

## Leaving the Table

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by [jamaharon](#)

### Summary

In 1964, a young farmboy named Jim Kirk steals a state-of-the-art visor from his neighbor's house.

That's the first time he gets to play "Star Trek."

That's the first time he meets Bones.

The first visor was clunky and expensive. Prohibitively so. There was only one man in town who could afford it, and it took Jim three months of working for nothing to earn the right to try that visor on.

That was the first time he went to the stars. His fists clenched at his sides, his fingernails digging into his palms. Inside the goggles, stars gave way to planets, lush and green. Alien men and women, multi-jointed fingers and purple blood, warp drives and phasers and...

And Jim would do anything to go back.

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In 1973, the Atari home visor was invented, and Jim Kirk was working double shifts at a factory warehouse just so he could purchase one. There was only one program locked into the visor. The same program everyone wanted to get their hands on: *Star Trek*. And this time, the box boasted, users could interface with each other no matter where they were in the continental United States.

This was how Jim's avatar, captain of the Starship Enterprise, met a country doctor named Bones.

"Actually," Bones told him later over a long-distance phone call, "I'm not much of a doctor. Never even went to college."

"Well, I'm not much of a pilot," Jim admitted. "Still, you should consider it. What's to stop you from going to medical school? You're smart enough."

The phone turned Bones' scoff into a snarl of static. "And what's to stop you from walking on the moon?" he asked.

Jim curled the cord around his finger and edged a little closer to the window. It was dark outside, but out here on his parents' farm, you could see the stars. They almost seemed close enough to touch.

"Nothing," he lied, placing his palm flat against a crack in the window glass, where cold air was seeping in. And in Atlanta, Georgia, Len glanced into the back room, where his sick mother was coughing up a storm.

"Same here," he said.

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In 1984, the visor was out of style, and the old Star Trek program went obsolete. But ten years later Jim Kirk bumped his head against the underside of an old rolltop desk and swore under his breath, sparks from the electric plug burning his fingertips. He crawled out from under it and checked the screen of his brand-new computer.

"Yes!" he whispered to himself, and he got to his feet, knees creaking.

It was months before he persuaded Bones to try one out — in the public library, because (Bones claimed) he wouldn't have one of those ugly useless dinosaurs in his lovely country house. The Starfleet forums popped up in '98, reconnecting users who hadn't seen each other since their visors died.

**Commercial spaceflights**, one messageboard said in a blink. **A dream come true?**

*What do you think?* Jim typed, hunting and pecking across the keyboard with his index finger.

*I think it's horseshit*, Bones said.

*You wouldn't want to go, if you could?*

*It's not gonna happen*, Bones said. *Not in our lifetimes.*

*Not in our lifetimes*, he said. And in the 60s, a teenage Jim Kirk stood in his father's cornfield and held a stolen visor to his eyes, breath coming out in foggy puffs while the stars unfurled before him. Utopian futures. Welcoming aliens. Science and wonder. And in 1974, a young Jim Kirk tipped his helmet back inside a muddy foxhole and scribbled a spaceship in the margins of a letter to a Southern man he'd never before, a man who was serving somewhere on this same muggy island, cursing at the mosquitos and sobbing over the wounded villagers he couldn't save.

There was no war in Star Trek. There were no farmhouses coming apart at the seams, no lean years where the children went hungry. There were no sick mothers hiding away in back rooms, no napalm-scalded babies writhing on government-issue cots. No desperate bartering of pennies, no poverty, no drugs.

*I'd go if I could*, Jim said. *I'd go in a heartbeat.*

*Of course you would*, Bones said.

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It was one year later when Bones stopped responding to Jim's calls. There was no one to remind him to eat, no one to snipe at him for being too optimistic, too flirty. In 2003, the Starfleet messageboard collapsed. In 2005, Jim paused in the video game aisle of his local supermarket, his hands shoved into the pockets of an old plaid housecoat. There was a box there, a cheap \$20 visor with the Star Trek logo slapped on the packaging.

Jim fingered a handful of crumpled bills shoved into his pocket, the paper like velvet against his skin. He remembered the hard flat cot he'd had to sleep on when he got caught for stealing Mr. Gates' visor back in '64. The thrill of calling Bones for the first time after meeting him in the game. The real tears he shed when the game went obsolete and he couldn't believe it, couldn't fathom that this wondrous leap in technology had fallen away like that, that humanity could just use it up and let it go. A novelty. A waste.

"I don't know what you're crying about," Bones had said, exasperated. "It's just a game."

Jim eyed the box a little longer and walked away.

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Yuri Gagarin felt it. Sally Ride felt it, too. They called it the Overview Effect.

In 2021, Jim Kirk turned on the TV and watched a commercial spaceflight break through the atmosphere for the very first time. His TV dinner sat unfinished on the coffee table; he could never finish his meals these days, not without Bones to nag him about it. Eyes glued to the television screen, he watched that little white capsule disappear.

Later, an actor Jim didn't recognize would stand before the microphone and say, "There's nothing up there. All my life, I waited to explore the stars, and when I finally got there, I realized it's just empty. Just empty, cold and black. Down on Earth, that's where all the vibrancy is, all the warmth. That's where the people are. Why would anyone leave that behind?"

Jim dragged the tines of his fork through cold mashed potatoes. He chewed the inside of his cheek.

"You were right, Bones," he said to the empty air.

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