

Who's Your Sam?

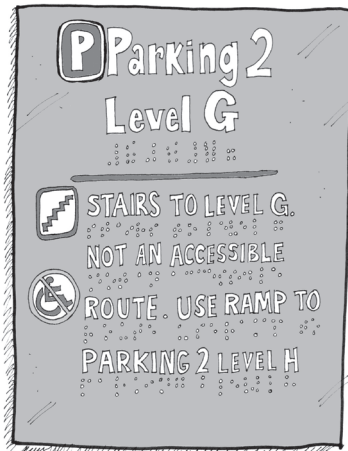
It is human nature to imagine, to put yourself in another's shoes.

—GERALDINE BROOKS, "TIMELESS TACT HELPS SUSTAIN A LITERARY TIME TRAVELER," *NEW YORK TIMES*

As I meandered through a confusingly laid out hospital, which shall remain nameless, this sign caught my eye. I say *caught my eye* advisedly. You'll soon understand why.

First, I struggled to figure out what the information below the line meant. (My car was in Parking 2. Should I use this door?) After I solved that mystery—yes, this door would take me to my car—I puzzled over the presence of Braille. Someone had spent money and effort to (theoretically) share this information with the sightless. But for whom, exactly, could these tactile words have value?

I did my best to imagine such a person. Flipping a coin, I made this person male. I'll call him Sam. What do we know about Sam?



- Sam is blind.
- Sam can read Braille.
- Sam knows that the sign exists. (Otherwise, he would never feel for it.)

Word Up!

- Sam is not in a wheelchair. (The sign is five feet above the floor. If Sam were in a wheelchair, he'd have to stretch to find it.)
- Sam has a companion who's in a wheelchair. (The message below the line has value only to people looking for a wheelchair-accessible route to Parking 2. If no one's in a wheelchair, no one cares about the message.)
- Sam's companion is unable to read the sign aloud. (Why else would Sam take the time to read with his fingers?) Ergo, his companion must be blind too, or else illiterate, or mute, or too young to read. I picture a five-year-old. I'll call her Julie.
- Sam is unfamiliar with the wheelchair-accessible routes, and he has no companion capable of guiding him. (If he knew the routes or had a guide, he'd have no use for the sign.)
- Sam wants to get to Parking 2. (The sign exists solely to direct people to Parking 2.)

Who is Julie to Sam? A neighbor girl? His niece? No way. He'd never be sent out alone to take her to the hospital. She has to be his daughter. He could be a single dad, proud and capable. Maybe Julie fell and broke her leg. Maybe the two of them recently moved to Portland (now you know) and have no nearby friends or family.

We come now to the scenario: Sam and Julie found their way into the hospital. (We have to go with that.) They completed their business there and are ready to go home. Sam is now wheeling Julie down a hospital corridor with one hand, feeling his way along the wall with the other.

"Hang in there, Punkin. I'm sure there's a sign here somewhere ...
Aha!"

Sam's fingers glide along the first row of dots: *Parking 2 Level G.*

"Parking 2 Level G. That's what we're looking for."

Stairs to Level G.

"Hmm. We can't take the wheelchair down the stairs."

Not an Accessible Route.

“That must mean we can’t take the wheelchair down the stairs.
Wow. Thanks for that.”

Use Ramp to Parking 2 Level H.

“Okay. Where’s the ramp?”

[_____]

“What the ...?”

Hell-o-o! Sam doesn’t need a ramp to the parking area. Sam can’t see to drive a car. Sam’s never going to feel his way along these walls while single-handedly wheeling his little girl through a labyrinth.

Whoever requisitioned this Braille translation had no conceivable audience in mind. However well-intentioned, that person (or that committee or that body of regulators) didn’t think through the scenario, didn’t play the whole movie.

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How about you? What do you see happening on the receiving end of your messages? How fully do you imagine your readers? Can you hear them talking, see them strolling down the halls? Do you play the whole movie? Who is your Sam?