

The parable of the stupid Samaritan

I tried to help Andrea, a disorientated stranger at a hectic London station, to the irritation of the state's representatives

BY JAMES MUMFORD

The woman came up to me as I was rushing from the Victoria Tube line to the Piccadilly, deep below King's Cross railway station. It was 6pm on Maundy Thursday and the walkways were packed.

"Can you help me?" she said.

Her blondish hair was long and unkempt; she had carrier bags underneath each arm; she looked highly disorientated. And her haggard appearance made her age difficult to determine.

"I'm trying to get to King's Cross station."

"This is King's Cross," I replied, pointing to the red National Rail logo on a nearby sign.

"What about them?" she said, of the Tube stop listings beneath.

"Forget about those," I said.

"I've got to get to Manchester."

"You're in the right place. Just follow the red logo and it'll take you to the rail station."

That this was going to be beyond her did not take long to ascertain.

"I've been walking in circles for so long."

I tried quickly to appraise the situation: the woman was clearly not with it; it was unlikely she was going to find the rail station by herself; but there were no Underground staff to be seen.

Also, I was in a rush.

"I'll take you up to the station," I said.

"Thank you."

We made our way slowly along the gangway, past my Piccadilly Line platform, and round the rabbit warren which is the King's Cross Underground network.

As we walked I learnt more about my charge. It was Andrea's first visit to London. She had come down from Carlisle (her return destination had already changed from Manchester to Carlisle) to meet relatives. Who hadn't showed. She declared she would never travel to the capital again.

As the escalators transported us to ground level, I tried to work out a) how late I was going to be for my friend waiting for me in a pub, and b) whether Andrea suffered from some form of mental illness or if it was a learning disability.

Above ground I reasoned that the next thing to do was to match Andrea's story against an objective marker: the ticket in her pocket. But that too was confusing: one read "St Albans", another "Manchester". So I searched for the nearest rail representative in a concourse just as hectic as the Underground.

"These are from Euston."

My heart sank. Andrea looked confused.

"It's one stop on the Tube," he continued, "or an eight-minute walk. You come out of here, turn left, cross the road—"

The futility of giving Andrea these instructions was lost on him. I interrupted: "Do you want me to take you there?" She nodded.

It was now that I made my first mistake. I took an executive decision that the short walk to Euston was a better bet than subjecting Andrea again to the chaos of the Tube at rush hour.

Heading out of King's Cross, I tried to make a rough estimate of

how late I was going to be. I called my friend, who offered to pick me up from the bottom of the Caledonian Road. I would drop off Andrea with staff at Euston and rush back. Fifteen minutes max: my next miscalculation. Because even before we reached the British Library, Andrea stopped. "I don't recognise this."

Oh no.

"Of course you don't," I said as gently as I could. "You've never been to London before."

She stepped back from me, shiftily.

I whipped out my iPhone and zoomed in on where we were, where we had come from, where we were going. No good. Too much to compute.

"I can't walk any farther. I'm so tired. I haven't eaten anything."

And then: "Where are we going?"

"Euston, remember? I thought you'd prefer to walk. Rather than go down in the Underground again."

She said she would have preferred to have got the Tube.

We proceeded on in convoy, at a glacial pace, me ten yards out in front, her stopping every 30 or 40 seconds, suspicion mounting.

So I threw everything I had at it: "We just have three more roads to cross"; "See that tower, we'll be able to see the station from there"; "We're three-quarters of the way there"—before eventually resorting to: "Andrea, you're gonna have to trust me."

Finally, we reached a point in the pavement where Euston's blessed rail sign came into view.

"Look! Look! See that sign? What does it say?"

"London Euston."

"Yes!"

"I'm sorry," she said, emanating relief. "I'm sorry."

Andrea promptly sat down on a bench.

"I have to eat. I haven't eaten all day."

"OK, OK, take your time. Get some food down you."

She swigged from a bottle of Coke, unwrapped a sandwich.

"Have half."

"No, no," I countered, unpeeling my own banana.

Heading towards Euston, my plan was simple: to identify the "authorities" as quickly as possible, settle Andrea's nerves, get her on the right train if it's the last thing I did.

Result! Outside the station I spotted two police officers standing next to a homeless man.

"Officer!"

But he made eyes at me and shook his head as if to say, "Not now."

"But offic—"

His head shook more vigorously.

Great. So Andrea and I entered the station. It was now 6.40.

Euston was far worse than King's Cross, hundreds of commuters frozen to the spot, gazing up at the ever-changing screens.

I rounded on the first official I could.

"Hi. I need your help. Right now. This lady is very disorientated. I found her on the Tube. We were sent here from King's Cross. She has a ticket to travel from here and I need you to put her on the right train."



James Mumford at Euston station: "She was gone, with my bag. I'm panicking, darting in and out of people trying to spot her"

"This train goes straight through to Carlisle," said the man (I'll call him Ferguson), inspecting the tickets.

Excellent news.

"But it's not valid on the 6.50".

Less good.

"She has to get the 7.30." I'm going to be really late.

Now in the disabled mobility office I am being told by another unsympathetic official that there are no more transit buggies available.

"Which platform is it?" I asked, frustrated.

"One," says Ferguson, "but the train won't be there yet."

Out loud: "Then I'll take her."

In my head: "Since no one else will."

Euston is an odd station, not least for the distance between the platform "entrances", where screens parade the travel updates, and the actual platforms. Arriving at platform 1, Andrea insisted we escape the crowds and proceed down to the platform. I capitulated: yet another mistake.

Down the long concrete slope we trooped and out onto the eerily empty platform. Alone now, with time to kill, I asked Andrea a little about her life. Between swigs of Coke she spoke about living alone, of a life on benefits, of estrangement from her parents—the embodiment of a broken Britain whose reality the liberal Left denies so stridently or dismisses as "pessimistic". Tears shone around her eyes as she told me of the abortion her mother had tricked her into having.

As I listened to this I was also becoming increasingly aware that 7 o'clock had rolled round, and 7.10 and 7.15 and still no train.

This one felt like a real fix: Andrea didn't want to move, but the platform was empty. I had to check the screen. But I had also to give her a sign that I wasn't going to run off.

"Listen. The train's not here. I'll check the boards. You keep an eye on my bag."

My biggest mistake yet.

Now I'm running around the concourse like a headless chicken. It's 7.20 and the train has changed to platform 12.

I raced back to platform 1. And of course:

She was gone, with my bag, containing most of my life in written form.

I'm panicking, darting in and out of people trying to spot her, trying to remember what she looked like.

Three transport police gazing up at the boards. I dived into my

story, realising as I voiced it how ridiculous it sounded.

"You left your bag with a stranger?"

"Yes, but . . ."

Explanations useless, we crossed the concourse as quickly as we could. To find, on platform 12, Ferguson, checking tickets.

"Have you seen her? Have you seen the woman I was with?"

"No."

I'm beginning to get angry.

"You sent us to platform 1! Why didn't you come and get us?"

Not even an attempt at an excuse.

"Well, have you seen the woman I was with?" I continued.

"No," Ferguson declared, as if he'd never set eyes on me.

"Sir, here, sir . . ." I swivelled round to see, behind Ferguson, another red-jacketed inspector pointing to a bag dumped against the barrier. It was mine.

"She left it for you."

"Did she make the train?"

"Yes."

Ferguson looks confused.

"She slipped behind you," his colleague added.

And then came the inevitable reprimand: "Let that be a lesson to you, sir, not to be so stupid as to leave your bag with strangers."

So here it was: the Good Samaritan had become the Stupid Samaritan.

"I was trying to help."

"Why didn't you come to the authorities?"

I hailed Ferguson. "Tell this policeman! Tell him I came to you with that woman!" But Ferguson was apoplectic at the earlier suggestion of incompetence.

Now seething, what I struggled to accept was that the all-important context was slipping out of sight, eluding them. It wasn't simply that the state had failed to support my "small undertaking". My very attempt to help was an irritation to them.

"It constantly opposes itself to one's acting," wrote Alexis de Tocqueville of the state. "It does not destroy, it prevents things from being born; it does not tyrannise, it hinders, compromises, enervates, extinguishes, dazes."

"The train is leaving," the female officer said. "Are you getting on it?"

"No!" I cried. "I was never getting on it!"

Beyond us the train pulled out. **S**