the gleaming rebuilt jewel of North America, and he's buying a round for Len in this dive instead of doing body shots with someone pretty, his own age, and not a total asshole.

Kirk stays quiet for the next little while, which is good, because Len's starting to like him. Not so much that he'll refrain from being a jackass if provoked, but enough so that he'd probably regret it in the morning.

The thing is, Len's been married (and faithful, thank you very much) for the last six years. He can't remember the last time he was in a bar; maybe not since med school. He took off his ring three days ago, right before he got on the shuttle at its stopover in Georgia, and he still feels unbalanced and untethered. Like his body chemistry is suddenly short on a whole chunk of minerals more or less necessary to life. Long story short: romance is the last thing on Len's mind. Half his soul is bruised black and blue, and where he's not bruised he's been scraped raw. He can barely imagine making a move on anyone right now.

So call him oblivious, but he doesn't see it coming till Kirk's hand actually lands on his thigh, light and then with greater pressure as he leans closer, fingertips rubbing gently at the inside seam of Len's trousers. It sends a whanging reverberation of something that isn't even pain singing through his whole body, something like a whack to the funny bone. With a hammer. Ten or twenty times in a row.

"So where are you staying?" Kirk murmurs. Len closes his eyes, takes a deep breath and puts his hand on top of the kid's hand. He runs warm.

"Not on my worst day," he says firmly, and moves Kirk's hand away. He sighs and flashes an apologetic smile to lighten the sting. "Apparently."

"C'mon. I feel like it's just what the doctor ordered." Kirk grins like he invented the joke.

"You don't even know me," Len protests. "I could be totally straight."

"Are you?"

"So far."

"Well, that sounds descriptive-not-prescriptive to me. You're what, like thirty-five? It's your quarter-life crisis, aren't you due for some exploration?"

"Kid," Len says wearily, "if you wanted to be my quarter-life crisis, you're three days and a couple thousand miles late." He swings out an arm, gesturing widely to encompass San Francisco, the Academy, space. Everything. Everything out there that's cold and dark and dangerous and still a better option than the life he left behind. "I'm about to get all the *exploration* I can handle."

Kirk sighs and tips his bottle up for a swig of beer.

Len faces forward, pointedly. He tries not to actually count the seconds until the kid will finish his beer, make some weak excuse and book it. Not that Len can blame him. What point is there in pretending like they're two people who might actually have things to say to each other? But when Kirk does finally toss back the last couple swallows of his Bud, he flags down the bartender for one more, glancing in Len's direction when she comes over.

"Still doin' all right?"

"I'm fine." Len eyes him suspiciously. Kirk laughs.

"You think I'm trying to get you drunk? Relax, I'm not gonna try and jump your creaky old bones."

Len knows he's over-sensitive but it's been a hell of a long day and Kirk's easy laughter riles him just the same. "Well, hey, you passed the psych eval, so I guess I'm not worried. Tell me something, though, are you gonna be just another tryhard with a stack of books, another cog in the Starfleet machine? Or am I looking at the next antisocial personality to crack and set himself up as god-king of some M-class planet that hasn't discovered antibiotics yet?"

"Are those mutually exclusive? I mean, wait, you've read *Connecticut Yankee*, right?"

"We're not gonna sit here and form a book club!" Len says, and maybe two drinks on a mostly empty stomach and a few mostly sleepless nights wasn't a great idea, because it comes out just a little too loud.

Kirk leans back a little. "Why not?"

"Because you're driving me crazy," Len says— and how strong did the bartender make these drinks, anyway? Because *that* came out a little too honest. (A lot too honest.)

Kirk just seems more and more gleeful the more riled up that Len gets. Yeah, it's quitting time. He waves his credit chip over one of the sensors in the bar, flicks his finger to add a tip, then stands and turns to leave.

"But what is your favorite book, though!" Kirk calls after him, and Len presses a hand to his forehead as an invisible icepick tries to stab directly into his dorsolateral prefrontal cortex. "Come on, Bones!"

*Bones?*

"That's not going to be a thing," Len says without looking back. He walks out, into the night. He tilts his head back, inhaling deeply, letting the cold clear his head a little. The night is foggy, overcast. No stars to be seen.

Well. He'll see enough of the stars before he's done, won't he?

He thinks about it, shivering, as he walks back towards the shuttleport and the little capsule hotel room he was assigned for the week. It's small and sterile but it'll be quiet and that's what he needs right now. Len tells himself that: yeah, *quiet*, that's what he needs.

He tries not to consider the alternative. Who knows. Maybe if he'd met Jim three days earlier, his quarter-life crisis *would've* been banging some Iowa roughneck with eyes so blue there oughta be a law.

But time only moves in one direction, and Len only has one place to go: out into the dark, alone. Right over the edge of the earth... It's almost three in the morning. He shudders a little and keeps walking.

The next morning Len's eating a mediocre replicated breakfast in the communal kitchenette of the shuttleport lodging area and Jim tracks him down again. He's wearing the same clothes as yesterday, but at least they're clean. His face, on the other hand, looks markedly worse, bruises rising in a panoply of colors. Len's fingers itch for a basic dermal protoplaser. Sitting down, Jim stabs a fork into one of Len's neglected sausage links and steals it without a hint of remorse.

"That's my breakfast! What is your damage?" Len demands before remembering that he already knows. Everybody does.

"Can I get on the waiting list for your *midlife* crisis?" Jim asks, chewing, then makes a weird face as he fully experiences the just slightly off taste and texture of the replicated sausage. There's a reason Len didn't eat it.

"What if I go out there and discover the fountain of youth?" Len says acidly, pointing a spoon straight up at the infinite emptiness of the void. "Cure for death. Could be out there. Then what'd you do?"

Jim snorts. "What happened to your fatalism? Disease and death wrapped in terror and, uh..." He reaches over again and steals another sausage. A glutton for punishment, apparently. "Hard radiation? I forget. The point is, *carpe diem*, right, Bones? Try something new!"

"Sure. Or how about *sic non confectus, non reficiat*."

"Oh, I don't believe *that*," Jim says quickly, which is either an ice-cold bluff, or he might actually have read a book. "Where would the human species be if we didn't keep trying to fix shit that wasn't broken?"

Well, *hell*.

"I mean, where are you placing your bet?" Jim continues. "On immortality? Or falling into a space-time vortex, getting your brain sucked out by some parasite from outside the galaxy—"

"Are you under the impression that discussing all the different varieties of inevitable horrific space death is gonna turn me on? Because it doesn't."

"Does it ruin your appetite?" Jim reaches for Len's tray, pausing with his hand open, halfway across the table.

Len sighs and slides it over. "You could get your own breakfast, you know."

Jim glances over towards the replicators at the far end of the room, squinting a little at the postcard-perfect view of the Bay framed by the tall, arched windows. It looks unreal, like an over-bright holo projection. The rest of the new recruits from yesterday's shuttle trip are clustered over there, drinking in the morning sunlight. They all look so painfully goddamn young. Like their mothers just got done scrubbing their little faces, pasting their cowlicks down with a licked thumb before sending them off to school with a paper sack lunch and an apple for Teacher. As rough around the edges as Jim Kirk might be, at least he looks like he might survive if he was left unattended for ten minutes.

They all look away quickly when they realize Jim and Len are looking in their direction.

Jim sighs, leans back and raises both hands, gesturing up and down at himself. "Hey, I offered you a fair trade. You said no."

Angels and ministers of grace defend us— "I coulda had your body for toast, fruit cup and two sausage links? What happens when people actually buy you a nice dinner?"

Jim eats the fruit cup carefully, one little diced piece at a time, and glances up at Len from under his lashes. "Find out."

"No," Len insists.

Jim smirks. Ugh, he's even eating the pineapple. He can't be human. "I gotta say, so far, this is a pretty dull quarter-life crisis, Bones."

"Goddamn it, don't call me Bones," Len says. He's gonna nip that *right* in the bud. That's *not* going to be a thing. Even if— well. It's another way to start over, isn't it? Leave everything behind, even the name?

"Sure," Jim says agreeably, like he can tell that Len is softening towards him. Len glares, leaning back in his chair. No. This definitely isn't going to be a thing.

It's not.

(Even if Jim Kirk is the best thing about his quarter-life crisis so far.)

Under no circumstances. He'll keep telling the kid that.

(Who's he trying to kid? He'll keep telling *himself* that.)

This is definitely, one hundred percent *not*—

"I think we're gonna be *best* friends," Jim says, fixing Len with a gaze so sincere it shocks him out of his internal debate. "Look, I'm serious! You and me. Book club buddies. Have you read *No One Is Talking About This*? I feel like it's one of the under-rated pre-Eugenics memoirs. 'There is still a real life to be lived, there are still real things to be done.' Right?"

—going to be a thing.

"Bones?"

"You're clearly going to need a keeper," Len says. "And it might as well be one who's medically trained."

Jim's busted-up face breaks into a brilliant grin. Len's bruised heart thumps just a little, despite himself. Is this what it feels like to have something to look forward to, instead of just things to regret?

Well, hell.

Maybe it is.

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