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The Talk

BY GIBSON FAY-LEBLANC

Kate was a devoted women's studies major with long hair that seemed to have a color and life of its own. A brown built from gold and rust and fresh-dug earth. She raised money to put a rape whistle in every student's mailbox; she wrote a thesis analyzing the paternalism inherent in the college's expansion plans. I was a longhaired peacenik, ex-hockey player—the one who dropped his free ride to study Shakespeare and the Metaphysical Poets.

Our lengthy courtship was either one night at a keg party, or two years of subversive work followed by one beautiful night at

a keg party.

I noticed Kate at freshmen orientation. Something about the way she carried herself: her small frame, the angle of her chin and neck, her eyes' bright secrets. I was distracted plenty by the large-breasted bottle-blondes who hung around the hockey house—the kind of girls I dated in high school—but I kept my eyes on Kate.

For two years, I noted where she studied in the library and found chairs not too close but close enough that she might walk by and see me intent on Love in the *Time of Cholera* or the complete John Donne. After I quit the hockey team, I volunteered to

build houses in Kentucky over spring break but got put in the group Kate wasn't leading. Sophomore year I brought my own home-made sign to the annual Take Back the Night walk Kate organized: *Dudes, No Means No*. She never looked twice in my direction. I began to wonder, though, if never looking at me twice was a strategy, something she was proving to herself.

That night I was deep into a paper on the lyrical appeal of Satan in *Paradise Lost* when barbaric hooting and yelling shattered the library's quiet. It grew louder and louder until three senior defensemen, Big Will, Macky, and Strapdog, rushed

through the swinging leather doors of the main reading room, called out “T Went,” hoisted my chair above their heads, and carried me out in it, whooping and grunting all the while.

A couple of hours later, I sat in that same chair on the porch of the hockey house, pumping and pouring from the keg, checking out the star-lidded sky, and thinking this wasn’t so bad, when I looked up and saw Kate standing there with two empty cups.

“Double fisting?” I said.

She almost smiled. “For my friends. Had to get outside.”

I nodded, tried to be cool. “Quieter out here.”

“Is it always like this?”

“Wait till the Jello shots come out.”

“I plan to be long gone by then.”

I pointed behind her, above the roofline of a row of three-deckers across the street. “Venus is in the crescent phase, about to disappear.”

She looked.

“When it’s closest, we can’t see it. Only 27 million miles away.”

What the hell am I saying?

The light from inside flashed green in her eyes. “Why does it disappear when it’s closest?”

“It’s reflecting all the light away from earth. If it was daytime and we had a telescope with a solar filter, we’d see a black dot moving across the sun.”

“Hockey player and star gazer?”

“I haven’t been a hockey player since we were first years,” I said, patting myself on the back for not saying *freshmen*.

“Must be weird, living here.”

“When in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes.”

A dimple flashed in her cheek when she smiled.

We talked about classes. I told her about Milton’s blindness, his daughter writing for him, and how my hockey buddies still couldn’t accept that I’d found something that wasn’t on ice.

A guttural roar came from inside—probably someone doing a funnel.

“Wanna get out of here?” I said.

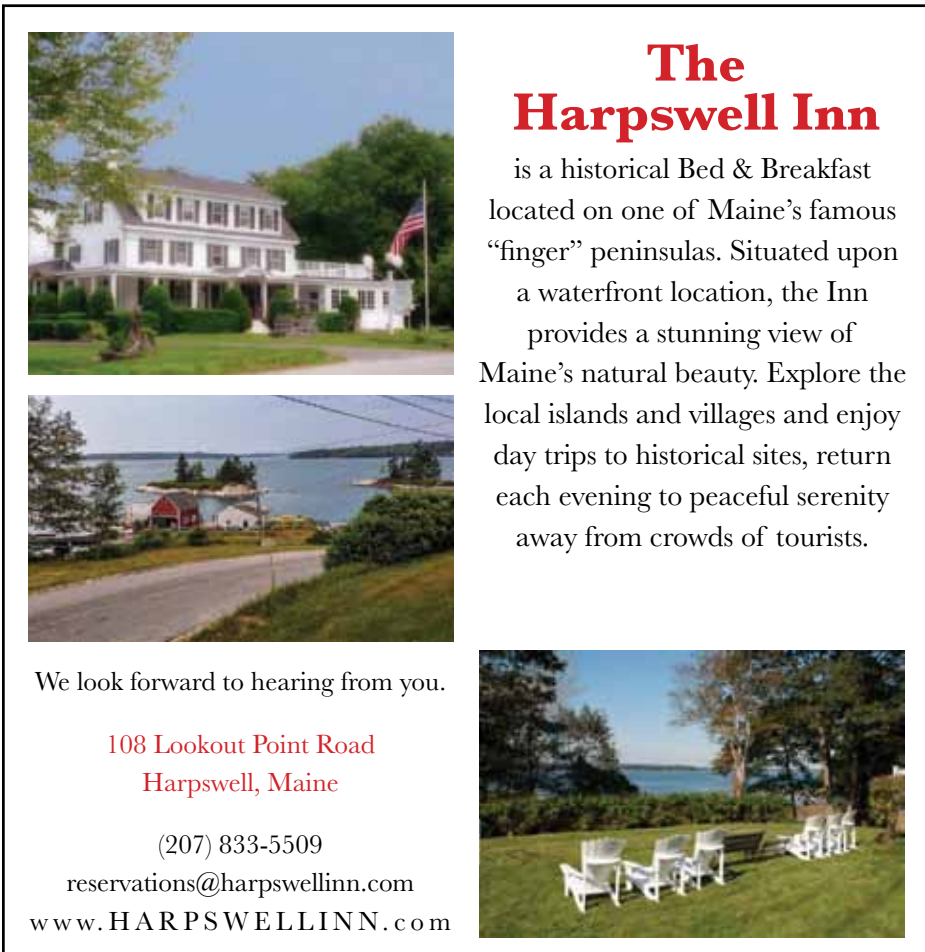
“Where?”

I shrugged. “I like to walk at night.” She was still holding the two plastic



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cups, now full. "I should bring these in to my friends."

"They could figure it out for themselves."

"And you could walk by yourself."

"Beautiful night, though."

I turned and walked down the stairs, forcing myself not to look back. The screen door slammed.

At the corner I stood next to the stop sign for a minute. *Loop back to the party or a long, lonely walk?* There were more of these walks lately than anything else.

"Are you beweeeping your outcast state?"

I turned and saw Kate walking down the block, her teeth lit by the streetlight. Her thin legs below her jean shorts, her ankles above her black sandals.

We walked and talked about books, the right-leaning campus newspaper, the best pastrami sandwich in town, and why Kate drove the Women's Studies van. She told me about a roommate who was raped two months into freshman year.

That night, as we walked and talked, I didn't so much as hold her hand. A couple of hours later, as we wound our way back to the party, I described how fathers should take turns staying home with the kids.

"It's more equitable," I said, gesticulating with my right hand, "plus fathers have lessons to impart without the mother around."

"And vice-versa."

"Of course."

It wasn't a lie. It's not like I concocted another Sam to convince Kate to invite me along for her end-of-the-night route, dropping several tipsy girls back to their dorms. But I was aware of my audience.

The piano and harmonica of "Thunder Road" came on the radio as we drove back up the hill toward the parking lot. *Oh, come take my hand*, I sang out the window quietly, stars a meager chorus over the streetlights, *Riding out tonight to case the promised land*. At the left-hand turn at the top of the hill, Kate gunned it an extra block and took a right down a dark cul-de-sac. She pulled over, put the van in park and turned toward me—teeth marks on her lower lip. She grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the long seat in the back.

Gibson Fay-LeBlanc was Portland's poet laureate from 2015 to 2018. "The Talk" is an excerpt from a novel-in-progress, *A River Between Us*.



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