

A Foreign Country by Xanthe



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Story Notes:

29/1/00 This story was written especially for Hal, for her birthday.

The pic is taken from a bigger pic, Fall, by Mika, and turned into this snippet by Sergeeva.

They quarrelled on Veteran's Day.

The very next day, Mulder passed his lover a file in the office. Inside were two air tickets for England, for four days in January.

"Why?" Skinner asked.

"Why not?" Mulder retaliated, smiling one of his infuriating smiles.

Skinner sighed. "January? Isn't it cold in England in January?" He asked.

"No colder than here." Mulder's smile was gentler this time, and Skinner had the distinct impression that his lover wasn't just referring to the weather. "Don't worry, Walter. I'll keep you warm," Mulder winked, and then he sauntered away.

London Heathrow was shrouded in a gray, lifeless smog when they touched down.

"Ah." Mulder took a deep breath and glanced around. "Home, sweet home," he announced.

Skinner raised an eyebrow. "Is it?"

"It was once." Mulder's smile was full of memories.

Skinner smiled back, hesitantly. "Mulder, what's this about?" He asked, not for the first time since he'd received those tickets.

"A la recherche du temps perdu, mon petit," Mulder replied.

"Wrong city," Skinner grunted. "Maybe you thought we were in Paris?"

"Gay Paree?" Mulder winked knowingly, one hand stealing under Skinner's jacket to lightly rest on soft wool, covering hard, muscled flesh.

"Petit?" Skinner frowned. "What, pray, is so small about me?"

"Only your generosity with the past," Mulder replied.

They slept in a hotel in Oxford. It was all low Tudor beams and roaring wood fires.

"Did they build these houses for dwarves?" Skinner grumbled, hitting his head on a low door frame.

"No, it's a very old house, and people were smaller back then." Mulder took hold of the wounded head, and kissed it better. Skinner cleared his throat and grunted. "And apparently haunted," Mulder added, glancing through the hotel guide book. "No, Walter, I didn't know that before I booked it. Honest."

Skinner's raised eyebrow told its own story.

Outside, there was a crisp, white frost that never lifted all day. Inside, they lay in a four poster bed, a tangle of limbs, with a thick quilt covering them. It was, Skinner thought to himself, nice. He moved an arm and pulled his lover close, and Mulder went, willingly, smiling in his sleep.

The sun was shining weakly in the sky when they stepped out into the town the next day. Mulder went forward, eagerly, dragging his reluctant lover behind.

"Dreaming spires?" Skinner glanced at mellow, honeyed stone, and the dappled Winter beauty of an old place that had seen much, and kept its secrets within cramped, winding alleys, ancient city walls, and the soft hush, hush of a wide, cheerful river. "It's...pretty," he conceded. Mulder shook his head, grinning slyly, and sneakily pinched his lover's bottom.

They stopped outside a tall house, and Mulder touched the yellow stone reverentially with his fingertips. "I lived here once," he said.

"Here?" Skinner was intrigued, despite himself. He thought of Mulder, 18 years old, long, seventies locks of hair flopping into eager hazel eyes as he walked from his college to this house. He wondered who his lover's friends had been, what his life had been, living here, in this old, unfamiliar world. What had Mulder been then?

"Here." On an impulse Mulder pressed the doorbell.

"What are you doing?" Skinner hissed.

"Taking a trip down memory lane," Mulder replied. A few seconds later a youth clad in 4 sweaters and a scarf opened the door, and peered at them. "Yo! St John's college?" Mulder asked, identifying the scarf.

"Yeah," the youth said cautiously.

"Good to meet you. I used to live here. If we don't look too much like axe murderers, could we come in? I'd love to look around the old place again," Mulder said, with, an absurdly disarming smile. Skinner grunted in disbelief as the youth shrugged, and then grinned, unable to withstand the Mulder charm offensive. The AD knew that feeling all too well. With a sigh he followed Mulder into the dark bowels of the house.

"Typical student's house," Mulder grinned. "Always was, always will be." He patted his lover's arm and Skinner's jaw did a sideways pincer movement as he surveyed the mess. There were 3 bicycles in the hall, a pair of abandoned boots covered in mud, several cricket bats, one (broken) tennis racquet and a dying pot plant. "...so I really appreciate this," Mulder was saying to the youth.

"Mick," the kid supplied.

"Fox." Mulder grinned.

Skinner frowned. "He can call you Fox but I can't?" He whispered.

"You're missing the point, Walter," Mulder replied, in his normal tone of voice. "Here, I was always Fox. I wouldn't want to change that. That would be revisionist history, mon petit."

"Hmm." Skinner pushed his hands into the pockets of his jeans, and glowered. Mick glanced at him uneasily.

"This is Walter. My partner, my lover, my life, and much less dangerous than he appears at first sight." Mulder waved a hand at his lover, and Skinner flushed, abashed by this unashamed brandishing of their relationship in public.

"Right. Yeah." Mick grinned, un-phased, and not, in fact, even remotely interested. "You're Yanks, right?" He questioned.

"It's the accent, it's a giveaway isn't it?" Mulder said. "How about this? Does this sound better?" He asked. Skinner did a double take. Mulder had affected the most flawless English accent. "I was here a long time, Walter," Mulder murmured. "There are some things you just...acquire."

"You could acquire it again in the bedroom maybe?" Skinner suggested in an undertone as Mick left the room.

"Turns you on, huh?" Mulder winked. Skinner's lips did the tiniest little dance of amusement.

"It's cold." Skinner observed, as they walked into the kitchen.

"They're students. Money's for partying," Mulder explained patiently. "Not heat."

"Ah." Skinner nodded. That clearly explained Mick's fashion statement of sweaters then. Mick reappeared, and offered them a joint. Skinner's jaw did a slow clench of disapproval, and only his firmest glare prevented his miscreant lover from accepting.

They wandered upstairs, glanced in at a bright yellow bathroom with peeling paint, and dirty net curtains.

"Never been washed. In the finest student tradition." Mulder smiled brightly.

Mick laughed out loud. "No time for washing." He shrugged. "You're only young once. Right?"

He led them into a large bedroom, with a big window looking out onto the street.

"Here slept Fox Mulder. Here Fox Mulder lost his virginity." Mulder glanced out of the window. "And here Fox Mulder vomited upon the streets of this ancient, and venerable town."

"Here Fox Mulder was a bit of a job then?" Mick teased.

"Yeah." Mulder grinned. "That's me - a hooligan. You're only young once. Right?"

Skinner listened with half an ear as his lover chatted easily to his new found friend. He wandered around the room, fingers touching the wall, the window, the peeling wooden door frames. He tried to picture Mulder here, belonging to this place and had a sudden image of his lover lying on the bed, losing the recently mentioned virginity, eyes dark with arousal, hair flopping into his eyes, sweat running down his face. His Mulder. Young, naïve, unknowing. His Mulder, running down these winding streets, his Mulder living this life, a life that Skinner had never shared. A Mulder he had not known. A Mulder he could never really

know. Hands rubbed his arms, and he shivered.

"Someone walk over your grave?" Mulder asked, his hands continuing their reassuring dance over Skinner's tense, and tautly muscled flesh.

"No. I walked over yours - the ghost of this you. I didn't know him," Skinner mused.

"Of course you did." Mulder smiled, that easy smile, and led his lover back down the stairs, with Skinner frowning, mystified, all the way. They bade farewell to Mick, and wandered up the street, and down another, into a meandering labyrinth of quaintly named roads, and picturesque little shops.

Skinner walked slowly, trying to make sense of Mulder's last statement. Damn it but he hated it when his lover did this to him. Mulder had been in one of his weird moods since the moment their plane had touched down. Infuriating, compelling, witty, charming, introspective, and irritatingly mysterious by turns. Skinner stopped, startled out of his reverie. There was no sign of his lover ahead. He looked behind, but there was no sign of him there either.

"Walter! I thought I'd lost you." Mulder ran back into the street, then stopped, a curious look on his face.

"What?" Skinner asked grumpily, expecting another mystery.

"You." A slow smile spread over Mulder's features, and he looked as if he'd undergone a profound, transforming, religious experience. "My past, present and future just merged in that one second, Walter. You have no idea how good you look. This tiny, winding street, and you - so big, so incongruous, so damn gorgeous."

"Mulder," Skinner growled warningly.

"Walter," Mulder threw back. "Don't deny me this. You do look beautiful. You don't belong on these streets, in this setting. You weren't here back then, and yet...you were always here with me in some way. Do you believe a memory can travel back in time, Walter?"

"What?" Skinner frowned.

Mulder took his lover's face between his hands. "You were always waiting for me. Oxford, DC, everywhere. You are always in my world. My heart reaches back and reaches forward, across the years. The ghost of you, standing here now, haunts me, standing there then, trembling on the brink of my life, not knowing what it would bring...or who."

"Mulder, you talk in riddles."

"Ah, but at least I talk, Walter. I talk," Mulder said softly.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Skinner bristled.

"It means it's time for afternoon tea." Mulder pulled Skinner sideways into a tea room without warning.

"Pounds, shillings and pence." Mulder smiled with excessive cheerfulness as he dispensed the required amount of money to cover the cost of 2 cups of tea, a plate of scones, clotted cream, and strawberry jam. "Well, maybe not the shillings, but pounds and pence at least," he beamed brightly. "Decimalization came to these sceptered isles in 1971, Walter," he informed his lover.

"Ah." Skinner took a sip of tea, wishing it was coffee. "Hmm," he said thoughtfully.

"Good?" Mulder's face was so close he could almost have kissed it. His lover's eyes were bright and inquisitive.

"Better than I'd expected," Skinner conceded.

"A world away from Liptons. The English are a nation who truly understand tea," Mulder smirked, "and scones." He cut into his, and spread it thick with clotted cream and strawberry jam. "And indeed, the whole concept of afternoon tea."

"Not bad," Skinner admitted, taking a bite of his scone.

"I once spent all night drinking tea on a hill overlooking Canterbury with two students from the Kent University debating society," Mulder sighed. "I'll take you to Canterbury one day. I wonder if it's as beautiful as I remember it? The cathedral was lit up, and shone out bright in the dark sky, and we sat and talked all night."

"About aliens?" Skinner inquired.

"About the truth," Mulder replied. "As all students do. Caffeine, sex, alcohol, and the search for the truth - about life, the universe, and everything. Douglas Adams," he smiled. "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. Why else do you think I chose an apartment with the number 42?" Skinner's eyes flashed with amusement, and the hint of a wry question. "42 - the answer to everything - it was clearly my destiny." Mulder smiled, mockingly, at himself. "Of course I was wrong. The answer wasn't there at all. It was alive and well, and living in Crystal City."

"If I'm the answer, I dread to think what the question is," Skinner mused, loving his lover's wild flights of fancy, loving sitting in the cozy tea-room after walking in the crisp Winter air, loving the taste of warm, clotted cream as it melted in his mouth.

"Oh, you know the question." Mulder waved an airy hand. "You always know everything before me. I seek so noisily, pound my head against any number of brick walls, and when I finally turn around I find that you knew the answer all along. Beneath that granite exterior, with its oh-so handsome walls, beats the warmest heart I've ever known, and I'll happily curl up beside it forever."

"Poetry!" Skinner mocked. "Make up a poem about these scones instead. They're a more fitting subject."

"Hmm." Mulder pursed his lips, and looked hard into his lover's cloaked soul. Skinner flushed, and turned his face away from the scrutiny.

They walked back late after a convivial drink in a pub, arms touching, comfortable, side by side. Mulder took them on a circuitous route, past his old alma mater, Magdalen College, and they ended up by the river. Mulder grabbed Skinner's arms, and, hauling him close, claimed one long, deep kiss.

"Here's where I kissed my first lover, and here's where I kiss my last," Mulder said.

Skinner steadied himself against the stone parapet of Magdalen Bridge, and finally gave in. "Mulder, what's all this about?" He asked. "Not that I'm not enjoying it, but why? What did you mean when you said that I knew you then?"

"The past is a foreign country, they do things differently there'. Isn't that what they say?" Mulder put his hand on his lover's shoulder, and rubbed tender circles on his back. "You knew me then, because you know me now, Walter. This place is part of what made me... me. My time here formed and shaped me. I was a boy, not even 18 years old, and I was scared, Walter. I'd never been away from home before, let alone travelled to a foreign land on my own. These streets were so strange to me, and now they have the seasoned familiarity of old, and much loved friends. When you're young, the world seems bigger, more frightening - you learn the skills you need to survive in it, and sometimes they're learned the hard way, and sometimes they're learned the easy way. Maybe my lessons were easier than yours, but you and I have so much in common beneath it all. We both left our homes at a similar age, and travelled alone to a foreign land, and when we returned, we weren't the same wide-eyed kids who left. I am the sum of what made me, Walter - as are you."

"This is about Veteran's Day. I knew it." Skinner jerked away, walked silently along the riverbank, his back hunched against the cold, alone with his past. Mulder ran to catch up with him, and tugged on his arm.

"Teenagers, strangers in strange lands," he whispered. "Learning how to survive."

"It's different," Skinner rasped, his jaw seizing up.

"Yes. Show me how." Mulder stood in front of him, walking backwards. "Tell me how, or take me there."

"There's a world of difference between this pretty little English town - all polite manners, and old stone walls - and a jungle, and the heat, and the stench, and the sickening smell of death." Skinner's tone was low, and his breath caught in his throat as he spoke.

"Strangers in a strange land," Mulder reminded him softly. He placed a hand on Skinner's chest, keeping his lover from walking. "Oxford is part of me, and you love me. Why would I hate what you were in Vietnam, Walter? Why do you think I would? It made you into the man I love."

"You don't know what I did." Skinner stood immobile, fingertips touching the bridge, hands as cold as the old stone wall.

"I know what you are. I have more compassion for you than you have for yourself." Mulder stood behind his lover, and placed a kiss on the back of the naked, unprotected scalp.

"What do you want me to do? Buy us a plane ticket, and show you around the killing fields?" Skinner rasped. "This is where I shot my first VC. This is where I lost my platoon. This..." He glanced down at white knuckles.

"No." Mulder pulled him away from the stone, took him within a comforting shield of arms, and warmed him from the inside out. "No, Walter. Just let me in."

They walked for a long time, and, hesitantly at first, Skinner began to speak. About a dark-eyed, boy with a wide, easy smile who'd left his home for a new life.

"And lost his smile somewhere along the way," Mulder said gently, one arm around his lover.

"And then found it again, many years later." Skinner treated his lover to an exclusive viewing of said smile.

"Thank god. It would have been a loss to the world." Mulder squeezed his lover's shoulder encouragingly.

They walked along the river, crossed a myriad of different bridges, and for a few, short hours, the cold English streets became a sultry Vietnamese battlefield as Skinner shared that particular time from his past with his lover.

As he stood, watching his lover's bowed head, and hearing his faltering tones, Mulder saw the fleeting ghost of a boy he had never known, and a war he had never fought. His mind invented its own image of his lover, younger than he'd ever known him, all gangly legs and arms, a maelstrom of youthful energy. Mulder sometimes spoke, and sometimes just stood, looking into the inky depths of the water, and sometimes reached out a comforting hand to

soothe his lover's shoulder, but mostly just listened. He heard about a boy who he'd never known, except in that he was still there, inside his lover, part of the man Skinner had become, a ghost inside the living.

When they finally returned to their hotel room, they found a fire burning in the grate. Skinner bumped his head on the doorframe.

"Thank god we're only here for four days," he murmured. "Any longer and I'd be decapitated."

"I'm at least as tall as you and I still have my head," Mulder said.

"A debatable point." Skinner grinned.

Mulder found some wine in the mini-bar, and poured them both a glass. He sat down on the rug in front of the fire, and patted the floor, inviting his lover to join him. Skinner settled down between his open legs, and they sat watching the flames flicker in the grate.

"I said I'd keep you warm," Mulder murmured, his arms folded snugly around his lover. "Here." Mulder raised his glass, and clinked it against Skinner's. "To ghosts," he said.

Skinner smiled, the kind of smile that made Mulder's heart beat twice as fast. The room was warm and cozy, the dark, wooden-beamed ceiling hanging low and intimate, keeping the secrets of a long and watchful existence.

"To ghosts - and other lovers," Skinner replied.

The End

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