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One day, a man of average height stood on a station platform holding a very heavy bag. That man was me, but it was not my bag. It belonged to a woman. And the bag was heavy because it had books in it.

She told me that herself. It was the first thing we said to each other. She had been standing there on the platform struggling, tilting up her shoulder on the side where she was holding it.

She was wearing glasses in the same sort of way, sort of awkwardly, as if they were hampering her sight. Or as if she hoped that by looking through them she might see something abstract, or ideal, something associated with the world and yet not the world. Something like the world, then, only better. She must have been short-sighted or idealistic, this woman, or maybe both, I didn't try to work that out.

It was her bag that bothered me first. She wouldn't put it down. Even though she was standing still, on

the platform, facing the tracks. Perhaps she didn't want to dirty the base of it. Which didn't strike me as a good enough reason to suffer like that.

My immediate problem was knowing whether I should offer to carry it, her bag, or, more rationally, more economically, in terms of effort—as much mine as hers—to get her to agree to put it down. The second solution was definitely short on panache, on gallantry even. The first, in comparison with the second, didn't have that obvious necessity without which any man feels that addressing a woman betrays premeditation.

Now there was nothing premeditated about what I was doing, I just instantly felt a need to help this woman.

I moved closer to her. She must have seen me, I think. But I didn't meet her eye. And as the question of which particular offer I should make to relieve her went round and round inside my head, I started walking round her, round this woman, executing slow concentric circles which brought me closer to her without properly bringing me into contact with her. She was standing some way back from the edge so I had plenty of room. Meanwhile she could see me, now, she could tell I was hovering round her. I was immediately worried there might be some

ambiguity, in my mind, and took the liberty of saying something to her. I offered to take her bag, explaining that it looked heavy. She thanked me, rather anxiously, and told me that, if she wanted, she could just put it down at her feet. I didn't have time to ask her why, in the circumstances, given that—by all appearances—she was struggling to carry the thing, she didn't do exactly that. At that point she preempted me and put her bag down on the platform, at her feet, and only then did I realize I was putting terrible pressure on her.

Because she didn't want to let go of it, her bag. I could see that. She was only relinquishing it to avoid my help. Running the risk of dirtying it, because of me. I felt guilty, when all I had intended was to do her a favor, and I wanted to make amends for this. I said no, that's not what I meant, I didn't want you to put it down, you'll get it dirty, unless you don't mind about that, of course, but I got the feeling you couldn't make up your mind to put it down because you were worried it would get dirty, on the bottom, maybe I'm exaggerating the point, though, or I could be wrong. If you could put my mind at rest on that, and just tell me you don't mind, I'd feel better. Or maybe I really am right, in which case tell me that

too, it wouldn't put my mind at rest, but perhaps I could do something about it, don't you think?

She looked at me from behind her glasses, not as if I was the ideal she was looking for in the world, on the contrary, she seemed to be thinking something wasn't quite right, in what she was seeing, or that her glasses weren't properly calibrated for me, or that I was a smudge on her lenses. Anyway, whatever she thought she said what do you want, exactly? Do you really find my bag all that interesting?

I nearly said no, it's not the bag I find interesting, it's you, well, not you, what's got to me is the actually slightly pointless effort you're making to carry it, because the ground's not all that dirty, on this platform, and even if it was, the bag isn't really touching it enough, I imagine your bag's got a little plastic buffer on each corner.... But I didn't say anything, I just apologized and waited for our train, I imagined we were waiting for the same one. We stayed there side by side, her with her bag at her feet, me with my embarrassment, and every now and then I threw a sideways glance at her and saw that she kept glancing too, but at her bag, as if afraid someone might steal it, and I realized *that* was the problem. She had been keeping it safe, earlier, this bag of hers. So then I was bold enough to say maybe you should pick it

back up, I can see you're worried, I'd never forgive myself if someone stole your bag because of me. But at the same time, I added, it looks heavy and, if you trusted me, I could hold it for you, at least until the train arrives. I'm not going to run off with it, anyway. I would have done that already.

She looked tempted by my offer, although still undecided. Then she looked at me and must have thought that, at worst, I was interested in her, not her bag, and she handed it to me. In her shoes, I wouldn't have dared, but I wasn't in her shoes. I took the bag, thinking this woman was actually pretty relaxed, with men, unless she was doing everything possible to be left in peace, but I wasn't sure this was the best way to go about it, with a man. But with me, I don't know. I still didn't know whether I would leave her in peace. The only thing I did know was I didn't want to be pushy.

Her bag really was heavy. It was at that point, partly to make conversation, partly to emphasize the extent of the favor I was now definitely doing her, that I asked her a question, not making much of it, but still very discretely affecting a fairly eloquent grimace so that she would notice it flit across my lips for the quarter second of existence I allocated it, I asked her what was in it, her bag, and

she said books. My grimace had been and gone, of course, but it did put me off a bit, because I don't read much. And only very slowly. I usually take just one book in my luggage. In fact, I didn't have any luggage at the time. I had ended up at the station because I'd had enough of wandering around the city, on my own, and, because I didn't want to go home, I'd decided to spend a while in a place where people were leaving. I'm not talking about the ones arriving, I'm not interested in them. And when I say people I don't mean men. It didn't do much for me watching men leave, even less seeing them arrive, of course. But watching a woman go off somewhere, yes, from time to time, heading for this or that platform, that suited me, I could imagine things. And even without the imagining, just watching them leave, these women, with their bags, small or cumbersome, it didn't matter, I found it touching, they seemed lived-in to me, it was better than seeing them in the street, where they could easily just be going home or to work, or on an errand or meeting a friend. A lover, at a stretch. Or a husband. Or no one. There were quite a few possibilities there too, in the city, but I felt the station was more promising. Women carried things when they left the place, with clothes and even underwear in their bags, it was

completely different, and they were heading somewhere, they really were heading somewhere. There was no messing around, not with these women, you couldn't try it on with them, they had more important things to do. Obviously, I'm thinking about the ones taking mainline services, the ones really getting away. I didn't go and stand by the platforms serving the suburbs, of course. And, as a precaution, I'd even bought a ticket, you never know. I hesitated about the destination and then—out of laziness, I admit—I went to the window for immediate departures that had the shortest queue. I asked for a one-way ticket to the end of the line. Rouen, to be precise, a place I clearly had no business in, or no more than anywhere else. But no one was expecting me in Paris, either, on that Saturday, and I had time on my hands.

My train was leaving in about half an hour and that didn't give me many opportunities. I mean to set off with someone else. At best, mind you, I was picturing a sort of honeymoon: I met her, she liked me, we more or less traveled together, depending on the availability of seats. It was more than the *beginning* of a story, it *was* a story. At worst, either I set off on my own or I went home to my apartment alone, having asked for a refund on my ticket.

As time went by, I fretted a bit about whether or not I should go at all, keeping an eye out for women leaving. To be honest, there weren't many of them, on this train, but still, there could have been more to come, and things might sort themselves out along the way too. I think I had definitely made the decision to leave.