

The Pathology of Graphology

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by

David Milnes

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Chapter One

When Geoff Osmah woke up in the morning, every morning, without exception, he did not want to live. He got out of bed and dressed himself and walked to work for nothing more than a bacon sandwich and a cup of tea. His job, polishing and valeting cars on the shabbier forecourts of Stoke Newington, Islington and Holloway, took him on a circuit where several cafés offered breakfast for less than two pounds. No matter which cafe, there was always gristle in the bacon, but it was the sandwich rather than the tea that separated him from suicide.

His friends – men in pubs – ignored or talked down his despair, or were too bored by it to be of any help. They wrote off his suicidal threats as piss-talk. But they were wrong, those friends. For the last few months, every night towards closing time, when he came back from the bar with his Guinness, Geoff's features had been locked in an open secret: booze offered neither euphoria nor the maudlin mood any more. He drank only to put himself out, off, under. And in the morning his hangovers dragged him out of bed to the toilet, and along his trammelled routes to work, to the comfort of that pot of tea and bacon sandwich, then on to the freezing bucket and chamois, six days a week, and he worked Sundays to death as well given half the chance.

Recently, the idea of doing something rash, reckless, even criminal, before he 'checked out', as he liked to put it, in his more romantic moods, had acquired an

allure. But he had no idea yet what kind of criminal he might become. He'd never broken the law in his life. Back in the mid-seventies, twenty years before this story takes place, when he'd started out as a semi-skilled man, a shuttering carpenter, earning a good wage on north London's redevelopment sites, there had been plenty of crime, heavy crime and light-fingered crime, going on all around him. It was the way of life then but he took no part in it. Not because he was scared or above it all, but simply because he was having too much fun. He looked back upon those years as golden now, when he was a known face in all north London's live music pubs, such as *The Hope & Anchor* in Islington or the notoriously violent *Three Crowns* (or *Broken Crowns*) in Stoke Newington. He blamed the downturn in the building cycle for his sackings from various sites, rather than his lunchtime sessions and his terminal unreliability. In the eighties he'd slipped to unskilled work – hospital porter, hotel porter, warehouse packer – and in the nineties he'd fallen into the grasping, grubby hands of the cleaning agencies. Women liked him, but they weren't any help either because their affections were always skin-deep. They liked the gentle curves of his face, and the long ovals of his brown eyes, set rather wide apart, and they liked to touch his hair, cut in a neat, brown, curly mat, finishing square at the neck. They liked his body, which all his walking and labouring had kept in good shape. And though they never said as much, they liked to be seen out with him. Put a pair of reflecting sunglasses on Geoff Osmah, and a police uniform, sit him on a Harley-Davidson, and he could have been a tv cop of yesteryear - *Hawaii Five-O* or *Charlie's Angels*. But his part would only be that of some attendant officer, a one-liner part: *'That's a ticket, ma'am.'* *'Pull over, sir.'* *'Gimme back up!'* *'Let him have it!'* *'Let's get the hell*

outahere!

But there was one aspect of his appearance no woman liked at all. His moustache was a rich, tobacco gold affair with lighter flecks in it, but it was too stiff, too rounded and bulbous, almost a walrus moustache from the sixties. Thick curls of it strayed over his lip and brushed the creamy head of his Guinness - sucked on it, he was fond of saying. When he lewdly repeated that joke, pint after pint, his girlfriends grew bored and disgusted, but he wouldn't shave off his moustache for any of them. He'd had it since youth, when it had been part of his general flamboyance. As soon as he shaved it off he knew he'd enter middle-age.

By dismissing him from *Your Call!* in the twilight hours of his thirty-eighth birthday, dj Pete Moran had triggered the endgame for Geoff Osmah, but Geoff's mood was already so low and unalterable he didn't even notice. The next morning, without fuss, without emotion, he knew what had to be done. Everything fitted together, made a natural sense to him. It was as if Moran had shown him a way and given him permission – *Oh, and Geoff, if you ever decide to hang up the chamois for good, what you need to do is . . .*

So on Saturday August 5th, 1995, Geoff Osmah didn't go to work. He didn't eat the gristly bacon sandwich that morning. Instead, he got up late and dressed in his best clothes: a Clydella shirt with paisley tie (that took him an age to knot), a pale green windcheater, a pair of creased grey slacks, and some cheap, new plastic brogues. The very smartest outfit he possessed. Then he abandoned his rooms on the Balls Pond Road and all his belongings therein. He walked out on himself forever. He thought of his departure in this dramatic way but actually there wasn't much to leave behind. Not even a phone or tv or scrap of

carpet. Only his much loathed and treasured radio alarm clock.

When he arrived at Victoria railway station, just after midday, Geoff was hot and agitated. His clothes were all wrong for the close August heat. But this discomfort meant nothing: inside there had been no change in mood or resolve. After checking the departure board for the Brighton trains, he drifted to a newsstand to buy a copy of *The Times*. Here was another sign. He'd never read *The Times* in his life. When he bought a newspaper it was *The Daily Mirror*, which he only read for the racing guide. The stallholder was about to serve him but turned away to serve a well groomed, important looking man in a pinstriped suit instead. Geoff immediately took offence and became angry and absurdly loud. He shouted at the stallholder, with his head down, his arm straight out -

“Give me the fuckin' *Times*, man! Give me it *now*! Give me the fuckin' *paper*!”

“All right, all right, brother,” the stallholder replied, interrupting his transaction with the pinstriped gentleman. “Calm down, calm down . . .”

But Geoff wouldn't calm down. His manner was the same with the woman at the ticket office. He barked demands for information about departures and arrivals he didn't need. Passengers in the other queues turned in his direction. Some frowned at one another, others looked around for help in uniform.

“I said what time does the fuckin' three-ten get in? You listening to me, you old tramp?”

“Sir, the three-ten gets in at platform two at

sixteen-o-eight. That's eight minutes past four, sir.”

“So what time does the fuckin' four-twenty get in? And which fuckin' shithole platform? You old whore.”

Once he'd boarded his Brighton train he quelled the riot of bad feeling inside and brooded over political stories he never normally read, and which were difficult to understand without any contextual knowledge. He broke up his reading with restless trips to the buffet car for beer and sandwiches. He moved among his fellow passengers with a frowning intensity, oval eyes narrowed, keen to check everyone out and judge what they were up to, what they were reading or talking about. He glanced over men's shoulders and into women's laps, taking in everything he could. Businessmen or professionals about to leave their seats stopped themselves, hesitated in their dark suits until he passed by with his untidy armfuls of Guinness cans and sandwich packets; and Geoff enjoyed that acknowledgement from these besuited men, that giving way.

On the other hand he treated the women he met with a gentlemanly courtesy that was all but theatrical. At the carriage junction he stopped to let an ancient, blue-rinsed lady pass by to her First Class compartment.

“You first, ma'am,” he said, and nodded and smiled.

In the buffet car he invited a plump student in black, a Goth, with noisy silver bangles, to queue ahead of him so he could stare down at her buttocks, all his anger melting into lust. The girl matched his theatricality with a coy, one-sided smile and whispered, “Why, thank you.”

“That's okay,” Geoff replied, breathing beer all over her neck. “No hurries, no worries.”

But this courtesy came undone when it failed to produce the right effect. On the way back to his seat he

met a second elderly lady, companion to the first, and he stood back for her and smiled just as he had for her friend:

“You first, ma'am.”

But this ancient neither smiled sweetly nor thanked him. She remained aloof and snubbed him with racist contempt. Geoff stepped up behind her and delivered a rabbit punch, right up close, his beery whisper puffing apart her grey perm -

“You wanna learn some fuckin' manners, you fuckin' slag, d'you hear?”

Despite that incident, on arrival in Brighton he became warmer and more expansive and more genuinely emotional towards both man and womankind, because his greetings now were also valedictory. He walked up and down the promenade, *The Times* folded beneath his arm, dispensing smiles and Good Afternoons to all and sundry, stopping now and then to brace himself against the rusted railings, to take some final gasps of sea air, and to gaze out over the English Channel, using as his model here a picture of a moustachioed Edwardian, in top hat and tails, that he'd seen in a daguerreotype postcard on a seafront stall. He didn't know why that picture stayed in his mind – the single man forward against the railings, the long-skirted, parasoled women passing behind - but it did, and he couldn't help himself posing in that way.

The thing was settled when two tiny children ran up behind as he stood at the railing, as if to spook him. A boy and a girl, both in dungarees, maybe twins, no more than three or four years old, full of milk-toothed mischief. He smiled down at them with amusement and affection, eyes tearing up, then offered curt good-luck salutes to their well-heeled, smiling, complacent parents, and turned away in a blur towards Roedean and Rottingdean, to reconnoitre the cliffs.

Anyone who has contemplated stepping off a cliff will attest to the difficulty Geoff faced that Saturday afternoon, and will forgive him. The idea of moving either leg into open space, or of jumping or diving from the edge, bending his knees to push off, feeling the updraught against his face, or maybe standing stiff and upright and falling off arms wide, like an olympic diver, or rolling himself into a ball and going over blind, head tucked in – each way felt more difficult than the last. Running at it was worst of all because of the divided sense that his body itself - arms, legs, heart, still full of health and strength - had become a separate and pitiable thing, and to make it propel itself to its destruction on the rocks below seemed somehow cruel and unfair.

At a quarter past six Geoff approached The Belvedere, a Brighton beach bar, after a long walk back down the coast from Telscombe Cliffs. On his way he'd come across a nudist bathing area in a cove near Telscombe and that had detained him, though he'd not descended and disrobed himself. The cove had been very busy, and his heart and step were heavy after the long walk back from all that naked and vulnerable humanity. He burned for the relief of his first drink.

But a display in the bay window of The Belvedere caught his eye and delayed rest and recovery, kept him standing outside on the pebbles, which hurt his feet through the thin soles of his hot plastic brogues. Many dream of meeting someone who will change their lives completely. Not only change their prospects but change the

way they think and feel about themselves forever. On his seaside breaks Geoff had squandered his share of holiday funds on fortune tellers, mainly for the pleasure of sitting in a private, confined space with a pretty woman and enjoying her undivided attention, while she held and stroked his hand. There were any number of mock gypsy girls in private tents along the seafront – some were university students, or said they were - who were prepared to sell fifteen minutes in this way, and other ways. But this warm August evening he was tempted to try something far more serious and scientific, and without any ulterior motive.

The display taped in the bay window of The Belvedere promoted, *'An Evening with Fraser Davis'*. Fraser Davis, the celebrated graphologist, was offering Consultations starting at £5, and scaling up to £25. This last was for a *'Full character analysis of an unnamed third party'*. The Terms & Conditions of the Consultations began by setting graphology apart from the seaside arts already familiar to Geoff - palmistry, astrology, tarot cards – and continued with some dense legalese about Fraser Davis's liabilities and indemnities that Geoff didn't bother to read. Other features of the display drew his eye.

Two copies of Mr Davis's book, *The Graphologist's Art*, were taped to the inside of the bay window, separated by a pane of dimpled glass central to both window and display. On the left, the window pane offered the front cover of the book: the title was in copperplate and all around it, on a parchment background, were incomplete scribbles in many hands, containing lines such as – *'If only I could love him'*, and *'Outraged that she could behave so, I took the unprecedented step of'* and *'I feel I can confide in you alone that'* and so on. The sense of these snippets was broken up by dated, and in some cases positively ancient,

celebrity signatures, dashed off at all angles in primary colours. Sean Connery in green, Barbara Windsor, Kenneth Williams and Ken Dodd in bright red, Jacques Cousteau in blue, Bob Hope and Burt Reynolds in violet, Eric Morecambe, Frank Muir, Ernie Wise, Jimmy Savile and Pete Moran in beige or brown. There were many names Geoff did not know, and still more he did not read.

Taped above the front cover and to the right, the other side of the dimpled glass, the second copy was opened at a Foreword written by Pete Moran. Most striking to Geoff, above the Foreword was an accompanying cameo of Moran. This held Geoff for some time. Moran's smiling, ageless face, topped with coiffured bouffant, set above his text and signature, possessed a sense of accomplishment Geoff could not understand. Eventually he passed to the text itself:

Everyone loves a success story. It is my very great and personal pleasure to write a foreword to The Graphologist's Art for Fraser Davis, who has fascinated so many listeners with his expert analysis since he joined Your Call! Many of his interpretations are included in this volume, with the original scripts painstakingly preserved. There's something here for everyone, as they say! The secret sleuths among us will also enjoy Fraser's anecdotes from his work with the Metropolitan Police, where his brilliance has contributed to the solution of some of the most notorious 'crimes of our times'!

This is a treat to savour.

Enjoy!

Pete Moran

Geoff felt a sense of anticipation about the evening ahead out of all proportion to his interest in Fraser Davis and *The Graphologist's Art*. He had listened to *Your Call!* many times, and he had some memory of this Fraser Davis, though he'd never been such a regular special guest as Moran's Foreword suggested. The graphology stuff just started off his endless, boring stories about this or that celebrity or unsolvable crime.

Geoff glanced around the other pages of the display, looking for a picture of Davis, but he found none. The cameo of Moran seemed to have displaced the authorial photograph.

He stalled before the memory of his own call to Pete Moran - just last night, not even a day ago. He had to hide from that memory, as he was hesitating and hiding now, outside The Belvedere, as if this Fraser Davis might point him out when he entered the bar and name and shame him at the door. *'That's him! He's the drunk from last night! Watch out, everybody!'*

Each and every word of his call to Pete Moran Geoff had known by heart. They were words he'd rerun a thousand times against the odds of his life. He'd been sharing them, as he had done so many times before, with a new young friend he'd just made in a quiet bar called *The Hunter*; on Dove Road, a five minute walk from home. At closing time his one-sided conversation had drawn his new

friend with him along the street to a Chinese, where Geoff had paid for two chicken chow mein. Then on to his new friend's flat, Geoff still talking, even when his host put on the radio and raised the volume. This new friend, much younger than Geoff, young enough to be his son, in fact, nodded his way through his chow mein while listening to Geoff going on and on, and to Pete Moran murmuring his counsel to various lonely, broke or desperate callers in the background, and he scraped out his aluminium tray while Geoff borrowed his phone to make his very own breakthrough call to *Your Call!*

And now here were those other lives – of Fraser Davis, and Moran himself – right here, brought down out of that mellow world of cultured voices murmuring truths on the radio, and photographs in magazines in barbers' shops, and cameos in books like this, brought down out of the ether and Sellotaped to a window of The Belvedere, Geoff's favourite watering hole in all of Brighton.

Now Geoff overcame his hesitation. He felt that criminal impulse rising - a violent, vengeful impulse – stirring inside him like a sexual excitement. He would meet Mr Davis. Oh yes. He'd join the queue. He'd have a Consultation this very evening.

He glanced around the bar as he breezed in, searching the dim and cavernous depths of the place, expecting to find a hub of activity somewhere. But the bar was virtually empty. The evening with Fraser Davis should have been underway for at least half an hour, but there was no sign of the event at all. Perhaps this was Davis's night off, or he was stuck in traffic someplace.

Waiting for his Guinness, Geoff caught sight of a white jacketed figure sitting alone in the second bay at the front of the pub, and he knew immediately who it was. The man sat obliquely and was perfectly still, staring out the

window at the pebble beach and the sea beyond, at people coming for an evening stroll on the stony and littered wastes, before heading home or moving on to a restaurant or club.

On the table before him was a low stack of paperbacks, just three or four books, and a box beneath the table perhaps contained more of the same, or pens and paper and a magnifying glass for the graphology Consultations.

Geoff paid for his Guinness, a wordless exchange with the sullen, lanky barman, swallowed a couple of draughts, licked the froth off his moustache, then strolled over, taking his time, making a detailed preliminary assessment between the bar and the bay window.

Davis's white jacket was actually an old tuxedo, and a white dress shirt beneath lent him a distinguished formality in The Belvedere. His goatee was grey but his shoulder length hair was still dark, and thrown back from his brows in a professorial style. That hairstyle, together with a dash of colour from an ancient, droopy, red bow tie, and a matching bandanna in his breast pocket, lightened his formality with a touch of artistic waywardness. He wore his golden half-moon glasses halfway down his nose, so that he might divide his attention between the book open in front of him, *The Graphologist's Art*, and the view from the bay window down the stony beach to the sea.

Davis remained perfectly still, did not acknowledge Geoff's approach in any way, until Geoff set his Guinness on his table, dangerously close to the low stack of paperbacks, and offered his hand.

"Geoff Osmah."

At last Davis moved.

His handshake was fleeting and palpably reluctant. As Geoff took his place on the curved window seat for his

Consultation, blocking the view of the beach, Davis chuckled and murmured a welcoming remark, something beginning with 'He who pays' and continuing with something like, 'displays', 'defrays', or 'delays', and ending with something like, 'some days' – it was impossible to make out exactly what he said because he spoke in such a low and sibilant whisper. Whatever he'd said, Geoff felt disturbed, soiled, invaded by it, as if Davis's words carried germs across the space between them.

Then Davis smiled at Geoff and this too caused unease: the smile spread, sinking into his goatee to leave no trace of pink flesh, neither lips nor gums. His teeth were thin and grey, part of the surrounding goatee. His face had a Celtic paleness and it was bonier and stronger closer to, resisting the crumpled impression of his slight shoulders and floppy clothes. His eyes were pale also: a pale, hard grey, that was exactly the colour of dental amalgam. Apart from the ancient red bow tie and the bandanna, everything about his appearance contributed to a sense of shifting half-tones, covering up something hard and sharp as flint.

What a guy! Geoff thought, reaching for his Guinness. Such an unappealing guy in every way! Little wonder there was no jacket photo in his book!

"Here's to, *The Graphologist's Art!*" Geoff said, as cheerily as he could.

"Och," Davis replied, and then murmured something which was again indecipherable, but which was evidently amusing to him because he chuckled at Geoff in a knowing, superior way, as if Geoff had touched on some private joke he couldn't possibly understand.

Again Geoff felt slighted. "What?" he asked. "What did you say?"

"Would yeu like a wee look at the book?"

Up until now Geoff had been certain that he'd heard

this Fraser Davis on the radio, as special guest, with Pete Moran, but the accent was completely wrong. It was Lowlands Scots. He remembered Fraser Davis's cultured English tones: he'd been a bumbling, apologetic fellow – 'rather this' and 'awfully that' - who would have passed for amusing in the seventies or eighties, in the innocent world of Frank Muir, Denis Norden and Patrick Campbell.

Geoff slouched in his window seat, his pint of Guinness tilted but secure in his labourer's fist. Fraser Davis still smiled, but around his mouth the short grey hairs of his goatee bristled with what might have been open hostility. Geoff's eyes dropped to the box of books at the man's feet. It was a box for Green Giant sweetcorn. There was a picture of the green and yellow giant facing his way. In the box was not *The Graphologist's Art* but a different volume:

Chew Upon This!

*The Best Forgotten Memoirs
of a Lifetime
in Light Entertainment!*

The jacket of this book had been part of the display outside but Geoff had given it scant attention. He'd absorbed from the blurb some of the landmarks of Davis's career: a song and dance man for the historic *Black & White Minstrel Show*, a quiz panellist on *What's My Line? Call my Bluff!*, and there were some other highlights he hadn't read properly. Finally, though, Davis had been washed up and hung out to dry on *Your Call!* with the ageing, outmoded

Pete Moran. But then again, no. Not finally. Finally, it was this: The Belvedere, Brighton beach. This guy was a sordid, depressing failure, Geoff decided. So much for Pete Moran's 'success story'. There was something worrying and rather sinister about him too. Geoff wanted no more to do with Fraser Davis and he certainly had no intention of parting with any money for a Consultation, thank you very much. He looked about for an exit and saw an empty wine glass the other side of the table. There was a long-resisted sip of sherry or whisky at the bottom.

Geoff drained his pint and stood up.

“Can I buy you one, Mr Davis?”

Without a word Davis quickly tipped back the precious dregs of his drink.

“Ta very much,” he said, with a wink, offering up his empty glass with a grateful chuckle. “At's a wee single malt . . . Much obliged . . .”

He could speak clearly enough where a drink was concerned, Geoff noted, and set off to the bar with the empty glasses. He left Davis's at the near end and moved down to where the lanky barman was still standing, arms folded, doing nothing. Why were barmen always like that? Idle, lanky, at ease, staring at nothing, doing nothing, watching television. Why didn't they get on with polishing glasses or wiping the bar? Geoff hated them as a tribe for their idleness, and for his shameful need of their help to cope with life. He ordered another Guinness and some crisps and nuts, and while his pint was drawn he drifted to the jukebox and selected Willy Nelson, Johnny Cash, Dolly Parton and a few other Country & Western favourites.

With *Blue Eyes Cryin' in the Rain* the mood in the bar changed and the figure in the tuxedo with his books

and Consultations became an instant irrelevance, but Geoff still wanted company.

He told the barman it was his birthday and bought him a drink.

“Which one?”

“Just turned thirty-fuckin'-eight, man. Just yesterday.”

The barman polished a glass for himself.

“Not today then, is it?”

Halfway through his third Guinness, led on by some seventies sounds on the jukebox, Geoff started bragging to the barman about his golden years, about the bands he'd seen at *The Hope & Anchor* and *The Three Crowns* or *Broken Crowns* in north London, bands that had gone on to make it big, like *AC/DC* and *Brinsley Schwarz*, Nick Lowe's old band. Nick Lowe had married Johnny Cash's daughter and lived in California now. He'd made it. Got out. California. Did the barman know that? Did he know those bands? Those pubs? . . . The barman shook his head and said nothing. Had he ever worked in places like that? Another shake of his weary head, and his eyes fell to his feet. “Hey,” Geoff said, “do you ever have any live music here? At The Belvedere?” The barman shook his head a third time and left him to serve a bunch of students at the other end, with whom he was all smiles and chat and charm.

Geoff's mood soured after his fourth pint, when the students had gone. Half to the barman, half to the bar at large, he let go a series of muttered curses about The Belvedere, about Brighton, about the old woman he'd met on the train - “that fuckin' hag” - about his “fuckin' birthday” and his “fuckin' existence” - at that the barman scowled and stepped closer - “wiping the fuckin' grime, putting on the fuckin' shine - ”

“Steady on there,” the barman warned.

“WIPING THE FUCKIN’ GRIME!” Geoff burst out to the empty bar. “ALL AROUND FINSBURY-FUCKIN’-PARK!” he shouted. Then, to the barman directly: “Every fuckin’ forecourt, man. Wiping the grime putting on the fuckin’ shine!”

He turned away and his drunken, angry eyes swivelled in their ovals around the saloon and fastened on Fraser Davis, who apparently had just completed a Consultation. A short man in a corduroy jacket – the man who'd put on the seventies sounds – had just parted with some cash to Davis and now hurried off to the safety of the toilets.

“HEY SHITHEAD!” Geoff bawled at Davis.

Davis turned in Geoff’s direction, head lowered, putting away his wallet in his tuxedo, staring back at Geoff over his half-moon glasses.

“KNOW YOUR FUCKIN’ NAME, THEN!”

Davis shook his head and stared, but not at Geoff now. At the barman.

“Any more of that and I’ll call the police,” the barman warned loudly. He nodded a reassurance to Davis, who turned back to the bay window.

But Geoff’s eruption was over.

In another minute or so he apologised to the barman: “Hey, man. I’m sorry. Won’t happen again. No worries. Bad day. Bad birthday.”

“You said that was yesterday.”

“Ah well. Forget about it.”

“I already had.”

Geoff gave up all conversation with the barman.

He was drinking on an empty stomach and all too soon he'd reached his Saturday night state of stupefaction: he couldn’t trust his hands to raise a full glass to his face.

Instead, he bent down, eyes shut, and sipped at the delicious white head of the Guinness, once, twice, three times, up and down, as if taking a libation. A line of froth painted his moustache but he didn't lick it away. The barman, judging his moment to the second, helped Geoff by raising the glass for him, tipping the drink steadily into him, ministering to him like a mother to a baby, while Geoff's eyes slid in their ovals, milky, useless, and blinked for the barman to stop. But the barman did not stop until he'd poured one more mouthful inside Geoff. He set a clean glass under the Guinness tap.

"Gimme a tray," Geoff said, head down, arm straight out.

"You'll never manage it."

"Gimme a fuckin' tray and some nuts and crisps. Gimme two packets each. I'm outside."

With a show of reluctance, the barman did as he was told. Geoff noticed him exchange another glance with the blurry white figure in the bay window, but he was too far gone now to make anything of it.

When he'd paid, Geoff stood and steadied himself, both hands on the bar. He stayed there a few seconds, perfectly still. With infinite care he carried his tray outside to the tables on the stony beach.

By nine his head was on the table and he couldn't sit up. A couple of times he'd slipped off to sleep and was about to do so again when the light was blocked by someone approaching. He thought it was the barman coming to tell

him to move on and to threaten him with the police again, but this person set down a box of Green Giant sweetcorn, crushing an unfinished packet of crisps. He drew out a chair on the noisy pebbles and sat down uninvited.

Fraser Davis took from his tuxedo pocket a box of matches and tapped a dozen or so onto the plastic table. He began to arrange them in a pattern.

“Ah bin watchen yeu, Geoff. Watchen yeu with yeu Guinness.”

Something snagged in Geoff's mind about this man's voice. If he could have shaken his head he would have done, but it was nailed by a headache to the table top.

“Not Fraser Davis . . .”

“But Ah am, Geoff,” came the quick reply. “Ah am Fraser Davis. No question about 'at.”

The matchstick pattern was complete. It would have been difficult for Geoff to discern it even if he'd been able to raise his head, because the matches disappeared on the dirty white plastic in the dim light. “Geoff.

Ye've got te make two wee squares. That's all.”

Geoff's eyes had shut again.

“Ye can only move three matchsticks. Two wee squares, three matchsticks. Can ye do that for mah, Geoff?”

At this moment a teenage couple weaved by their table on their way into The Belvedere for a nightcap. They passed so close they brushed Geoff's chair. He opened his eyes, saw their young hips, no more than a metre from his face - the slim male and the shapely female hips. He saw their hands in each other's back pockets. He closed his eyes on what he saw, then slowly opened them again.

“He'll be all right for the night!” Davis said, and he chuckled, causing the pretty girl, whose long brown hair came halfway down her back, to look over her shoulder.

At that look from the girl, first to Fraser Davis, and then to himself – a look of undisguised contempt - Geoff set his right arm across the patio table and swept it steadily across, brushing Fraser Davis's matchsticks, his puzzle, his box of matches, his box of books, the crisp packets, an unfinished glass of Guinness, brushing the whole evening onto the pebbles, where it landed with a thud and a tinkle of broken glass.

He rested his head on his arm and slept.