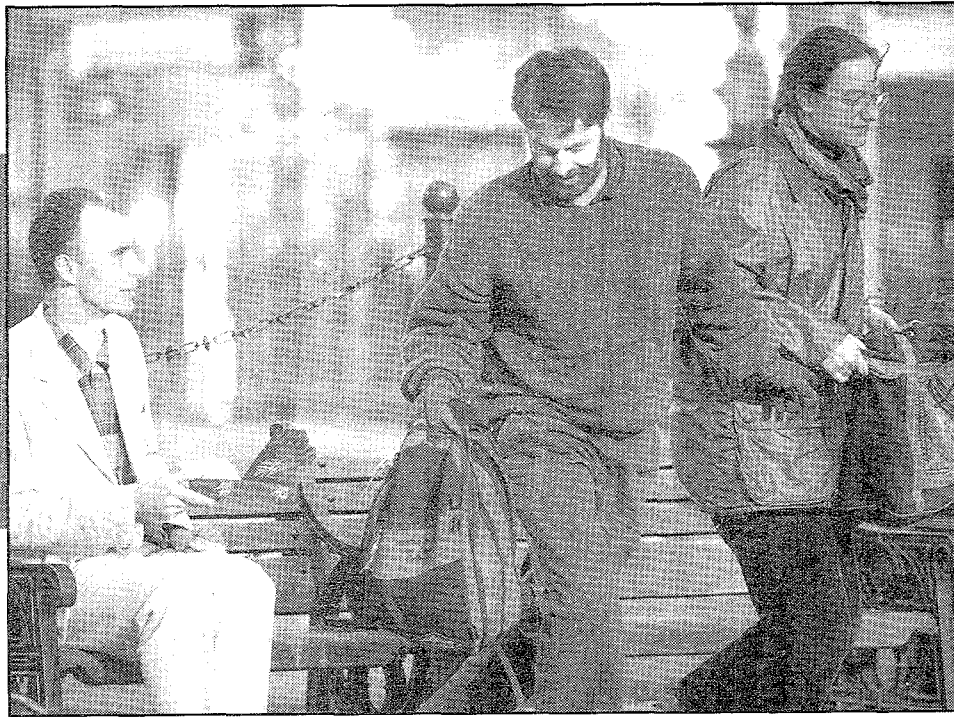




HELLO: An Australian couple are hesitant to take a chocolate but eventually accept



GOODBYE: York Membery offers to tell the same couple his life story — they decline

FORREST CHUMP

FORREST Gump
Freckled life was
like a box of
chocolates.

That's easy for him to say.

He was offering his homespun philosophy on a park bench in America's Deep South. They can relate to that kind of thing there.

In this country's Deep South (well, Leicester Square in London's West End) it's a very different kettle of chocolate.

The British may have taken to the hugely-successful Tom Hanks film, but they're still park bench novices when they come face-to-face with Britain's answer to Gump.

Me.

11.45am: I stroll into Leicester Square with a box of chocolates, a battered suitcase and an off-the-wrong-peg suit, and take a bench.

Noon: My only company are pigeons and gulls. I throw one fat bird a chocolate but it waddles away unimpressed.

Minutes tick away. I glance once more at my copy of *The Wit And Wisdom of Forrest Gump*. One entry reads: "Stupid is as stupid does." I know the feeling.

12.30: An Australian couple sit next to me. This is my big moment. "My momma used to say that life's like a box of chocolates," I say in a Deep Southern drawl that's a couple of thousand miles wide of the mark. "You never know what you're gonna get."

I stick the chocolates under his nose. He looks at me strangely. "Thanks, mate," he says hesitantly and takes the hazelnut whirl. His girlfriend opts for the strawberry creme. So far, so good.

"Don't ever pick a fight with someone really ugly-looking," I say, giving him a dumb look. I'm about to start on my life story when he grabs his



SIMPLE: Hanks as Gump

(Our man
does a Tom
Hanks on a
park bench)

By YORK MEMBERY

girlfriend's arm, jumps to his feet and disappears from my life forever.

1pm: Kids play while office workers wrapped against the cold nibble sandwiches. No-one sits next to me. Even a tramp rummaging in a bin is giving me a funny look. I feel like a leper. My fingers and toes begin to go numb. My Forrest Gump sneakers aren't designed for a British winter.

1.30pm: A businessman sits at the other end of the bench and begins eating his sandwiches. When he's finished, I offer him a chocolate.

"No thanks," he says.

"My momma used to say life's like a box of chocolates..." I begin.

"That's what the guy says in that film," he smiles. I act dumb: "What film?"

"Forrest Gump," he says. "It's about a simpleton who sits on a bench, offers people chocolates and tells his life story."

For a minute, I think I've been rumbled. But no. Even though I must be the only soul in Britain dumb

enough to wear a Forrest Gump jacket, trousers, shirt and expression on a freezing January day, he still shows no sign of suspicion.

"Stupid is as stupid does," I say. He smiles sympathetically. "It's cold." Too damn right. "I'd better be going." And he, too, is gone.

2pm: I'm beginning to feel sorry for myself. Simple Gump charm clearly counts for little this side of the pond. It wouldn't have been much of a film if it had been made here. I think to myself.

I open my box of chocolates. A tramp lurches up: "Got a fag, mate?" I shake my head. "How about a chocolate, then?"

I give him one of the hard, crunchy ones that are always the last to go and he staggers off.

2.30pm: The light begins to fade and I despair of ever finding someone who'll listen to my story. Instead, I stumble on something even better — a real-life Forrest Gump.

A middle-aged man who looks almost as odd as me

sits down and looks at me gormlessly. I look back — gormlessly. I offer him a chocolate.

"My momma used to say that life's like a box of chocolates," I say.

He eyes me suspiciously, then takes one.

"Do you know what I'm doing?" he asks. I shake my head.

"Sitting down."

Gump would have been hard pushed to give a better answer.

"What are you doing here?" he asks.

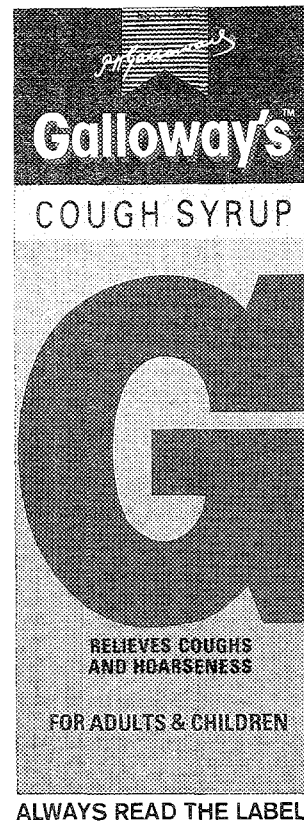
Here's my chance. "Well, it's like this..."

Before I have a chance to continue, he has got up and walked away.

Maybe it's just the way I tell them. Still, the experience has left me wiser and I'd like to share with you Five Pearls Of Wisdom For Budding Forrest Gumps:

- 1) There are better ways to spend a winter's day than by sitting on a bench in a lightweight suit.
- 2) If you have no choice, like me, (ie. it's the boss's orders), get a pair of extra-thick thermal undies.
- 3) You've a greater chance of being told to bog off if you wear a silly suit.
- 4) Pigeons don't like chocolates.
- 5) Don't accept sweets from strangers.

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Life is worse than a
box of chocolates..