

*"And in the end, it's not the
years in your life that count.*

It's the life in your years."

-Abraham Lincoln

A platoon of soldiers is marching along a road, forty strong they march in formation; a ten by four grid. They are of varied heights, arranged in no order and with no apparent leader, they move forward at a measured pace. All but one are men, the only woman is at the rear, slightly shorter but otherwise no different to the men. All are veterans, none below the age of twenty: they have seen much conflict.

Apart from this platoon, the whole long road is deserted. It is fairly wide, big enough for six vehicles abreast and crudely constructed; despite this it is blemish free. It curves slightly to the middle, towards the soldiers where they march, up the centre of the road, equidistant from both sides.

They march under the moon, its light crashes violently into the road, silhouetting the platoon against the cold wintery backdrop of the night. The air is still. It is raining heavily, falling constantly amongst the soldiers; there is no protection in the exposed open landscape of the road. The rain falls at a sharp angle, nearly forty-five degrees to the soldiers despite the lack of wind.

At regular intervals the night is lit up by a crack of lightning, piercing the heart of the sky it is followed ten seconds later by the rolling wave of thunder that breaks over the marching soldiers. The road is silent but for the falling rain, as if the world has stopped and is cleansing itself. It pounds the road into mud; the footprints of the soldiers gradually fill up with water before being consumed by the earth, erasing what has been.

The sky is split, ten seconds later its energy roles over the road, a loud boom of thunder accompanying it. And everything becomes still again, but for the patter of rain on the road, where, shoulder to shoulder, the platoon is marching.

They are strong, well toned and of mixed race: their skin is darkened by time in the sun, their hair lightened. The woman is paler, with naturally

dark hair; she has been exposed less. They are all dressed alike; faded khakis, of a coarse, hardy material; their boots practical but worn, victims of heavy use. They carry no packs and their belts are empty. Each carry the same gun, a long assault rifle, held rigidly away from their body, it is cocked and ready. They walk in a tight group, marching in step, in a straight line, parallel to both sides of the road. The moon illuminates the path ahead.

In front of them is the coarse mud of the road, equally viscose across its whole breadth. The platoon marches forward in a straight line, without making the slightest little detour. Behind them the surface is marked by their footprints, unblemished in the clean mud, quite deep, about two inches; the rain fills them and they are consumed.

The road is bordered on each side by human waste and wreckage, the crumbling shells of buildings and burnt shells of industry. There is nothing natural about the ruins, their harsh right-angles of protruding functionality interrupt the smooth contours of the natural world.

The soldiers are looking straight ahead. They don't so much as glance at the rubble on either side of them; they are even less inclined to turn around and see how far they have come. They continue on their way with evenly spaced, rapid steps. In the distance lightning strikes, splitting the sky and lighting up the night; a wave of thunder rolls across the road, rain washes away the footprints.

In front of them are two owls, perched on the rubble just at the edge of the road. They sit there, their deep yellow eyes tracking the platoon as it marches inexorably on. But the soldiers do not notice, with their eyes focussed straight ahead they barely notice the destruction around them, oblivious to what they have left behind. As the platoon moves closer towards them, the owls flap their wings and fly off; describing a curve across the night sky they are silhouetted by a crack of lightning before coming down again just on the edge of the rubble, about a hundred yards away; chased by a rolling wave of thunder.

Taking no notice of the tracks they are carving so precisely on the road, nor of the lighting in the distance, nor the owls having flown overhead, the platoon moves forward, a four by ten grid, with measured steps.

Their faces, while physically different, are alike. Their expression is the same; serious, thoughtful, perhaps a little anxious. They walk with the same purpose, the same goal. Their grooming, too, is identical, they wear the same cropped haircut, and share two days of facial growth; though it is obvious one is a woman, her hair longer and face bare.

She is at the rear, second from the left, her eyes tunnel intensely into the back of the man in front. On her left is a tall man, dark and heavy; to her right, the smallest of the men, his hair is light and skin pale.

In front of them marches the platoon, the road stretches as far as the eye can see in either direction, it is bounded only by the devastation on either side. On their left, the buildings rise almost majestically out of the ground, a testament to the ingenuity of men, falling to time. On their right the destruction is more immense, buildings are levelled; there is a strange calm in their absence. They are lit up by a sudden crack of lightning in the sky; it immediately retreats as if it were never there.

Then, ten seconds later, a thunderous boom rolls across the night, sweeping down the road it leaves a ringing in the ears of the soldiers.

The thunder flees as fast as it had come; silence engulfs the road again, regaining its hold on the introverted world of the platoon. During the silence, the falling of the rain intensifies, plunging the soldiers into a solitary world of confinement; they can no longer see ahead.

In the ensuing moments, the echoing crack of a far distant gun can be heard, carried towards them on the wind. Only the woman reacts, turning to her shorter counterpart they exchange in low tones; the platoon stares blankly forward. The rain drowns the faint ringing on the air and the platoon marches forward.

When the rain has dissipated, they can no longer hear anything. The platoon is still marching, the same regular rhythm, eyes fixed straight ahead. In front of them, four owls sit impassively in the heights of

destruction, their yellow eyes staring deliberately over the road. As the platoon approaches, they flap their wings and fly off.

They describe a curve over the devastation, and come down in the rubble, still in the same direction, just at the edge of the road, about a hundred yards away. A bolt of lightning pierces the night.

"Maybe the end is near," says the woman at the rear of the platoon, "we've never been this far before..."

Her words are drowned by the rumble of thunder washing over them.

"And we'll never come as far again," replies the dark man to her left.

But this hasn't made them modify their pace; and the same prints, behind them, continue to appear, as they go along, before they are consumed in a puddle of rain; lost to the world.

After a moment, the blond man to her right, says:

"We're still a long way off."

And then all three walk on in silence.

They remain thus silent until, in the distance, gun fire can be heard, rising and falling on the breeze and piercing the air, but still indistinct. The woman breathes: "There it is."

There is no reply.

The owls, which they had been on the point of catching up, flap their wings and fly off, first one, then two...

There are six now, floating on the breeze, their yellow eyes pierce the rain, then they are once more on the ground, about a hundred yards in front of the platoon.

The night is pierced now at regular intervals, long bolts of lightning trace through the sky; thunder follows only two seconds later.

The rain stops. The platoon continues to march forward. Ahead of them, six owls sit impassively on the side of the road, they stoically watch the platoon approaching, eyes unblinking and intense. Beyond the owls the devastation stops, it is replaced by nothing, merely empty space, the road

continues indeterminably to the horizon. In the distance the guns cease, all is silent but for the ever present rain hitting the ground.

As the soldiers move past the owls, lightning cracks, brighter than before, the deep bass of thunder rolls down the road, rain cleanses the air, washing away the footprints.

The platoon keeps moving, marching indeterminably forward; behind them it keeps raining, the wind dies, and the east glows.