

An Encounter Alan Murphy

Intelligent? Such a comforting word of praise. Such an unlikely morsel of real encouragement. Offered by - a distinguished peer? A supportive relative? A friend? Glimpsed in a warm review of one's first literary effort? No, this honeyed epithet, this nugget of blithe reassurance came out of the mouth of one Joseph Tobias Soap, esquire, proud owner of one park bench and acres upon acres of nothing else.

I was on my way to see a witch doctor. Or rather, the contemporary equivalent: a healer/clairvoyant/hairdresser who had in certain respects the aspect of a witch and none of the qualifications of a doctor. But she had been recommended to me. In addition to this, providence seemed to favour the encounter; clouds were assuming the shape of arrows pointing the way to her lair; tea leaves were grabbing me by the lapels and urging me to get there on time.

And it was with grave, resolute steps - those of someone anticipating death or rebirth or both - that I was endeavouring to do this. And then I met Joseph Tobias. No soap.

"You look like a very intelligent sort of chap," said No Soap.

The interjection seemed, under the circumstances, faintly ridiculous and almost a non sequitur. Fate taking the piss, having a bit of fun at my expense. Ya see, No Soap wasn't one of your break-off-a-long-and-vituperative-conversation-with-the-wind-to-perform-keyhole-surgery-on-a-passerby-with-a-broken-bottle sort of hobos. No, he was one of those genteel, old-world tramps, surely a rarity these days. He was all charm and deference, exuding something genuinely carefree, or so it seemed. A sort of anachronistic paean to the joys of poverty.



Having nothing to say in reply, I made my excuses and continued on my journey.