

Holiday

by S.H. Gall

My reedy frame was cloaked in a heavy down parka that night at the Holiday. It was uncomfortably warm in the room to begin with, perhaps with the collective yearning of many souls, but the parka had one useful quality. It was handy for casually brushing up against bodies. And one body in particular.

There were precious few men to my liking that night, which was typical. I was very young, so young I was swilling gin & tonics in the pit of winter. I had a boyfriend. We had sex quite often, yet I still craved more on the side. My guy was Croatian. I sought an Italian.

There were a few interactions with random strangers who sat on the next stool. Small talk mostly, followed by abrupt turn-downs. All it took was a rueful smile and a turn of the head. Meaningless, because they weren't my type. Mine was a shallow world. There was a particular guy I liked who usually could be found on any given night, waiting to get fucked in the back of his conversion van. He was the oldest of my conquests, but insatiable despite his age. Not tonight, though. I was about to throw in the towel when I saw him.

Brown eyes, check. Noble nose, check. Other details fell by the wayside. The bathroom was in the basement, and as I meandered down to it, I made a point of letting my heavy coat brush the man's back as I passed. After three such forays to the filthy john, he turned his head, curious as to why my coat kept making contact with his back. With some hesitancy he got up, and led me to the door.

He could scarcely believe I'd chosen him, but the quilted brush — more like a light smack — of the parka left him no choice but to accept. He lived just a few blocks away. I don't recall the walk, but my recollection of our stripping down once in his living room is impeccable. He was short, and hairy, and his mouth tasted of garlic and Campari. Well-hung. Snow white tan. Unmistakably Italian.

I didn't get his digits. Two weeks later, I was standing outside his building, throwing snowballs at his window to get his attention.

Somewhat incredulously, he accepted my offer for another encounter. And then there were others.

I stayed with my boyfriend, had affairs with many men, mostly married. But the Italian from the Holiday refused to leave my head. The Croatian finally left town, not willing to support my bad habits, not willing to continue couples therapy, eager to soak in his beloved California sun. I went further down the rabbit hole, finally discovering bona fide insanity. An antidepressant I was taking caused a psychotic break, and I ended up in the hospital on a Valium drip.

I've been with the Italian for over a decade now ... and officially, as a couple, for four years and counting. The Holiday is closed now, the building demolished. But as I sit on the bus and pass the site, I can see it clear as day. It was a beginning.

