

Less Clear and Clearer

Posted originally on the [Ad Astra :: Star Trek Fanfiction Archive](http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/1135) at <http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/1135>.

Rating:	General Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	Gen
Fandom:	Star Trek: The Original Series
Character:	Montgomery "Scotty" Scott
Additional Tags:	Introspection , Weekly Challenge: The Face Looking Back At You
Language:	English
Collections:	Weekly Writing Challenges
Stats:	Published: 2023-11-02 Words: 700 Chapters: 1/1

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Summary

(2369) - A week or so after leaving the *Enterprise-D*, Scotty does some reflecting.

It had been longer than seventy-five years since the last time he'd actually met his own eyes in the mirror.

It wasn't a matter of avoidance. He just-- didn't feel any great need to examine his own face. He'd never been one to preen; the most effort Scotty had ever taken on his appearance was when he was dating Fio about a thousand years ago. Outside of that, he'd only bothered with the mirror in order to comb his hair and shave, at least absent those times he had stopped that, too.

The *Goddard* was a tiny runabout, as runabouts went -- not even as large as the old Class-F's were -- and its likewise tiny reactors could only go so far before refueling became a priority. Scotty had sat with the manuals for the shuttle, trying to catch up on three quarters of a century's worth of innovation in hopes of improving her efficiency; he ultimately found himself disappointed that they had *changed* a lot, but actually improved very little, mechanically speaking.

So-- not much shock-worthy innovation. Replicators instead of synthesizers. Holodecks. They also somehow came up with computers that could *literally* be infected with a virus or bacteria; the *Enterprise-D* hadn't been retrofitted to include the bio-neural circuitry, but all new ships were designed with it right from the outset and Scotty thought that was a certain kind of madness.

Yet in all of that, a mirror was still just a mirror. And in all of that, it was also still more than, too.

He studied the man looking back at him; features that were both his and not-his filling the surface of it. Familiar and unfamiliar. He was freshly scrubbed after using the cubical shower that lived in the wall when not in use, but hadn't bothered shaving since he and the *Enterprise-D* had parted ways most of a week before.

Starfleet had been sending subspace communique since; the first thing Scotty learned how to do after leaving was reprogram the shuttle's comms to silently shunt them into an inbox where they would sit unread.

Last he'd glanced, they'd been creeping up towards two hundred. He figured-- maybe five hundred before he'd pick one at random and read it. Maybe.

There wasn't much else to do on the *Goddard* but-- well, read tech specs. Refine fuel. Think too much. Struggle with sleeping, which hadn't happened in a long time. Mourn for Matt Franklin, poor lad.

Exist, if one could quite call it that.

Scotty wished he could mourn everyone *else* -- only Spock and McCoy were still alive that he was aware of -- but nothing about their deaths had become real to him.

Seventy-five years was a stupid number; human brains weren't meant to just leap forward like that and skip the between bits. What were you on the other side of that? Alive?

What is this face, less clear and clearer--?

A whisper at his shoulder, touched with balsam fir and salt.

There was a flash of teeth in the mirror, sharp enough and fierce enough that it actually surprised him; his own face, broad and aged, but the expression something he didn't honestly think he was even capable of anymore, to go with the feeling that grabbed his throat and twisted

below his breastbone. Actual feeling, visceral; before this week, it had been years since he'd felt this much of anything.

Doctor Crusher had asked him, in one of the few moments they were alone, "Your records say that as of your last physical, you were on medications for depression and anxiety, but the scans aren't showing anything in your blood. Had Doctor McCoy tapered you off of them...?"

It explained a few things, though only in retrospect. Transporter buffers were intended to strip foreign contaminants and normally medications weren't, but *seventy-five years* cycling through those filters--

But even in that moment, Scotty had just blinked and raised his eyebrows like he was surprised -- in fairness, he kind of was -- and then lied straight-faced, "Aye, lass."

Now, he took in his reflection, of this man he knew and didn't know, of these feelings he knew and didn't know, then turned around and headed back to the pilot's seat.

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