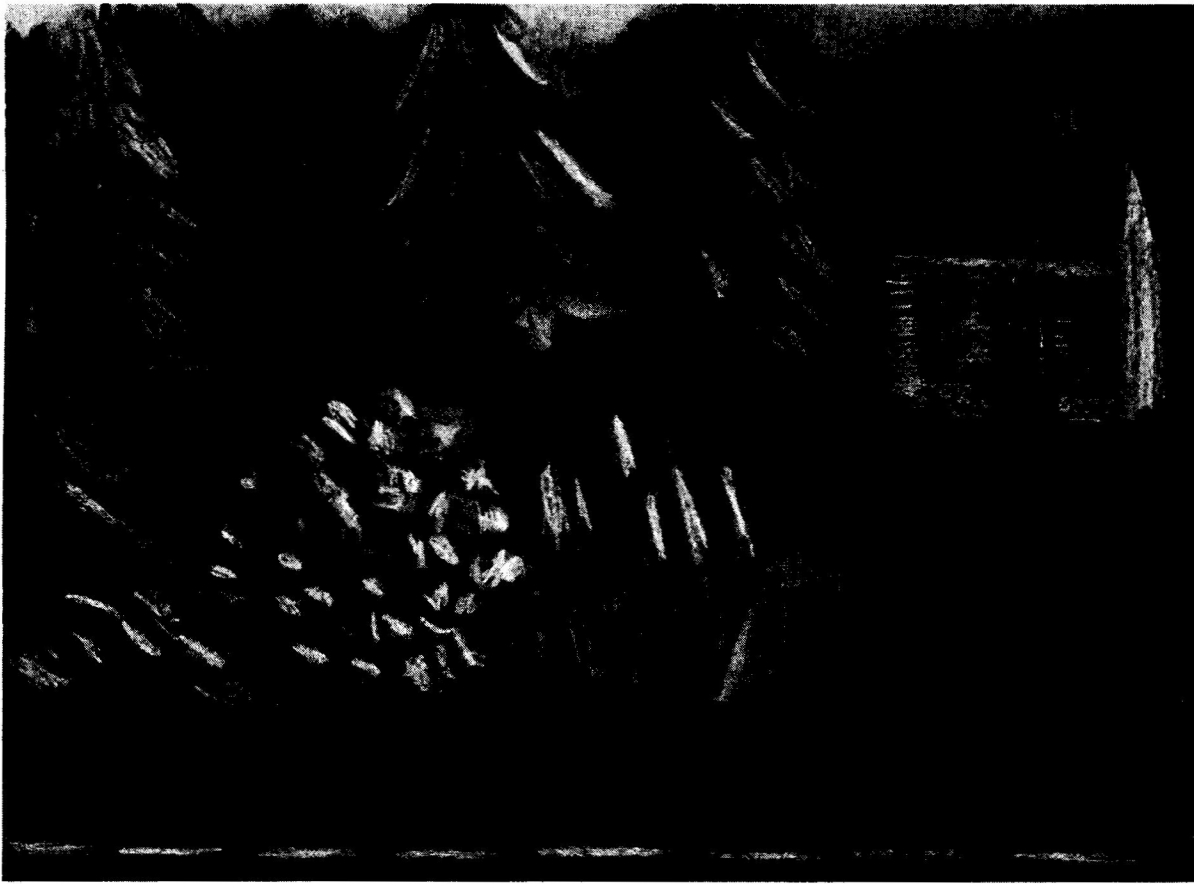


Speeding On Small Roads

Fiction By Sebastian Junger



ILLUSTRATION/MICHELLE DAMBOISE

When Joey came back from work it was dusk and very cold, frost on the windows. Melissa was drawing and didn't look up even when he stomped the snow off his boots. Some nights the snow melted in the hallway and some nights were so cold and they kept the heat so low it didn't melt 'till dawn. Then the sun would come along.

She'd been drawing all afternoon. She'd drawn onions she'd drawn work boots—Joey had two pair—she'd drawn paper clips she'd drawn her toes real large. Joey stood in the hallway and stripped his clothes. He peeled off his Carhardtts, his sweatshirt, his flannel shirt, his other flannel shirt, his long john top, his canvas work pants, his long john bottoms, his socks and walked up to her. He was utterly naked. She continued to draw.

"I'm showering," he said.

She said, "Well, hello."

His feet squeaked on the floor. Mel-

issa glanced back at him and kept drawing. She drew the cat she drew the kitchen sink she drew a glove. She drew fast, moving around the apartment in blue sweats and sweaters, and folded the sheets of paper back and drew more. Some drawings took thirty seconds and she liked those best. Others took years and made her cry. She drew vegetables for a while and gave that up for toes. She drew toes and from that learned feet and finally shoes, she drew a lot of shoes and boots too, boots in particular, especially Joey's work boots which were cracked and paint-spattered and looked like they would never give out or need to be replaced, would stay faithful to Joey's hard-working feet forever.

Joey had red hair. He had good balance and graceful long legs despite his really big faithful boots and he'd climb most anything (shingled a church roof once and those babies are steep, he liked to say). He could also lift

real heavy stuff and do tons of pushups and situps and everybody but everybody just loved him.

He's perfect in almost every way, Melissa thought. Mainly, she loved his red hair.

He turned the water off too slowly and the pipes rattled. He whistled while he dried himself and then emerged from the bathroom with billows of steam and again his feet squeaked on the floor. He had stripped and varnished the floor on weekends in exchange for a half-month's rent and sometimes it seemed to Melissa he just couldn't stop working. That could make her cry; times, most anything could make her cry.

You're awful lucky, hissed her mother. Awful damn lucky, that man you have.

Melissa had olive skin round almond eyes and hair so rich and dark Joey wrapped himself in it when he slept. He looked forward to her every day. They would be married in the spring.

His feet left puddles on the acrylic finish of the floor. He crossed the bedroom and kissed her on the cheek. She was drawing the laundry bin now—she drew in thick Conti crayon that blackened her fingertips on cheap manilla paper and it really looked like a laundry bin; looked just like one. She smiled and kept drawing.

"Go well today?" he said.

"I drew everything in the apartment twice," she said.

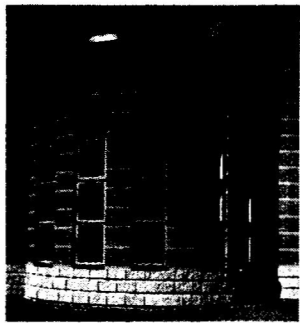
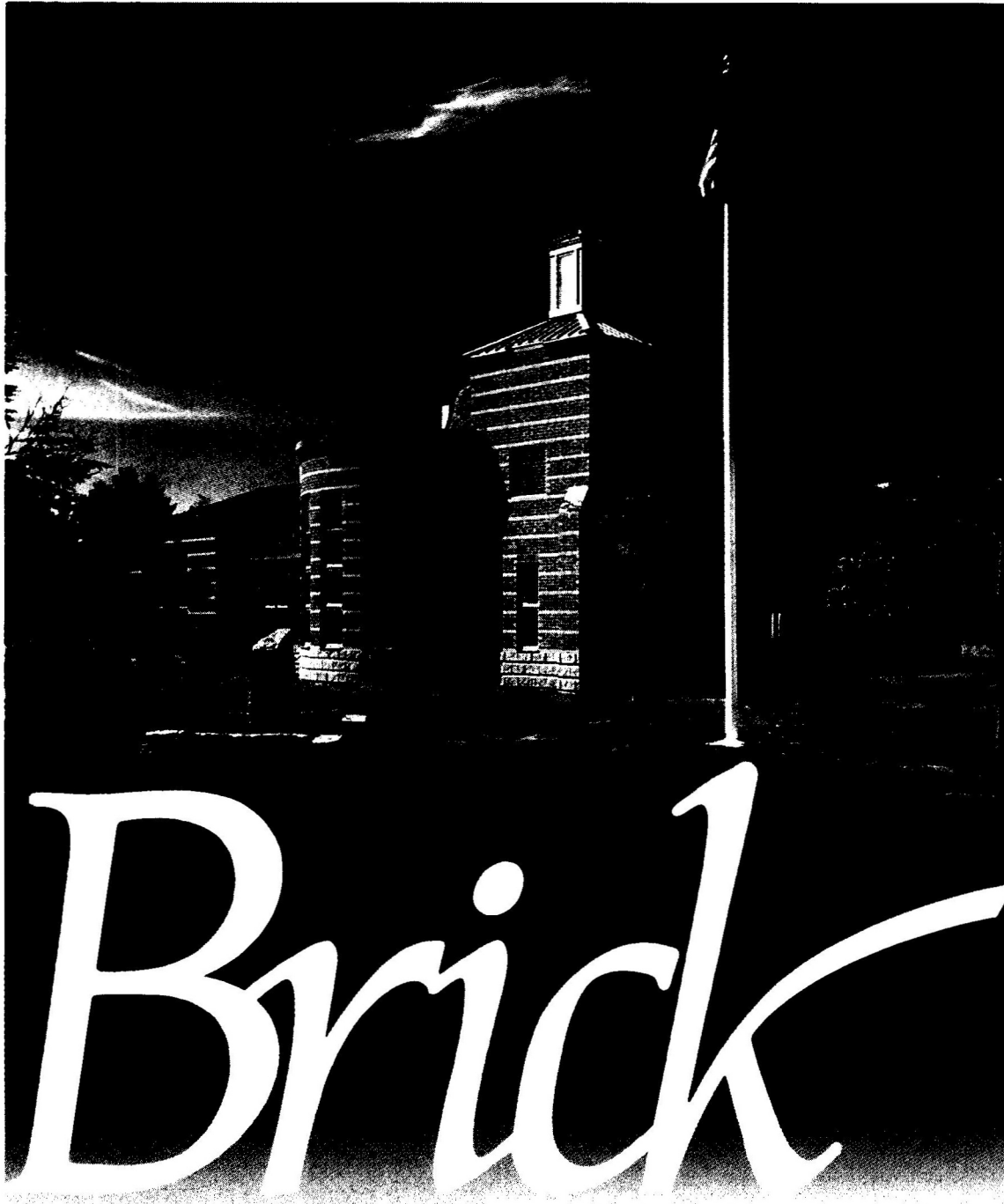
"Then what?"

"I'll start on the street."

"The street?"

"Lie down," she said.

She sat on his hips where his belt would be and put the pad on his chest. The hair on his chest was red like on his head, it was red all over him except on his chin where it was really more gold, she'd noted, and she started to draw. She drew his eyes and then tore the sheet off, right off the pad and started again with his bones. She did his cheekbones and chinbone and jawbone and then, exactly, how his hair fell. It cascaded like ropy golden water (she told him that once; what, he'd said?). She kept drawing and finally wanted to do his chest but her pad was on it; she took off her pants instead. She took off her shirt and sweaters too



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and sat there drawing in nothing but breasts, Joey thought.

"What?"

"Nothing," he said.

His features began to fill in. She moved on him, just so. He looked sleepy but smiled a little. His lips smiled, his face stayed the same, tilted back. "Hmm," he said.

She drew his nose and his neck. She drew his wrinkles, each one. He was really filling in.

"Keep your head back," she said. He smiled again even though he looked like he was asleep too. He was not asleep and they were gonna marry in the spring. His mouth was open and she drew it and all the teeth that were in it. She drew quickly like the thirty-second things that were really her best even alongside the three-year stuff that made everybody cry.

He moved under her in tiny little earthquakes and thought about his work boots. They were the boots he put on every day to go to work for the woman he was gonna marry in the spring and BOY we're young, he thought, looking up at her really wonderful young breasts.

She finished his eyebrows and sat up and put him inside her and drew his ear.

"Come here," he said.

His hair's catching the light just right and it really is golden, she thought. This is the best I've ever drawn him and I've drawn him a lot cause we're gonna marry but this is the best maybe the very best I've ever done and my GOD the light on his hair.

"Keep your head back, will you?" she said.

He kept his head back. He worked every day really hard; every day. She didn't work but she drew and they were gonna get married in the spring. I'll work for both of us, he thought; I'll work and never do anything stupid, not fall off a roof or drink or gamble or even speed on small roads. This is it, he thought; this is really it.

She drew his lips and then his eyes. She drew so fast she couldn't keep up with herself. She laid the Conti crayon flat against the paper, flush against the grain. Her strokes were fast, almost brutal. The lines lost their detail, became thick and black. She struggled. He disappeared. Eventually the darkness filled the page. ■