

The Book of Virtue

Bibliomysteries

by Ken Bruen, 1951-

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My old man:
Tough.
Cruel.
Merciless.

And that was on the weekends when he was happy. If a psycho could do happy.
His cop buddies said,
“Frank, Frank is just intense.”

Right.

Other kids go,

“My dad took me to the Yankees.”

Mine, he took out my teeth.

With intensity.

The horrors of peace. He bought the farm when I was seventeen. My mom, she took off for Boise, Idaho.

Hell of another sort.

They buried my father in the American flag. No argument, he was a patriot.

I played *Another one bites the dust*.

He'd have hated Queen to be the band.

His inheritance?

A book.

Rich, huh?

My father died horribly. A slow, lingering, eat-your-guts-in-pieces cancer. His buddies admired my constant vigil.

Yeah.

I wanted to ensure he didn't have one of those miraculous recoveries. His last hour, we had an Irish priest who anointed him, said,

“He will soon be with God.”

The devil, maybe. With any luck.

He was lucid in his last moments. Looked at me with total fear.

I asked, “Are you afraid?”

He nodded, his eyes welling up. I leaned close, whispered, “Good, and, you know, it will get worse.”

A flash of anger in those dead brown eyes, and I asked, “What are you going to do, huh? Who you going to call, you freaking bully?”

The death rattle was loud and chilling. The doctor rushed in, held his hand, said, “I am so sorry.”

I managed to keep my smirk in check. He was buried in a cheap box, to accessorize his cheap soul. A week after, I was given his estate.

The single book.

Mind you, it was a beautiful volume, bound in soft leather, gold leaf trim. Heavy, too.

And well thumbed.

I was puzzled. My old man, his reading extended to the sports page in The Daily News.

But a book?

WTF?

On the cover, in faded gold was, *Virtue*.

Like he'd know any damn thing about that.

Flicked through it...???

In his spidery handwriting, it was jammed with notes. The first page had this:

“You cannot open a book without learning something.”
—Confucius.

I put the book down.
“Was he trying to educate himself?”
The schmuck.
My cell shrilled.
Brady, my boss. He muttered,
“Sorry about your old man.”
Yeah. Yada, yada.
Did the sympathy jig for all of two minutes. Then,
“Grief in the club last night.”
The outrider here being
“The hell where you?”
And, unsaid,
“So your old man bought the farm. You’re supposed to ensure the club runs
smooth.”
The Khe San, in midtown.
Home to:
Wise guys
Cops
Strippers
Low lifes
Skels
Power trippers
Politicians.
All R and R-ing in a place of uneasy truce.
My job: to maintain smooth and easy vibe. I didn’t ask if they checked their
weapons at the door but did try to keep a rack on the rampant egos. I had an
assistant—in truth a Mack 5 would have been the biz—but, lacking that, I had—
Cici.
A weapon of a whole deadly calibre.
Brady was a Nam wanna-be, like Bruce in his heyday, a dubious tradition
begun by John Wayne with the loathsome Green Berets. Rattle on enough about a
lost war and it gave the impression you were there. Sure to be shooting, Brady
played *Born in the USA* like his own personal anthem. That he was from the
Ukraine seemed neither here nor deceptive there.
I ran the club, and well.
Was taught by the best, my best friend, Scotty, but more of that later.
Had learned to walk the taut line between chaos and safety that growing up
with a bully equips you to do. When your mother takes a walk early, you lose any
semblance of trust. My old man, second generation Mick, was as sentimental as
only a fledging psychopath can be. His MO was simple:
Beat the living shit out of your child, play the suck-heart songs:
Danny Boy
Galway Bay
Molly Malone

Sink a bottle of Jay.
Weep buckets for your own miserable self.
What they term the “Constellation of Disadvantage.”
Booze, mental illness, violence.
But books?
Never.
So what the hell was this beautifully bound edition about? I opened another page at random.
Got

“A book must be an ice axe
To break
The seas
Frozen inside our soul.”

I was rattled.
If he could quote that, and, Jesus wept, have applied it to his own self, where the fuck did that leave my dark finished portrait of him?
Resolved to run it by Cici.
She was
Brady’s babe, in every sense.
Twenty five years of age with the experience of fifty, and all of them dirty.
And ruthless.
Concealed behind a stunning face, she had that rarity, green eyes, and a mouth designed by a *Playboy* deity.
She was a simple girl at heart, really.
All she wanted really was a shitload of cash.
And, like, before the spring.
Her beauty was of that unique stop-you-dead variety.
Worse, she knew it.
Used it.
Sure, I was banging her. If you live a cliché, then that’s the most lame of all.
But, see, I could talk to her, I think. And,
Get this:
She read.
Our club catered to the young punks, reared on the movies *Casino* and *Wise Guys*.
They spoke a mangled Joe Peschi, convoluted by snatches of Travis Bickle.
Books? Nope.
They didn’t know from kindle to *National Enquirer*. But Cici, she’d have a book running alongside her vegetarian Slurpee. Her latest was titled, *Ethics of the Urban Sister*.
I shit thee not.
So, she seemed to know stuff. Couple that with an old soul glint in her amazing eyes and you had, what?
Sensuality with knowledge.
Late February, New York was colder than my old man’s eyes.

An hour before the club opened, we were having the usual hassle:
Chef on the piss
Waitresses on the whinge
And a mega tab from an old guy in one of The Families who no one had the
cojones to ask,
“Yo, fook head, you want to like, settle your freaking bill?”
Translate
Me.
As in having to ass kiss and somehow get some major green from the dangerous
bastard.
Cici was down with the young guns’ lingo,
Was explaining to me the essence of
“Too school for cool.”
And the extreme irrationality of adding NOT to a statement. Like
“I’m happy.”
Dramatic pause,
Then, “Not.”
Fook on a bike.
But the word that annoyed me beyond coherent belief was the universal reply to
seemingly any situation.
Like
“Your wife was killed.”
“...Whatever!”
Or, even good news:
“You won the State Lottery.”
They go
“...Whatever.”
Drives me ape shit.
My old man was dead five months then. Okay, five months and change.
So, I counted. You betcha. Joy can be measured.
Cici had, in a drunken moment, told me that Brady kept a mountain of coke,
and a ton of cash, in his apartment. She was laying down the seed of a plan.
Scotty had been dead three months.
We cherished the hour before Brady showed. Cici had taken my music faves on
board. We had a ritual down. She’d ask, “Caf Corretto?”
Basically the Italian version of a pick me up. Caffeine with Jameson.
The tunes: U2, with “Bad.”
The Edge proving he was indeed the owner of the driving guitar.
Lorena McKennet, with *Raglan Road*.
Vintage regret. The Irish legacy.
The Clash, with *London Calling*.
Because they rock, always.
Gretchen Peters’ *Bus to San Cloud*.
Pining in beauty.
We were midway along when the door whipped open and Brady blasted in.
Heavy-set, muscle and fat in contention. A squashed-in face with eyes that never
heard of humor.

His opener:

“Turn off that shit.”

Meant we’d have *Born in the USA*.

Ad nauseum.

And add ferocity.

His crudity always managed to reach new depths of offense.

Like,

“Bitch, the office. I need servicing.”

Cute, huh?

Scotty.

My best and, in truth, only friend.

The ubiquitous *them*, whoever the fook they be, say,

“The difference between one friend and none is infinite.”

Scotty was the manager of Khe Shan before me. I was taken on as his assistant. I’d been fiercely pressured by my father to follow his footsteps—heavy, brutal, as they were and join the NYPD.

Yeah, right, like hell.

I went to business college at night. Learned that school teaches you one thing: Greed rocks.

I wanted to rock.

I had a job during the day stocking shelves. And,

Get this:

Carrying customers’ bags to their cars. All I ever, Christ ever, needed to know about humiliation, being almost literally invisible.

Until,

A Friday, carrying mega-freight for a guy in his forties, driving a Porsche. Dressed casual, but rich. His casual gear wasn’t from Gap, unless he owned the branch, and he had that permanent tan that drives New Yorkers nuts.

Envy? Oh, yeah.

And his shoes, those Italian jobs that mock,

“Sucks being poor.”

I managed to finally get his heavy bags in the car. He never looked at me, flipped me a buck. I said, “You’re fooking kidding.”

He turned, levelled the bluest eyes outside of Hollywood, laughed, said, “You’re the help, be grateful.”

One thing genetics bestows: I’ve a temper.

My fist bunched instantly and he clocked it, asked, “How dumb are you, T?”

T?

He pulled out a hundred, “This stir your mojo?”

I gave him the look, the one that goes, “Keep fooking with me and see how that pans out.”

Two things happened that changed my life.

One, I decked him.

Two, my boss saw me do it, rushed out, picked the dude up, muttered profuse, insincere apologies, pledging,

“His ass is so fired.”

The guy rubbed his chin, dismissed my boss with a curt, “Let me have a word.”

Asked, "What are you going to do now, job wise?"

The hundred was still crumpled in his hand, a trickle of blood leaking from his mouth. I fessed up.

"Don't know."

He assessed me anew, then,

"You like clubs, as in nightclubs?"

"Sure, what's not to like?"

"You want to work in The Khe?"

That's how famous/infamous it was. Didn't even need its full title.

Was he kidding?

"Are you kidding?"

No.

Straight up.

He was El Hombre. The guy who transformed it from a seedy mediocrity to the exclusive joint it was. He turned towards the Porsche, said, "Be there this evening, six sharp. Wear black pants, a clip-on tie, white shirt, and shoes that fly."

My mind was playing catch up, badly. I asked, "Clip-on?"

"Yeah, the client wants to pulp you, he goes for the tie, every predictable time."

I couldn't help it. I stared at the vanishing Franklin. He laughed.

"For punching your new boss, you're fined the hundred."

As the Porsche went into its beautiful rev, I shouted, "What's T?"

"T... is for Trash."

Later, I would discover the reason for the

Unflappable

Laid back

Luded

Vibe he had.

A blend of Klonopin and Tequila. Keeps not only the demons at bay but awarded a chill of the emotions as outrider.

I duly showed up at the club and muddled through for the next few weeks. Learned the biz the hard way, by mostly screwing up. Scotty was from South Detroit, not so much street wise as street lethal. Steered me through the delicate art of handling the wise guys, as in, if they didn't pick up their tabs, let it slide until the club owner decided to act. He warned,

"If you're told to ask for payment directly, get yourself a very large gun."

Added, "If you don't adapt to thinking outside the box, you'll be in one."

Right.

Scotty had earned a shit-load of cash, from, as he put it, "Creative stealing."

Creative, I could do.

We began to hang out on our Sundays, the only day the club closed. I coerced him into coming to Shea Stadium. I didn't convert him from a Yankees fan, but I did get him to at least appreciate Reyes.

Scotty had taken on my choice of Jameson. Our final Sunday, he'd taken me to a pub he frequented, The Blaggard, West 39th Street, between Fifth and Sixth Avenues. They had Guinness on tap. What more recommendation could you need? Scotty looked more tense the more he knocked back, said, "Brady is connected to the Russian gangs."

One thing I'd absorbed fast was those mothers made the Italians seem tame. And were regular customers. Always with the incredible dames. They carried a built-in smirk, the one that whispered, "Fook with me, we'll bury you."

I believed.

He asked me, "You ever see the Korean movie, *I Saw the Devil*?"

Nope.

I didn't do Oriental unless it was a hooker. Scotty laughed, said, "You're a piece of work, but hear this: if I disappear, you can be sure, Brady is behind it."

What?

I went, "What?"

He explained.

He claims to be American as cover for his gang ties. The cocksucker is from Minsk... fooking Minsk, yah believe it?

Scotty was so ultra cool, so in freaking control, I couldn't imagine anyone getting the jump. As if he read my thoughts, he added, "Brady has a small country's money in his apartment. I know because he showed me. The fook is a showboat, almost daring me to rip him off."

I was saturating this, a silence of foreboding over us. Scotty said, "If, if, you have to step up, and I'm in the wind, amass a pension, then take Brady out before he buys you the farm."

I was so immersed with my father's book that I put this rap down to the Jay. Changing the subject, I told him about my "inheritance."

He laid a mess of twenties on the counter, to the bar lady's delight. No wonder they liked him—and they did. He knocked back his last shot, said, "Some men, they think if they can give the impression of goodness despite being a first class son of a bitch, then they have rewritten the book of their life."

Deep, huh?

I wasn't buying, asked, "That's what you figure my father tried to do?"

He stood, shucked on his shearling coat, a cool three thousand bucks worth, looked at me, with something like warmth, said, "Oh, yeah, his very own *Book of Virtue*."

We walked down Fifth, a wind blowing across our backs like the dead prayer of despair. We stopped at the intersection and Scotty hailed a cab, turned to me, registering my expression of alarm as he raised his arms, and laughed. Asked, "What, you think I'm going to give you a hug?"

Paused.

"One thing I learned about the Micks: they don't do affection."

I regret very little of the life I've lived, not even the heavy crap, but oh, Sweet jaysus, why didn't I at least say, "Thanks for being my buddy and hey, you know, you needn't worry, I've got your back."

I didn't.

Didn't have his back, either.

And that's a true Micked pity.

Monday was one of those stunning New York days. A bright, sunny afternoon, cold but crisp. Reason you never left.

Ever.

Scotty didn't show up for work. Two days later, they fished his beaten body out of the East River.

I had literally read in *The Book of Virtue*, as I now termed the book, "When the incredible happens, add credible to your account."

Brady was in hyper spirits that evening, dancing around, treating the mob factions to champagne, was almost civil to me.

Like that would last.

It didn't.

He sneered at me, "Scotty has moved on."

And, as if it was a real award, "You're the new boss."

Did I start checking on Scotty's death then?

Nope, I was too busy amassing my own fortune.

Months trickled by, I read my father's book, went to bed, frequently with Cici.

Did her sleeping with Brady bother me?

Take a flying guess.

Was near the end of *The Book of Virtue* and read, "What warehouse of the soul awaits me now?"

I muttered, "As long as it's hot as hell."

Thought, *Scotty, where were you when I needed you?*

Conscious of...

"Where was I when he went in the East River?"

And the days moved on until Brady began his dismantling of me.

With an awareness of unpaid tabs circulating in the club.

Brady had literally grabbed my arm, hissed, "Get the tabs settled."

I tried, adding as much steel as I dared.

"Scotty would have dealt discreetly with this."

He gave me a sneer of such malevolence, like he was crowing, said, "Pity he didn't learn to swim."

Dancing away, he threw, "D'Agostino owes me, that's what you need to get your focus with."

Meaning, the old Mafiosi whose running bill was getting seriously out of hand. I asked, "You really want to mess with him?"

He gave his crooked grin, all malice and spite, said, "I won't be."

Pause.

"You will."

Then added, "Before Tuesday."

My father's cop buddies were like a vile extension of him. Save for one, Casey. Yeah, second generation of cop and Mick. Almost a caricature.

Boozy

Hard ass

Harp-ed

If Gene Hackman were Irish, he'd be Casey. But he treated me good.

Very.

After my father passed, he'd said,

"You ever need anything..."

So.

So met with him, in an Irish bar off Madison Square Garden. He was dressed in a thick off-white Aran Island sweater, heavy pea jacket, tweed cap, as if he were auditioning for a part in *Mick Does New York*. A shock of wiry white hair and hands that could cover Manhattan and you had the essence of the Irish NYPD legacy. It wasn't that these guys took life as it came. Hell, no. They grabbed it by the throttle, kicked its ass, and, if that failed, they beat the living shit out it.

Casey had the end booth, shielded from prying eyes, though you'd need some cojones to stare at Casey. He welcomed, "I got you a Jay, lad. Sit yer own self down."

The Jay was at least a double, no ice, heaven forbid. Those Micks weren't hot on blasphemy. He didn't reach over and ruffle my hair but the vibe was there. Even if I reached eighty, I'd always be "the kid" to these dinosaurs.

I knew the drill: get some shots down, then approach the subject in a creep-up-on-it fashion. If you were in a hurry, park it elsewhere. Casey ordered a side of fries and a bunch of pickled eggs. He ordered, I swear, by pounding the table, just once. And, you guessed it, offered/ commanded, "Dig in."

Those old timers, the book in their lives was, "Book 'em, Danno."

Once we had the ritual drinks in, eggs demolished, he leaned back, asked, "How you holding up, kiddo?"

I lied, said okay, then asked, "You know anything about Brady, my boss at Khe Shan?"

He sighed. The guy could have sighed for the entire U. S. Shook his huge head, said, "Piece of shite, connected to the Russian mob. Animals."

Paused.

Gave me the cool slow appraisal, fine-honed in nigh twenty years of staring down the enemy. *Enemy* covered just about the whole planet save cops and family.

He asked, "This about the schmuck they pulled out of the East River?"

You might ridicule these throw-back nigh vigilante cops but Holy shit, they were on the ball. You didn't trawl the five boroughs for two decades and be stupid.

I advised, if quietly, "He was my buddy."

Casey snorted and, when you have a Jameson shooter half way to your lips, it's doubly effective, but he never spilled a drop. Drained it, crashed it down on the table with, "Never had you down as a bollix, much less a stupid one."

I did the smart thing: shut the hell up. Dense silence over us and... few things more lethal than a brooding silent Mick. He finally said, "Lemme educate you, son. Scotty was well known to the Detroit PD, but a slick fook, so they never nailed him. He headed west, hooked up with Brady, another piece of work who'd adopted an Irish name to make him thug-friendly. They made a lot of cold cash and ploughed it into the club to make it seem legit. The past year, Scotty began to make inroads into his own crew to oust Brady."

Paused.

"You get the picture?"

Yeah.

Then he added, "Brady will let you run the club for a year, tops, then whack you and bring in some other naïve schmuck."

I excused me own self, headed for the restroom, ordered up a fresh batch of the Jay, and punched the wall, hurt the living crap out of me hand. On my return, I changed tack, asked, "You ever have my old man down for a reader?"

We clinked shots, downed them, and Casey answered, "No way. You kidding?"

I told him about *The Book of Virtue* and he let a low whistle, said, "Me, I never was much for no book learning."

Sounding like he was in a bad Western.

We mulled it over, then he went, "My mother, Lord rest her and all the bad Caseys, she used to sing a Yeats poem, yeah, sing it. All I got is, "The world is more full of weeping than we can understand."

God is good; he didn't sing it. I hadn't enough Jay to ever endure that. Then he leaned over, put his large hand on my shoulder, said, "Frank had his faults but, deep down, he was a decent guy."

I felt the bile rise, spat, "Oh, like, *he meant well?*"

He sat back, stunned by my venom, tried, "Jaysus, Tommy, c'mon, he loved you."

I said, "That weeping world... *Frank* caused his fair share."

And that was the end of the chat.

He warned me to watch my back, and to call if I needed anything.

I got out of there, had a moment of vague regret that I'd busted his balls, then thought, "He was my Dad's buddy, so the hell with him."

My father's book

Was diverted by a note on the binding. Read, "Sewn binding, the strongest yet the most expensive. The pages are sewn into the book manually with a sewing machine."

Followed by a note, in my father's hand, "Check out Moleskin diaries, used by Hemingway and Chatwin."

Now I was seriously perplexed.

Too, the oddest thing, just holding the book, it gave me the strangest sensation of, hell, I'm slow to admit this,

Peace?

WTF?

I went online, put in, www.realbooks.com

Trawled through a ton of sites until I found one dealing exclusively with the physical qualities of a book, not the contents.

Read long-winded boring passages about the creation of a book, the printing, art of binding, and muttered,

"Bibliophiles."

Come the final Wednesday of the virtue saga.

The last page of my father's book had passages of two poems, Francis Thompson's *The Hound of Heaven* and Cafavvy's *Alexandria*. The gist being, he'd been pursued all his life in dread and terror and, secondly, no matter what he did, he couldn't escape his life, as if you fooked up in one place, so you would always do.

If cops were secretly reading this stuff in their leisure time, no wonder they ate their guns.

Cici had the day off and came to my apartment, the top floor of a brownstone that I lavished my savings on. She had a mouth on her, kidding I ain't. She asked, "How much are you ripping off from the club?"

A lot.

I said, "As if I would."

She let that slide.

Gave me the hot look.

It burned.

Followed with a blast of white radiance.

After, I had one of my rarest cigs and, God forgive me, one supplied by Cici.

Virginia Slims.

Not too macho. She pulled on one of my faded denim shirts. I had it longer than I had sense. Looked good, looked in heat. Trailing smoke, she went to mix up a batch of Vodka Spritzers.

Most appetites nigh sated, she picked up my dad's book, asked, "You read?"

What?

Like I was a dumb bastard?

Hello.

She flicked through it, said, "Now there's a word."

I followed her to the main room, an XL Yankees T-shirt on, asked,

"What's that?"

She read, *Schadenfreude*.

I asked, "The hell does that mean?"

She pulled a battered dictionary from my battered book collection, found the entry, intoned, "A pleasure taken from another's misfortune."

Looked at me,

Added,

"Brady."

Got my vote.

Handed me a glass of the freshly blended batch, it tasted,

Cold

Good and

Like

Hope.

As artificial as that.

And as long lasting.

I said, "Or my old man."

She sat lotus style on the sofa, looked at me for a long beat.

Then,

"We need to deal with Brady."

Sure.

How?

I asked, "How?"

She took a deep gulp of her drink, her eyes watching me over the rim of the glass. And, "We need to cash his check."

No dictionary needed for that.

“I wanted to develop a curiosity that was oceanic and insatiable as well as a desire to learn every word in the English language that didn’t sound pretentious or ditzzy.”

Pat Conroy.

My Losing Season.

I was beginning to understand that my old man had used his book in a vain attempt at catching an education. Was that admirable? Weighed it against the terror he’d inflicted on me all his miserable life.

Time was running out on my supposed plea to the Mafioso to ask him to settle his tab. No doubt, if I did, he’d see it as the ultimate diss and, man, this was a guy who beat a busboy to pulp for standing too close while the psycho was getting up from a meal—a meal, of course, that he didn’t pay for.

Too, the schmuck, horror, never, like, not ever, left a tip.

Enough reason right there to whack his tight ass. I owned an illegal Browning Nine. You run my kind of club, you need to pack more than attitude.

Cici had it down.

Brady rented a fook pad on West 45th Street, between Madison and Fifth Avenues. Friday afternoons, he liked Cici to come by and... entertain him. She had a key and gave me a copy.

Oh, and a shit-load of coke. Said, “Scatter it around the bedroom, make it look like a dope gig gone south.”

Cici would have a very high profile lunch with some friends, alibi ensuring. Me, I had none and that itself is its own defense.

The gun was untraceable. I’d literally found it a year ago, shoved down behind a seat in the VIP section.

Friday, coming up to noon, I felt calm. Removing Brady would be a downright freaking joy and, in some odd way, like a lash back at me old man. I dressed casual, not sure of the dress code for murder. Old jeans, a battered windbreaker, Converse sneakers that had always been a size too small. Walk in the blood and the cops, gee, they’d have a footprint.

It went like clockwork.

Brady had laughed when I let myself in. He was nose deep in candy, lolling on a sofa, rasped, “Jesus, never thought you had the *cojones* to attempt a burglary.”

Why wasn’t he alarmed?

The coke had fried his brain... too out there to be alarmed.

Put one in his gut first, let him whine a bit, chalk up serious payback... but all fine things must end so added three to his dumb head.

All she wrote.

I then scattered the coke like fragile snow around his pad.

Found the money in a suitcase.

Yeah, believe it, a suitcase.

Enough cash to launch two new clubs.

Got the hell out of there.

Discreetly.

Next day, the cops arrived.

I kid thee not.

Two detectives, one surly and the other surlier. Bad cop by two.

The latter asked,
Pushing a book at me, "This yours?"
"My dad's book!"

Before I could protest, the first added, "If it has your fingerprints?"
They had a warrant and found the suitcase in jig time.

Cici.

The bitch.

I did of course try to implicate her but her alibi was solid. More than.

My lawyer was very young, up to speed with the current kid jargon. Said, "You don't have to worry."

Looked at the cop's book, of evidence, added "Not."

I sat back in the hard prison metal chair, looked at him, said slowly,

"What...

the...

fook...

ever."

