



(hashtag)  
**helpselfie**

self-help journey\*  
a **novel** by Vernon Howl

\*published in part as a fundraiser for the L.A.P.D., who own the domestic & international rights to the story, via penal code 1524: Section 311.3



# # *Help Selfie*

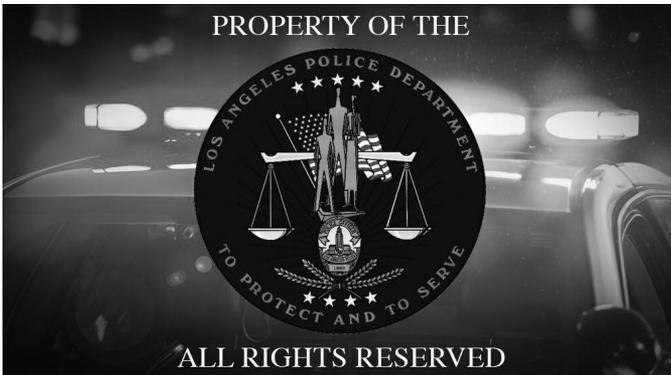
by

Vernon Howl

a

~~novel~~

“self-help journey”





***I wanted to write a self-help book that wasn't the "same old, same old" self-help book. Enter: this book.***

***Not the kind of book that's  
like "What am I reading  
here? Probably just another  
California Chicken Therapy  
rip-off again, here we go..."  
Not that.***

***If you're not familiar with  
California Chicken Therapy,  
please put down this book  
and go purchase my book  
The Complete Idiot's Guide  
to California Chicken  
Therapy right now.***

***Of course you'll have to get that book on the black market because the makers of the Complete Idiot's Guide series sued the pants off me because my book was "not authorized." I was also sued by the inventor of California Chicken Therapy, Chet Rind, but he dropped his lawsuit after he realized we were actually long lost twin brothers.***

***Chet and I were separated at birth because our mother couldn't afford to live her own life let alone take care of twins who would both go on to become successful self-help book authors (well, fingers crossed in my case). And I'm not here to argue over who the more successful brother is. Chet's doing his thing and I'm doing mine. I think I might get an invite to Christmas this year. Chet's pad is sick.***

***I don't even get a penny of revenue off of The Complete Idiot's Guide to California Chicken Therapy. I just think it's a good book and I did a good job writing it.***

***Anyway, where was I?***

***I wanted to write a self-help book that wasn't the "same old, same old" self-help book.***

***That's when I came up with  
the concept for (hashtag)  
Help Selfie.***

***I decided to stylize the title of this book as #HelpSelfie (one word) so that it was ready to go viral on social media.***

***So you're probably  
wondering what #HelpSelfie  
is all about, right? I get it.  
Lemme break it down.***

***You are yourself. Your phone is just your phone. But you can use your phone to take pictures of – wait for it – that’s right: YOURSELF. A common practice these days known as – you guessed it – the “selfie.”***

***Phones are not just for making phone calls anymore. Most of them have cameras built into them. If I could go back in time and tell that to the child version of me? Wow, he would be floored. I mean, sure I was already technically “floored” (sleeping on the floor due to the neglect of my foster parents) but still, would I have even believed myself? Haha, probably not.***

***And this is the key to #HelpSelfie: embrace technology, and you embrace the current day, and what else is there except the current day? Live in the now, not in the past. If I lived my life in the past? I'd be dead. Most days I might as well have been. When I started getting into California Chicken Therapy, my first thought was "wow, I could've come up with this" and that's the spirit of #HelpSelfie***

***When I figured out that Chet Rind was my long lost twin brother, I realized I literally could've come up with it. We basically have the same mind/brain. Sure, he was lucky to have been adopted by an extremely loving and rich family right there in the hospital and I somehow wound up a ward of the state in just an endless string of horrific situations filled with abuse and lifelong trauma. I was just a baby for god's sake! But am I bitter? Nope. That's #HelpSelfie***

***I'll be diving deeper into what #HelpSelfie entails in a pragmatic sense, but first a little bit about myself...***

***As previously mentioned, I am adopted. Fun story: when I was first reunited with my twin Chet Rind (as he was suing me for copyright infringement), I had the odd thought that perhaps he might have the same birthmark as me and so I showed him the red blotch on my thigh. He replied, "I don't think that's a birthmark. It looks like a really bad cigarette burn to me," which checks out because a few of my foster parents did put cigarettes out on me. He also***

***mentioned that birthmarks weren't a thing that had anything to do with genetics and they themselves are just literal scars from the childbirth procedure, which – I don't know – seemed like he didn't have to mention that and make me feel stupid. He invited me over to dinner at his parents' house shortly after that and it was literally the biggest mansion I've ever seen. We had a great meal and afterwards I asked him maybe his parents could be my parents too, and he just responded with the***

***coldest and most  
emotionless “No.” I didn’t  
appreciate that either, since I  
was basically half-joking  
even if deep down it was, or  
is something that I would like  
in a way. I mean, why  
couldn’t they adopt me, even  
if it was just symbolic.  
Because I’m 43 years old? I  
don’t think there’s a law  
against it. But enough about  
Chet. This isn’t about him.***

***I've had my share of business failures in this life, I am not gonna lie. My first and arguably greatest was the Baboon Bonnets™ fiasco (yes, I still own the trademark). Lemme rewind.***

***The year was 2024 and Bahá'í madness was sweeping the culture, all the culture. Nearly 90% of the population had converted to the religion and its teachings had infiltrated every level of media and influence. But it really went bananas (pun intended) when in December of that year, Theo Spielberg made what would become the highest grossing movie of all time: The Bahá'í Baboon.***

***I saw it in the theaters  
seventeen times.***

***It was “baboon” mania pretty much 24-7 at that point, and so I did what any red-blooded entrepreneur would do: I sunk my life savings into some merch to try and capitalize on the craze. There were Bahá’í Baboon branded things everywhere and anywhere you looked, both legit and knockoff. But one area which I felt was underexplored was the infant clothing market. Enter: Baboon Bonnets™.***

***These were baby bonnets with a large rendering of the cartoon figure of the baboon from the movie taking up most of the surface area. Well, therein laid the problem. These were knockoffs and the baboon rendering really didn't capture the cuteness of The Bahá'í Baboon; it actually looked kind of realistic.***

***One thing led to another, and before you know it, a toddler in Pasadena beat an infant to death who was wearing one of my bonnets because he thought it was a real baboon who had snuck into the Bahá'í church service, because – in just a really bad twist of fate – this corresponded with the Great L.A. Zoo Escape, and there were like hundreds of exotic animals on the loose for real. That was the first time I got sued.***

***There were enough Baboon Bonnets™ attacks (though only the one fatality, thankfully) to warrant a class action suit and those fuckers are still trying to dig their claws in to this day. How many times can you bleed a man dry? That's what I would like to know.***

***And there were other failures still. While I was knee deep in the bonnet fallout, I got the opportunity to go on a reality TV dating show called Love at First Might. The premise there being you would get to go on a first date with a pretty girl if you could outduel two other eligible bachelors in over-the-top feats of strength and, honestly, stupidity. Well, the very first game was a spaghetti-eating competition. They lined me up in the middle between two muscular guys (both***

***named Brad) and served us  
up piping hot plates of  
spaghetti each with a silver  
fork stuck in the middle.***

***As previously mentioned, I did not have a normal or happy upbringing. Forks or any utensils were seldom used in my childhood. I couldn't count the number of times I ate cereal (wet with water) by the handful, but it was a lot. The one foster dad who did let me use a fork on occasion, taught me how to use it all wrong. Of course, he did this to humiliate me, I now know, but for years, in public and private, I used to hold a fork upside down, slightly jabbing the sharp ends into my palm to get a***

***good grip, and using the  
wrong end as a kind of small  
and ineffective spoon.***

***And – yup – that’s how I held  
it on the TV show.***

***Needless to say, the other two competitors killed me in round one (I never even got through the first bowl of spaghetti) and I was kicked off the episode. But my appearance went mega-viral. It was and still is the highest rated episode of the show ever. I attempted to capitalize on this highly embarrassing incident by selling trucker hats and tank-tops with a logo I designed...***



***My tenure as “Mr. Fork Finger” was short-lived, unfortunately. The Baboon Bonnet™ leeches took every cent of my sales from the venture. I got 100% of the shame and none of the profits off of that one.***

***Later, Chet would admit to recognizing me on the show and all the associated memes. “It was like looking into a mirror,” he told me. I asked him why he didn’t reach out to me then and he just laughed. Good ole Chet.***

***My next venture wasn't quite as costly (in terms of dollars and sense anyhow). The only thing I lost was time. Quite literally: time. I'm talking about when I went to jail for selling fake fish.***

***The fish, of course, weren't "fake" even if the newspapers and internet had a field day with headlines like "From Mr. Fork Fingers to Fake Fish Fella" and things like that. People still love alliteration. Basically, what I did was pretty simple: I would buy frozen fish in bulk from Costco (my neighbor let me use his card), defrost it and then set up rogue stands at various farmer's markets. I'd mark up the price well over 1000% and pretend these wet filets were freshly caught in the***

***wild. I didn't know the names of too many expensive fish and since the only one I did know (salmon) were pink-colored, I usually just made up names for the fish, like Back Bay Biteys or Supple Whimmers. This is how I got exposed, obviously. A fish aficionado pointed the local fuzz my way and I did two months in county because I couldn't possibly afford a lawyer to help fight the charge.***

***You live and you learn. And  
I've lived (and learned) a lot.***

***That's why I decided to write this book. It's the #1 reason, in fact. And we're gonna get into the #HelpSelfie System™ in just a minute here, but first... well, I have to come clean about one thing.***

***It was me. I set the animals  
free.***

***As I mentioned, I had an extremely troubled childhood. A few weeks before I got heavy into Bahá'í and The Bahá'í Baboon movie explosion, I was confronted by someone from my past. A real bad person whom I, for potential legal reasons, should not mention here in this book. Let's just say he wasn't just a bad apple, but a rotten one. More like spoiled applesauce, to be honest.***

***Basically I was blackmailed into helping do the animal breakout thing at the Los Angeles Zoo, which was fucking horrifying. (They never pinned me as part of the group so maybe it's a bad idea writing about it now, but hopefully you'll see what I am doing in just a minute here.)***

***The police and government people said that it was an eco-terror type of thing, but I can set the record straight here: the fools who organized it were total anarchists; there was no good reason for it. Literally the scariest night of my entire life. Everyone involved was given one of those clunky suits cops use when they are training the K-9 attack units (as if that would protect you from the bite of a Siberian Tiger? Ha!) and also pepper spray and gas masks, which I deployed***

***rather liberally, preemptively, just in case one of the critters decided to hunt me down after I opened up their cage. (The person in charge hacked into the system to unlock everything; I was just among the three or four dozen foot soldiers tasked with opening the doors.) I would crack a cage and sprint, leaving a cloud of pepper spray in my wake, even though almost all of the animals – totally confused – didn't bolt right away.***

***So, why bring this up, you ask. That's a great question.***

***When I was running around like a fool, helping to commit that major crime on that fateful night, I saw something that I have never talked about with another soul before. And while I have never talked about it, I managed to take a picture of it WITH MY PHONE. And now I am ready to share it for the first time in my life:***



***What beast is that you ask? I have no idea. It was like being in a fever dream that night. The rush of loose animals in the night, alarms going off, scared perpetrators trying to escape (I was among the nine or ten who did, luckily): it was almost too much. I felt like collapsing in a heap, letting the creatures or the cops do with me what they would. Until – that is – I met Jim.***

***You probably didn't think this self-help book had real talking animals in it. I bet you didn't, but alas it does. Jim was some kind of hairless bear – I later learned that it's common for bears to lose their fur after years in captivity – and he stopped me in my tracks. His voice was cartoonish in the way one might expect a talking bear's voice to sound like, but its tone was also purposeful and direct; I never once thought that I was hallucinating.***

***Jim told me that many bad things were going to happen to me because of what I was taking part in that night. I immediately tried to explain my rather specific and unfortunate situation, but he shushed me. He said that, despite the horrors (over 250 animals had to be destroyed in the interest of public safety), this incident would also be the catalyst for my greatest success in life. Well, needless to say, I mulled that over and over for a long time.***

***Nothing about being a central figure in the largest zoo escape in world history screamed “#Winning” to me, if you know what I mean. My failures, which I’ve already laid out in detail, were indeed a direct result of my actions. Before Jim and I parted ways, I asked if I could snap a picture. He said sure, and – god as my witness – winked when he did. Before he scampered away he told me to never lose that photo.***

***For many years, sometimes daily, I would glance at the photo and wonder if the secret to my “greatest success” was hidden inside. And it wasn’t until visiting Chet’s house for the third and last time (he wanted to go over some legal stuff about me not trying to use the California Chicken Therapy brand anymore), when it dawned on me. His house was essentially a time capsule: pictures on every wall, floor to ceilings in each room. There was some art, sure, but it was mostly***

***people... family. And so I got to thinking. Where are my pictures? Who is my family? I thought about my third foster dad Bill who trained me to catch whole peanuts, still in the shell, in my mouth, so he could bet his drinking buddies that I could grab ten in a row, and how – when I would inevitably flub the eighth or so throw (usually because Bill sucked at throwing) – he would beat be something fierce after forking over what was likely his last twenty. Nope, wouldn't want his picture on***

***my wall. And what about Clare, one of my countless foster sisters, who used to dress me as E.T. and not just E.T. but when E.T. was wearing all that ladies clothing and makeup, and paraded me down the street in the middle of summer when it was 100° just so she could attempt to scam other kids out of a buck to get a picture with “Lady E.T.” (that was so far before most kids’ time they had no idea what I was supposed to be!). Yeah, I’m glad I have nothing but my memories of her.***

***It was then and there when it dawned on me that my only family is me.***

***I am all I've ever needed. We  
all are. Sure. It's nice to have  
a family. A loving mom and  
dad. Two kids in the yard.  
The whole nine. I wouldn't  
not want that.***

*But at the end of the day, it's  
just you. Your*

***SELF***

*And who better to*

***HELP***

*yourself, than – hey, you're  
catching on – Yourself.*

***So, here's the deal... What have we learned so far?***

- 1. It's just you (yourself)***
- 2. Everybody (you) has a phone***
- 3. You can only rely on yourself***
- 4. ?***

*Listen, the fourth and final step isn't magic, and I'm sure you've probably figured it out already. It's simple:*

***Start***

***Taking***

***Selfies***

#HelpSelfie

***Go crazy. Take them as often as you can. With each snapshot, you're creating a record of who you are at that moment in time. It won't take long—***

“Freeze! Stop right there.”

*What the fuck. Is that a cop? Is that, oh shit, oh no... it's fucking dozens of cops? Oh, what the fuck?!*

I stop my tape recorder and start back towards Chet's house. I see him. He's locking the door and drawing all the blinds. “Chet!” I yell. “What the fuck dude?”

“We're gonna need you to stop immediately and get on the ground. Drop what's in your hand! Get on the ground! Flat on your stomach! Get on the fucking ground!” The cops yell.

*I can't believe this is happening. I just stopped to record my book because I felt inspired. It was all the family photos. Jesus, I wish I was in them.*

“We will shoot you. We will fucking shoot you. Drop what's in your hand and get the fuck down.” I do as they say. I drop the tape recorder. I get down on my stomach.

*Shit, what if I broke it? Well, the tape is probably fine. That was such a good start to the book. I was just getting into it. Fuck, I should have just walked*

*and talked on my way home. It's over eleven fucking miles anyway! I can't believe Chet wouldn't get me an Uber. How the hell is he 'strapped for cash right now.' He's clearly fucking lying. Fuck, I'm fucked.*

“Sir, were you responsible for the L.A. Zoo terrorist incident?” a cop asks. “We have reason to believe you were. We know there are several individuals who got away that night and we believe you're one of them.”

“Oh, yeah? Seriously, that was fucking years ago? Do I look like some eco-terrorist maggot to you? You got the wrong guy,” I tell them.

One of the cops picks up my tape recorder. The other cop says, “We have reason to believe that on this tape you've made a confession to that fact.” My heart drops into the pit of my stomach. “What's on this tape, sir?”

*That fucking weasel. Chet, that monster. My own brother! He must have heard me talking and called the cop when I got to the part about the zoo.*

“We're gonna hear it eventually. We also have a cooperating witness.”

*Yup, I'm doomed.*

“I want a lawyer,” I tell them.

•

On the way to the police station, I hatch a plan.

“I’m a writer, guys. A novelist. Sure, I ‘confessed’ to the zoo thing, but that wasn’t really me. That was the character ‘me’, in the novel. It’s called poetic license, ever heard of it?” *Probably not*, I mumble.

“What did you say?”

“I mean,” I continue, “was that not a central part of all of our lives? It was a huge part of mine, I tell you that. Do you remember the Bahá’í baboon bonnet incident? The baby who got killed? By the toddler? Because he thought—”

“Sure. What the hell does that have to do with anything?”

“That was me! I was the bonnet guy. I got sued. Remember?”

“Holy shit, you’re ‘fork finger’ dude, aren’t you?”

“Well, it was *Mr. Fork Finger*,” I tell them. “But that’s not important. What’s important is that the zoo escape has haunted me. Forever. And more so than your average bear.” I stop to cringe at my accidental and ill-timed pun. “Look, I got inspiration for this book, this novel—it’s total fiction. Total fiction. And as I was leaving my brother’s house, I started to dictate my ideas. Simple as that. Definitely not a crime to the best of my knowledge.”

“You’re ‘brother’ seems to think otherwise. He was pretty adamant on the phone. Said you definitely fit the bill. And so on...”

“My brother, god bless his heart, is an excitable person. A very nervous sort.” I’m not sure if my story’s connecting with these cops. They seem to know I’m full of shit. I’m getting extremely frustrated. “You know, he’s adopted too. But we’re real twin brothers. Yeah, my bro lucked out. Silver spoon situation. Not me, but it’s fine. I wouldn’t have it any other way. We basically have the same brain. Identical twins, not, not—you know, the other kind.” We ride the rest of the way in silence.

•

They play the tape at the station. They use the tape recorder. It didn't break when I dropped it.

*I can't believe that thing didn't break. Just my luck. Just my fucking luck. It would have taken them forever to find something to play the tape on. At least a couple days. Coulda bought myself some time. Even when I do something so perfect, like utilizing an archaic technology to delay the release of incriminating evidence, it goes to shit.*

The tape plays at a wonky, not quite half speed (the recorder having been damaged when it fell). I hear myself, my voice, damaged and slow.

I sound hopeful, even through all the mud and distortion.

I smile.

“I wanted to write a self-help book that wasn't the ‘same old, same old’ self-help book. Enter, this book,” my voice says. The cops in the room all look at each other.

“A novel?” The cop in charge says, sarcastically.

“Poetic. License,” I say, almost in a whisper, feeling inspired and proud in a weird way.

“Not the kind of book that’s like ‘What am I reading here? Probably just another California Chicken Therapy rip-off again, here we go.’ Not that.”

“Ain’t your brother some self-help guru, too?” The cops all chuckle.

“More like self-help scam artist, if you ask me,” another doltish cop chimes in. They chuckle harder.

The tape plays for a while. When I first mention the zoo, but don’t expand on it, they share a worried look around the room. *Maybe he’s telling the truth,* it seems to say. *Maybe the brother heard wrong.* It doesn’t last. My confession comes...

“I would crack a cage and sprint, leaving a cloud of pepper spray in my wake, even though almost all of the animals—totally confused—didn’t bolt right away,” my twisted voice finally starts to wrap it up. They’ve heard enough. The head cop shuts it off. I’m toast.

*I did jail once and I can do it again. Hell, maybe they’ll go easy on me since it was so long ago now.*

“You’ll be wanting a lawyer, I presume?” The head cop says.

“Hmm,” I scoff. “Yeah, get me Bear. Jim Bear. That’s my lawyer. *Jim. Bear.*” I’m not sure why I say that. He’s on my mind, I guess.

The other cops shuffle out of the room, leaving me alone with the boss. “Listen, I’m not unsympathetic to your plight here. Not entirely,” he tells me. “What was the blackmail business all about? The situation you mentioned, before the zoo attack?”

“Ah, You caught that, did you?” I sit up straight. “Sure, why not.” I sigh deeply. “Only my deepest, darkest secret.”

“Listen, you—”

“A long time ago one of my foster ‘dads’, a real fucking pervert mind you, well he peddled in, uh, child porn. Ha. Yeah. Child porn. Haha.” I don’t know why I’m laughing. “I’ve never told anyone this. Well, I was sorta malnourished as a kid and my growth was super stunted and what have you, so this guy put me in the movies even though I was

like *way* older. I musta been fifteen, sixteen. I'm not sure."

The cop is listening, slack-jawed and frowning.

"And that's that, I guess. You probably don't want details. I still looked the same, mostly. Then. I think they said I was nine or ten in the videos? Don't remember. I didn't want it getting out. I didn't want—I mean, the plan made no sense to me. I also didn't ask any questions." The cop looks sick.

"Well, anyway, you asked. That's that. You caught him, though. I was happy about that."

"Your dad is Graham Bridges?" The cop is stunned.

"Not dad. Foster parent. But, yes, sure. That's him."

The cop is white as a ghost. He bolts up and says,

"Give me a minute, I just—"

"Did y'all not know that? About him? The, you know?"

"No, well. No, I don't think so. Sit tight. I'm sorry. I'll be right back."

•

*He's been gone a long time. Is this good or bad? What if I had told somebody that earlier? Maybe it could've helped me in some way? It's so embarrassing, though. Shit, it's just as well. What's taking so long?*

I get up and move to the door of the interrogation room. I bang on it and yell, "Hey! What's up? What's going on out there? Am I being charged? Hey? Hey!" I sit back down in a slouch of frustration.

Just then, I hear a loud scratching, rumbling noise coming from the wall behind me. I turn to look and it appears to be shaking. Bits of dust and concrete are shaking loose. *BAMMM! CRUNCHHH!* A hole in the wall about three feet in diameter appears through a cloud of dusty smoke.

*What the fuck?*

I'm staring into the eyes of Jim the hairless bear from the zoo. "You called for a lawyer?" he says, and laughs. I laugh too.

*What the fuck.*

"I can't—is this really happening?"

“Yes, it is, my friend. I’ve come to set you free.”

I crawl through the hole, into the night, with my old animal friend. He seems a lot smaller than before, and even balder. “Now what?” I ask him. “They're not gonna stop looking for me. *Chet* won't let him. Honestly, I should—”

“You should do what? What should you do?” Jim says. “You’re free. You’re finally free. You did it.”

“I’m not, you—I’m not fucking free! I’ll never be free. What the hell is wrong with you?” I feel like killing this talking bear. I grab him by the neck and shake. “You promised me. You promised. You said I would see my ‘greatest success.’ Well? What is it, you disgusting beast? *What the fuck is it?!*”

***What is it? What is  
my greatest success?  
What is it? What is  
my greatest success?***