

The Golden Gate Miles

Skateboarding was easy, with enough experience anyone could at least ride a distance, it was who came with it, that Mason found difficult. At high school's start, many young teens were desperate for a pack, and at the time he jumped at the opportunity to be in the cool gang of skater guys. A lot of things were different before America's second civil war, a time when Mason didn't wake up in a new bed every morning.

This dawn was in another abandoned house, this time it was more of a manor, that sat atop a green hill dotted with redwood trees. Mason took one last look around the mansion-he wished that his group could at least spend one more night, but a schedule was to be kept, and so Mason swung backpack over his shoulders and donned his Great Grandfather's WW2 helmet. It was the only acceptable safety feature to the gang, even now with injuries being a much bigger deal than in the past.

"Hey guys, how many miles are we traveling today?" Mason called out as he exited the manor and onto the street. "About 15 miles before we stop--hoping to make it to the Golden Gate bridge by sundown," Peter said, joint bobbing between his lips. Mason nodded and followed the group without another word. He didn't talk to Peter, Noah, and Clyde that much nowadays, before the war hit, it was easier to make conversation. Now any words Mason said seemed like a reminder of how different he was from them.

Getting started was always the hard part in Mason's opinion, having to pump his leg to keep up with the pack, right after he woke up, with just some beef jerky to serve as breakfast. Noah, the leader of the gang, had decided to only bust out the MREs at lunch, and by dinner they

would find a good place for a fire. “Most practical plan,” Noah had said when they had decided to head up north, following the escape route to Canada and away from the fighting.

The sun was partially hidden by dark clouds in the sky, giving the right balance of heat and shade as the four boys rode down the 280 highway. Cars and other abandoned vehicles lined the sides the road, pushed out of the way by military convoys, and other large migrations of people heading north.

“It’s almost like a wall,” Mason said to the group, who just made agreeing noises. The concrete stretched along a rural path, that Mason admired it in a way, how it seemed like this continuous pile up of cars was keeping back nature. Mason even began to think of a poem to write later, a hobby that was often laughed away by Clyde, who was the self proclaimed jokester of the group. He often used Mason as a prop for his comedic material, though no one would ever laugh. Not because Noah and Peter respected Mason, more because Clyde’s jokes were painfully bad.

Mason still thought of poetry, despite no one around wanting to hear it. He still made mental poems when he was skateboarding. And write them down when they all took a break from boarding.

The gang had gone a significant distance, when Noah announced it was time for lunch. The remains of a rest stop on the San Francisco city limits was where they got off their boards. The field the boys set up in, was overgrown, not that it stopped Clyde from rolling around in it, while Mason set up everyone’s lunch. MREs or Meals Ready to Eat was the typical lunch meal for the four of them, being the only thing the military still handed out for food.

Peter dug into his meal with weed fueled hunger, Clyde tried to crack a joke about Mason and his meal preparation, Noah just ate not even paying attention to Clyde's bit, while Mason himself thought of something he could say that would sound cool.

Mason peered over the hill's crest as he began to notice some smoke. "Guys, I think there's a fire in the city?" Mason said.

"The Rebels are using a scorched earth tactic, burning most of the city so the Loyalists can't use anything," Peter said. Mason looked down upon the city of San Francisco, now starting to see the flames that slowly grew. "Do you think we should head out now before the fire reaches us?" Mason said.

"Don't worry, the fire isn't gonna come up here. The rebels made sure to give a safe route for refugees like us," Peter said now staring at Mason's uneaten lunch.

"You can have it. I'm using the bathroom," Mason said before walking over to the cement shack. He wasn't really feeling the need to use this cold concrete room for his business but rather to write down an idea for a poem he got looking at the burning city. Mason liked to think about his situation as history in progress, one day the war would end, one day Mason could look back at this and smile at how worried he was and how it all turned out well. Mason's leather journal was already halfway filled with poems, written with shaky hands. All based on the slowly darkening world that surrounded this young teen.

City on fire

Burning Hope

Walls of cars stacking higher

Only friend, just a bag of dope

World ruled by hate

Running up North

Only chance to escape

Begging for the border to quickly come forth

As Mason stared at the finished poem, he heard an explosion and what felt like a short earthquake followed. Stuffing the book back into his backpack, Mason ran outside to see three fighter jets zip by. He ran over to his abandoned lunch, and turning his gaze in circles Mason, finally spotted his group just starting to ride down the hill.

“Guys wait!” Mason yelled hopping onto his skateboard. Mason rode it down the hill struggling with his balance as he fumbled with his metal helmet. Peter was the first one to look back, only shrugging in response to Mason’s cries to let him catch up. The gang was 12 yards ahead and didn’t seem to want to slow down, the laughing of Clyde could be heard with the gusts of wind. Then, the skateboard struck a bump in the road and Mason was flung off. Bouncing on the asphalt, his vision twirled until it came to a stop. When it did Mason wasted no time getting back on his skateboard and pumped his left foot to still follow the trio, who were nothing more than dots in the distance.

Mason knew it was pointless to attempt to follow his friends who had disappeared into the dark haze from the city fire. He laughed a little at how the black smoke looked like an evil fog rather than what would normally accompany San Francisco. But this was already making Mason cough, tear up, and he knew it was time to find a place to stop.

He found shelter in the historical section of the Presidio, with the eucalyptus trees shading the teen from the setting sun. The smoke itself wasn’t as bad here, which meant the fire

wasn't nearby. Mason vaguely recalled a fun fact Peter had told him, how white or light gray smoke meant that whatever fire there was, was dying down. Peter was always full of facts

A unlocked manor with a beige paint-job was where Mason decided to spend the night.

"Guess I'll crash here," Mason said, walking throughout the abandoned building. Right about now Noah was probably choosing a place they could spend the night, most likely already north of the Golden Gate Bridge.

Mason found a can of chili in the pantry, chose a bed on the second floor, and took off his shoes at the bedroom door. It would be about now when Clyde would make a terrible joke on the younger teen's stinky feet.

The jets seemed to have quieted down. Mason sat in the stillness, the only sounds being his spoon hitting the bottom of the can. He sighed, and pulled out his journal, and flipped to the first page, it was a poem about the first day of high school. That was the passage Mason was working on when Clyde had approached him. At first it was to mock Mason by doing a bad impression, one that made Noah walk over and apologize for the "bad attempt at bullying," and invite the 14 year old Mason to join them for lunch. After that he worked his way into the group. Mason had thought when he was traveling up from Santa Cruz with the three of them, that he had found a place in their group. He thought he was one of the guys.

Mason lie down and lit a blunt. He couldn't say now that being left behind was all that surprising. He figured that in times filled with war and hardship you only wanted to save those closest to you. It wasn't like Mason was gonna give up--he still had dreams of the safe zone in Canada.

Blowing out a puff of smoke, Mason looked out the window, the moon had already risen, clear and bright. Tomorrow he'd fill up his bag with food lying around, and make his way across the Golden Gate Bridge. Not because he still wanted to catch up with Noah, Peter, and Clyde, but because Mason still wanted to journey north. He still wanted a peaceful life, he owed it to himself, and he would make it to a new home.