



THE
POLKA
DOT
GIRL A Mystery

By Darragh McManus

The author of *Even Flow*

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Copyright Acknowledgements

'And death shall have no dominion'

And Death Shall Have No Dominion, Dylan Thomas, lines 1 and 9, from
Twenty-Five Poems, JM Dent & Sons, 1936

'Experience is wine and art the brandy we distil from it'

A Mixture of Frailties, Robertson Davies, Scribner, 1958

About the Author

Darragh McManus is a writer and journalist. His first crime novel, *Even Flow*, was published by Roundfire in 2012. Other books include the non-fiction *GAA Confidential* and the comic novel *Cold! Steel! Justice!!!* For more than a decade he has written reviews, features and opinion columns for several papers, including The Irish Independent, The Sunday Times and The Guardian. He also writes YA fiction and stage plays. He lives in the west of Ireland.

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The Polka Dot Girl

For women everywhere

Chapter I

Madeleine

SHE was dead by the time I got there, and by the looks of things she'd been dead for quite a while before they pulled her from the water. Some horrible things in that water had done some horrible things to her face, and it looked like it had been a really pretty face once; say, 30 seconds before whoever it was threw her into that water with those horrible things doing those horrible things to her pretty face...

Jesus. I needed a cigarette and a strong coffee. We were on a half-rotted wooden platform at the far end of the docks with no nothing down there, never mind a coffee machine, so I settled for just the cigarette.

I spat out a scrap of tobacco and took a nice, long, warming drag. I figured it was going to be one of those nights that hang around too long, outstay their welcome, insist on dragging their feet and yours both, hour after hour, until you're just about ready to finally tell them to piss off, take a hike, when bingo, you realize it's morning and they're already gone, and you're the only one left hanging around. How does that happen? I'd had too many of those nights recently, but then I reminded myself: you're the law, this is the job, shut your whining face and do it.

This was going to be one of those nights. My watch read 1.20am by the pale yellow glow of a streetlight and the work was only getting started. Two divers trawling the harbor bottom for any more evidence (hopefully not another body) while a third sat in the boat, looking cold and bored; two forensics officers setting up portable equipment inside a disused steel shipping container; three uniforms sealing off the area for about 50 yards in every direction. Doing all the right things in this very wrong situation.

The call had been made by a prostitute, a middle-aged dame known to most of the dicks who worked the Vice detail. Cops and her fellow working girls called her Poison Rose; someone said her actual name was Manning, but I didn't know yet for sure. She sat on a low plastic stool nearby, taking nips from a bottle of whiskey the color of old brass and staring out at the flat blackness of the water. All the other prostitutes had skedaddled, presumably, by the time we arrived. Her face resembled a mask, under heavy face-paint and the glare of spotlights; she reminded me of a character from Japanese Noh theater. Yeah, that's me—smarter than the average bear...

Poison Rose could wait a little while longer. I left my witness to her burnished whiskey and dazed reflection, and walked 30 yards to where my victim lay. The girl was laid out on some sort of black plastic sheeting, or maybe it was canvas—fabrics were never my specialty. She wore a polka dot dress, white with black spots, hiked midway up one thigh, plastered wet to the other at the knee. I didn't like to see that, a girl exposed that way in death. As if reading my mind, the coroner waddled over and tugged the dress down, patting it smooth on the victim's pale shins like the way you might tuck a child into bed.

The coroner on duty tonight, Farrington, was actually the assistant coroner—the head body-slicer was on holidays in the mountains. Lucky so-and-so, always seemed to be *in absentia* when a really gnarly case rolled in...and I didn't just mean that in the physiological sense, though the sight of the girl's destroyed face made me simultaneously want to throw up, light a second cigarette and pass out. I didn't have much of a stomach for gore.

No, this was going to be a real doozy politically, too. Her features were mangled beyond recognition but I clocked the girl straight away—clocked the tattoo on her upper left breast, a beautiful flower, maybe a rose, twisting on its own thorny stem. I'd seen it, and her, a few times before, at black-tie functions, at the theater, even once or twice at a ball-game with her partner *du jour*. I knew who she was, alright, and Farrington knew but wasn't letting on, and before morning broke everyone in this claustrophobic little burg would know that Madeleine Greenhill had been murdered and thrown in the water for the fishes to feed on.

My stomach rolled again at the thought of it. I took a few steps closer to Farrington to distract my mind. The assistant coroner had the sort of face that you just knew had been adorably cute as a child—a real round-cheeked cherub—but now, pushing 50, had expanded to piggy fatness, in line with the rest of the body. The eyes seemed to almost literally be pushed back into the head by the pressure of roiling waves of blubber, and that anachronistic, medieval hairstyle didn't help. But Farrington was okay, what you might call “real stand-up”: decent, stoical and about as sensitive as anyone can be after two decades of exposure to the worst excesses of behavior and the grossest examples of biological breakdown.

“Genie, Genie, Genie. What's the good word?”

Farrington didn't look up from a crouched position, hunched over what used to be Madeleine Greenhill, one hand gingerly poking at the corpse with something long and sharp and shiny, the other steadying that

corpulent mass like a flesh tripod set square on the ground. One of the girl's shoes, a black strappy sandal, had shrunk in the water and now cut into her ghostly flesh, squeezing her slim calf into a grotesque shape it never knew in life. The other sandal, presumably, was slowly burrowing down into mud and saltwater.

I nodded hello, even though I knew it couldn't be seen, and said, "Hi, Farr. What's the good word? The word is there isn't any good. Not coming out of this, anyhow. That's, uh, yeah, that's what the word is telling me."

Farrington looked up, glared at me but more as a warning than an act of aggression. Then a quick smile, a return to the work and a strained levity in the voice: "Hey-ho-hey. Let's all keep smiling, shall we? Let's do our job and keep smiling and let others worry about tomorrow, alright?"

I hunkered down beside Farrington and Madeleine—quit it, I told myself, this is not Madeleine, there is no Madeleine Greenhill anymore—I hunkered down and said, "So what can you tell me?"

Farrington spoke and worked together: "Hard to say for sure and definite, but I think she was dead before she hit the water. Her lungs seem relatively clear. And see this here...?" Pointing to a dark bruise on the girl's forehead which bloomed outwards, soft and terrible. "...clearly a blow. Our old pal, 'blunt force trauma.' I think Mad...the *victim* was struck on the head, probably hard enough to kill, then dumped in the harbor. Certainly unconscious going in. So she didn't, you know, uh...suffer. She wouldn't have been aware of what happened after that. It was just...lights out."

I gave silent thanks to whatever god was partly looking out for beautiful young murder victims that night; small comfort is still comfort. I thought, This at least will soften the edges of her mother's pain, if only a little. I knew her mother by name; everybody knew her, either personally or by reputation. Now it was my responsibility as the initial investigating officer to inform Misericordiae Greenhill that her only daughter was dead, and I dreaded it more than I usually dreaded those dreadful, dead-full house calls. Old Misery—incorrect translation, but that's what everyone called her when they were absolutely sure she wasn't listening. She had famously once punched the then-Mayor at a charity ball in an argument over theology, if you can believe it. Then there was that rumor, last year or the year before, about Madeleine and her new flame and the leg-break beating dished out to said flame on mama dearest's orders...

I didn't tend to go for rumors but I bought that one. Old Misery was a hard-nosed bitch with a heart like granite, diamond-eyed and

borderline evil; she was capable of anything. And yet I felt sorry for her. No woman should ever have to hear the news I was about to bring her.

Farrington was still talking; I tuned back in on the words "...tests should prove it but if I had to give a hunch, which I don't, I'd say our victim had been intoxicated. Which also makes it easier to throw her in the briny."

"What makes you think that?"

Farrington spoke *sotto voce*: "I'll deny saying this if you quote me, but check this out." There they were, trailing out from Madeleine's sleeve, running into and through and out of the crook of her elbow: the track-marks of a needle. Holy hell. Misericordiae Greenhill's kid was a junkie? No wonder Farrington didn't want to know about it.

"When we have a toxicology report that can't be naysayed, that proves it 1000 per cent, I'll go on the record: the girl was using. 'Till then, I didn't notice these tiny holes in her arm here, and you didn't either. I'm only telling you because."

I said, "Got you. Thanks, Farr." I stood and tried to fill my lungs with good, fresh air, something to scour them clean, rinse out the rank aftertaste of death from my body. Then I remembered I was standing in a shabby harbor at the western end of a ruined old beauty of a town; clean air is in short supply around these parts.

Farrington stood too, gazing almost tenderly at Madeleine, and said, "Yeeahh. Yeah, I think you kiddies have got a new little sandcastle to play with."

That's what we sometimes called our investigations: "sandcastle", or "castle" for short. As in, "What castle are you working on now?", or "Damn, I'm bored. Can't wait for a really big castle to get stuck into. Get my hands properly wet, you know?" It's the work we do, it inures you to finer sensitivities. You feel the empathy in your gut, it's safe there, you'll never lose it and become less than human; but in the forebrain it's all bravado and foolery, all crotch and swagger. This helps us not to care too deeply about those many sad, hapless victims; care too much for all of them and you'll never be able to help one of them. Some cops are naturally soft-hearted, some are just callous shitbirds anyway, but we all put up the same front.

Or maybe it's that we're frustrated idealists, the definition of a cynic. That's where the name comes from: like a real sandcastle, we patiently build something up out of the available material, putting shape and structure on things, but the metaphorical waves just keep coming and wash it all away again, most times. You start out with sunny hope in your heart and end up with the same cold mess you had at the beginning.

Or maybe that's just me. Odette always told me I was too soft to be a cop... Jesus. Odette. She *knew* Madeleine Greenhill—taught her piano for a while, a few years back. Said she was a sweet enough girl, a little wild maybe, but sweet. Mark that as one more name on my list of awkward impending conversations.

I slapped Farrington on that ample back, feeling fat wobble with the impact, and said, "Alright, Farr. Thanks again. And..." I drew a hand across my mouth. "...zip about that other thing."

Farrington nodded solemnly, then gestured towards one of the tech team who had a futuristic-looking camera slung about their neck. "Okay, Annie Leibowitz, come on over here. You've got ten minutes and then I'm moving this poor girl to a better resting place, so get snapping." The crime scene photographer jogged over, the camera bouncing from side to side on its neck strap. Farrington hollered to the young uniformed officer standing guard on the perimeter, just inside the main entrance gates: "Hey! Wake up. Where's that transport I ordered? Call them again, and tell them if it's not here within five minutes there is gonna be one *seriously* pissed-off assistant coroner, and I've got the big knives, right?"

I steeled myself, lit another cigarette for good luck and strode towards Poison Rose, still staring, still sitting, still sipping. I crouched on the ground beside her and pulled out a notebook and pen.

"Hello. My name is Detective Auf der Maur. I need to ask you some questions."

Rose looked up at me and smiled suddenly, as though she'd recognized someone she knew. She said, "You're a pretty young thing, aren't you? Well, not so young, but pretty. And *little*. You're like a dark, shiny little princess."

Her eyes misted over, a sort of intoxicated glaze seeping down from whiskey-soaked mind to damp chin. I smiled, a mite embarrassed, and said, "Right. Thanks for the, uh, thanks for the compliment. Listen, I need to ask you some questions. I need your real name for starters, your full name. Are you listening to me?"

Rose's gaze had returned to the water where the divers' boat was turning, coming back to land, spewing out a crescent moon of foam under the crescent moon of heaven. They hadn't found anything else, it seemed. I was about to repeat my question when Rose spoke, sounding faraway; it almost felt like I was hearing a voiceover in a movie even though she was right there.

"I know that girl. The..." She pointed a thumb towards Madeleine Greenhill's corpse. "...the dead girl. I know her. I mean to say, I *knew* her. Back in the day. You know, the old days. She was younger then. I was

younger. I was pretty, too." She smiled at me again, unhinged and depressing, her face-paint cracking. "Pretty like you."

"Look, I'm sorry. You couldn't have known her. That girl is no more than 21. You must be confused."

She wasn't listening to me; she wasn't there anymore. "I knew her. She looked different, though. Her hair...lighter. Not a brunette like she is now. 'Course, she's not *anything* now. Sad, isn't it?"

I stubbed out my cigarette and sighed heavily. This was going nowhere and I had more than one somewhere to go. Poison Rose, I figured, had a poisoned brain; she was off the planet, floating free, her moorings cut loose by the sharp edge of substance abuse. I turned and spotted a kid in the standard dark green beat-cop uniform, lurking on the periphery, looking more like a rubbernecker than an active participant. I stood up and whistled over.

"Come here, officer. What's your name?"

"Uh, Browne, Detective. I'm Jerry Browne, Silberling Street. I, ah, I caught the squeal from Dispatch. After the initial emergency call from, uh, that lady there. Me and my partner, Officer Mulqueen. That's, ah, that's her over there."

Another grunt stood about 15 feet away from us, a thin, serious-faced young woman with blonde hair tied in a bun, discreetly moving from foot to foot in an effort to ward off the cold. I nodded and said, "Go on."

"Yes, uh, I caught the squeal like I say, reported body find, possible homicide," Browne said. "Gunned it over here as fast as we could. Met Miss, uh...Miss Rose here when we arrived. Seemed pretty *compos mentis*, you know, a bit tipsy but she could talk okay. Brought us over to the, uh, the body, where it was floating out there. We could see it. Officer Mulqueen secured the area while I called you guys. Called Detectives Division, crime scene unit, dive team, snappers, I mean photographers, as per procedure."

"What time did you arrive? As close as you can to the exact time."

"Shortly after half-past 12, Detective. We got the call, like, two minutes after. I remember this because my watch gives a little beep on the half-hour. You know, one of those digital ones? Two beeps on the hour, one on the half. So I heard the beep and then a minute or two later, Dispatch came through with...this."

"Anyone else I should know about?"

"Divers got here fast, marked down the girl's location and pulled her out. What else, what else? ...Just two security guards. They have a shack back towards the main gates but off a ways. Stupid place to put the

security office. They say they didn't see or hear a thing. Probably didn't. Probably asleep the whole time. But I've got their names if you need to question them."

The officer stood there, silent, all talked out for now. I did a quick situation breakdown in my mind: forensics and Farrington would soon have all they needed or could get from the scene. Poison Rose was no use to me drunk and nowhere near sober. And I had to break the news to Misery before someone else did. In a place like Hera City, that was likely to happen sooner than I wanted.

I said, "Okay, Browne, this is what we'll do. Take Poison Rose to Silberling Street lock-up. Put her in a cell for the night, on her own. We're not booking her, we just want to sober her up. She's away with the fairies right now. Give her a cot and a hot meal, some coffee. Let her sleep for a few hours. Tell the night desk you're acting under the orders of Detective Auf der Maur, Homicide. I'll come by myself in the morning, early. And be *gentle* with her, with Rose. Alright? Any questions?"

Browne said, "No, Detective", then paused and smiled shyly. "Well, one. If you don't mind me asking. Are you, uh, Eugenie Auf der Maur?"

"That's right. Why?"

"I think you knew my cousin in the Academy. Marcella Donat? Big, cropped hair, sort of, uh..." Soft laughter. "Like a bull in a china shop. And that was *her* description."

I smiled as well. "I remember Marcella. Big Cella, yeah. Great girl. How's she doing? Haven't heard much of her since we worked Fraud together, and that was a while ago. She still a cop? Hasn't had a nervous breakdown yet, I hope."

I laughed. Browne said, "No, no nervous breakdown but she's not in the force anymore, either. Quit, uh, two years ago I think it was. Bad back, this recurring disk thing. They were scraping off each other or something. Basically couldn't handle the physical stuff anymore, and the life of a desk cop, well..."

"Not Marcella's thing, right?"

"No, Ma'am. Although she still, I mean, she's gone private, so she's still a detective kind of. Does research for people, traces, runs down debt welchers, all that."

"Right. Good for her. Tell her Genie said hi the next time you're talking to her."

"Certainly will, Ma'am."

"And I'll talk to you in the morning probably. Good night, Officer Browne."

I moved off, tipping my finger to Farrington who was packing equipment into a large leather satchel that looked too small for everything being shoved into it. I glanced back at Poison Rose, now wrapped in a rough hemp blanket and being gently led by Browne and Mulqueen, away from that pitch-dark, deathly still water and towards their patrol cruiser which I could see parked across the street outside. Rose looked baffled and dead beat. I sure felt the second part.

I was almost at the gates, and still looking behind me, when my right heel got caught in a crack in the concrete. I stumbled, my leg going one way and the rest of me going the other. The heel broke off, four inches of hard molded plastic just snapping like that, and I fell, my knee cracking off the ground. *Shit*. Clever girl to wear heels to a crime scene at these disintegrating docks. I righted myself, pushed myself up off the ground, dusted myself off, metaphorically and literally. I took off both shoes, dangling them by the strap, and looked back at all the other women: the techs, the divers, the cops in uniform, Farrington, even Poison Rose, all of whom were struggling to keep a smile off their faces. I was embarrassed as hell, mortified, red-faced.

I mentally shrugged and then made a deep bow to my audience, saying, "Thank you, thank you, thank you." When Farrington started to applaud, I knew it was time to leave. I smiled at her and got out of there as quick as bare feet would get me.