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BRAILLE ON SUBWAYS

You can read a braille book when it's closed in your lap. You can't read a print book when it's closed in your lap, but you can read a closed braille book by simply slipping your hand inside and feeling the dots with your finger, the book closed with your hand inside it, reading. Slipping my hand inside this new biography of Louis Braille, while I'm on a crowded subway, say, reading a few paragraphs about the school for the blind in Paris in the early 1800s, feels a little like slipping my hand inside the blouse of my girlfriend on a crowded subway and copping a feel without anyone seeing because they're all reading or sleeping or looking out of windows. Then the smile in her eyes, as the whorl of my index finger furtively finds her nipple, pausing over it like a favorite passage, would be as indecipherable as the dots on this braille page are to the sighted.

And that's what I love about braille. It's a secret code, invented for that purpose—to keep secrets—by a French military man, Charles Barbier, who was unable to sell the idea to the French military, so he tried giving it away for free to the school for the blind in Paris where Louis Braille was a student in 1819. But the school wasn't interested either. Or rather, the school's director, the vainglorious Sebastien Guillie, wasn't interested. And he refused to adopt Barbier's method of raised dots.

But the blind children were interested. They were more than interested. They got their hands on the dots, and they loved them! They said the dots were far better than the cumbersome system of embossed print letters that the school was using at the time. And so shortly thereafter, when Guillie was fired for scandalously slipping his hand inside the blouse of one of the music teachers, the new director, Dr. Pignier, not only embraced Barbier's method of raised dots, he also encouraged the young Louis Braille to refine it and improve it and eventually to develop it into the current system of literacy that bears his name and is used by blind people all over the world.

And I'm thinking I'd like to make that pilgrimage one day, the one they describe in the back of this Louis Braille biography, which includes an appendix with a map and directions to the exact location of the little cemetery in Coupvray where the grave—practically a shrine—is situated. Hundreds of blind people every year make the pilgrimage to pay their respects and give thanks, leaving behind little brailled notes and letters and poems and prayers and business cards, a veritable garden of braille growing all around his gravesite in piles of stippled gray and white and yellow paper.

NONFICTION

And I'm thinking I would have loved to meet Louis back in the day, to pick his brain about his eponymous code. If only I were alive back then. Or if only he were alive today. And in a way, he IS alive, at least that's how it feels when I read: it feels like I'm in touch with Louis Braille himself. Or part of him, anyway. The part that's buried in the grave at Coupvray.

Because the part that's buried in Coupvray are his hands. Only his hands. You see, the hands were separated from the rest of him when the villagers of Coupvray and the bigwigs from Paris got into a tug of war over his remains, some 100 years after his death. Because when Braille died in 1852, his system of raised dots hadn't caught on yet, hadn't spread like wildfire throughout the world, which it would do in the decades to come. In fact, almost no one was using braille when Braille died, and he was buried in complete obscurity back in Coupvray, where he had been born, and where the villagers knew him, and loved him, and would remember him always.

But pretty soon the dots began to spread, clandestinely at first, then more openly, more boldly, among the blind teachers and students and graduates of the school for the blind who loved the dots and used them and believed in them in spite of the benighted sighted teachers who still advocated for the embossed print letters instead of the dots (because the sighted teachers couldn't read the dots!). And pretty soon the dots caught on, caught fire, all across France, then Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas, and it wasn't long before blind people all over the world were reading braille and calling Louis Braille the Father of Literacy. And so a hundred years later, in 1952, when the bigwigs came down from Paris and tried to talk the villagers of Coupvray into disinterring Louis and bringing him up to Paris where he could be properly buried in the Pantheon among "the great and famous dead of France," the villagers would have none of it. They told the bigwigs where to go. And the French have some very colorful ways of telling you where to go.

But the bigwigs cajoled and pleaded, insisted and begged, and finally they reached a compromise with the village elders: Coupvray could keep the hands. The bones of Braille's hands would remain in Coupvray, because they were the vessels, the vehicles, the hands that had imparted to the hands of blind people all over the world a perfect means of reading and writing. But the rest of him would be shipped up to Paris and buried with great ceremony in the bowels of the Pantheon, sans hands.

And that's why today I can read a braille book when it's closed in my lap, or in someone else's lap, someone who happens to be sitting next to me, like my girlfriend, say, reading a braille book closed in her lap on a crowded subway. And maybe she comes across a passage that makes her smile, and

maybe she wants to share it with me. So she leans over, she leans in close so I can smell her fresh clean scent and hear her high sweet laugh in my ear, saying: “Hey, baby, check this out.” And she takes my hand in her hand and guides it over to her lap, and I slip my hand inside the book in her lap and I read what she was just reading. And nobody sees me doing this because they’re all reading or sleeping or just looking out of windows. And soon a smile begins to rise on my face like a sunrise, so now we’re both sitting there smiling over the same passage in the same braille book closed in her lap with my hand and her hand inside it.