

**Chapter One: Henry Reads the Handwriting on the Wall**  
from [Beercans on the Side of the Road: The Story of Henry the Hitchhiker](#)

**Abstract:** It looks like young Henry Freedman, star student from Midlincum Heights, is not going to listen to reason from Papa's card-playing buddy, Mayor Ginslinger, and is going to drop out of school. There go his hopes for a successful future.

Mama gasped for breath suddenly, her face turning red as a result, and slumped back onto the sofa chair so that her head hung over its back and her arms drooped to each side. Tears came to her eyes. She pulled out her handkerchief from the front pocket of her apron and blew her nose. "My son, my son, where did I fail you?" She cried profusely before regaining her composure.

She shook her head in disgust then as she threw darts at me from the nail of her pointed finger. "And don't let me hear any more of that talk about dropping out of school, Henry Freedman. Now, quickly, be off or you'll be late for Simchas Torah services."

In embarrassed silence, I kissed her cheek and left the home of my parents.

The streets were alive with suits and ties and mink stoles and crewcut treelawns and friends who knew what they wanted to be when they grew up and parents who had found their niche in society. *Shul*-walking was a community activity now, and had been since the congregation sold the downtown building to a Black Baptist congregation and built a new structure on the Jewish side of town at the turn of the decade. Simchas Torah is observed, according to the Jewish calendar, on the ninth and last day of Succos. It is one of the most joyous holidays of the Jewish year.

But as I walked the six blocks to Temple from Mama and Papa's house, I was feeling glum. The future loomed ominously near and I didn't feel prepared. Graduation was three terms away. After twenty-two years as a dependent, I would be shot like a cannonball into the job market, where I would be forced to fend for myself, with only the love of my family and *chutzpah* to keep me grounded in my travels, and I was supposed to believe I had nothing to worry about because I had a diploma. The diploma was my ticket to the future, they said, and I felt like I was on the wrong bus. I still didn't know what I wanted to be when I grew up. For some reason, I had never outgrown my fixation with being a cowboy, but Papa said I should be practical, there were no job openings for cowboys in Midlincum Heights, Michigan. I thought seriously about being a writer because I kept a journal anyhow, but my guidance counselor told me I couldn't capitalize on my journal until I became famous, and I needed a major until then. When I had to declare a major, I chose Law because I thought I might be able to use my writing in a practical way, but I didn't really want to be a lawyer. I continued to write in my journal because I thought better on paper than out loud, but I didn't know where to sell what I wrote, so to pay rent and tuition I took a part-time job at Eden Towers, where I worked as a secretary for an insurance agency. Between the job and homework, I didn't have much time left for writing. I thought of the early Hebrew nomads, in the desert for forty years, and I felt very out of tune with the spiritualism of my ancestors.

The service was held in the large sanctuary, where the far wall opened to a back room, equal in size to the first. The combined capacity of the two rooms comfortably sat the entire congregation, with one guest per family. I walked down the aisle looking for a familiar face next to an empty seat.

I recognized Mr. Ginslinger, Papa's card playing buddy, sitting in his usual seat in the front row next to the middle aisle. He was whispering back and forth over an empty seat with Mama's good friend, Mrs. Goldbladder. He stood when he saw me. "Well, Henry Freedman," he said, "it's so nice to see you. Do you know Mrs. Goldbladder?"

"Of course I know Henry," Mrs. Goldbladder said, as she brushed off my seat. "I've heard some wonderful things about you, young man. You make our community very proud."

"Yes, sir, he's a real *nachas*-giver to his parents," Mr. Ginslinger added proudly. "A straight four-point student from way back. How's school treating you, Henry? Still getting straight A's?"

"I got a B once," I said.

"Must not have been a very smart teacher." He winked knowingly.

Mrs. Goldbladder was a staunch liberal, the local chairper-son of the Democratic Club. She had campaigned vigorously for every Democratic presidential nominee since Adlai Stevenson and in the 1968 Democratic primary campaign kept the books for the Eugene McCarthy Fundraising Committee. When McCarthy bolted the Democratic Party and started his own, after losing to Johnson in the primary, she switched to LBJ, but now, eight years later, she still felt bitter toward the antiwar movement on campus because the radicals there failed to cut their hair en masse and go Clean for Gene. Mrs. Goldbladder believed the pen was mightier than the sword and during the war she often wrote angry letters to Congressmen threatening to vote against them in the next election if they didn't vote to limit defense spending in Vietnam.

Mr. Ginslinger, our mayor, had been a Nixon man since Checkers and supported law-and-order like it was his idea. Running in a non-partisan election, he easily outdistanced his opponent, another member of the congregation, whose main issue was a demand that City Council not patronize industries who do any war-related business in Vietnam. Himself the owner of a highly successful liquor business, the mayor had contributed large sums of money to any national candidate who promised victory or jobs.

The 1970 Kent State killings were in local news again because just the night before a political activist from Kent had spoken at the high school on the issue of why Ohio Governor Rhodes and the upper echelons of the Ohio National Guard should be indicted for murder. Because of their own personal involvement with Kent State, both Mrs. Goldbladder and Mr. Ginslinger attended the meeting.

Kent State had shaken Mrs. Goldbladder noticeably because she was in Kent when it happened, managing a dress shop. She recalled that May as being the worst month in over eight years and added that the owner had to put his whole spring line on sale because all the students went on strike and left town. "I supported their goals but I didn't agree with their tactics," she said, gripping her necklace to support the courage of her conviction.

Mr. Ginslinger had also been personally touched by Kent State. His son, Gordon, a political science major, had dropped out of school in his senior year to organize the student strike on his campus. When he came home for summer vacation, his hair was down to his shoulders and he had a full-length beard. As the mayor so sadly recalled, "I lost a son in the war."

"Frankly," he said to Mrs. Goldbladder, as he leaned over the armrest and winked at me because he expected great things from me, "I think if those hippies don't like it here, they should go to China."

"It's just terrible," concluded Mrs. Goldbladder, reflecting the war's continuing impact on the community. "When is it all going to end? Why, only yesterday the Ableman boy with the

beard was arrested at State for smoking marijuana. He'll have that blemish on his record for the rest of his life now. It killed his parents."

Mr. Ginslinger stroked his chin and shook his head in sorry agreement. "He was such a bright boy, too. He had so much potential."

I followed their conversation like it was a tennis match, then spaced them out and looked straight ahead at the Temple's new Chagall to rest my neck. I thumbed through the prayer book to see how many pages we had to read for the service. I wanted to be at *Shul* about as much as I wanted to eat a worm, but Mama had a weak heart and she was already worried about me because I kept threatening to drop out of college, so I went to keep her happy. She saw me as her only hope to succeed as a good mother and said if I dropped out she would hold a hot iron to her cheeks until she was blind in both eyes.

Mama and Papa were both first generation children of East European immigrants. Papa graduated high school, Mama didn't. Both worked for as long as I could remember, although Mama said she stayed home with me the first three years of my life. Papa never could run a business. Three attempts went under before I was born. He attributed it to lack of a college degree and always swore his son would not be a useless bum like him, which was synonymous with not having a degree. He earned a respectable living at Kil-Gro Chemical and with Mama's income as a secretary at Mount Sinai Hospital we made the move to Midlincum Heights before I could ride a two-wheeler. Papa always said if I couldn't find a job elsewhere I could probably work at Kil-Gro, but he was sure I could do better. If Papa's other investments had caused him *tsouris*, in me he thought he had a winner.

"... Now take young Freedman here," the mayor said. He slapped my knee to make his point. "A fine example of America's youth."

"Mr. Ginslinger," I said to him, "I want to drop out of school."

The organist pounded a long harsh chord.

"Nonsense, Henry." He patted my knee. "You're doctor material. Don't disappoint your parents."

The congregation looked forward in respectful silence as the rabbi entered stage right. He wore a long black robe that had been handed down to him through four generations of rabbis and a fedora-like *yarmulke* that he wore to call attention to the plight of the Soviet Jews. The rabbi was a controversial addition to the Temple payroll. Mrs. Goldbladder said the rabbi was "way ahead of his time." Mr. Ginslinger called him "a damn Commie." During the war, he supported the National Liberation Front in Vietnam, and in his sermons he often compared them to the early Zionists in Palestine after the First World War. Most everyone in the congregation had said they were against the war, but when the rabbi was arrested in front of the Washington Monument during Nixon's inauguration in January 1973, many of them called upon him to resign, saying it was unkosher for a rabbi to mix religion and politics. He smiled as he passed the four members of the Temple Board of Trustees, who occupied four honorary seats on the stage, and they smiled back.

"Now, what's this I hear about you wanting to drop out of school, Henry?" Mr. Ginslinger whispered to me as the rabbi adjusted his robe and cleared his throat. "I won't say I'm surprised, although I am. Never be too quick to take a stand, I always say."

I whispered back that I was thinking about it. "I'm tired of doing what's expected of me," I said. "I want to be free to do what I want."

"I think you would be making a tragic mistake. You need your degree," he said.

“Why, you don’t have one.” It was common knowledge. Everyone knew Mr. Ginslinger’s life story because he was the regular guest speaker at the annual Junior Chamber of Commerce awards assembly and he told his rags-to-riches success story every year. The oldest of five children born to a German immigrant couple, his parents had both died when he was in the ninth grade so he dropped out to support his brothers and sisters....etc. etc. until he struck it rich. His moral always was: “With hard work, you too can all be successes.” He never said anything about college, because it was assumed we would all attend.

“Henry, things were different when I was your age,” he said. “We’re living in a more specialized time. Nowadays, you need a degree if you want to make it in the business world.”

“Why, a degree doesn’t mean I know anything. A lot of people have degrees and look what shape the country is in.”

“Yes, but people unfortunately think it does.”

“Maybe that’s why it’s in such bad shape.”

The service began with the rabbi’s usual Simchas Torah greeting. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the two holidays which begin the High Holy Day season, were the only two days of the year when the entire congregation showed up, but by Simchas Torah, the sanctuary was half empty again, so every year the rabbi welcomed us with the same joke about how sorry he was that his long lost friends could only stay two days. Then he said, “Our service will begin on *daf mayaw arbaw’im v’arbawaw*, page 144,” and the background noise resumed.

We smalltalked as we prayed, mostly polite Question and Answer conversation about school and courses and sports. We both seemed to avoid my area of concern, as if it were a clove of garlic on an empty stomach. But even “So what else is new?” has a way of sticking close to the underlying feeling of the moment, like a cat guarding its territory. He winked at a pretty congregant in the next aisle and in an aside asked if I was getting any snatch. I assured him I was getting a fair share and he noted that frustration in one area of one’s life is often caused by frustration in another.

“So stick it out, Henry,” he said. “You may not think you need a degree now, but wait until you try to find a job. Interviewers look very carefully at your job transcripts and a degree looks good on your record.”

“But that’s unfair,” he said. “It shouldn’t be that way.”

“I know it’s unfair. Life’s unfair. But that’s how it is. You can’t fight City Hall, Henry, so why try? Believe me, it’ll open doors for you that you never knew existed.”

We rose for the *Shema*.

“Look, Mr. Ginslinger,” I whispered to him as we returned to our seats, “I haven’t said I would never go back. Maybe I will finish school someday, I don’t know. But right now I’ve got to see the world.”

“Better to get it out of the way now, Henry, even if it seems hard,” he said, “because it’ll be a lot harder when you try to go back. It’s like I always say, ‘It’s better to be safe than sorry.’”

“But what if I did it a different way? What would be wrong if I travelled for a few years and worked at odd jobs to survive and then finished my degree when I had a better idea of what I wanted to study?”

“What would your resume look like then if you went from job to job? Job stability is as important as that little piece of paper. Employers don’t want you to be creative, just consistent.”

We rose again and prayed silently.

The festival of Succos goes back to the days before the second Temple was destroyed by the Romans. For this holiday, the ancient Hebrews journeyed to Jerusalem with the first crops of their final harvest and the first born of their flocks and offered them as sacrifices to God. Now, Jews celebrate Succos by erecting *succohs*, booths made of branches from fruit trees, to commemorate the tabernacles under which our ancestors slept during their stays in Jerusalem. During the Simchas Torah service, the cantor finishes chanting the last chapter in the book of Deuteronomy, the fifth book of Moses, and begins immediately to chant the first chapter in Genesis, the first. Thus, one complete reading has come to an end and a new one has begun. In this way, the rabbis teach us, we learn that if something feels good we should do it again. In addition, we recall in symbolic form how the Hebrews prayed at one time to celebrate and give thanks for a successful year just ending and to ask God for a good year to come.

Simchas Torah is also the time when young Jewish boys and girls are called up to the stage to receive their own Torahs. Then they all parade around the sanctuary behind four of the men who are carrying the four Torah scrolls. As the rabbi explained, our ancestors in many different eras of our history often had to hide their Torahs. When we march now, it is not off to war but to rejoice for our freedom. I was one of those men who carried the Torah, but I didn't feel especially free.

The service ended on a high note with the announcement by the President of the congregation that the Building Fund had reached its goal again for the fourth straight year.

"*Mazel tov*," he said to everyone.

"*Mazel tov*," they replied.

"*Mazel tov*," Mr. Ginslinger said to me. He looked sad like a puppy.

"Henry," he added, as we stood to leave, "I know it's corny, but, as you know, I never got that useless piece of paper and I've always felt like there was something missing in my life. You've gone so far, why don't you just finish?"

He smiled suddenly as the first of many voters came over to shake his hand. Mr. Ginslinger was a celebrity in the congregation because of his distinguished record as a community servant and it was rumored that he would run for state senator in the coming election. While he dismissed such talk as half truths and innuendos, he never expressly denied the allegation. I said I would meet him in the lobby and walked on ahead.

A message in the men's room stall caught my attention. I caught my zipper on my pants as I read: "Give up your college education now before it's too late and you get sucked into the illusion of status, materialism, power, or fame. I sold Utopian Essays for ten cents at a garage sale today. Shakespeare went for a quarter. On the other hand, my genuine velour and velvet horse picture went for five bucks. You college creeps are a bunch of schmucks who don't even have the balls to write good graffiti—One who knows, The ghost of the Sixties." A religious flow relieved my insides as I read the handwriting on the wall.

I met Mr. Ginslinger in the lobby and we left the Temple together. As we walked up the street, the mayor explained to me why I should vote, as an expression of my faith in the democratic process, even if I didn't like either of the two major candidates, and he advised me to stay away from third-party candidates because it was a waste of a vote. He illustrated his position by recounting tales of votes he made in council that made a difference. He asked how Mama and Papa were feeling and I said they were fine. I asked him how his wife was feeling and he said she had his vote.