

# Wonders will never cease

## Chapter 1: Thursday 3 December, 1985

The final Faculty Board of the year proceeded at its customary funereal pace. Fergus Girvan wriggled in his chair and wished its sagging, clammy plastic seat in hell – the moist warmth was playing merry murder with his piles.

Fergus and far too many other people were currently crammed into a single room in one of Ariel University's tatty, prefabricated buildings. Wan December daylight barely glimmered through plate glass windows already running with condensation.

1985 had been as dull as this meeting, for Fergus. For much of the rest of the country it had been perfectly bloody under the ruthless government of Margaret Thatcher. This year she had finally smashed the miners' into submission. Socialism was a dirty word. Greed was encouraged. The Welfare State was being dismantled. Public services fell by the wayside almost daily as their funding was slashed. Even at the university savings had had to be made. These were gloomy days indeed for anyone who'd ever voted Labour. And after seven vicious years there was no sign even of revolt from within the government. Thatcher cried 'on!' and the vegetables in her cabinet simply echoed her cry. Where and at what speed were questions they consistently failed to ask.

Now she had time on her hands Thatcher might well turn her attention to Ariel University. The Iron Lady hated anything Harold Wilson's government had put in place to make easier the lives of citizens not born into privileged families (never mind that she herself was a grocer's daughter). And Ariel was a soft enough target, being funded differently from conventional universities: it stood out from the crowd. It wasn't wise to stand anywhere the Leaderine's steely gaze could see you clearly. Yes, Thatcher's next quarry could well be Ariel. She might cut its funding until it ceased to be viable. Or she might try to snuff it out altogether.

Well, they'd just have to keep their union dues paid and man the barricades if the Gorgon's stony gaze were to swing their way next year. How bad could it really get? Surely in the civilised Eighties even the Mad Axewoman couldn't excise a whole university and get away with it? Looking ahead as far as Christmas, now less than a month away, was hard enough for Fergus. It was not his favourite time of year, not least because it was the one day when the pubs were shut in the evening. But at least the bloody phone didn't ring.

In an attempt to get something done while the meeting droned on, Fergus mentally worked his way through his diary for the rest of the year.

There was the faculty Christmas party yet to endure. That had historically been a ripe and ribald event, but more recently had become marred by limitations placed on duration of the festivities and the quantity of alcohol provided.

Some days before the Christmas party a meeting of the Architecture course committee was scheduled. Fergus was looking forward to that. He intended to present them with a pitch for a

chapter on ancient architecture which would make their eyes water. He wanted to make one more visit to the British Library before giving Marion his draft outline for typing. It was yet another scintillating Girvan non pareil. Ground-breaking results from research into the sort of subjects covered by the term 'Classics' was difficult – the ground had been pored over so minutely by so many for so long. But Fergus had discovered something truly original about the Pharos of Alexandria in the bowels of the British Library and he couldn't wait to share it with his colleagues. The wonders of the ancient world had long been a favourite area of Fergus's study. Not so much was known about them as one might suppose. For instance, many scholars disputed the very existence of The Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

Which reminded him of a third professional duty remaining in the year. He was due to meet with a Hungarian PhD student who had a fascinating theory about those very hanging gardens: that they were, in fact, the hanging gardens of somewhere other than Babylon. This would explain much. And was certain to make for a fascinating thesis. He was looking forward very much to meeting Ms Jardanyi.

But as for the Faculty Board – all was, as usual, obfuscation and pettifoggery. He didn't know why he bothered coming, except that people who didn't turn up tended to get lumbered, 'by a show of hands', with the faculty's shittier tasks. The last time there had been anything of interest to him on the agenda was when they'd agreed to fund his trip to Alexandria in the autumn. He permitted himself a smug little smirk. They would certainly find *that* had been money well spent.

Reliving the glories of an autumn spent in Alexandria, Fergus slumped into an almost pleasant torpor. As the lengthy business of recording apologies began, his mind finished revisiting Alexandria and segued into a replay of his fiftieth birthday celebration the night before. It began to rove pleurably over the hills and valleys, some thickly wooded, of buxom Sukie, with whom he had spent that exhausting and rejuvenating night. What a quim – velvety as a mouse's ear and tight as ...

The sneeze caught Fergus by surprise, and his ears popped painfully. His body might be a temple, but recently it had begun to feel like a ruined one. He still hadn't been able completely to shift the sinus infection he'd picked up on the plane coming home from Alexandria the month before.

He glared at the window wall, running with condensation. What did the administration here think they were – guppies? This saturated atmosphere wasn't fit for human occupation. He could feel the bacteria which had taken up residence in his upper nasal cavities expanding gleefully with every minute he spent in this soupy air. The teasing pain in his backside wasn't improving his temper, either.

He wished he'd been able to stay in Alexandria for Christmas. His hotel had been comfortable, the food excellent, the weather balmy. The Corniche had been swarming with sophisticated young women. Of course, it being a Muslim country, alcohol wasn't too plentiful, but he'd managed.

The wearisome present intruded as the Professor of the Classics Department, Petra Stavrou, came in late and squeezed her way noisily past the massed knees of the faculty to reach a conspicuously vacant seat next to the Dean, Patrick Redman. Petra was always a top table person – all the department heads were – but she did not usually rate a seat so close to the godhead. Petra being his head of department, Fergus's curiosity was immediately piqued.

Petra was an ambitious woman, this reflected in her dress. Those fashionable padded shoulders, aggressively tailored suits, and gravity-defying stiletto court shoes were worn to show she meant business. She had joined the Classics Department several years after Fergus. Nevertheless, she had steamed past him in the promotion stakes, receiving the single, fiercely coveted, Professorship available to the department two years before – and becoming Fergus's boss in the process.

Petra was an able enough scholar, but completely preoccupied with the location of the texts and artefacts that were her specialism and the staple of her study. She had a Greek mother but had never lived in Greece. This combination of circumstances made her, of course, obsessively Greek.

She had changed her surname to her mother's patronymic by Deed Poll as soon as she was old enough to do so. Greek artefacts should be in Greece was her primary thesis. That so many of them had been removed by the British, Petra felt as a personal affront. Any and all campaigns for the return of the Elgin marbles and similar collections to their country of origin could be sure of her support. About other areas of Classical study she was rather less concerned which, thankfully, left Fergus to get on with his own work unmolested much of the time.

Why had Patrick placed Petra at his right hand like this? Faculty politics was a deep stream, but not a broad one. It took Fergus mere moments to recall that a new Dean would be elected in the New Year. It was Not Done to campaign openly – one hoped to be *asked* to stand by one's peers – but it did not do, either, to depend *entirely* on reputation and respect. A little oiling of the wheels was allowable, even expected. So, Petra had ambitions in that direction did she? And, by the look of it, Patrick's support.

In her absence the Department would require an Acting Head. Ted was too old and Veronica was due to go on maternity leave in the New Year. There was no-one but himself! Fergus Girvan (Acting) Head of Classics. That had a nice ring to it. He could easily manage the extra work load – his current research project would be written up by the spring and his writing commitments too. He could see his way to helping her out. She had only to ask. He could hardly wait.

Fergus's career had been trading water for some time. His doctoral thesis on the Twelve Stages of the Hero's Journey had been an academic best seller. At his appointment in 1969 to the academic staff of the new, innovative, distance-teaching Ariel University (motto 'the university of the air') he had felt like a duck finding water for the first time. He and his new employers quickly discovered that he had a gift for creating course materials which could be taught at a distance. But his star did not rise. His Chair, which everyone considered a foregone conclusion when they hired him, had not materialised.

Not least because Petra snaffled it. She had worked out where in Greece a cache of very ancient marble statues had come from, and insisted they be disinterred from the bowels of the British Museum (where they had been mouldering for a couple of centuries) and repatriated. The Greek government had been effusive in their thanks and had established both a Research Fellowship and a bursary in the department as a result. After that coup her Chair was a foregone conclusion.

His only recourse was to submit a case for a personal Chair. He was particularly hopeful of success next year. He had ground-breaking research in the pipeline, nearing completion in fact, concerning his longstanding area of interest, the wonders of the ancient world. In addition, Ms Jardanyi's research, into the same area of study as his own looked very exciting. The result of his interview with her next week was surely a foregone conclusion. Her résumé was outstanding. To supervise her, surely exceptional, PhD would be a solid asset to his case. And now it looked as though he would be Acting Head of Department if – oh, let imagination reign – *when* Petra became Dean.

It looked as though his luck was finally about to change.

\*

They nipped smartly through the agenda, penny pinching here, compromising there, until they got to the art historians' request for funding for a trip to Florence to help develop their forthcoming course on Renaissance sculpture.

At this point Patrick lumbered to his feet. The trip was being planned by Nick Bonetti, the senior Art History lecturer. Nick had obviously expected to be asked to introduce the item. He was trying now to catch Patrick's eye without having to put up his hand for attention like a boy who needs to leave the room. Patrick, on his feet rummaging around for his spectacles and shuffling notes, was resolutely not meeting Nick's eye.

Give him his bloody trip, thought Fergus, and let's get on. He glanced at his watch. The Vaults Bar would be open by now, and the bottle of half-decent burgundy which Chris, the Steward, uncorked for him on Faculty Board days for just this sort of eventuality would be breathing nicely. He could almost taste the first soothing glass.

Patrick was an imposing figure. Six foot three in his Hush Puppies, with a mane of silver hair and matching, luxuriant moustaches, he looked like some legendary ancient Celtic hero. His appearance, however, was deceptive. Patrick was more worrier than warrior, and these days used his considerable intellect to smooth the way for the government's frequent cuts to the university's budget. Instead of standing up for distance education, bloody banner raised, he did the work of the university's fiscal and administrative imps of darkness for them, arguing that a thrifty approach now would reap rewards when things got really tight. When Patrick thought the rainy day he was saving the faculty's pennies for was going to dawn Fergus couldn't imagine. It had been chucking it down in stair rods ever since Thatcher had become Prime Minister six years before. He had begun to fear that they would have to prise the doorknob of No 10 out of her cold, dead hand.

Patrick had got his glasses and notes in order at last, and was in full flow, setting the merits of the Renaissance Room at the Victoria and Albert Museum against the time and expense of actually going to Florence. The administrators were smiling and nodding, Nick was becoming apoplectic. The rest of his department (two girls and a boy) were whispering. None of them had expected this hatchet job.

Patrick ahem-ed his way to his coup de grâce. He said,

'So I don't see how we can support you in this, Nick – you see it just isn't ...'

Fergus sighed. It was time for action.

'If the Dean will indulge me? I have a few points to make.'

'*Must* you, Fergus? I really wasn't intending to open this up for debate. We still have a lot to get through ...'

He trailed off, in the pseudo-vague way he had cultivated over the years to turn wrath, and started shuffling papers again. Fergus was on his feet at once. Nobody told Fergus Girvan the matter wasn't for debate.

'I'm afraid I really must, Patrick.' Fergus whipped his own specs out of his top pocket and on to his face with a flourish, the better to watch the expressions on the faces of those present. His blunt common sense flooded the room, bringing balm to the souls of the beleaguered members of the Art History Department (pretty girls they were too). He unfurled his tattered and bloody banner, veteran of many a successful campaign, and spoke beneath it, straight to the heart and to the point. He said what needed to be said, neither more nor less, then he sat down.

Nick was right behind his standard,

'As Fergus has so ably pointed out, Patrick ...'

And it was clear the Florence trip was on.

\*

In the Vaults Bar Fergus was expansive – this mood enhanced by a couple of bottles of the almost-passable burgundy, the first purchased for him by a grateful Nick, both shared with the whole art history department. Fergus drank deeply and relaxed into the warm, smoky fug.

It was good to be a hero again. Largesse brimming over he poured the remaining burgundy into the youngsters' glasses and waved to Chris for another bottle. The kids demurred. He let his hand fall. He did have things to do this afternoon, and it didn't do these days to be too diddled driving home, especially with the M1 greasy with wintry drizzle.

And just like that he felt the euphoria of the meeting drain away, to be replaced by the reality of his life in which the lows rather seemed to exceed the highs these days. There was no getting

away from it, drunk or sober. Despite the gratitude of the Art History Department he, Fergus Girvan, had never really fulfilled his potential.

The iffy cartilage in his left knee squeaked painfully as he rose to go. Ageing was a bitch and no mistake. The quartet of art historians had their heads together over his wine, engrossed in planning the Florentine trip. Didn't they understand what Patrick's attack on it meant? Nick was old enough to know. The young ones thought this was the way things had always been – having to do battle to get a few quid to do essential research. It had been the envy of the world, the British education system. Now look at it. He almost turned back to try and make them see the storm clouds gathering: they should be knocking nails into an Ark *right now* in anticipation of the imminent Deluge. But at least they were going to Florence.

Trying not to limp he set off back to his room.

But by the time he reached it the smile was back on his face. Fergus was not a man to dwell on that which could not be cured. There was going to be a vacancy when Petra announced her candidacy for the Deanship. And he, Fergus, was going to fill it.

Everybody was in, of course, for the Board. Flushed and booming Fergus bestrode the corridors, greeting colleagues cheerily, slapping shoulders, winking at the typing pool. Then he went into his office and shut the door. He had plans to make – which ears could most usefully be bent, which favours should be called in. He would have something new, something unassailable on his résumé next time his case for a personal Chair went in front of the promotions board: Acting Head of Department. Hell, yes.

\*

When he got home his answerphone was winking at him. He picked up a message from his daughter, Andy.

'Fergus, I need to see you.' Even on the machine the tinny voice rang with conspiracy. 'Tomorrow's the day you work from home isn't it? Can you come over to the school at lunchtime? Don't call home. I had a major row with Mum this morning and you know she always gets ratty when you phone. See you tomorrow? Please?'

The machine gave the time of the call. She'd only just missed him this morning. Must have called from a box on the way to school. Whatever could it be?

He sighed. His daughter was adept at playing both ends against the middle. It was one reason – of many – why her mother disliked him so intensely. If Mary refused the girl something the first thing she did was go and try Fergus for it. Somehow that always seemed to work, and Mary would rail at him for encouraging her. Whatever it was, it was always his fault.

They'd had these lunchtime assignations before. Lunchtime was good. It meant she wasn't late home. Somehow when they were together time just seemed to slip away and he was always dropping her off hours late, and facing a stormy Mary.

The disembodied voice of the machine said 'end of message'.

Fergus stared at it while it instructed him, as if he didn't know, what to do if he wanted to delete all messages. He had a bad feeling about this.

