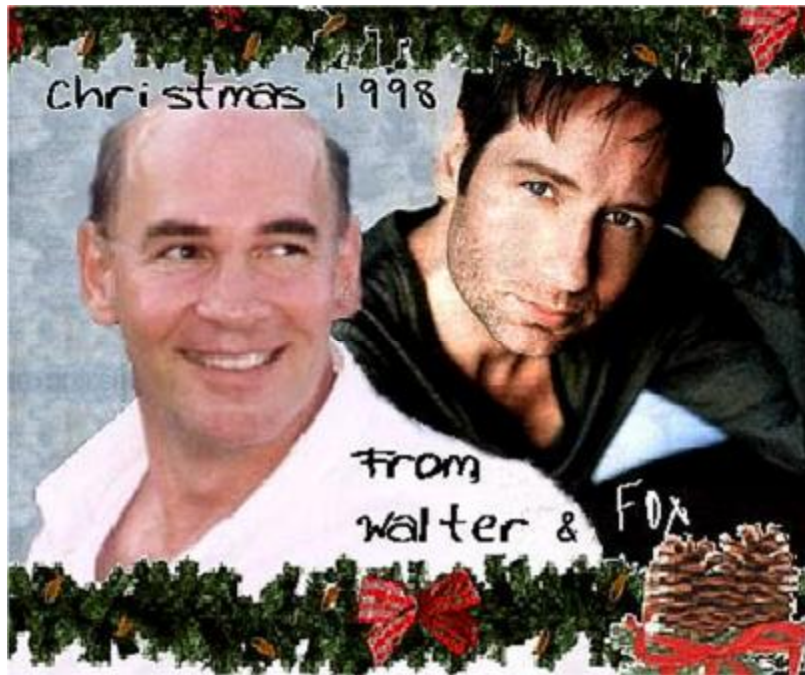


The Snowman by Xanthe



<http://www.xanthe.org/the-snowman/>

"Have you ever built a snowman, Walter?" he asks, head on one side.

"Of course. Hasn't everyone?" I grunt.

He's sitting by the window, one slender hand resting against the glass, staring out at the snow. His empty coffee cup hangs from a languid finger.

"A White Christmas," he laughs, showing white teeth. "Just like the ones we used to know."

"Last year was white." I clear away the dishes.

"It was?" He thinks back.

"Yeah. Last year it snowed. I remember because..." And I pause, the words catching in my throat.

Forgive me, this isn't where it started. I'm not very good at story telling. I'll go back.

It's Christmas Eve. I'm working late. There's no reason to go home, no presents to buy and wrap. I've bought a tree, but it's standing undecorated in my hallway. Sharon and I used to do it together...well, **she** used to. I used to just stand there and hand her garlands, and tinsel, and stars, and angels, and when she wasn't looking I'd steal one of the tree chocolates. Only she always knew. She had eyes in the back of her head.

"Walter?" she'd say sternly, a laugh in her voice, and I'd pretend to act guilty at being found out, and she'd tap the top of my head and kiss me. Chocolatey kisses.

Anyway, like I said, there's no reason to rush home. I glance out of my window at the busy streets below, seething with people bustling around like so many demented ants. I'm feeling glad that I don't have to go and join the fray. And sad. Curiously sad as well. I hate crowds, and I'm not exactly crazy about shopping either. I used to buy Sharon perfume, every year. And sometimes lingerie, although she never wore what I bought her. I guess I got the wrong size, or the wrong color, or something.

I bought Kim some perfume, the same kind that Sharon used to like, maybe because old habits are hard to break, maybe because it's the only gift I feel comfortable buying, I don't know. She seemed pleased though - and she smiled when I told her to go home early. She's a good kid. I like her - she works hard. I stay though, and I can hear the building gradually getting emptier and emptier, until finally it falls silent. It's kind of eerie. Just me, my lamp, my desk. I keep delaying, wondering if I can find a way to stay here all night, and all tomorrow, but I can't.

I do something I've never done before. I go walkabout. I wander down those empty corridors, peer into dark rooms, glance at half empty glasses, and wrapping paper left abandoned after various impromptu Christmas parties. I feel like a Captain, taking a tour around his ship to make sure that everything is okay. I don't know what takes me down to the basement, but I'm surprised to see a light on under the door of Mulder's office. I think about it for a moment, and then go and knock.

"Yo. It's open."

I put my head around the door, and see him sitting at his desk, glasses perched on the end of his nose, typing.

"You still here, Agent Mulder?" I ask. "Didn't anybody tell you it's Christmas?"

"Are you kidding? I was driven out of the mall by the sounds of all those kids singing," he grins. "You can't avoid Christmas. It pursues you, relentlessly, and holds you in its death grip. You can thrash around all you like, but there's no escape!" He moves his long arms and legs restlessly in time to his slightly crazed monologue.

"You **can** avoid it," I tell him. "Work late, don't go shopping, and don't turn the TV on. I've found that works."

"I'll try that sometime. Thanks for the advice, sir." He stares at me for a moment, with those knowing hazel eyes. "You're avoiding the season of goodwill too then I take it, sir?"

"Yes." I venture into his territory, feeling welcomed, perch myself on the edge of his desk. I haven't always felt welcome in this room. "And you? Don't you have plans for the holiday, Mulder?"

He shrugs, the sadness glancing across his features momentarily.

"No. I would go to my mother's but..." he hesitates. "Things aren't good between us," he shrugs again.

"I thought you and your mother were close," I remark in surprise.

"No," he shakes his head. "We aren't."

"When she had that stroke...I thought...you were very upset."

"She's my mom." He makes a face. "I do love her."

"Of course." I sit there, wishing I was better at small talk. "Uh...so you're not spending Christmas with Agent Scully?"

He looks up sharply. I guess people are always prying into the nature of the relationship he has with Agent Scully.

"No," he smiles, obviously deciding that I have no hidden agenda. "She did offer, but...well, she's spending the holiday with her folks, and let's just say that her brother and I aren't exactly buddies."

"Ah." I watch him for a while. Does he have any friends? He's fallen out with his mother, **and** with Scully's brother? I know he wouldn't exactly win any prizes for most popular FBI agent, but despite the trouble he's always caused me, I like him.

"What about you, sir? What are your plans?" he asks.

"Nothing," I shrug. "I don't like Christmas much."

"Me neither."

He types something onto his computer, and I feel as if he's dismissing me, so I get up to go. I don't know what stops me, or why I say what I do.

"If you don't want to be alone tomorrow, you're welcome to stop by my place for lunch, Mulder. I don't have much - but it's enough for two. You know, turkey, cake."

He looks surprised, and I know he's going to say 'no'.

"Thank you. Yeah. That'd be nice," he nods. "Want me to bring anything?"

I'm too surprised he's agreed to think of anything, so I just shrug.

"Uh, no. I don't think so. Just yourself. About 12:30?"

"12:30. Yes." He smiles and I feel...curious about him, about his life.

He arrives on time, bearing a bottle of wine. And he isn't nervous being around me - a lot of people are. It's the nature of the job. They can't see past the title. Mulder isn't like that. He takes everyone as he finds them. He starts talking the moment I let him through the door. Not nervous chatter, but clever, witty observations - about the weather, and the prospect of snow, about the crap on television. I don't have to say much. I think that suits me more. I'm not very talkative. Never have been. After a while I start talking though. I don't know how that happens - something to do with Mulder, his insatiable curiosity, and desire for knowledge. He could draw conversation out of the most socially inept person, and I'm not that. I'm just...quiet. I tell him about 'Nam - not the gory stuff, just some of the rest of it.

"Do you ever meet up with any other vets?" He asks, hovering behind me in the kitchen, dipping his fingers into whatever he can find that looks appetizing.

"Occasionally," I shrug.

"But you haven't stayed friends?" He puts his head on one side, looking at me keenly.

"I...find there isn't a great deal of time for friends."

"Yeah. It's the job," he sighs. "But don't you ever get lonely?"

"No," I snap, shortly. "I'm not the kind of person who needs much company."

"No. Right," he smiles. "Hey, that smells great, sir." He sniffs the air extravagantly, and I have to laugh.

"I can cook!" I announce boastfully. "And it kind of feels wrong to have you call me sir. Today, for one day only, why don't you call me Walter?"

"Walter? Fine," he grins. "Please don't call me Fox though. Mulder is fine. Fox is gross." He puts his finger down his throat and mimes a vomiting fit.

"Hey - you haven't even **tasted** my cooking yet," I find myself joking, and he grins even more.

"Walter Skinner. Culinary genius." Mulder sits back in his chair and runs his hands over his distended stomach. "You are the cook to beat all cooks, Walter."

"Somehow I get the feeling you don't eat home cooked meals very often," I shake my head, still marveling at the three helpings he managed to devour.

"E.S.P?" he puts his slender fingers against my head, and I'm reminded suddenly, and bizarrely, of Mr. Spock doing a Vulcan mind meld. "Are you telepathic, Walter? How did you guess that? Are you trying to make me investigate an X File on Christmas day?!"

"Idiot." I shake my head, dislodging his fingers. "I bet you never cook for yourself though, do you?"

"Cook?" he feigns astonishment. "What's that? Nah, you're right, Walter. I don't cook. Neither does my mom. And nor, to my certain knowledge, did my dad. The Mulder family doesn't have those kinds of genes. The Scully family on the other hand, has them in abundance. Mrs Scully cooks almost as well as you do, Walter."

"Flattery will get you coffee," I grin, standing up and feeling pleasantly full myself. And surprisingly happy. Mulder's good company, and, you know, it's nice not to be alone for a change. He gets up, and wanders around the room, examines my CD and video collection, while I disappear into the kitchen to make the coffee.

"Have you ever built a snowman, Walter?" he asks, head on one side.

"Of course. Hasn't everyone?" I grunt.

He's sitting by the window, one slender hand resting against the glass, staring out at the snow. His empty coffee cup hangs from a languid finger.

"A White Christmas," he laughs, showing white teeth. "Just like the ones we used to know."

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"It was?" He thinks back.

"Yeah. Last year it snowed. I remember because..." And I pause, the words catching in my throat.

Outside the snow is falling fast, too fast, burying everything under a white landscape. My world is blurry, and I take my glasses off, wipe them on the tablecloth.

"Yes?" his voice is a whisper.

"I remember because that was when I asked them to turn off Sharon's respirator. I remember looking at her white face, then looking out of the window, and seeing the snowflakes fall. She loved the snow. She loved Christmas. I never did."

"How long was she in a coma for?" he asks, and his voice is close. I can't see him though. I can't see anyone but her. She was so beautiful. And so still. And white. Lying in her white hospital gown, under white sheets, in a white room. And outside the world was painting itself white too.

"Ten months," I shrug. "I kept thinking...hoping..."

"Yes." I feel a hand on my shoulder.

"It was Christmas Day. I told them to turn it off on Christmas Day. They said I should have done it before, that she would never regain consciousness, but I couldn't until that day. Seeing her lying there, on the day she loved more than any other, knowing this wasn't the way she would have wanted to spend it. That's when I decided."

"I built a snowman a few months after Sam disappeared." He rests his head against mine. "I asked Mom what I could dress him in and she brought me out Sam's old coat, and one of her woollen hats. That's when I knew she wasn't coming back."

It's dark outside now, and dark inside. I can feel his hand pressed briefly against my arm.

"Come on, Walter." He pulls me up, finds my coat, and puts it on me as if I'm a child.

"Mulder...what?"

"Come with me." He drags me out of the door, and down to the elevator, then out into the street and along to the park. He laughs as he runs in the snow, his mouth open, catching snowflakes.

"Mulder...I'm way too old for this!" I protest, but he just grabs my arm and keeps pulling.

"No you're not, Walter. Neither am I. Come on!"

He picks up a handful of snow and throws it at me, laughing as it smashes against my head. I'm laughing too, much to my own surprise. I pursue him through the park, throwing snowballs at him, until I catch up and stuff a handful of snow down the back of his sweater, making him squeal.

"You bastard, Walter!" he grins, his teeth white against the dark evening sky. "I'll get you for that!" He lunges at me, snow in hand, but he's just a kid, a boy, and I side-step him easily, grabbing him in a neck lock and throwing him down on the soft snowy ground, kicking snow over him as he lies there, laughing his ass off.

"This is what you call 'getting me' is it?" I grin, reaching down to shovel snow onto his face with my gloved hands.

"No. This is." He gets up, smoothly, hanging onto the lapels of my coat, and his lips brush away the snow from my eyelashes. It's so quick, so sudden, and unexpected, that my heart stops for a moment, then starts again, beating too fast. I stand there in the snow, feeling it cover me, like a blanket.

Time stands still. The night is crystal clear, icy, gleaming and glinting like a diamond, and there's just me, and the darkness, and the moon, and the snow. Cold and yet warm at the same time. The moment stretches into eternity, and all the while I can see his dancing hazel

eyes, and the outline of his mouth as it slowly, oh so slowly, closes against mine. His lips are soft, and tender, and mine are unresisting. He tastes unfamiliar, strong, muscular, yet curiously so yielding, and sweet.

When he lets me go, I find that I can't move.

"You look like you're wearing a hat." He wipes a cloud of snow from my bare head. "My real life snowman."

"Did you just kiss me?" I ask, still in shock.

"Yes. Did you enjoy it?" he grins, brushing more snow from my shoulders.

"Yes."

There are white flakes of snow in his dark hair, and one flake comes to rest gently on the tip of his nose. Thick droplets of water coat his eyelashes.

"You have a new memory now, Walter," he smiles, taking my hand and running me across the snowy landscape. "Next time it snows, think of me, dancing." He swivels his hips outrageously, the swirling snowflakes making patterns around his head, and across his body, until he blends into the blizzard, a manic, dancing mannequin, twisting in time to the winter music.

He leads me home through the fog of snow and of my whirling mind, and when he gets me into my apartment, he undoes my coat, his long fingers straying to caress my cold face. I stand there, stupefied, my mouth aching to be kissed again, and he obliges, his lips feeling too warm and solid against my frozen mouth.

"My snowman," he murmurs, not stopping at my coat, moving on to unbutton my shirt as well. "Let's thaw you out, shall we?"

His mouth lingers against my neck, softly presses against a collarbone, lightly teases a nipple. He takes my hand and leads me over to the fire, undoes my pants, and pushes them down my thighs, and my briefs follow. As if in a dream I step out of them, and allow him to press me down onto the rug, allow his body to nuzzle against mine as if it were made to fit there. His head beneath my chin, his long legs wrapped around my thighs, his hands stroking my body. I'm dimly aware that he's undressed too. I can feel his skin, naked against my own, a light sheen of sweat glistening in the orange glow of the fire. He makes love to me gently, softly, sweetly, as if in a dream. His tongue is slow and languid, his hands feather light. He doesn't taste like Sharon, or smell like her. His man's body is different, and yet so perfect. Beautiful - just as she was. He is new, unfamiliar, and yet so familiar too. I let him do whatever he wants, move to accommodate whatever he asks, allow him to touch me in ways I never knew were possible, never dreamed of, or thought I wanted. Yet my body responds to his expert touch, like a musical instrument being played by a master.

When at last, evening turns to night, and our bodies are exhausted, my new love holds me in his arms and smiles, one fingertip resting on my lips.

"Despite what we thought - it turned out to be a good Christmas after all, Walter," he whispers.

The End

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