

SELF-HELP

Written by
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INT. "DA BOMB" BOOKSTORE - LATE AFTERNOON

Barnes and Noble in its prime. A maze of aisles and books.

Skinny, bespectacled ARTHUR tiptoes timidly along... runs a finger over book spines. Reads a title. Shakes his head.

Reaching the end of the section, he takes a left. Glimpses towards a CATEGORY SIGN.

Distracted, he collides with - WHACK! Solid, full of working class vigor FRED.

ARTHUR

Oooof!

He pinwheels back. Fred grabs Arthur before he falls, sets him on his feet.

FRED

Whoa... hold your horses. Don't you know this is a one way aisle?

ARTHUR

(stammers)

It is? My bad. Excuse me!

Fred snickers. Gives Arthur a hard, close look.

FRED

You believed me? Oh, that's rich. Joke's over, buddy. All's good!

Flustered, Arthur looks around. No-one saw that. Good. To deflect, he re-reads the Category Sign:

ARTHUR

"Classic literature"? Oops.

FRED

Figures. You're into Virginia Woolf?

ARTHUR

Uh, no. That's not why I'm here.

FRED

You absolutely, positively sure? I mean, you kinda look the type.

ARTHUR

I'm not *anybody's* type!

(beat)

Where's the Store Directory?

Fred points across the room.

FRED

Guess you're no regular. And they say people like *me* don't cotton books. A particular title caught your eye?

ARTHUR

Er, no - just a section. I want to browse, but I'm... lost. The first person I asked pointed me this way. They said, past the Romance nook.

Arthur takes a step. Fred throws out a friendly arm, blocks his way. Arthur blurts:

ARTHUR

I'm looking for self-help. Do you at least know which way?

Fred explodes in a belly laugh - heartier than before.

ARTHUR

(puzzled)

That was funny, too?

FRED

Funny? That one's meta! Do you even listen to yourself? You just asked for help... to help *yourself*. Well, consider this your lucky day. A chance to listen, learn AND read!

Seizing Arthur's wrist, Fred drags him down the aisle. Makes twists and turns - captured Arthur flip-flops behind.

Arthur pin-balls into oversized books and shelves.

ARTHUR

Ow! Let go! What are you doing?

FRED

What you asked for. Guiding you to the self-help aisle. And introducing you to -

He takes another turn.

FRED

The best guru in modern life!

The shelves open to a lounge. Not more than a tiny nook, but large enough to wedge a DESK. On top: stacks of BOOKS.

With MORTON LEDERSON seated in between. Dressed in designer duds, Morton projects pure confidence. A ROLEX watch shines on his wrist. The MICROPHONE in front of Morton can't hide that million watt smile.

A CROWD surges around the desk, holds out books to sign. Lederson's in mid-sermon just as Fred and Arthur arrive.

MORTON

I may not be a doctor, but I can diagnose society's disease. Anyone with eyes and respect for truth can do that much!

Morton's voice: loud, but quirky. Reminiscent of Kermit the Frog. Spotting Arthur, Morton points:

MORTON

You! What's YOUR diagnosis, Sir?

Put on the spot, Arthur shrinks back. Fred's firm grip pins him in place.

ARTHUR

Um, chickenpox?

The crowd falls silent: Huh? Then erupts with giggles at Arthur's "joke". Morton snorts, rolls eyes.

MORTON

Chickenpox? Really? Who here wants to explain to this "gentleman" the cure?

The crowd chimes in, like a Greek chorus:

CROWD

Personal responsibility!

Morton holds up and waves a copy of his book: "Personal Responsibility: The Lost Virtue".

MORTON

And what's the enemy of Responsibility, folks?

The crowd has this cue memorized. Responds:

CROWD

The Cult of Victim-hood!

Arthur turns anxious eyes to Fred, whispers:

ARTHUR

What is this... gathering?

FRED

A book signing. By one of the healthiest, no-nonsense, practical philosophers you'll ever meet. You don't recognize Morton Lederson?

ARTHUR

Uh, doesn't ring a bell...

FRED

Hmmpph. He's only written some of the best books on self-actualization in history! Chunk full 'a advice on how to take charge of your modern life. Consider yourself blessed, pal -

ARTHUR

My name is Arthur. Not Pal -

FRED

You get to see Lederson up close. So grab the initiative - by the horns, so to speak. Listen. And learn!

Fred shoves Arthur forward. The crowd parts - causing Arthur to bump up against Morton's throne... er, desk.

One look at Arthur, and Morton's smile widens into a shark's grin. He recognizes an opportunity when he sees it...

Switching to "friendly" mode, Lederson waves.

MORTON

Welcome, fellow man and traveler. What wisdom do YOU seek?

Arthur tries to back away. But the crowd closes in.

ARTHUR

I...think I made a wrong turn. I'm not traveling at all. At least, here.

MORTON

You "think"? As opposed to know? And - if you're not traveling... please do be our guest. Stay!

Arthur scans the crowd. He's in the spotlight. No escape.

ARTHUR

All I wanted was the self-help section -

Lederson holds up a sage finger.

MORTON

Ah-ha. Everyone, notice he said
"wanted" it. But desires and wishes
don't make things happen. Actions do!

The crowd applauds. It's a Morton message they're familiar with, and love to hear.

Burned by the correction, Arthur stops trying to flee. Turning to Morton, he puts fists on his hips - pouts.

ARTHUR

That's just it. I did "take Action."

MORTON

How?

ARTHUR

I... I drove here by myself?

A HECKLER in the back yells out:

HECKLER

You drove here by yourself? Ooooh,
give that brave man a gold star!

SCATTERED LAUGHTER. Arthur digs in scrawny heels. Fumes.

ARTHUR

The clerk pointed me to the wrong
section of the store. I'm not to
blame if she got that wrong!

HECKLER

"She"? Now big man's blaming a girl!
Someone revoke that guy's Man Card!

A MIDDLE AGED MEMBER riffs back:

MIDDLE AGED MEMBER

Just look at him. His mommy did!

More LAUGHTER. Until Morton waves - then it stops. Locking eyes with Arthur, Lederson intones:

MORTON

No-one can blame this man for other's
faults.

ARTHUR

THANK you. As I was saying -

MORTON

However, your fault is farther reaching. More profound.

Morton makes "meditation" gestures. Deep-breathes.

MORTON

Clear the victim mentality from your mind, Friend. Only YOU are responsible for the path your life takes. Once in your existence -

ARTHUR

You don't know me. Why assume-

MORTON

I know so many just like you. Answer honestly: did you look up where the Self-Help Section was in this store? Actualized adults cultivate the habit to research and plan ahead.

ARTHUR

How could I -

MORTON

Google it. Any fifth grade knows how that works.

ARTHUR

Not every store includes a floor-plan on their webpage!

MORTON

Even if it didn't, the Directory's over there.

(points)

Right next to the "non-binary" rest room. You can't miss that unless you're blind.

ARTHUR

I didn't need the bathroom. Or the Directory. I was relying on the clerk!

The crowd "ooooohs". Morton nods, smiles.

MORTON

Exactly my point. You "relied on the clerk". Not yourself. And for what? To read someone else's advice? Ironically in a book for "self-help"?

Arthur squints, confused.

ARTHUR

What's wrong with self-help books?
Isn't that kind of what you write?

MORTON

No, MY books are but a platform to amplify what real men already know, deep in their hearts. That Victimhood is a poison that infects society. Take a hard look at yourself! Ask hard questions! Purge your weakness. Don't waffle. Make a choice! Once you own up to Personal Responsibility, you won't need "self-help" books. And you'll finally know what it's like to be alive!

The crowd cheers. Morton waves his book again.

MORTON

Now, I'm afraid time is limited. I've got reservations for dinner. And, like any man, my word is bond. I can't be late. So, who's got a book to sign?

The crowd surges, shoves Arthur aside. The Heckler hisses.

HECKLER

Loser.

Arthur shoots a baleful look at Morton. The writer shrugs.

MORTON

Don't blame me. Thank me. The questions I asked were a test. It's a shame you failed... for now.

(points at the crowd)

But it's a learning lesson for them.

EXT. BOOKSTORE - BUS STOP - LATER

The sun sinks. Arthur huddles at a bus stop bench, reads a book (not Morton's). The bookstore's a block away. An alleyway nearby:

Arthur squints at the bus schedule. Groans.

ARTHUR

How long is this delay?

Excited RUMBLES prompt him to look up:

Morton emerges - surrounded by his fan-boy crowd. He signs one last book, waves cheerfully.

MORTON

This has been a pleasure, but we all
have individual lives to lead.
Including me!

Fred waves towards him.

FRED

Don't go yet. One more question!

MORTON

So sorry, but dinner calls!

Morton trots off - a handsome figure in his slick threads. He croaks quietly under his breath:

MORTON

I ask them to think for themselves.
Will these children ever learn?

He checks his Rolex for the time.

MORTON

Pressing the flesh might be tedious.
But it pays for appetizers at least!

Passing Arthur, Morton double takes.

MORTON

You're still here?

ARTHUR

I - uh - the bus is late?

MORTON

(beat)

You said you DROVE here.

Arthur tries to hide behind his book; wilts.

ARTHUR

You were making me look like a loser
already. Can you blame me if I didn't
want to admit I can't afford a car?

MORTON

I could smell it!

ARTHUR
 (sniffs his armpit)
 Wait, what?

MORTON
 There it is! Even with the most
 trivial details, you refuse to take
 Personal Responsibility. Blame you?
 Yes, I most certainly should.

Morton stalks off - throws one last insult.

MORTON
 Start owning your mistakes, Son. Or
 you'll be waiting for a bus your
 whole life!

Suddenly: A NERVOUS MAN darts from the alley. Aims a GUN at
 Morton's head!

NERVOUS MAN
 Hey, you!

Morton swings towards him.

MORTON
 You "who"? Be specific...
 (sees the gun)
 Oh my.

NERVOUS MAN
 Yeah, you. Mr. Nice Suit. Gimme that
 even nicer watch!

Morton freezes. Appraises the man head to toe.

MORTON
 Dirty clothes. Looks like you haven't
 bathed. I bet you don't make your
 bed, either.

NERVOUS MAN
 My bed is the street. It makes
 itself. If you don't wanna get
 drilled, toss over the bling, Rich
 Boy.

MORTON
 Is this a joke?

NERVOUS MAN
 Man, I ain't eaten for days. That
 watch is worth - what - a grand at
 least?

MORTON

Eight thousand, if you must know.
Money well earned - and spent!

NERVOUS MAN

Well, I'm "earning" this. Hand it
over. Now!

MORTON

Not in a million years!

Morton swings towards a terrified Arthur, who cowers behind
his book. It's a pathetically useless shield.

MORTON

Call the police!

NERVOUS MAN

If you do, I'll shoot you both!

Arthur raises a shaking hand, like a kid asking questions in
school.

ARTHUR

Uh, Morton...

MORTON

That's Lederson to you!

ARTHUR

No offense, but shouldn't YOU be
calling the cops? I'm not the
individual getting mugged.

Nervous Man eyeballs Arthur, snorts.

NERVOUS MAN

Why would I shake you down? I bet you
don't even have five bucks.

More silent begging from Morton. Arthur shrugs.

ARTHUR

If that. I'm kinda - broke.

Outside the bookstore: the crowd of fans slowly notice the
situation. They drift over: Curious, and confused.

Nervous Man waves the gun impatiently at Morton.

NERVOUS MAN

C'mon. Stop waffling. Make a choice.
What do you value more: that
pretentious bauble or your skull?

Morton squeaks, hands the Rolex over.

The man pockets the watch. Waves the gun more.

NERVOUS MAN

Good. Now repeat that with your wallet.

MORTON

What?

NERVOUS MAN

Are you deaf, or just an asshole?

MORTON

I gave you what you asked for. You're moving goalposts. That's not fair!

The crowd of Morton fans surround the two. Many clutch his books- Morton's million watt smile on every cover.

But real life Morton's in a mood. He yells out:

MORTON

Did any of you see? He stole my watch!

ARTHUR

Actually, you *sort* of gave it to him.

MORTON

He's got a gun. That doesn't count!

ARTHUR

(beat)

That's *kind* of a Victim Mentality, isn't it?

The Heckler steps forward, thinking.

HECKLER

Ya know, that skinny little guy's got a big fat point.

ARTHUR

Thanks. Wait - being skinny's NOT my identity!

Morton rests a protective hand on his pocket. Nervous Man notices the bulge underneath - darts out a hand, pulls Morton's WALLET out.

A furious tug of war ensues.

The crowd steps back, holds their breath...

CROWD

Ooooooooooh.

NERVOUS MAN

I got places to be. Enough!

Nervous man thrusts the gun's muzzle between Morton's eyes.

Morton hands the wallet over, like a hot potato.

Nervous Man rifles through. His eyes light up at the score.

NERVOUS MAN

Two hundred bucks? A black Amex?
Cool! Maybe I'll get a watch for my
other arm, too!

Morton whirls towards the crowd, indignant.

MORTON

You're all just standing there? While
I get mugged? In broad daylight?

ARTHUR

Actually, the sun's setting...

MORTON

That's not my point! Don't any of you
have the balls to take action?

Fred steps forward, clears his throat.

FRED

You taught us to ask questions.

MORTON

Which I'm doing now, for Christ
sakes!

FRED

It's your wallet. Not ours. So... why
aren't you taking action?

Morton waves his hands wildly.

MORTON

Look - right there. See that gun?!?

The Middle Aged Member eyes the gun. The alley. Calculates.

MIDDLE AGED MEMBER
 I almost didn't come here today.
 Everyone knows downtown's a bit...
 sketchy.

ARTHUR
 (nods)
 Yeah. That's why the bus's always
 late. No-one likes coming here at
 all.

He and Fred exchange looks.

ARTHUR
 Maybe if Morton had researched the
 area, he would have taken better
 precautions.

FRED
 Like a bullet proof jacket? That'd
 help.

MORTON
 No, no - it wouldn't! He's holding
 that gun to my HEAD!

ARTHUR
 (to Fred)
 He could've at least hired a body
 guard.

FRED
 That right there. Or not come at all.

The Heckler beams, as a thought hits.

HECKLER
 I bet this is really a demonstration.
 A test to see if we've learned from
 his books!

The crowd Ooooohs and aaahs. The Middle Aged Member gasps.

MIDDLE AGED MEMBER
 I bet he's right!

MORTON
 Don't bet. You'll lose!

Arthur eyes the gunman, unconvinced.

ARTHUR
 Are they right? Are you a test?

MORTON

(howls)

A test of my faith in humanity! And
all of your IQs!

Realizing his "out", Nervous Man shrugs - lies.

NERVOUS MAN

Think about it, pal. If this were
real - everyone 'a youse a witness.
Would I be so stupid as to pull all
this before your eyes?

MORTON

Fuck it, you're all idiots!

Morton lunges for the wallet. Nervous Man pulls it back -
PISTOL WHIPS Morton with his gun!

Morton screams. Crumples. Writhes on the ground.

MORTON

My nose. Oh god, it's broken!

His Kermit the Frog voice whistles. Arthur blinks:

ARTHUR

Is that blood?

The Heckler peers down, shrugs.

HECKLER

Gotta be fake. Morton's a stickler
for detail. He's great that way.

Morton reaches for Fred's ankle. Who backs off, out of
reach.

FRED

Hah! I've read Chapter Five of your
book, *Masculinity*. I'm gonna pass
this test with flying colors. You're
all gonna see!

Arthur cocks his head: Huh? Fred explains:

FRED

Morton says knowing how to defend
yourself is a rite of passage for
men. He has a black belt in Taek Kwon
D-

MORTON

(moans)

Well, the belt itself was honorary -

FRED

So, he could've disarmed that actor
in seconds. If he'd wanted to, that
is!

Nervous Man kicks Morton - a direct hit to the gut! Morton
groans.

HECKLER

Awesome acting!

The crowd applauds, takes pictures.

MIDDLE AGED MEMBER

This is such a profound
demonstration!

HECKLER

No-one help him. Just walk away. Like
Morton says in Personal
Responsibility, Chapter Six: every
time you play into the Victim-hood
Cult, they win. You lose!

Behind the crowd, lights FLASH.

Nervous Man runs off, disappears down the alley with
Morton's wallet and Rolex.

But it's not the cops - it's the bus.

Losing interest, the crowd disperses.

Leaving Morton on the ground. Arthur turns towards his bus.
Morton yelps, reaches out.

MORTON

Can't you at least call an ambulance?

Arthur bends down, SHAKES HIS HAND.

ARTHUR

Thank you for this life lesson, Sir!
You'll never know how much you've
opened my eyes! When I get home, I
promise...

MORTON

(croaks)

Right now. Call 911...

ARTHUR
I'll Google your books, buy one on
Amazon!

He boards the bus - yells to Morton:

ARTHUR
Enjoy your dinner!

The vehicle rolls away.

Left to bleed on the sidewalk, Morton chokes on smoke -
adding yet more weirdness to his voice.

MORTON
Won't someone help me? Pllllllease?